The Somerset County Court House: A History
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The history of county court houses often reflects the development of the county they are in—so it is with the Somerset County Court House. When it was created in 1688, the County of Somerset was subject to the “…jurisdiction of the County of Middlesex.” Somerset at this time was only beginning to emerge as a truly separate entity. Still sparsely populated, it was logical that all judicial matters be heard in the Middlesex Court.

But by 1714 the situation in Somerset had changed. The county was growing and needed its own court. Therefore, the Colonial Assembly passed an act allowing for the construction of a court house in Somerset. The site chosen by the Freeholders was Six Mile Run, now Franklin Park. The actual size and style of the court and jail are unknown, but they were adequate to service the needs of the county. Unfortunately, the site was not easily accessible to most of the residents of the county.

In 1737 the court house and jail accidentally caught fire and burned, destroying the records contained in the buildings. Once again Somerset built a court house and jail, but they were relocated to present-day Millstone.

This court house served the county until 1779. In that year, British Lt. Colonel John Simcoe led a raiding party of “…eighty Tory raiders from Staten Island, crossing to Perth Amboy, seeking to capture Governor Livingston and to scuttle the flat-boats of the American army.” On October 27th, Simcoe reached the Somerset Court House and burned it. All the records “…except four books of mortgages…” were lost. The court during the Revolutionary War was “…temporarily held at Hillsboro(sic),” although no specific site was mentioned.

It wasn’t until 1782 that serious work on building a new court house began. In September of 1782, Peter Wycoff, Major MacDonald and John Simerson were appointed a committee to unite with a committee from the Consistory of the Church of Raritan (Dutch Reformed Church) and the Board voted to join the Raritan Congregation, and build a court house, allowing the congregation to worship there under certain stipulations to be entered into at a future date.

Thus began an association between the court and the Dutch Reformed Church that would last until 1788. In that year the Dutch Reformed Church withdrew from its agreement to use the court house, which was located at Somerville.

The county court continued to use this structure until 1799, when the fourth court house was constructed. In 1849 it was enlarged by adding another story and a portico on the front. At this time there were two other buildings on the court house green, smaller than the court house, that served as offices for the County Clerk and Surrogate.

By 1905, the court house and county offices had outlived their usefulness. On February
14, 1905, the Freeholders declared the court and the county offices “inadequate…and unanimously agreed to take such steps as were deemed necessary and proper for the erection of a court house, jail and buildings suitable for the transaction of public business.”

The Freeholders wasted little time in finding an architect. On November 28, 1905, nine months after their decision to build, they hired the firm of J. Riely Gordon, Tracy and Swartwout.

"On May 12, 1906, Bid #12 was accepted by the Freeholders to build the court house at a cost of $227,589.00. William H. Fissell and Wagner of 1133 Broadway, NY won the contract to construct the new court house. On May 31, 1906, the Freeholders authorized the sale of the old court house. What couldn't be sold was demolished."5

The new court house at this time was the most prominent public building in the county. It was built with pride and attention to detail, for it represented the county's stature, prosperity and, indeed, confidence in the future.

Gordon was an excellent choice as the architect. He designed the Capitol Building of Arizona (1899-1900) in Phoenix and 70 court houses in the southwest. Gordon became a specialist in designing various types of government buildings. Perhaps he was drawn to this specialty because he began his career in Washington, D.C., as a draftsman in the office of the U.S. Supervising Architect and later served as a supervisor of many government buildings. In 1904 he moved to New York and joined the firm of Tracy and Swartwout and in 1905 undertook the Somerset County Court House project.

The project posed some unique problems for Gordon. He had to construct a building on the green that would not conflict with the church, yet be the major focal point of the green. He was keenly aware of the fact that the court house would not be an isolated building; that it would act as a unifying factor not only of the green but the surrounding area. In order to give the court house prominence, he first had the site graded slightly higher than the church. In order to soften the contrast between the two buildings, he took great care to save existing trees and directed trees to be planted between the court house and the church. To give the structure the visual impact he desired, he set it slightly aback from the front of the church but built it higher.

Gordon designed a Beaux Arts-style structure that was massive yet graceful, built with the finest white Alabama marble, three stories high, containing forty-six offices and rooms. The building is in the “form of a Greek cross with exterior porticoes of Ionic Columns."6 Inside he designed a beautifully paneled rotunda extending from the ground floor to a “(lead) glass dome in the roof, surrounded by a marble lantern."7 There were five court rooms opening into the galleries on different floors around the central rotunda. The galleried rotunda is supported by arches on the ground floor and then by eight scagliola Corinthian columns.

Gordon used techniques such as borrowed light to illuminate stairwells and developed a unique ventilation system to cool the building. He utilized cross-breezes as well as the rotunda to...
aid in cooling. Sections of the leaded glass above the rotunda were designed to be opened in warm weather, drawing the cool air from the basement areas up into the rotunda.

The main court room received special attention from Gordon. When you entered the court room you were immediately struck by the openness and light that surrounded you. Light seemed to come from everywhere. Your eyes would have been quickly drawn to the judge's bench, for it was bathed in light coming from leaded glass which was in place at the time behind the judge's chair. Gordon had again used his genius to create a desired effect.

The judge's bench is against the north wall. Gordon realized that by using borrowed light from the stairway on the other side of the wall, he could provide a source of natural light, filtered through colored glass. This would bathe the bench and the judge in a relatively constant amber light. Above the leaded windows was the American Eagle. This combination presented a dramatic setting, but Gordon had more in mind. He designed a magnificent leaded glass oculus in the center of the ceiling. The glass was specifically made for the Court of Somerset. It was crafted by outstanding artisans in New York and was truly a work of art.

Gordon's design was now complete, for when you entered this room and stood before the bench, you had the feeling that you were in a temple of Justice.

In the intervening years, the main court room has undergone renovations. "In 1928 the court house was…renovated, the court rooms redecorated, their acoustics perfected and new vaults installed…."8 The glass windows behind the judge's chair would disappear in a later modification. Still later, acoustical tile would be added to the ceiling. The one item that has always remained constant is the outstanding leaded glass in the ceiling, which has been largely restored to its original beauty.

Once again, the description written about the court house in 1937 is true: "...on the trim and spacious green, on the main thoroughfare in the midst of historic Somerville, the beautiful white marble court house of Somerset glistens in the sunlight."9

On its copper dome above a golden crown, the statue of Justice once again stands as a reminder that, under the law, all should be equal.

Today, the Somerset County Court House has been brought back to much of its original splendor while having been brought forward into the 21st century.

Donald N. Esposito, Historian

References
2. Ibid.
4. Minutes of the Board of Chosen Freeholders, 1905.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

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