

# The Lackawanna Historical Society BULLETIN

Vol. 11, No. 1

February 1978



## LACKAWANNA COUNTY COURT HOUSE

The Lackawanna County Court House stands on a central square in the city of Scranton. Many of us pass it regularly, probably without much more than a passing glance and with little knowledge of the history and interesting story behind this imposing structure.

Lackawanna County was the 67th and last county to be created in Pennsylvania. Declared a new county on August 21, 1878 by Gov. John Hartranft, with Scranton as the county seat, there was an immediate need for court and county offices. Quarters were soon secured for the county offices in the Second National Bank Bld. at 234 Lackawanna Avenue and the county courts were held in Washington Hall across the street where Sampster's store now stands. These offices served the new county for almost six years until the present court house was completed.

County officials soon began seeking a suitable site for a new county court house. Largely through the instrumentality of Dr. B.H. Throop, the officials of the Lackawanna Iron and Coal Co. and the Susquehanna and Wyoming Valley Railroad Co. donated an empty square in the center of the city to the county. It was bounded by Washington and Adams Avenues and Spruce and Linden Streets and had been for a long time the location of a swamp, well known as the lily pond in the summer and an ice pond in the winter. This swampy area had only recently been filled in with slag and ashes from

the Iron Company furnaces. The lot was deeded to the County Commissioners as a site for county and city buildings and a public park on Dec. 15, 1879.

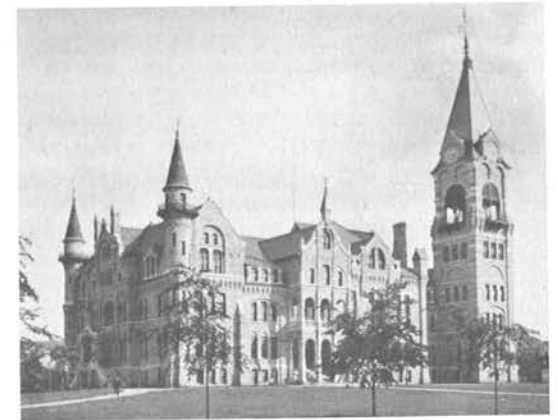
Early in 1880 a competition was advertised for plans for a first-class, fire proof court house 100 by 140 costing no more than \$100,000. The first plans accepted were drawn by Milton E. Beebe, Buffalo, N.Y. but the bids for the same came to \$204,000, so were rejected as being too expensive. A new circular was issued in October and on Jan. 6, 1881 the plans of Isaac G. Perry, a prominent Binghamton, N.Y. architect were accepted. They called for a two and half story edifice of Norman and Romanesque Victorian style to be constructed of native West Mountain stone trimmed with Onondago grey limestone. The construction contract was awarded to John Snaith of Ithica, N.Y. for a cost of \$139,929. The first Commissioners Henry L. Gage, Horace F. Barrett and Dennis Tierney issued bonds for \$150,000, to pay for the structure. Ground was broken on April 15, 1881.

The necessity of excavating to the depth of 30 feet to reach a solid foundation caused an additional cost of \$30,000 to the job and delayed the work so that it was not until over a year later that the foundations were completed and the cornerstone could be laid. This was a cause for great rejoicing and an impressive ceremony was planned. The day May 25, 1882 was a disappointingly rainy one; nevertheless a parade of G.A.R., National Guard and Masonic units marched to the site led by Bauer's and Ringold's Bands where under a huge tent a large crowd witnessed the impressive Masonic ceremonies as the two-ton cornerstone was lowered into place and an oration was delivered by Judge Alfred Hand. An interesting collection of memorabilia were enclosed in the cornerstone which can still be seen on the Spruce Street side of the Court House. A Grand Banquet was held that evening at the Wyoming House attended by dignitaries and members of the Lackawanna Bar at which no less than 18 speeches were made, causing the affair to last to a very late hour.

Work on the Court House continued until it was finally completed and ready for occupancy. Dedication ceremonies were held on Monday, March 24, 1884 with the opening of the Courts by Presiding Judge John Handley. The Contractor then delivered the finished building to the Commissioners: H.P. Jacobs, W.W. Williams and Patrick Coar. Speeches were made by several officials and the building was thrown open for public inspection. That evening a banquet was held in the first floor corridor by the Lackawanna

County Bar Asso. It was an outstanding affair, "brilliantly illuminated by gaslights, with orchestra music, a catered dinner of twelve courses and though no wine was served, it was said that spirits were available in the basement." This was the one and only time such an affair was held in the Court House. The final cost of the finished court house was \$259,360 for construction, furnishings and landscaping the grounds, considerably in excess of the original estimates. A photograph of the new Court House as it appeared in the 1880's is printed above.

Within a dozen years the building proved to be too small. More space was needed for expanding county offices. Accordingly plans were drawn by a local architect B. Taylor Lacey and a contract let to Conrad Schroeder for \$61,457 to raise the roof and add a third story to the Court House. This work began in July 1896 and was completed in 1897. Some of the exterior design was changed as will be noted in the second photograph. The exterior appearance of the Court House has changed but little since that time with the exception of the high pointed spire on the tower. This had to be lowered 25 feet in June of 1929 because of the dangers caused by the constant falling of tiles off the steep pitch of the spire. Harry Duckworth was the architect for this change. A program of interior remodeling of the court rooms was completed in 1920 with Fred A. Nelson as architect. The original bond issues for the construction of the Court House were finally paid off 60 years later in Dec. 1936. Morgan Thomas, Michael F. Lawler and William J. Geiger were the well known commissioners at the time.



In the past 25 years a number of additions and renovations serve to illustrate the constant need for more space for county offices as well as the soaring costs of construction work. First

# LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CATLIN HOUSE  
232 MONROE AVENUE  
SCRANTON, PENNSYLVANIA 18510

MRS. T. ARCHER MORGAN  
717 MONROE AVE.  
SCRANTON, PA. 18510

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
Permit No. 56  
Scranton, Pa.

## FEBRUARY PROGRAM

**Wednesday, February 22 — 8 P.M.**

Dr. William Messner, Dean and Prof. Abe Bernstein, History and Sociology Dept. of Keystone Junior College will lecture on the subject "coal-town U.S.A." They will discuss the impact of coal mining and the persistence of an ethnic identity on this area with discussion following.

## MARCH PROGRAM

**Wednesday, March 29 — 8 P.M.**

A slide illustrated lecture entitled "Two Hundred Years of History and Architecture in the Lackawanna Valley" will be given by Rev. William P. Lewis, Executive Director.

## APRIL PROGRAM

**Tuesday, April 18 — 8 P.M.**

David Mapes, a prominent Binghamton, N.Y. antiques dealer and President of the Broome County Historical Society will give a slide illustrated lecture on "Louis C. Tiffany, a History of His Lamps and Glass". Exhibit for the occasion of Tiffany glassware.

## MAY PROGRAM

**Wednesday, May 10 — 6:30 P.M.**

The Annual Dinner and Installation of Officers will take place. Speaker will be from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, D.C. and the meeting will be co-sponsored by the Architectural Heritage Asso. The public is invited to all of these meetings; reservations will be needed for the dinner meeting.

## MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Annual notices of dues have been sent out and many of you have already responded. If you have not, please send in your dues soon. We will also be conducting a New Members Campaign this year to increase our membership. We are asking each one of you to secure two new members. We will be sending a mailing to selected leaders and citizens in our city and county and urging them to "Join the Lackawanna Historical Society and help celebrate our County Centennial".

We now have a total of 367 members; 57 new members were received during 1977. However during the past year we also lost several active and long time members by death, among them: Miss Patience Carr, Mrs. George M. D. Lewis, Mrs. P. Anthony Sweet, Trustee Carl Ellis, E. William Fleth, Alvah Hice, William R. Hughes, Atty. Emmanuel Laster, Atty. James K. Peck, Atty. Lawrence Savige and Thomas Steele.

VISITORS to the Catlin House during the year 1977 totaled 2482 including 63 groups who either toured the house or held a meeting there.

the County purchased the former Scranton Lackawanna Trust Co., a six story office building at 506-516 Spruce St. for \$199,000 and moved a number of offices into it in May 1957. This was called the Court House Annex. Before long more space was needed so it was decided to erect a wing on the Linden Street side of the Court House. A two story addition with open parking space on the street level constructed of West Mountain stone with black marble trim was begun May 1963 and dedicated October 17, 1964 at a cost of \$567,300. At the same time new stair towers, new lighting, wiring and ceilings and a glass enclosed walkway to the addition were added to the original building. Patrick Melody, Edmund Reif and Charles R. Harte were Commissioners then.

Within the past few years the ever increasing services which the county is called upon to render has necessitated further space for offices. So in June 1971 the Commissioners purchased the former Stohr and Fister Building at the corner of Spruce and Adams Ave. for \$275,000 and completely renovated the six story structure at a cost of \$1.5 million. This is now called the County Administration Building. The Court House Annex was vacated in Dec. 1972 and after standing empty for some time was sold to the Penn Security Bank and razed last Fall.

The original Court House Building itself was completely renovated 1975-76 with Federal Revenue Sharing Funds at a cost of \$1,250,000. These renovations included sandblasting the exterior, landscaping the grounds with park facilities, all new doors, lighting and windows in the interior.

Within the Court House the first floor contains the offices of the Sheriff, Clerk of Judicial Records, Building Supt. and Recorder of Deeds; the second floor contains three very imposing Court Rooms panellèd in oak with decorated ceilings; the offices of the presiding Judges and an extensive Law Library. The third floor contains the Orphans Court Room, offices of the Public Defender, Register of Wills, Marriage License Bureau, Probation Department and the Clerk of Criminal Records. The present County Commissioners are Charles P. Luger, Robert W. Pettinato and Edward Zipay.

The story of the host of prominent lawyers and eminent judges who have argued for and dispensed justice within these walls for almost a century is another story yet to be written. The Lackawanna County Court House stands today as an interesting monument to the 100 years of ever-changing history in Lackawanna County.

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