



Wisconsin's Courthouses: Temples of Justice

As places where “government of the people” is most closely felt by many individuals, courthouses and the activities that take place within them must be preserved and safeguarded.

I became interested in government at age 12. When a family friend ran for a county elected position, I delivered campaign brochures door to door. She won, and I was hooked. Over the next several years, I often visited the civic heart of our community – the courthouse. On election nights, that was the place to be, as local politicians, lawyers, labor and business leaders, and judges and other elected officials would gather in the lobby and watch election returns from an overhead projector.

I thought the Kenosha County Courthouse was the most stately and grand building in town, and I got to work in the courthouse basement, for the county assessor, one summer when I was in college.

I often meet with State Bar of Wisconsin members where they live and work. I've been to all 72 counties and to many of the courthouses.

Local courthouses are expressions of a community's civic pride. They are often the most architecturally significant and prominent building in town.

As part of the celebration of Wisconsin's sesquicentennial, the book *Wisconsin's Historic Courthouses*, with photos by L. Roger Turner and text by Marv Balousek, was published in 1988. In the introduction, retired Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Roland Day wrote, “Wisconsin's historic courthouses have been rightfully called ‘Temples of Justice.’ They are dedicated to preserving the promises and guarantees of liberty and self-government written into the United States and Wisconsin constitutions by ‘we the people.’” These “Temples of Justice sought to preserve and remind us of our heritage – and our hopes,” Day said.

The local courthouse is where civility rules and dispassionate justice is rendered. It is where government “of the people” is most closely felt, as individuals come to engage.

Our courthouses are not merely symbols; they are the embodiment of justice and our democratic way of life. We must preserve and protect not only their physical and historical presence but also what goes on inside in fulfillment of justice for all.

Civic, judicial, and legal leaders are working to restore the Kenosha County Courthouse's Ceremonial Courtroom, which will be 100 years old in 2025. In the 1960s, the room's ornamental ceiling, which had inlaid glass laylights, was covered with a dropped ceiling. Restoration will not be cheap. But like justice itself, the investment will be worth what will be restored and preserved for generations to come.

Let us be vigilant, in each county seat, across our great state as we continue to work to preserve, protect, and defend these temples of justice. **WL**

BY LARRY J. MARTIN

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Kenosha County Ceremonial Courtroom, post-restoration, computer generated image. Kenosha County Ceremonial Courtroom Restoration Project, scan the code for more information.

