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The Docket

A Brief Overview of the History of the Genesee County Courthouse

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This is the fifth installment in a series of articles on the 8th Judicial District County Court buildings. In this issue the focus is on Genesee County. The county seat for Genesee County is in the city of Batavia and its Legislative body is housed on the third floor of the Old Courthouse, located at 7 Main Street. This building, comprised of stone, was constructed in 1841.

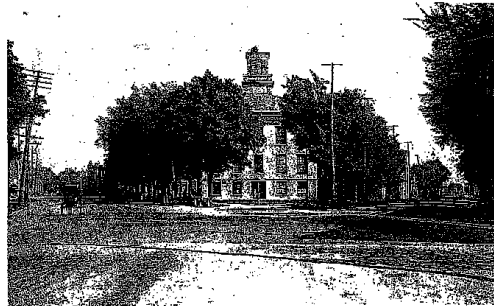
This building is situated at the junction of Main and Ellicott Street in downtown Batavia. The "Old Courthouse" replaced an even earlier structure, first built in 1802. This frame building faced Court Street and came to be called Ellicott Hall. This original courthouse was named after Joseph Ellicott, an agent of the Holland Land Company. This company orchestrated the sales of land throughout western New York. This frame structure was destroyed by fire on the 5th of January in 1918.

The Old Courthouse is a beautiful example of Greek revival architecture. It was the product of local craftsmen who used locally-found materials. It is topped by a two-tiered cupola that houses a brass bell. This antebellum courthouse is the current home to not only the County Legislature but also to the County Manager, the Assistant County Manager, and the County Attorney. Since 1973 the Old Courthouse has been on the National Register of Historic Landmarks.

In 1996 the ground was broken for a new courthouse. This gave rise to the Genesee County Courts Facilities Building, located at 1 West Main Street in Batavia. This complex includes a variety of courts serving different judicial functions. It is located in a fitting place – at the crossroads between a Native American trail and the Big Bend of the Tonawanda. This is appropriate because it

is the location referred to as the “Great Hearing Place” by Native Americans who had long inhabited this part of western New York.

The 1896 photograph shown below is the famous intersection where the Upton Monument now stands.



The 1841 Courthouse is in the center – just to the right of the horse-drawn buggy just prior to the advent of the automobile.

About thirty years later we can see just how dramatically the area around the Old Courthouse appeared. The photograph shown below illustrates the view facing the rear of the 1841 Courthouse; a building now flanked by the mass produced automobiles of the 1920s.

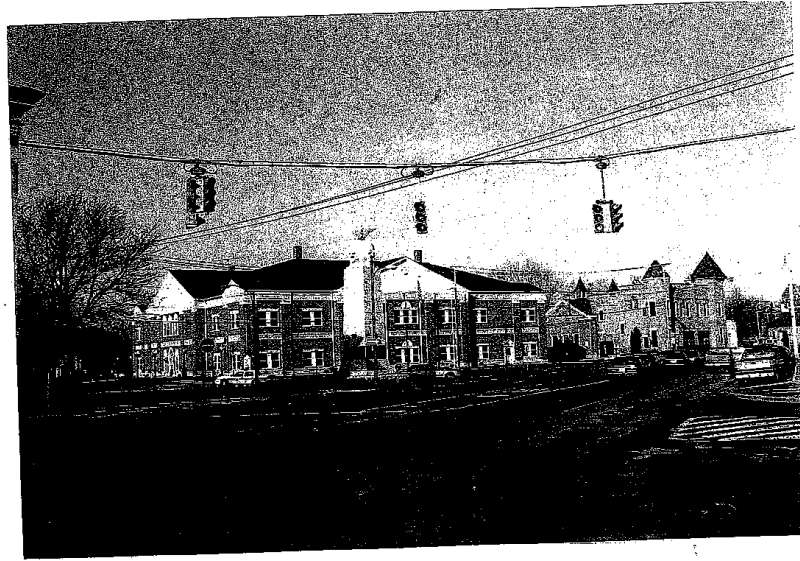


Now contrast this photograph with that taken sometime in the 1950s. The horse-drawn carriage is by this time found in history textbooks, while the type –

and number – of automobiles traveling past the Old Courthouse clearly illustrates a Batavia undergoing dramatic changes. In this photograph shown below, notice the Upton Monument, dedicated to the memory of soldiers and sailors from Genesee County. This soldiers and sailors monument was first dedicated shortly after the end of the First World War, on August 5th, 1919.



By the time of this next photograph taken about 2003 the modern Genesee County Courts Facility was at the site shown below. This was taken at 1 West Main Street, again in Batavia.



This new Courts Facility embodied a very different age, one in which the expertise of the nineteenth century craftsmen who had erected the 1841 Courthouse were like the horse-drawn carriage – realities belonging to a very different time. Passersby saw this as the photograph below illustrates. Taken in 1996, they saw the heavy beams of the new Courthouse being put into place in a scene far removed from the earlier images of that same area of downtown Batavia.

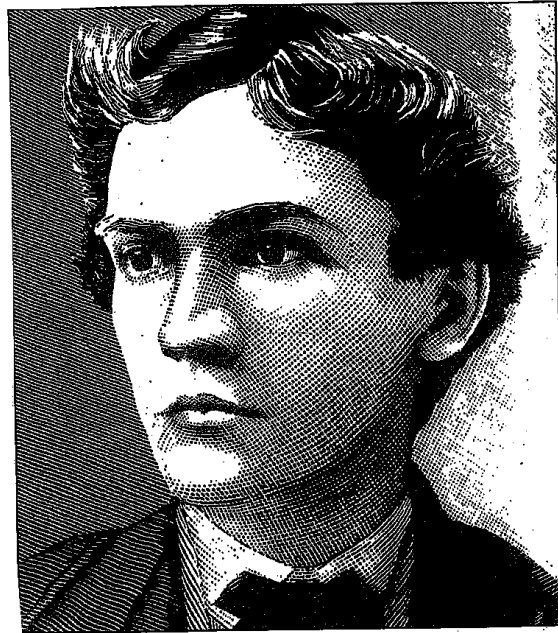


The history of the courthouses in Genesee County is of course also a history taking one beyond the architecture of the buildings and the streets outside. It is also one of drama inside the courthouse. For example, there is the infamous Polly Frisch murder trial in 1859 – indeed, the *five* trials it took to convict this woman who had poisoned her family.

To no one's surprise courtrooms are more times than not the scene of great dramas – as in the case of the Polly Frisch trials. The same is so in the case of the trial of Batavia businessman E. Newton Rowell, which ended in 1884 with his acquittal. This sensational trial was the result of Rowell's shooting to death his wife's lover – Johnson Lynch, the great-grandson of President John Adams. See their photographs below.



JOHNSON LYNCH GREAT-GRANDSON
OF PRESIDENT JOHN ADAMS



BUSINESSMAN E. NEWTON (NEWT) ROWELL

These are only two of the many dramas that have been played out to this day in Batavia's courthouses. In the new facility of our own day the Genesee County Courts Facility houses a variety of judicial activities. These include the Genesee County Supreme Court, the Genesee County Court, the Genesee County Family

Court, the Genesee County Surrogate's Court, and the Batavia City Court. The volume and variety of cases represented by these different courts capture the historical growth and attendant complexities evident in daily judicial proceedings. Nonetheless, be it the earliest frame structure of 1802, or the Old Courthouse of 1841, or the modern complex of today, the intensity of human lives continues to be depicted in the courthouses of Genesee County – along with the attendant pursuit of justice and equality before the law.