

Courting the past

A new display in York County's third official courthouse depicts the history of such buildings.



Scott Butcher talks about some of the history depicted in a new display at the old courthouse on Market Street in York.

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For the Daily Record/Sunday News
York Daily Record/Sunday News

Aug 30, 2006 —

In the Bible, it takes only four chapters for the first murder to take place. Man's behavior has improved very little since that time. As such, there has always been a need for courts of law.

Since 1754, York's courthouses have undergone six major changes in an effort to accommodate man's ongoing tradition of criminal behavior. The history of those changes is now recorded in a display named "The Evolution of the York County Courthouse."

The display was officially opened to the public Tuesday on the third floor of York's third courthouse on East Market Street. The project's \$25,000 cost was privately funded by Susquehanna Pfaltzgraff.

Richard Banz, York County Heritage Trust's chief curator, and Lila Fourhman-Shaull, the trust's head librarian and archivist, consulted on the project to ensure historical accuracy.

Project engineer Scott Butcher said the display will serve as an important reminder of York's judicial history.

"This was an idea that came about during the conversion of the old courthouse into a county administrative center," Butcher said. "It's so easy to lose important pieces of our history, and no one wanted this forgotten."

Six display boxes show a journey that begins 252 years ago when William Wills began constructing the first courthouse in Centre Square at George and Market streets.



The display details the old courthouse in York before its 1957 expansion.

In 1841, a second courthouse was built at 28 E. Market St. to accommodate York's growing population.

By the time of the construction of York's third courthouse in 1898, York was a prosperous community and the people wanted a building to reflect that.

Prominent local architect John Dempwolf designed a structure that would become an area landmark. The new building, which was built in the same spot as its predecessor, was topped by three domes. The center dome rose 155 feet. It also incorporated some of the most modern turn-of-the-century conveniences such as an elevator and modern heating system.

In 1957, this building underwent a dramatic transformation and expansion. For almost six decades, Dempwolf's courthouse was famous for its usage of Roman-style yellow bricks.

But in 1957, the courthouse received a new red brick façade. But Butcher said many of the original yellow bricks can still be seen at the rear of the building.

By 2004, the courthouse had once again been outgrown by the population it served.

Some considered tearing down Dempwolf's building, but county administrator Chuck Noll said that would have been a tragedy.

"This is arguably Dempwolf's finest work," Noll said. "And the citizens should be proud that it stands in their midst."

So the decision was made to build the York County Judicial Center at Philadelphia and George streets.

"If you compare the new to the old, you can really see the changing attitudes of the tax payer," Noll said. "The Market Street courthouse is a tribute to the community's wealth and success. The new building is sterile and utilitarian, a tribute to this community's desire for government to be frugal with its wealth."

In time, York County President Commissioner Lori Mitrick, said she hopes the renovated administrative building and courthouse display will become an educational destination. In an effort to create more awareness about both, the building will host an open house at either the end of September or the beginning of October.

In the meantime, Mitrick said, both are open to anyone who is interested.

"It's a worthwhile trip to come in and look around," she said. "And if visitors make their way to the third floor, they'll get a great local history lesson."



York County President Commissioner Lori Mitrick talks about the display at the old courthouse in downtown York.