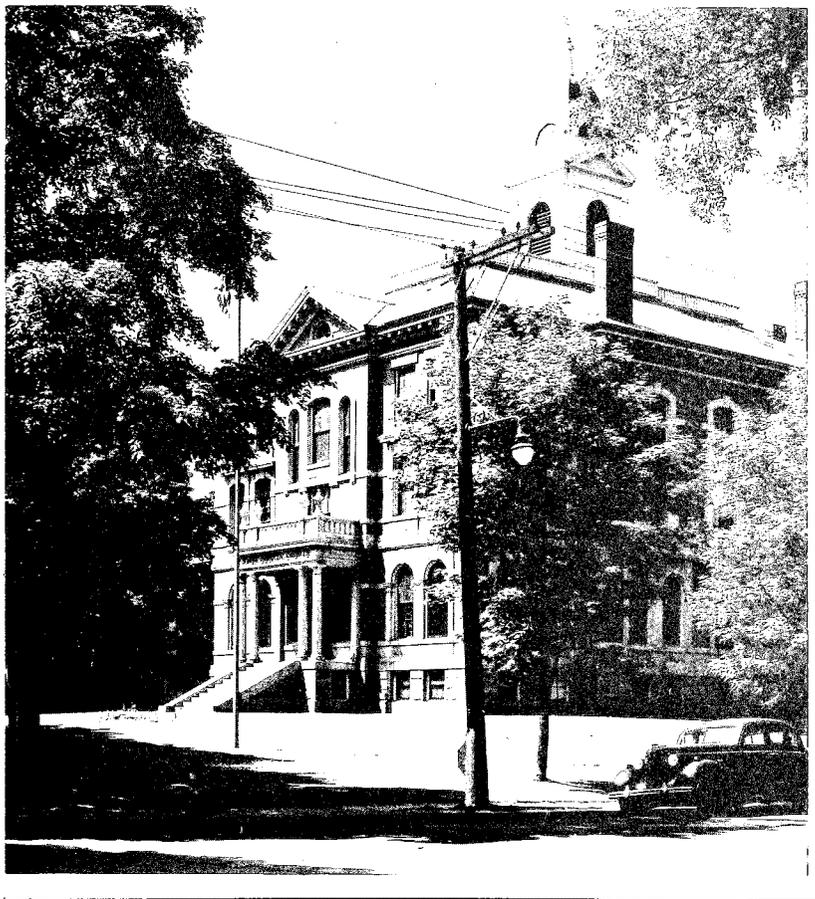


One Hundredth Anniversary
The Knox County Court House

Rockland, Maine



March, 1875 – March, 1975

Cover Photo of Court House in 1946 by Sidney L. Cullen

Printed by Courier-Gazette, Inc.
Rockland, Maine



COUNTY OF KNOX
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

COURT HOUSE

ROCKLAND, MAINE 04841

COMMISSIONERS

ROBERT H. HEALD
RAYMOND E. LUDWIG
ROBERT C. MCINTOSH

On behalf of all the County personnel, the Commissioners would like to take this space to express our sincere appreciation to Dick Dooley of the Courier-Gazette staff, for his efforts in researching and compiling this commemorative history of our past. We are especially grateful for having this at this particular period in time, since it relates not only to the Centennial of Knox County but also to the Bicentennial of the State of Maine.

Signed

County Commissioners

Robert C. McIntosh, Rockland

Robert H. Heald, Union

Raymond E. Ludwig, Hope



1895 Court House

KNOX COUNTY COURT HOUSE

AN INFORMAL HISTORY

by Dick Dooley

Spectators crowded the courtroom when Justice William Wirt Virgin of Portland moved to the bench at 10 a. m. Tuesday, March 9, 1875. It was the opening of the March term of the Supreme Judicial Court for Knox County and was, in effect, an official opening of the handsome new court house in Rockland.

Justice Virgin was followed into the courtroom by the Rev. S.L.B. Chase, pastor of the Baptist Church, and the Rev. J. H. Ward, rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, who provided appropriate scriptural selections and prayer. After a proclamation given by Sheriff John F. Torrey, grand and traverse juries were sworn, the docket was called, and cases assigned for trial.

The first case to be heard in the new Knox County Court House would be a civil action — Anson B. Bowler vs. Inhabitants of Washington, to recover damages for injuries received by reason of alleged obstruction in the public highway.

The court house structure at this time was not quite complete. Some interior work remained to be done before the Register of Deeds, and Register of Probate offices could move from leased quarters in the Pillsbury Block, at the southwest corner of Main and School Streets.

Less than a year was taken to build the court house, actual construction work having started in early June of 1874. County-owned property for the project was bounded by Union, Limerock and High Streets. Two buildings were razed to permit construction — the Old Spofford House, built in 1812, and "the old schoolhouse on the corner" (of Union and Limerock). The court house would be flanked to the south by the soon to be completed Universalist Church.

Although effects of the nationwide financial panic of 1873 were still felt, there was no lack of construction in Rockland the following year — all going up at the same time in the same neighborhood were the court house, the church, and just to the east, the new Custom House and Post Office.

At this time, Knox County was young, having been formed from portions of Lincoln and Waldo Counties, and incorporated April 1, 1860. Rockland as a city was not much older, incorporation having come in 1854.

Twenty years later a new court house opened its doors in Rockland, but finding a permanent home for assorted courts had not been easy.

Late in 1859, The Rockland Gazette published a four-page tabloid-size 'Extra,' devoted entirely to discussion of a proposed new county, hopefully to be named for Gen. Henry Knox. As strong an argument as any for formation of a new county was the complete inadequacy of existing court facilities, and means, or lack of means, of conducting business at the county level.

Noted editorially was, "The great inconvenience and expense to which the people of East Lincoln had been subjected, in being compelled to travel from 30 to 50 miles to attend court and transact business appertaining to the county — the expense, delay and vexation incident to the trials of cases."

The annoyance and inconvenience of trying to gather together witnesses for court cases, which could and did drag on for weeks, was a major factor leading to establishment by the Legislature of an annual term of court in Rockland. It was not a notable improvement. Said The Gazette:

"It proves what has been so much urged, the pressing necessity of a new county, so that we may have the facilities for doing our county and court business nearer home, and where we do most of our business."

And continuing:

"By the present arrangement, the people are still obliged to attend court twice a year in Wiscasset. During the last October term of the court at Wiscasset, nearly the entire time of the court was consumed in the trial of cases originating in the Eastern part of the County. One case from St. George, in which some fifty or sixty witnesses were introduced, lasted eleven days."

It was indeed an awkward situation for East Lincoln residents, for these words about difficulties in attending court at Wiscasset, and travel in general, were written more than a decade before the Knox & Lincoln Railroad finally pushed through to its Rockland terminus.

The New County

But a new county was formed, and Rockland, after a brief flurry of promotion of Camden for county seat, became shire town.

Former Waldo County communities joining the new county structures were Appleton, Hope, Camden, North Haven and Vinalhaven.

Entering the new Knox County from Lincoln were Washington,

Union, Warren, Friendship, Cushing, St. George, South Thomaston, Thomaston, Rockland, Mussel Ridge, and Matinicus.

Original officers of Knox County were appointed by Governor Lot M. Morrill, to serve until their place would be taken through election of other persons.

Horatio Alden, Camden, Judge of Probate; Albert S. Rice, Rockland, Register of Probate; Samuel L. Hodgman, Warren, Clerk of Courts; T. R. Simonton, Camden, County Attorney; George W. White, South Thomaston, Register of Deeds; Bartlett Jackson, Rockland, County Treasurer; Seth S. Gerry, Thomaston, Zenas Cook, Friendship, and William H. Meservey, County Commissioners.

First home for Supreme Judicial Court for Knox County was Atlantic Hall, an upstairs area leased in the Ulmer Block, at the southeast corner of Main and Sea Streets. This is not to be confused with an Atlantic Hall Block, once situated near South Main and Thomaston Streets.

There was a certain lack of continuity in the new county's court system. As opening date for the May, 1860 term of court neared, The Gazette observed:

"We are requested by the County Treasurer to say that persons having business with him will please call at the Clerk's Office of the Judicial Court, old Lime Rock Bank Building, up Stairs."

This almost plaintive announcement would have been meaningful to 1860 readers who were aware that the "old" Lime Rock Bank had been located at the southwest corner of Main and Summer Streets — not all that convenient to the newly leased courtroom. The banking house, meanwhile, had moved to the second floor of the Berry Block, over the present Gregory's premises, where a decade later a spectacular if bungled robbery would take place.

It had been reported rather gloomily that more than 1,000 cases were on the docket for consideration in Supreme Judicial Court for Knox County. Notwithstanding, Hon. Richard D. Rice, presiding justice, arrived in Rockland for a seven-day court term which opened May 8, 1860, just a month after Knox County became a political entity.

Actually, very few cases on the docket were heard by Justice Rice.

"Owing to the situation of the docket, the actions being transferred from Waldo and Lincoln Courts then in session, and the lawyers in many instances being absent in the other courts, the Judge announced that he should not at this first term compel trials in any civil actions unless the parties were agreed."

This decision dispensed with jury trials in civil cases.

The Grand Jury acted upon matters presented for its consideration and returned six indictments: one for murder, two for larceny, one for assault and battery, and two against Common Sellers (violators of the prohibitory law).

The murder trial was continued until the October term, "the prisoner asking a postponement on ground of recency of death of the deceased, and want of time for preparation of his defense."

One man was sentenced to six months in the county jail for larceny from a vessel in Rockland, with other criminal cases also continued. The county jail referred to was that in Wiscasset, since it was many years before such a facility would be constructed locally.

Much attention was given in the press to mechanics of the new court procedure in Rockland.

"The Grand Jury and the Traverse Juries comprised a larger number of intelligent and substantial men than are often seen on juries, speaking well for the intelligence of Knox County."

Justice Rice named Col. John D. Rust of Rockport to act as Sheriff and Officer of Court, "and the following coroners (deputies) were appointed under him as assistants: C. A. Libby, Rockland; Moses Walcott, Washington; Nathaniel Moody, Thomaston; S. W. Laughten, Appleton."

It was remarked that Col. Rust "was polite and attentive, and makes an efficient and accomplished officer."

Also cited for splendid work was Clerk of Courts S. L. Hodgman: "Everyone was surprised at his readiness in matters which puzzle many an old clerk."

Evidently the first term of Supreme Judicial Court in the new county was regarded as satisfactory.

The Pillsbury Block

Soon after, various Knox County offices were brought together in the Pillsbury Block, completed in 1859 at the corner of Main and School Streets. Through a lease agreement, offices were opened on the second and third floors of the building, the courtroom occupying what at one time was known by the euphonious name of Melonian Hall.

Knox County court and general business would be transacted here until 1874, when it was finally decided to proceed with construction

of a court house. It is clear from reports of the time that need for such a facility were not exaggerated. It is also clear that a new lease agreement for county quarters in the Pillsbury Block was due to be negotiated.

A legal notice published by the County Commissioners, and a lengthy editorial on the court house matter appeared in The Rockland Gazette for Feb. 19, 1874.

These published articles directed the attention of Knox County residents to the work of a committee appointed in December, 1873 to study five options. To report on the five possibilities were: Albert P. Gould, Thomaston; Ephraim M. Wood, Camden; and Andrew Burkett, Washington.

- 1) To examine buildings now leased by the County for offices, their security and suitability, and what alterations, if any, are necessary for use for a term not exceeding 20 years from expiration of the present lease.

- 2) To report on terms for renewing lease of the present building.

- 3) To report on other buildings, presently or to be constructed in Rockland, which might be leased.

- 4) To procure plans and cost estimate for construction of a Court House on the county lot at Union and Limerock Streets.

- 5) To prepare a notice to the municipal officers of the towns in the county of the intention of the County Commissioners to obtain a loan for such construction, with consent of the county communities, as required by law.

The committee subsequently prepared its report, which was published by the County Commissioners: George E. Cummings, Union; John Davis II, Friendship; and Watson M. Trussell, St. George.

The study committee had several items to report, leaving little doubt that a new County Court House and office building was clearly indicated.

As to lease terms, annual cost to the county to continue in the Pillsbury Block would be \$1,600, with no changes, alterations or improvements to be made by the landlord. This would be entirely unsatisfactory, particularly since vaults and safes in the Main Street building were not fireproof, a critical matter in terms of records in the Register of Deeds and Register of Probate.

"The courtroom is in no respect suitable. For many years it has been a constant subject of complaint on the part of the judges, the Bar,

and those to compelled to attend the courts. Some of the judges of the Supreme Court have expressed the determination not to hold another term in it, but to direct the Sheriff to procure another place to hold court."

In fact, the courtroom could not be heated adequately, and in hot weather became quite unbearable. Open windows did little for court procedure, due to constant noise from Main Street traffic below, and this mode of ventilation was termed "perilous to health."

Cost of the Pillsbury Block, should the county seek to purchase the building, would be at least \$30,000, and, with necessary improvements, would undoubtedly be more expensive than a new structure.

Not surprisingly, it was decided to erect a new facility on the county property at Union and Limerock Streets, and to obtain a loan not to exceed \$50,000 for the project.

It was all systems go, but by the time the dust settled and the new Knox County Court House opened for business, the price tag total had reached \$83,000.

Following official notice to Knox County communities, voting on the court house project was favorable by nearly a 3-1 margin or 1,386-475, although this particular tabulation did not include returns from the island communities of Hurricane, North Haven, and Vinalhaven.

For some reason, residents of Union, Thomaston and Warren were overwhelmingly opposed to the construction loan.

The maximum amount of \$50,000 set for the project was based on the recently completed Somerset County Court House at Skowhegan, on which \$48,000 had been spent.

Distinguished Architects

Architects for the Knox County building were Gridley J. F. Bryant and Lewis P. Rogers of Boston. Mr. Bryant was well known for his design of municipal buildings. For Boston he had planned the City Hall and City Hospital, the Custom House, the Arlington Street Church, and later an 1884 addition to the Parker House.

Bryant's designs in Maine included the Androscoggin County Court House, jails in Kennebec, Penobscot and Washington Counties, the Men's Reformatory in South Portland, and the Custom House at Eastport.

Seven bids were opened by the County Commissioners on May 6, 1874, with two sets of plans submitted by each bidder. The first

plan called for a comparatively small amount of granite to be used above the basement level; the second plans indicated substantial amounts of granite, with exterior walls to be faced with brick.

W. H. Glover & Co., of Rockland, was successful bidder, with a second plan amount of \$50,524. Other bids came from firms in Bangor, Waterville, Lewiston, Newburyport, Mass., and Boston.

The structure was to be 85 feet in length, 55 feet wide, three stories in height above the basement, and with a thirty-foot cupola. The first floor would accommodate all the county offices, with fire-proof storage areas for records. The second floor would be taken up by the courtroom, "a noble hall," occupying the full width and length of the building, with height between floor and ceiling of 24 feet.

At either end on two stories would be rooms for judges, jury and counsel, with entrances to the floor and gallery.

Accordingly, construction work was started June 10 at the county lot bounded by Union, Limerock and High Streets in Rockland.

Some delay was experienced when a bed of soft clay was discovered some distance below the excavation for foundation walls. As a result, considerable work went into placing heavy stone beneath the foundation walls, a procedure not included in the original contracts. Nevertheless, work was pushed forward "with much vigor." Exterior work was, in fact, completed before the winter of 1874-75, and the grounds partially graded.

Construction apparently proceeded smoothly enough, although "a rather startling accident" occurred at the site in early September. While a block of granite, weighing an estimated ton and one half, was being raised above the second floor level by derrick, a guy of the derrick, attached to the belfry of the Universalist Church parted, "letting the derrick fall with a crash." The main derrick spar struck and took down much of the inside staging, but fortunately became wedged in one of the window apertures, thus preventing considerably more damage to the wall. Equally fortunately, no one was injured, although one workman was carried down with the staging.

There was a small army of workers on the project, not to mention those engaged nearby on the Universalist Church, and the Custom House and Post Office.

William H. Glover, Edward K. Glover and Albert D. Lawry of the Rockland contracting firm listed the following sub-contractors:

Bodwell Granite Co., foundation stones, and granite for exterior

walls above ground; George W. Laws, master mason and plasterer; Charles H. Parker & Co., iron mongers.

Justus E. Sherman, painter and glazier; Walter J. Wood, tinroofing and hardware; O. H. Chadwick and Charles W. Newton, heating and ventilating apparatus; A. Ross Weeks, gas fixtures; T. D. Merrill, plumbing works.

As is frequently the case, expenses managed to exceed estimates by a fairly wide margin. The loan obtained for construction was for \$50,000, and an accounting showed a total of \$24,465 in additional expense. This total included such items as \$7,070 for the foundation, \$7,300 in heating apparatus, and \$2,000 for the architects.

An additional \$8,300 was projected for completion of the work, this amount including \$4,000 for iron fencing, \$500 for cistern and pumps, and \$800 for furniture.

Thus a second loan of \$33,146 was necessary, as Knox County residents followed the progress of construction at Union and Limerock Streets.

"We think a candid examination of the exterior taste and construction of these facades as erected, will bear witness to the fact that a most successful, pleasing and harmonious effect has been produced by the architects in the architecture of this most noticeable building."

Obviously a Rockland Gazette writer was somewhat carried away after visiting the just completed Knox County Court House. It was early March, 1875, and workmen were rushing to complete interior work in time for opening of the March term of Supreme Judicial Court for Knox County, the first such session in permanent quarters in Rockland.

Contractor Glover was said to have eleven carpenters hastening to complete the court room interior.

"The finish is in ash, oiled, and is very handsome. The railings for the bar, the Clerk's table, and the jury seats are already in place. They are of black walnut, with posts of the same."

Continued the Gazette:

A Noble Hall

"The Court Room is a noble hall, 44 by 52 feet, and 24 feet in height. It has six ample windows, five feet wide and sixteen feet high, and in the evening will be lighted by four very handsome chandeliers of ten (gas) burners each, with porcelain shades." The arched ceiling

was reported to be handsomely ornamented with cornice and center piece in stucco work.

The judge's platform was raised three steps, and was furnished with a large black walnut desk of elegant style. The clerk's platform was raised a single step, and displayed an elegant roll-top black walnut desk. The bar enclosure featured three handsome tables of corresponding style. The courtroom furniture was made to order by F. O. Bailey & Co., of Portland, and was much admired for its styling.

Furniture for the various county offices was not forgotten, but delivery had not yet been made at this time.

Only one dim view was taken editorially of the overall project. This concerned one major change in original plans — elimination of a gallery in the courtroom for spectators.

"The accommodations for such portion of the public as may wish to observe the course of judicial proceedings are exceedingly limited, much more so than in the present (Pillsbury Block) court-room.

"The original plan provided for a gallery in front over the entrance for the convenience of spectators, but the plan was changed, the gallery omitted, and two rooms finished in place of it."

These would be the second floor jury and conference rooms still in use at the east, or Union Street, end of the court house.

"The original plan was a recognition of this privilege of the public; the modification of the plan is a denial of it."

In all other respects, however, the new court house was adjudged admirable by *The Gazette*.

The basement level was described as being subdivided by a center corridor from front to rear, "flanked by apartments for cellar and fuel (coal) purposes, as well as boiler room, lockups and lobby for prisoners waiting trial from day-to-day only, including also rooms devoted to water-closets and urinals."

Built in a regular course of dressed granite, the basement was also described rather quaintly as "rustic." Evidently guests in the lockups downstairs came to regard the accommodations as sufficiently "rustic."

Heating apparatus was extensive and took up considerable space. There were two large steam boilers, providing both direct and indirect heat through enclosed and exposed radiators.

The first, or main, floor on the north side contained the probate offices, with a fireproof vault room attached, and the grand jury room and witness area adjoining.

On the south side was located the "apartment" of the County Commissioners connecting with the offices of the Clerk of Courts, also with a fireproof vault-room, and the Register of Deeds, "which in itself is a fireproof room."

In addition to the courtroom, and jury and conference rooms on the second floor, there were two "apartments" intended for use as a law library and additional consultation space, as well as judge's chambers.

It was noted that not long after the court house was completed, members of the Knox County bar provided a fine law library through contributions and membership dues. Additional volumes were to be purchased in large part from liquor fines assessed in court. Such fines were generally quite severe.

Above these rooms on the third, or mezzanine floor were two other "apartments," for which no particular use was specified in the 1875 account.

As noted previously, Justice William Wirt Virgin presided at the first term of Supreme Judicial Court for Knox County, which opened March 9, 1875.

The first case to be heard was a civil action brought by Mr. Anson Bowler against the Inhabitants of the Town of Washington, for injuries received from an alleged obstruction in the highway. Unfortunately we do not know offhand just how Mr. Bowler fared in his court action.

Almost immediately statewide attention was focused on the new Knox County Court House. A case of a quite different nature came before Justice Virgin in that March court term.

An injunction was brought to prevent Knox County Sheriff John F. Torrey from executing sentence of death upon Louis H. F. Wagner, the Smutty Nose (Isles of Shoals) murderer, and John True Gordon, convicted of the murder of his brother, sister-in-law and niece at Thorndike. Distinguished defense counsel presented numerous points of law, but the court was to deny the petitions for injunction.

Wagner and Gordon were hanged at the State Prison in June, 1875, "a ghastly and barbarous spectacle." Such an uproar was created by the double hanging that the Legislature did vote to abolish capital punishment, although the death penalty was restored for a period in the 1880s with three more persons going to the gallows in Thomaston.

At any rate, Knox County residents had seen the construction of a splendid new court house and county office building, and there appear to have been few howls of outrage over the unexpectedly large final cost of \$83,000. General thinking was that the new facility was well worth the investment, after 14 years of inconvenience in leased quarters.



Scene from School Street 1906



The New Knox County Jail as shown in November, 1892.