

Dade courtroom restored to its 1928 splendor

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The Miami-Dade County Courthouse's historic courtroom 6-1 reopened Thursday looking just as it did back in 1928.

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The carved wood doors leading to Miami-Dade's newly renovated historic Courtroom 6-1 swung open Thursday, giving spectators a glimpse at its restored 1928 grandeur.

More than 200 spectators filed inside for the afternoon unveiling and dedication of the courtroom, which once again looks just like it did 80 years ago when the Miami-Dade County Courthouse opened for legal business at 73 W. Flagler St.

The \$650,000 restoration of the spacious courtroom, which took eight months, is a natural move in preserving local legal history.

"No other courtroom in Miami-Dade has hosted as many historic cases as this one," said Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Scott Silverman, who led the push for the restoration and heads the 11th Judicial Circuit Historical Society.

Within its walls, gangster Al Capone, who had a home in Miami Beach, was tried and acquitted of perjury in 1930.

Would-be assassin Giuseppe Zangara was sentenced to die after attempting to kill Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 at Bayfront Park. He missed, but ended up shooting to death the mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak.



William Ball, who took part in the restoration, examines a lamp his company made that is now on the judge's desk.

It's the courtroom where, in the 1930s, a gunshot accidentally went off during a trial of a man accused of hunting out of season and a real human skull was passed around to horrified jurors during a scandalous murder trial.

In 1966, national media crowded into 6-1 for the trial of socialite Candace Mosler and her lover/nephew accused of killing Mosler's wealthy husband. They were acquitted.

And it's where America's landmark tobacco trial was held in the 1990s.

While history was happening inside the courtroom, the space itself underwent some baffling renovations: In the 1950s, acoustic tiles were glued over the plaster walls. All the original fixtures disappeared. The original Florida pine floor was covered with carpet and linoleum.

But after years of neglect, the octogenarian has had a facelift.

Joseph Serota, co-chairman of the renovation committee, told the crowd of judges, attorneys and history buffs attending the event. "This is the beginning of a new history for courtroom 6-1."

Wall fans, ornate desk lamps and candelabra-like sconces have been returned.



Miami-Dade Circuit Court Judge Scott Silverman admires the new-old look of Courtroom 6-1. He led the push for restoration of the historic room.

The original benches used by the judge and stenographer and the witness box have been refinished.

The walls are now plaster, fitting for the times.

The high-beam wood ceilings have been refinished, with carved daisies splashed with color adorning them.

Robert Fiore, former president of the Dade County Bar Association and another co-chairman of the courtroom restoration committee, said 6-1 is one of a kind.

"It really feels like you're stepping into 1928," Fiore said. "I've seen a lot of courtrooms in my 22 years of practice. None is as special as this one is now."

The idea to restore the courtroom to its original look began in 1999, with the completion of a similar redo of the courthouse lobby.

State grants were secured for \$315,000; the rest had to be matched with private donations from the South Florida legal community. It came through, said Miami-Dade Chief Judge Joseph Farina.

Among the big donors thanked for helping finance the project were law firms Boies Schiller & Flexner and Greenberg Traurig and the historic preservation group The Villagers.

Also credited were the artisans, architect and contractor whose job was to recreate a past when Calvin Coolidge was president.

Azulejo General Contractor handled the major job, which in part entailed pulling off all the acoustic tiles affixed to the wall of the entire courtroom, said project manager Leyvis Quintana.

"All we really had to go on were old photographs of trials in the courtroom," she said.

Architect James Piersol was tasked with making the vision a reality -- and hiding the modern-age lighting and acoustic materials.

Ernesto Rojo and his crew were assigned the task of restoring all the wood in the courtroom, including 15 spectator benches, the jury box and benches.

William Ball had one of the hardest tasks: He had to recreate from scratch the ornate lighting fixtures. "The candelabras alone had 145 separate pieces each," he said. "It took several people to do the job."

Karla Villon, an artist from Dania Beach, was contracted to paint the flowers carved on both sides of the wood high beams across the ceiling.

Akin to Michelangelo, she painted 37 large daisies and 42 smaller ones, all the while standing on a ladder. "It was a personal challenge," she said. "I became like a mule; someone had to keep pushing me to go on. But the courtroom is a work of art."

Among those enchanted with the retro courtroom was Circuit Judge Margarita Esquiroz, who will preside in the showcase legal hall.

She admits she'll be the envy of other judges, but she has her own concerns.

"I suspect attorneys are not going to want to settle cases here because they'll enjoy being here -- so I guess I'll be spending a lot of time on the bench."



Georgia Jones Ayers, left, joins others for the unveiling of the restored courtroom.



It was standing room only in this trial in Courtroom 6-1, seen in an undated photo. Some famous defendants appeared there, including Al Capone and the man who tried to kill President Franklin D. Roosevelt.