

As new court annex opens, an era ends

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The Hartford Courant (1923-1992); Apr 13, 1992; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant

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By WILLIAM COCKERHAM

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The U.S. District Court in Hartford reached the end of an era last week when a new \$3.5 million ground-floor annex behind the 450 Main St. building opened its doors for judicial business.

Although the old second-floor courtrooms will still be used occasionally, most courthouse observers say it won't be the same. The rooms called "North Court" and "South Court" took on a personality of their own over the past three decades, in a time and place that witnessed some

of the biggest changes in society and the law in modern history.

For more than 30 years, mobsters, revolutionaries, counterfeiters, drug dealers and robbers confronted justice in the drab, cavernous rooms where spectators often had to strain to hear testimony.

And when they weren't being used for civil and criminal hearings and trials, the rooms were opened to thousands of immigrants from northern Europe, Asia, Africa and the West Indies, who came, dressed in their Sunday best, to swear allegiance to a new country.

Many colorful stories unfolded be-

hind the court's closed doors.

There was the 1979 suit brought by Paul "Sweet Pie" Winer, an itinerant piano player and crooner who wore a skimpy leather loin cloth. Winer was trying to enjoin the state Liquor Control Commission from penalizing nightclubs where he performed. His so-called lewd act wouldn't even be an issue today, but then it was news.

When a lawyer was trying to explain Winer's costume to the court, U.S. Judge M. Joseph Blumenfeld stopped him in mid-sentence.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what [loin cloths] are. You can buy them on any street in New Orleans," he said.

Blumenfeld then ruled against Winer, writing in his decision:

He "did not persuade this court that the value — entertainment, artistic or otherwise — of his performance would suffer in any significant regard if he were to wear shorts rather than an athletic supporter."

Blumenfeld was also the judge who ruled in 1972 that a color television set was not a luxury. With a wave of his hand, he said a bankrupt man did not have to turn over his \$350 set to a court-appointed trustee, noting that it cost just about the

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same as a black-and-white one.

Though the court was not without its moments of humor, certain federal judges made it clear that the courthouse was a serious place. Judge T. Emmet Clarie, for example, would not permit male spectators in the courtroom without ties until the 1980s.

When about a dozen tieless members of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party were barred from a 1970s trial involving two of their own charged with a firebombing, they later returned with red ribbons tied in bows around their necks.

Even the usually staid Clarie had to laugh.

"They got them at the Salvation Army," Clarie said.

Clarie, appointed by President John F. Kennedy in 1960, is the only judge left at 450 Main St. who was there when it opened in 1961.

A handwritten lawsuit filed by a 61-year-old Norwalk woman in 1974 was one of the most unusual. Louise Staedtler Hopp said her grandmother bought the whole United States from Chief Sitting Bull for \$99 million. As a surviving blood relative, Hopp demanded compensation.

Judge Jon O. Newman dismissed her suit, saying she had filed it too late and in the wrong court. Newman also noted that neither Hopp nor other family members had any canceled checks written to the Indian chief to back their claim.

One of the most colorful figures to appear in the court was Francis "Fat Frannie" Curcio, whose weight once topped 400 pounds. He was so large that he had to walk sideways to get through the courtroom doors. The sight of him being pushed into the court once in a hospital chair, its wheels bent to an angle under the tremendous load, drew gasps from spectators.

During his 1983 trial for loan sharking, Curcio adamantly denied that he threatened customers whose loan payments were late.

"I've never made a threat in my whole life to anybody. Business is so great you never have to intimidate anybody. It doesn't make any sense . . . I want repeat business," Curcio said on the witness stand.

When Curcio received a 10-year sentence on the loan-sharking conviction and an additional 10 years for obstructing justice by feigning a heart attack, his lawyer told the judge it amounted to a life sentence for the ailing man. Curcio died seven years later of a heart attack at a hospital near the Petersburg, Va., federal prison where he was serving his sentence.



Tom Stevens / Special to The Courant
■ Above, in a file photo, 400-pound Francis Curcio, in a wheelchair, is taken into U.S. District 2 Court in Hartford during his 1983 trial for loan sharking. The trial of the colorful Curcio took place in the second-floor courtrooms. Below is the foyer near Courtroom 2 in the new annex to the court building.

One of the most spectacular trials held in the second-floor courtrooms was the 1989 trial of four Puerto Rican separatists found guilty of being involved in the \$7 million Wells Fargo robbery in West Hartford six years earlier. Another defendant pleaded guilty this year and charges against a second were dismissed. Seven remaining defendants, two of whom are fugitives, are still awaiting trial.

That trial before Clarie brought about the most stringent security measures in the court's history, which included armed guards on the rooftops of the Abraham S. Ribicoff Federal Building, metal detectors and bomb-sniffing dogs.

The defendants were convicted of conspiring to steal money to finance a violent overthrow of the U.S. government in Puerto Rico.

Victor M. Gerena of Hartford, the armored car guard who pulled off the robbery, is now a fugitive believed to be in hiding in Cuba.

Another trial that will go down in the annals of criminal history at the courthouse involved more than 20 members of the Providence, R.I.-based Patriarca crime family who were indicted in 1990 and found guilty last year of racketeering.

The federal trial was aided by the testimony of John F. "Sonny" Castagna, a killer and Mafia turn-



coat once described as "the most treacherous man in Hartford."

Security was so tight for Castagna, court security officers with the U.S. marshal's office said that on trial days, he arrived long before they did.

"They must have brought him here in the middle of the night," one officer said. "All of a sudden, poof! There he was."

The Main Street courthouse has also been the scene of scores of demonstrations during the past three decades. The front doors have been splashed with blood, and more than once federal marshals

have had to cut chained demonstrators from the doors.

U.S. Judge Peter C. Dorsey, who has overseen construction of the annex since it began a year and a half ago, said full use of the new facility will occur gradually. Only one of the annex's three courtrooms has been furnished to date.

But when it does open fully, most of the major trials will take place in the annex. And only memories of the second-floor courthouse will remain.

Courant staff writers Thomas D. Williams and Lynne Tuohy contributed to this story.