

Maryland Gazette – AA Courthouse Museum – Sheriff’s Office Memorabilia 01/02/10

New courthouse museum focuses on county's place in legal history

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Built in 1824, the Anne Arundel County Courthouse has been expanded three times over the years to dominate an entire city block off Church Circle in Annapolis.

County Circuit Court judges have set legal precedents there in such areas as slavery, voter's rights and historic preservation.

But until now, there was no place in the courthouse to memorialize that history.

"As wonderful as this courthouse is, and I think it is marvelous ... I've always thought that component was missing," Circuit Court Judge Nancy Davis-Loomis said at the Dec. 10 grand opening of the courthouse's new museum.

The museum's first permanent exhibit, "Crossroads of the Community," focuses on the courthouse's place at the center of life in the county - both physically and figuratively.

"Things happen here that affect everyone," said Fran Czajka, executive director of the Anne Arundel County Bar Association and a leading force behind the creation of the museum.

In addition to the lawsuits and criminal matters settled in its courtrooms, the courthouse is the site of about 1,300 weddings and hundreds of auctions and adoptions each year.

"The courthouse has so many wonderful stories," said Ann Fligsten, chairwoman of the Campaign for the Museum of the Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County.

The exhibit highlights three historic cases heard in the courthouse. The cases established new precedents regarding the rights of a free slave in the South before the Civil War, an African-American's right to vote in the early 1900s, and the state's power over local government.

The last case involved the county's failed attempt to demolish the old Mount Moriah African Methodist Episcopal Church on Franklin Street while remodeling and expanding the Circuit Courthouse in the late 1990s.

The exhibit also features artifacts recovered from the area when the courthouse was expanded, as well as some memorabilia of the county Sheriff's Office.

The museum - located in the old offices of the clerk of the court just inside the courthouse's front door - took a decade to come to fruition.

"It's something we have always wanted to do, but it wasn't a high priority," Court Administrator Russell G. Wallace said.

He reserved a room for the museum when the courthouse was renovated and expanded 10 years ago. He even posted a sign outside the 18-by-25-foot room calling it the "courthouse museum," but nothing ever materialized to fill the spot.

"It was an idea without a plan," he said, explaining why the room stayed empty for most of the past decade. "It takes time, it takes money and it takes commitment."

About two years later, in 2001, Assistant Attorney General Philip Deter moved to Anne Arundel from Hawaii, bringing with him a foundation for the plan.

Deter started asking questions about the vacant museum room, explained he was involved with another courthouse museum in Hawaii, and eventually helped form a committee within the county bar association to create the museum.

Over the years, the committee has worked with The Key School in Annapolis to develop historical reenactments of some of the county's key legal cases, Czajka said. About five years ago they also set up a temporary exhibit in the museum regarding the building's history, she said.

It took more than 30 people - including local historians, archeologists and lawyers - to finally create the permanent exhibit, Czajka said. With their help, they raised about \$30,000 in grants and donations to pay for the renovations and construction of the exhibit, she said.

Czajka and others stressed that while they are happy the exhibit is open, they want to do more - whether it be arranging more historical reenactments of cases or developing curriculums for schools so teachers can use the museum on field trips.

"This is what we see as Phase 1," Czajka said. "We expect it to continue to develop."

The museum is open when the courthouse is open, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. It is closed on state holidays.

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