

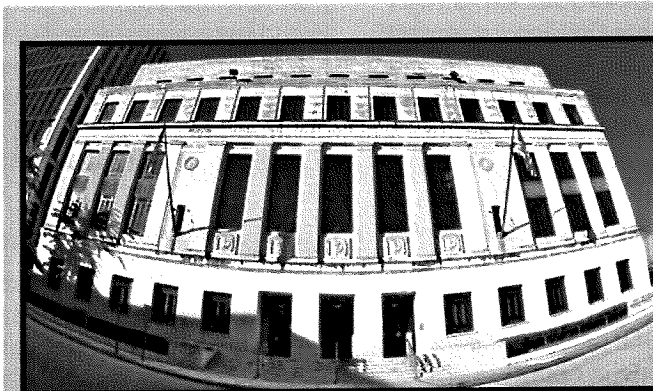
# The Southern District of Alabama Part I: The John Archibald Campbell United States Courthouse

By G. Cameron Pfeiffer-Traylor

*"But above all, the courthouse: the center, the focus, the hub; sitting looming in the center of the county's circumference like a single cloud in its ring of horizon, laying its vast shadow to the uttermost rim of horizon; musing, brooding, symbolic and ponderable, tall as cloud, solid as rock, dominating all: protector of the weak, judicate and curb of the passions and lusts, repository and guardian of the aspirations and hopes. ..."*

*William C. Faulkner,  
"The Courthouse (A Name for the City)" in "Requiem for a Nun"*

What do 24 federal judges, three saints, Nicholas Cage, the *USS Indianapolis*, a U.S. Supreme Court associate justice, a World War II hero, rock stars, Mardi Gras, thousands of citizens from countries spanning the globe, and the Revival and Art Deco architectural movements have in common? The four walls of the United States Customs and Court House in Mobile, Ala., known today as the John Archibald Campbell United States Courthouse.



The John A. Campbell Courthouse has been an anchor of the Mobile, Ala., community since the 1930s. (Photo courtesy of G.C. Pfeiffer-Traylor)



The Mobile courthouse under construction in April 1935. (National Archives at Atlanta)

Federal courthouses are more than just four austere and imposing walls. They do not stand in isolation to the world around them. Rather, they are living, breathing henges – gathering spots where the laws of the land meet the claims of the day, impacting lives and resolving disputes from the smallest of towns to the grandest of cities across the United States. Mobile's federal courthouse, and its Southern District, are no different.

Open to the public, the courthouse is where the U.S. Constitution transforms into real people, places and causes. Where decisions to honor your word, or not, peacefully translate into jury verdicts. Where criminal activity meets its punishment. Where people from all walks of life play an active role in the judicial process – whether through jury service, litigation, public service or advocacy. It is also where individuals from numerous countries pledge their loyalty to the United States and become

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naturalized citizens. The work that goes on within these walls, every day, impacts the many and plays a significant public role.

**Courthouse Origins**

From the alligator- and oyster-laden Mobile Delta to the fertile topsoil of the Black Belt, today’s Southern District of Alabama (Southern and Northern Divisions) stretches from Mobile to Selma, encompassing Baldwin, Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Escambia, Hale, Marengo, Mobile, Monroe, Perry, Washington and Wilcox counties. One of the nation’s 94 district (trial) courts and more than 200 years in the making, the Southern District and its courthouses trace their origins back to 1804 and to what was then known as the Mississippi Territory.

Apart from sporadic matters addressed at Fort Stoddert, the first “courthouse” consisted of a patch of shaded grass below the “great Jury Oak” in Baldwin County, Alabama, where the then singular federal judge held court in the early 1800s. On April 21, 1820, Congress organized Alabama as a judicial district and authorized one federal judgeship for the state. In 1824, the Southern District was officially established, covering Autauga, Baldwin, Bibb, Butler, Clarke, Conecuh, Covington, Dallas, Greene, Henry, Marengo, Mobile, Monroe, Montgomery, Perry, Pickens, Pike, Shelby, Tuscaloosa, Washington, and Wilcox counties. This led to the second “courthouse” – actually comprising of two structures, as the federal judge held court in Cahawba and Mobile four times a year.

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Thereafter, from 1867-1934, early Southern District judges held court in Mobile, on the third floor of what was then the United States Customs House and Post Office. During that period, in 1905, Selma was added as an “authorized meeting place” for the Southern District. In 1911, the Southern District was reorganized to reflect the 13 counties it now serves, and court was held both in Selma and Mobile. In 1966, the Southern District received its second judgeship, and two judges served until 1984, when a third was authorized. In sum, 24 federal judges served the Southern District (including those who hold court today), and court continued to be held both in Selma and Mobile through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Hopes for a New Courthouse**

While courthouse locations varied in the first hundred years of the Southern District, early 20<sup>th</sup> century events rendered Mobile a key contender for permanence. The 1920s “roared” through Mobile with a combination of large-scale civic projects and port expansion on the heels of a post-World War I shipbuilding boom. Such activity injected the local economy with new industries as well as a variety of factories along the waterfront. However, this commercial renaissance in the Port City abruptly paused in the fall of 1929, as the Great Depression hit, presenting challenges. Even so, despite facing hard times, more notable events were in store, and the 1930s brought The New Deal to Mobile and a new federal building.

Early 1930s Mobile reawakened from a period of reflection and self-preservation, reigniting its renaissance. Cotton exports, banana imports, downtown dock expansions, formation of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society (1935), construction of Bellingrath Gardens (1932), the maritime industry skyrocketing, and an influx of new citizens quickly revamped the city. Cotton and corn ruled, with Alabama producing 1,312,963 bales of cotton and 35,683,874 bushels of corn in 1930. Alabama’s Tallulah Brockman Bankhead was becoming a star of stage, screen and radio. The newly launched Alabama Deep Sea Fishing Rodeo was a hit. Chocolate milk cost 5 cents at Van Antwerp’s, and you could buy a Plymouth for \$445 or eat a full breakfast at Morrison’s for 13 cents. Amid these changes, there were rumblings of a new federal building in downtown Mobile. In 1932, a local bank president wrote to The Press Register:

Dear Sir: While we are very much opposed to expenditure of monies by the government for any purpose which is not absolutely essential to its conduct, we are informed that there is an appropriation of \$100,000,000.00 for Public Buildings. If it is really necessary (sic) that the Government spend this money (and we hope it is not)

*See “The Southern District of Alabama” page 38*

we naturally hope that a portion of it will be spent for a Federal Building in Mobile, for if any city in the United States needs a Federal Building (which we doubt) it is Mobile.

Just two years later, in 1934, the Southern District underwent a pivotal change, as its stately new home at 113 Saint Joseph St. began to take shape.

### **Courthouse Comes to Mobile: 1934-1935**

The Southern District courthouse was initially erected as a public federal building named the United States Court House and Custom House (which remains inscribed on the façade today). Placed in the National Park Service's prestigious and protected National Register of Historic Places on Oct. 8, 2008, "this building stands as a symbol of the Federal presence in Mobile while serving as a ... fine example of Federal architecture of the 1930s. The building is significant in American history and architecture and possesses integrity of design, materials and workmanship ... and serves as a good example of the Modern Classic style of architecture using a combination of Neo-Classical Revival, Renaissance Revival and Art Deco inspired detailing." So, how did such a striking structure arrive in Mobile?

A number of downtown sites were considered. The contract for the new federal building was awarded on Sept. 1, 1934, and construction began 24 days later. The building was completed on Dec. 9, 1935, and was hailed as a success and a welcome sight in downtown Mobile as "(f)ederal agencies acquired additional respect as employers, since they could always meet their payrolls." The Mobile Register reported then-Congressman John McDuffie's efforts behind bringing the building to Mobile with a laudatory description of the building:

McDuffie has been a leader in the fight for the building. Quick action by treasury officials, after finding funds were sufficient for the construction, was due to Mr. McDuffie's insistence ... (t)he building – long a dream of civic leaders ... likely will become a realization within 12 months ... (c)ontrasted will be the scene, by that time, at St. Joseph and St. Louis Streets. Where now a row of unsightly buildings presents a shabby appearance on the outskirts of Mobile's business area, by the end of a year will stand the magnificent structure, memorial to the efforts of Mobile's citizenry and the untiring work of those, such as Congressman McDuffie, in obtaining the building. ... (T)he new government structure will stand five stores high, a magnificent edifice of modified Greek architecture ... the building will be one of the most beautiful of its type in the country. ... On the first floor will be located the naturalization bureau, immigration department, recruiting offices for the marine corps, army and navy, customs storage room, collector of

internal revenue office, bureau of plant industry, bureau of narcotics, offices of the organized reserves, and two small laboratories. ... Two handsome elevators and stairs will lead up from the lobby to the second floor, which is occupied entirely by the department of justice. The federal courtroom, the architects' crowning piece of artistry, will take up the entire front half of the building on that floor, with its ceiling extending through the third floor. Plans provide for special acoustical treatment ... and a ventilation system which will permit the design of windows to shut out noise from the streets. Even sounds from the courtroom lobby will not be heard in the courtroom. The judge's private office will open off the courtroom and will be adjoined by his library. ... The office of the clerk ... and his assistants ... will occupy the second floor, with a witness room, the marshal's public and private offices, the office of the field deputies and a small cell room for prisoners on trial. The third floor ... will be devoted to the department of justice, with rooms for the grand jury and witnesses; the district attorney's suite ... probation officer's private and public offices, the United States commissioner's office and public hearing room, and the deputy prohibition administrator's offices ... the fourth floor will be devoted chiefly to the collector of customs and the coast guard. The army engineer's corps and the weather bureau will be located on the fifth floor. Provision has been made for weather bureau apparatus on the roof ... the building will be heated from the boiler room and ... will be ventilated by a duct system. A light court in the rear ... will provide light for the entire structure.

As for the specifics, with an original contract price of \$363,100 – and under the talented eyes of local architectural firm Carey and Dowling and Louis A. Simon (supervising architect, U.S. Department of Treasury) – construction began in 1934 on 1.8 acres of packed sand strategically selected for its location at 113 Saint Joseph St. Interestingly, the architect decided, "after rather lengthy consideration," to construct the building out of Alabama limestone "taken from quarries in the northern section of the state" for which McDuffie was "gratified" as "I have been anxious that the project benefit industry of our own state."

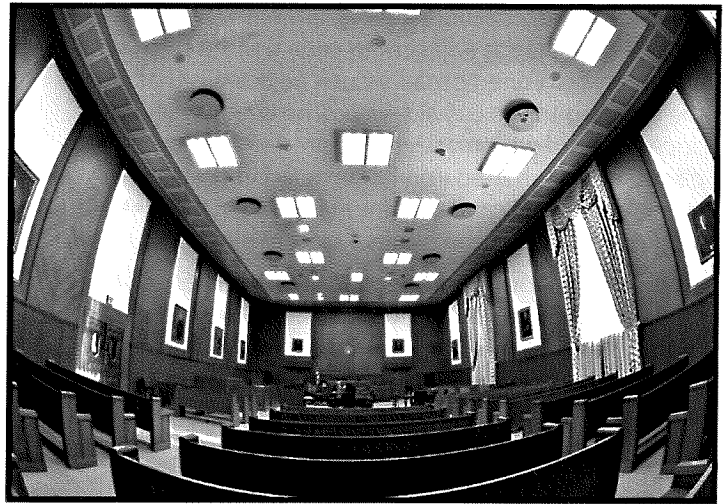
The sandy plot was available after the United States Custom House and Post Office (1856), a three-story Neo-Renaissance structure designed by architect Ammi B. Young, was razed. Only a handful of feet above sea level and a few blocks shy of the Mobile River and the state's only saltwater port, the federal building was situated at the corner of three saints – Saint Joseph, Saint Michael and Saint Louis streets – in one of the oldest sections of Mobile. Its purpose was two-fold: to house the United States Custom Service and the United States Courts.

The architectural mood of Alabama in the early 1930s is reflected in the building's style: "(G)rowing out of a

## The Southern District of Alabama, continued



In a photo from 1934, construction continues on the West Ceremonial Courtroom of the courthouse in Mobile. (National Archives at Atlanta)



The West Ceremonial Courtroom on the second floor, as it appears today. (Photo courtesy of G.C. Pfeiffer-Traylor)

conscious attempt to cast off entirely or to highly stylize any allusions to the architectural past, the Art Deco, Art Moderne ... styles all made their appearance. ... All three trends share in common an emphasis upon a streamlined appearance and sleek functionalism ... (yet) in Art Deco, an emphasis upon zigzags and other geometrical decorations about doors, windows and rooflines." As a whole, the building presents an exacting blend of the Neo-Classical Revival, Renaissance Revival and Art Deco architectural styles, while being rooted in the Modern Classic federal architecture of the 1930s.

The 1934 construction process temporarily transformed a little brick paved street in Mobile into a cultural crossroads, employing construction workers and artists from across the nation. Nashville brick/stone masons; Mobile painters, roofers, electricians and glaziers; New Orleans plumbers; Atlanta plasterers; Detroit ornamental metal workers; Ohio elevator installers; Montgomery marble/terrazzo installers; Dallas pipe layers; New York cork floor installers; and Virginia linoleum installers worked side by side for over a year to bring the plans to life. A foundation of Alabama limestone, supported by Stone Mountain granite, fortified the building to withstand the tests of time in this sub-tropical and hurricane-prone climate. Insulated with only "hair felt," the building was illuminated by brass light fixtures, and, though situated in one of the highest rainfall cities in the nation, it lacked waterproofing or drains, having only galvanized wrought iron downspouts. Despite the sweltering nature of Mobile summers, the building lacked air conditioning; the only ventilation was "for the courtrooms" and consisted of a

"fan," *apparently in the singular*. Over the approximately 14 months of construction, the contract price increased only \$3,133.52, for a total cost of \$366,233.52.

Commanding in scale and massive, with monumental and rectilinear form, modestly detailed wall surfaces and carved ornamentation, the building is an eye-catcher. In short, it's all in the details. A casual stroll around the exterior reveals a subtle symphony of refined materials and conscientiously placed architectural gems. Like any well-heeled "80 something" Alabama "Grande Dame" bedecked in her finest, the takeaway is a simultaneously stalwart and elegant presence. So, let's pause to properly greet this great lady and take a closer look at the four walls that architecturally exalt the Southern District.

### Architectural Tour

The primary façade represents the most stunning architectural jewel of this building and is simply a standout. Facing east to greet the morning sun and rooted in a granite base, five stories of glowing, smooth, white Alabama limestone ashlar (spanning some 146,000 square feet) rise up from Saint Joseph Street, adorned with dazzling Michigan cast bronze ornamentation, to define the building and graciously welcome the public at the main entrance.

The building was erected with a U-shaped footprint (to provide illumination and ventilation for interior spaces). The front façade sits at the bottom of the U with (originally) an expansive open light court at its center. The first floor is set off by a continuous molded projecting stringcourse running horizontally between

the first and second floors. A monument featuring the Bill of Rights stands adjacent to wide granite steps with minimally fashioned broad stone cheek walls that join the building to the city sidewalk. The cheek walls were once adorned with massive mounted single cylindrical pillar and star-shaped iron lanterns, accentuating the main entry functionally and ornamentally. While the lanterns no longer are present, the original placement mounts remain.

Looking up toward the second and third floors, you see large windows grouped into three prominent bays in an unfenestrated stone field. The center bay contains five openings separated by four fluted pilasters. Each window rests on a limestone spandrel panel at the second-floor level, and centered stone fields, bookending the center bay, are adorned with two mounted flagpoles and symmetrically placed carved recessed symbols of the agencies that originally occupied the building (medallions) within a glyphed octagon (the United States Department of Justice seal, and a Latin inscription with the scales of justice seal). The center bay also presents five more carvings: two scales of justice, with laurel wreath and bundled axe motifs; two lamps of knowledge; and the American eagle surrounded by a laurel wreath and bundled ax motif. The end bays feature three grouped windows with taller openings and ornate ornamental bronze spandrels with vine motifs between the second- and third-floor windows, separated by fluted pilasters. Decorative borders and chevron designs also separate the second- and third-floor windows. Fluted iconic pilasters accent the walls between the second and third floors, rising to an unembellished entablature that wraps around the building. A continuous denticulated molding separates the architrave and the frieze. Within the frieze, centered on the façade, are incised the words "United States Court House and Custom House," accented by a panel of relief-work displaying foliage and carved rosettes.

Unembellished entablature and denticulated molding delineate the third and fourth floors, adding definition to the building's mid-section. The third-floor windows are accented with a glyphed band of ornamentation and centered carved starburst design. A repetition of pilasters separates the window openings, mimicking those at the lower levels yet smaller in scale to give "the illusion of greater height to the building." The fourth floor is stepped back from the lower floors. Each bay is separated by a simple limestone pilaster and a simple molded cornice along the base of the parapet wall, accented at intervals with raised five-point stars aligned in a repeating pattern. The four floors are 13 bays wide along this elevation. The fifth floor lacks ornamentation and is further stepped back from the fourth floor, and is 11 bays wide, merging seamlessly with the roof parapet. The penthouse and attic, brick with limestone parapets, rise above.

Facing the courthouse steps, let's turn right to the north elevation, detailed similarly but lacking the additional ornamentation of the east center bay. This elevation divides the original building from a later addition and features a monumental bronze gate with Art Deco delights. Slightly arched and depicting stylized Art Deco scrollwork and fretwork designs in shapes favoring that of a building and a wave, the gate marks the line between the addition and the original building and once provided access to the central light court. Originally comprising 10 bays on the first through fourth floors and eight on the fifth, the addition increased this to 18 bays on the first through fourth floors and 17 bays on the fifth floor. Just past the gate, a secondary courthouse entrance features reeded granite cheek walls flanking granite stairs set off against limestone walls that rise to a recessed aluminum paneled entry vestibule with a decorative transom motif. The opening to the vestibule is surrounded by a limestone jamb detailed in a reeded design. Massive original lanterns flank paired bronze doors.

Traveling on, we find the west elevation, now partially hidden by an employee parking garage. Ornamentation includes bronze spandrel panels between the second- and third-floor lower windows and moldings and cornices of the adjacent elevations that wrap around this side of the building. The broad middle section is surfaced in brick masonry showing the 1940 addition. Smooth limestone belt courses mimic the moldings and cornices on the other elevations above the first, third and fourth floors. The attic rises from this central section, giving the appearance of a sixth floor, and it houses mechanical equipment, including the original air handlers that serviced the second floor's ceremonial courtroom – reportedly the first air-conditioned courtroom in the United States.

Around the corner, the south elevation presents, continuing the general massing and rhythm of the building yet today virtually invisible because of the close proximity of the nine-story Federal Corps of Engineers building. The only ornamentation is the repeating pattern of bronze spandrel panels between the second- and third-floor lower windows.

Returning to the front façade, notice the courthouse doors before stepping inside. Lacking ornamentation, the three main doors are set back into three central bays. Simple rectangular portals, aligned vertically with the windows above, provide passage through a deeply recessed threshold to the main entry doors. This threshold serves as an exterior vestibule and features granite flooring, limestone walls, a plaster ceiling, original suspended white globe lights and three sets of paired bronze and glass doors.

## **The Southern District of Alabama, continued**

Upon entering the main vestibule and lobby, dotted with Art Deco light fixtures and fixed glazed panels in doors/transoms, guests are greeted by a portrait of U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice John A. Campbell, the building's namesake. Prominently situated above Campbell's antique Victorian mahogany chair, a bronze plaque in his name is affixed to the lobby wall. Outside, a stone wall reflects the building's name in his honor.

The main lobby serves as a hub of activity, and the ground floor remains the locus for public services as it did back on Dec. 8, 1941, when World War II hero, physician and author Dr. Sidney C. Phillips, Jr. (1924-2015) voluntarily enlisted in the courthouse lobby. Some 72 years later, he returned to the building as the honored guest speaker for the December 2013 naturalization ceremony, reflecting upon his lobby "visit."

The lobby also has been a gathering spot of sorts since the 1930s for thousands of foreign individuals (and their friends and families), while they awaited their turn at

the elevators to travel to the second-floor ceremonial courtroom to be sworn in as newly naturalized citizens. Like the vestibule, the lobby retains much of its original character – Art Deco stylings of corbeled travertine clad walls, corbeled pilasters, walnut doors, terrazzo tile floors and the like. Other original features include the brass Office Directory placard mounted on the lobby wall, and the cast iron grilles in the vestibule set within travertine panels.

While the first floor has undergone interior renovations over the years, it remains the main public access point (for court employees, jurors, attorneys, litigants, newly naturalized citizens, visitors, etc.) and location of the intake unit for court's dockets. Today, one courtroom (a later addition), the jury assembly room, IT offices and the clerk's office are included on this floor. Portraits of the Southern District clerks of court since 1935 are also on display.

Upstairs, the second floor is anchored by two primary courtrooms resplendent with mahogany and a small

*continued, next page*

## **The Eleventh Circuit Historical Society**

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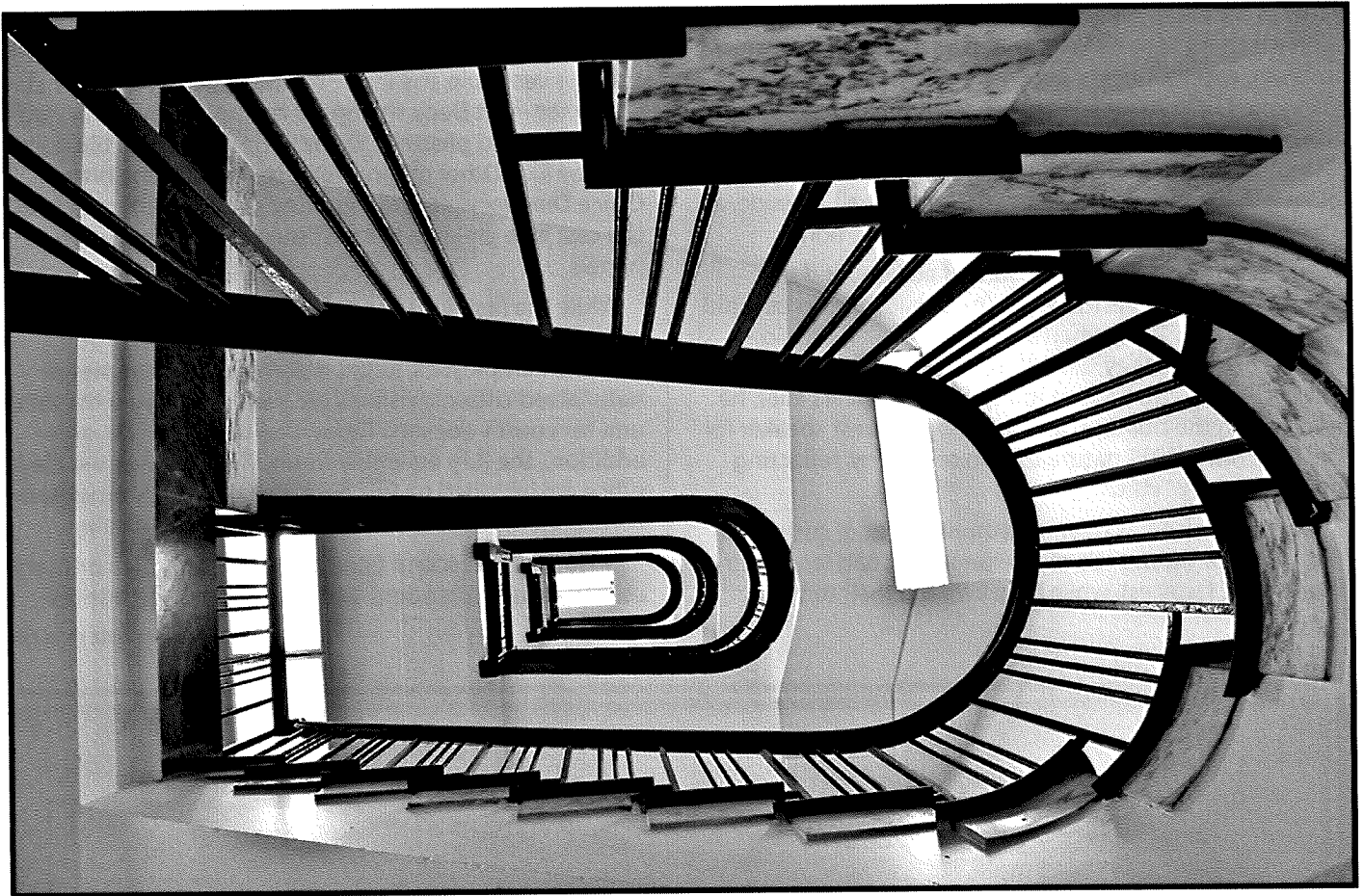
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The interior stairwell, here seen looking up from the first floor, is a show-stopper. (Photo courtesy of G.C. Pfeiffer-Traylor)

lobby featuring portraits of the judges who have served and currently serve the Southern District. These special spaces retain the integrity of the building's original character-defining features, which are introduced with grand flair and include gorgeous Cardiff green marble wainscoting, terrazzo floors, plaster walls/ceilings, walnut details, wood moldings, decorative bronze grilles and 1930s furniture.

The west courtroom, now the ceremonial courtroom, serves the chief judge. The courtroom doors are oversized wood pocket doors that open to paired leather-covered fly doors surrounded by corbeled wood moldings. Inside, eight slightly recessed wood panels, plaster walls and highly skilled millwork adds to the room's beauty. Along the walls, full-height wood paneling and wainscot five feet in height capped with four-inch glyphed dado rails rest on 11-inch Cardiff green marble bases, while impressive doorways feature rounded and corbeled surrounds and an architrave detailed with triglyphs. Wood veneer panels in alternating diagonal patterns cover the remaining

walls. Decorative bronze grilles with fluted borders and a plaster ceiling with a decorative cornice of acanthus leaves carry the building's artistry skyward.

Much of the furniture is original – the judge's bench, jury box, clerk's desk and courtroom gallery benches – and showcase a fluted border with black wood inlay. The original cork tile floor in the courtroom and judge's chambers – a checkered pattern of medium and light browns – remains underfoot hidden by contemporary carpeting. The grandeur of the 1930s is on display, and the sense of import of any hearing held in the room is undeniable, as litigants present their cases under portraits of past chief judges of the Southern District. The connecting chief judge's chambers features diamond-shaped wood panels, walnut veneer covering the full wall height, semicircular fan wood designs, original copper finished lights, panel wood wainscot, wood shelving and crown molding.

The east courtroom features an abundance of wood detailing and was the original ceremonial courtroom

## The Southern District of Alabama, continued

when constructed. After the addition, the west courtroom was added and the east courtroom was converted to an open floor plan for use by the Customs Service. In the 1960s, the space was returned to its original intended use and still functions as a courtroom today – presenting a modern and streamlined feel with minimally stylized floor-to-ceiling wall paneling and little ornamentation or carving.

Walking toward the interior stairwell we find another show-stopper. Elaborately finished between the first and second floors, the stairwell's curved walls are covered with white marble wainscot accented with a Cardiff green dado rail, Cardiff green marble stair stringers and treads with white marble risers, an iron balustrade with a polished brass railing, and a polished brass handrail mounted to the marble wainscot. Above the second floor, the stair materials change to green terrazzo with



A portrait of John A. Campbell along with Campbell's Victorian mahogany chair are on display in the first-floor lobby. (Photo courtesy of G.C. Pfeiffer-Traylor)

risers/stringers of painted iron and a balustrade with wood versus brass railing. The repetitive spiraling pattern of the stairwell beautifully captures the 1930s architectural aesthetic.

The third through fifth floors house the U.S. Marshals, satellite offices for U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby and the U.S. Attorney, IT training, an Eleventh Circuit chambers, the grand jury room, and four additional courtrooms with judges' chambers. Throughout these floors, many original finishes remain – hallways with terrazzo and marble borders/wainscot, plaster walls, mahogany doors, unique wood millwork, and the original brass mail chutes on each floor's hallway. The fifth floor also contains a conference room featuring paintings by local artists, which provides a spot for court employees to gather under the Latin phrases "*Audi Alteram Partem*" (listen to the other side) and "*Justitia Omnibus*" (justice for all) – tangible reminders of the purposes of the four walls within which the Southern District sits.

### The Addition: 1939-1940

In 1939, the Southern District underwent another metamorphosis as the receiver of funding from President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal "alphabet soup program" (e.g., the Works Progress Administration or WPA), which contributed an addition to the building. This led to expanding the building's size westward with renovations of what was the open light court – matching the expansion of the surrounding city. In July 1939, the Public Buildings Administration with the Federal Work Agency began the bidding process for an "extension and remodeling" of the courthouse. Bid invitations included specific instructions – "the patching or hiding of defects (in the stone and marble work) shall not be permitted(,)" for the existing structure "stones to be removed shall be carefully handled so as not to be chipped or broken" – and included detailed schematics to match the existing building. A \$280,000 addition was proposed in July 1938, with Mobilian John W. McClure, U.S. Treasury Department construction engineer, rendering sketches for submission to the government architect.

In September 1938, plans for the addition, "the annex," were progressing rapidly, with notes that it "would include a new federal courtroom a facility which is considered sorely needed due to the small size of the present room. It has also been pointed out that the acoustics of the present courtroom are poor." The addition, completed in 1940 and designed by federal architect Simon, enclosed the open (west) end of the light court and connected interior hallways at the west end of the building. The construction was intended to be sympathetic and join seamlessly with the original building, and while brickwork

(versus limestone) was used, it was painted to match. With the addition, a new air-conditioned courtroom was constructed opposite the second-floor ceremonial courtroom – making this the first air-conditioned courthouse in the United States. A few years later, in 1958, bids were taken to air condition the entire building and reconstruct the pre-existing air-conditioning systems in one courtroom and judge's chambers.

### **Courthouse Namesake**

In 1979, an Act of Congress introduced by Mobile U.S. Congressman Jack Edwards (upon the suggestion of Mobile attorney and local historian David A. Bagwell) named the federal courthouse in Mobile in Campbell's honor. In 1981, the building was officially named the John Archibald Campbell United States Courthouse in honor of U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice John Archibald Campbell (1853-1861).

Born in Georgia on June 24, 1811, Campbell graduated from college at 14, was admitted to the Georgia Bar at 18 and the Alabama Bar at 19, was elected to the legislature from Montgomery in 1836, and was Mobile's only U.S. Supreme Court Justice. In 1837, he moved to Mobile, where he practiced until 1852. When a vacancy appeared on the U.S. Supreme Court in 1852, the sitting justices were so impressed with Campbell that they called upon President Franklin Pierce for his appointment. President Pierce selected Campbell for appointment, and he was confirmed in four days in 1853. He served until 1861, when he resigned with Alabama's secession, believing he was no longer a U.S. citizen and thus no longer eligible to serve. He "was one of us; his signature is on the sheepskin list of the bar of the Southern District of Alabama ... the oldest bar association in the state." "Campbell had an extensive U.S. Supreme Court practice, arguing six cases there in the 1851-52 term alone. He argued cases, among others, relating to land titles in downtown Mobile, where the Spanish and French background and post-Constitutional statehood made the issue complex; he thought up, argued and convinced the Supreme Court to adopt what is known as 'the original footing doctrine' of the Union, that later states came in upon the same basis as the original states." Campbell also wrote a concurring opinion in the Dred Scott case.

Campbell is described as a minor bureaucratic functionary in the Confederate government during the Civil War, but he was one of the Commissioners of the Confederacy at the Hampton Roads Conference, where he met personally with President Abraham Lincoln on a steamboat in Virginia to try to end the war. Additionally, "(f)ollowing Lincoln's April 14, 1865, assassination,

Campbell was arrested on May 30, 1865, and sent to Fort Pulaski in Georgia; he claimed to not know why, writing, 'I should be glad to know why I am arrested and detained.' Only later would he learn that it was on suspicion of conspiracy in President Lincoln's assassination. Campbell was released in October 1865." Former fellow Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Curtis wrote President Andrew Johnson that "Judge Campbell, as you ... know, was not only clear of all connection with the conspiracy to destroy the government, but incurred great odium in the South especially in his own state, by his opposition to it." Johnson released Campbell from prison.

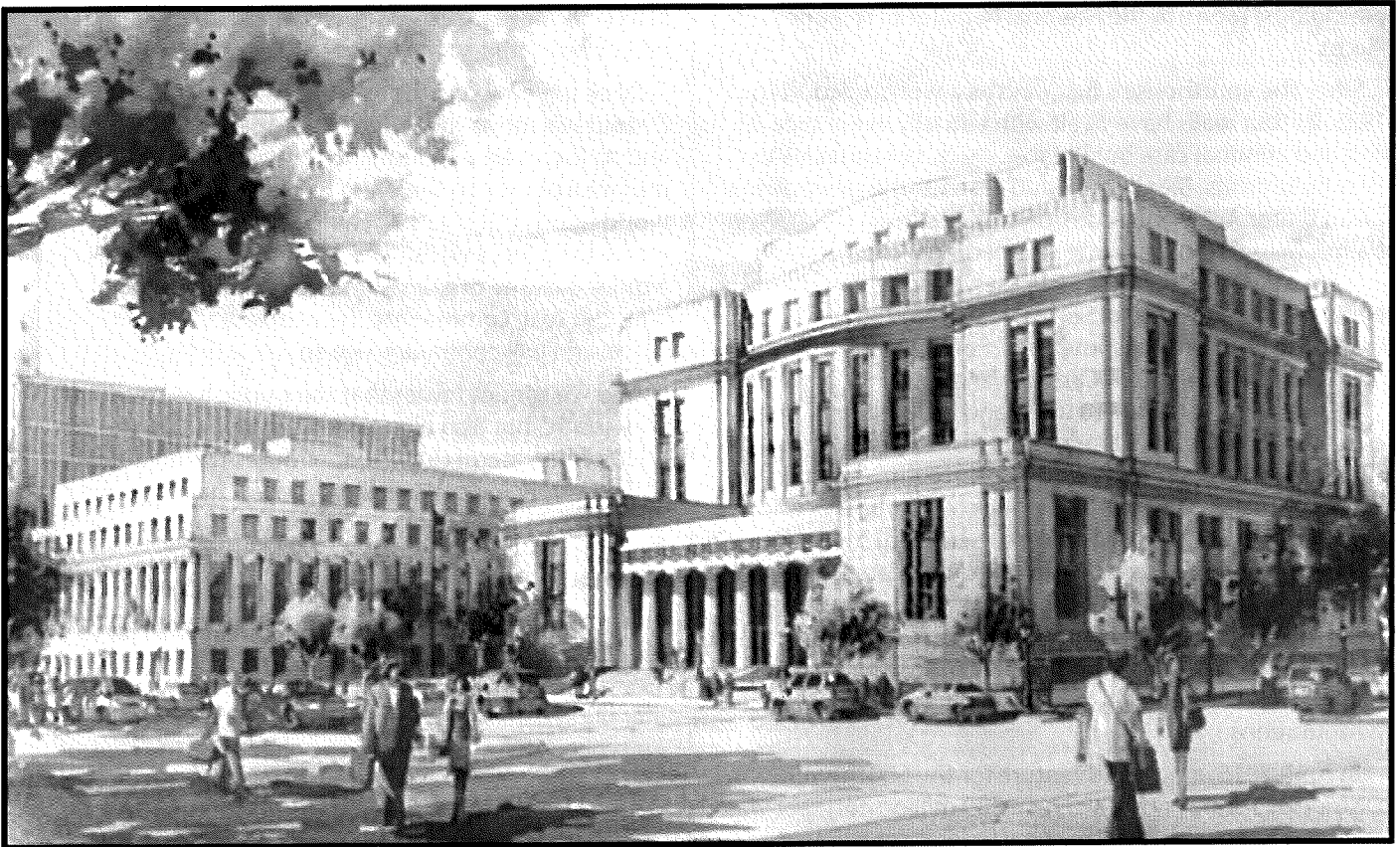
Following his release, Campbell moved to New Orleans and resumed practice, with six Supreme Court cases in a year. He argued (and lost) the famous Slaughterhouse cases, but in a particular case, many of the U.S. Supreme Court justices said his argument was the best they had heard in their careers (the legendary Myra Gaines cases, to quiet title to all of downtown New Orleans in one woman). He later moved to Baltimore, where he continued to practice. In 1889, the Supreme Court invited him to the Centennial Celebration of the U.S. Judiciary. He declined due to poor health, responding: "Tell the Court that I join daily in the prayer, 'God Save the United States and bless this Honorable Court.'"

As for the man Campbell was, it is said that his:

... apparent character was like the firefly's lamp: light, without heat. A master of reasoning, profound in logic and inspired by a commanding sense of justice, he was ... 'a man all head and no heart.' He lived to himself and in the things that seemed to him important. He was possibly the most distinguished nationally of any of the persons who have in the past lived in Mobile. He was a great lawyer, a man of profound learning and a justice of the United States Supreme Court whose decisions are ranked among the ablest ever delivered in that tribunal. It is said of him that he was absolutely incapable of prejudice or of obstinacy of opinion. The truth, and the truth only, was the object of his incessant study, and he was not satisfied until he found it. Painstaking to the last degree, he may almost be said to have burdened his judgments with citations; but he had the satisfaction of knowing that his work was thoroughly done and would stand up under the severest fire of criticism. ... The motto obeyed by Judge Campbell, therefore, was Thoroughness. Whatever he set himself to do, he did with all his might. He did not leave his work half-finished. He was in this respect the model upon which all men seeking success in business or profession should form themselves.

Justice Campbell died in 1889 and was buried in Baltimore. The Mobile Register eulogy reads:

Among them all (the chiefs who had part in the war) there is none whose record is full of more valuable instruction than that of John A. Campbell. In him was



An artist's rendering of a new courthouse, to be built close to the historic building. (Photo courtesy of U.S. District Court, S.D. Ala.)

***In April 2015, a novel adventure for the Southern District was announced when an \$89 million contract was awarded to construct both a new federal courthouse a stone's throw from the historic building and to revamp the existing building to house the offices of the District's U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Bankruptcy Administration, U.S. Probation Office, U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Pretrial Services, Veterans Affairs, Federal Defenders and General Services Administration.***

embodied a personal, moral and an intellectual force of the very highest order. He moved among great men. He argued great cases, he adjudicated great causes. A leader in war and in peace he proved himself faithful to every trust and equal to every occasion. His life was a continuous and systematic effort to do good things and to achieve great things, and in both he was eminently successful.

Judge Richard B. Owen, "sometime mayor of Mobile" and one of Campbell's students, also wrote a tribute in The

Mobile Register at the time of his death:

It is to his virtues as a private citizen, his kindness and generosity as a friend and patron and his devotion and tenderness in the domestic circle that I fain would do appropriate homage ... his character was probably thoroughly understood by but few of his fellow citizen of Mobile; but, in very truth, it can be said by those to whom the inner sanctuary of his life was opened his name will be forever honored and the memory of his friendship a joy forever. Dignified and somewhat stern in demeanor, it was not easy to apprehend him. He was the friend ... of young men who aspired to something loftier than the mere accumulation of money and who studied law for its training in statesmanship and as a means for the elevation of the country's citizenship and the advancement of the country's greatness.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In 2008, state-of-the-art interior renovations were completed to the first floor's main clerks' office, jury room, and intake area. In the spring of that year, Campbell descendants donated his antique Victorian chair to the Southern District, now prominently displayed in the lobby. That October, the building obtained its protected (and

## The Southern District of Alabama, continued

prestigious) listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Since the courthouse's first days as a working court in 1935, its four walls have dealt with virtually every type of civil and criminal case imaginable – e.g., conspiracies to distribute drugs, BP oil spill fraud cases, turtle smuggling, Clean Water Act, public corruption, constitutional claims, billboard bans, same sex marriage, employment discrimination, Civil Rights Act cases, prisoner litigation, maritime disputes, Social Security appeals, terrorism, intellectual property disputes, etc. For example, from June 2014-2015, the Southern District handled 1,131 civil and criminal cases, entailing 18 trials, and including: (1) on the civil side – 102 Social Security appeals, 18 product liability suits, 149 prisoner petitions, 20 real property disputes, 28 labor suits, 100 contracts disputes, 65 tort cases and 97 civil rights actions; and (2) on the criminal side – 71 nonmarijuana drug cases, 21 immigration cases, 115 firearms/explosive cases, 61 fraud cases, 27 sex offense cases and 12 cases for larceny. While the official business of the court will continue, the four walls within which the Southern District sits are on the brink of even more permutations.

In April 2015, a novel adventure for the Southern District was announced when an \$89 million contract was awarded to construct both a new federal courthouse a stone's throw from the historic building and to revamp the existing building to house the offices of the District's U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Bankruptcy Administration, U.S. Probation Office, U.S. Marshals Service, U.S. Pretrial Services, Veterans Affairs, Federal Defenders and General Services Administration. Just as the original federal building had economic impact in 1935, the new courthouse is projected as an economic boost to the local economy: "1,957 to 1,829 jobs, with Mobile County payrolls ranging from \$20.16 million and \$38.4 million."

The historic building also has recently become a movie star. In the summer of 2015, the cast and crew of the WWII movie "USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage" descended on the courthouse, filming the pivotal court-martial scene with actor Nicholas Cage (in his role as Capt. Charles Butler McVay) in the second-floor ceremonial courtroom, selected for its historic integrity and early 20<sup>th</sup> century atmosphere.

Across the street, exploration of the land on which the new federal courthouse will rise is already complete. Archaeological excavations of what was formerly a grouping of 1830s family homes owned by doctors, business owners and lawyers were finished in October 2015, uncovering dishes, glass, potshards and other 19<sup>th</sup> century household items. Moreover, as of mid-November 2015, some renovations have been completed in the

historic building, as Bankruptcy and Veterans Affairs offices relocated to the former fifth-floor law library.

Once the new courthouse is constructed, the Southern District will move "next door," but the 1935 building and its four walls will remain – undergoing additional metamorphoses to serve the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world upon which its 19<sup>th</sup> century foundations were laid. Indeed, the "four walls" of the Southern District – whether a great oak tree or grand limestone edifice – have adapted to accommodate the needs of the public they serve, and will continue to do so.

And we cannot forget that the public has been not only inside, but also alongside its four walls since the 1800s when Mardi Gras parade routes traveled down Saint Joseph and today still pass near the courthouse. Colorful beads tossed by those on floats to those who shouted "Throw me something, Mister" often decorate the 1930s granite steps and trees on the right of way, catching the light as a reminder of the revelry just outside the "earnest goings-on" inside. And starting in the 1990s, Mobile's BayFest citywide rock concert was held, literally surrounding the structure and entertaining court employees for days with sound checks by the likes of Keith Urban, Duran Duran and B.B. King.

While revelry will always abound outside its four walls, the Southern District will continue to take seriously its mission of justice for all, as well as its role in the historic and architectural fabric of the United States judiciary. As noted in the National Registry nomination: The United States Court House and Custom House is "a civic icon." Here's hoping that this landmark structure will continue to be one for the next 80 years.

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