

# AOPC CONNECTED

NEWSLETTER OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF PA COURTS



P E N N S Y L V A N I A  
BIRTHPLACE OF  
AMERICAN JUSTICE  
1776 ~ 2026

# Supreme Court of Pennsylvania



Chief Justice Debra Todd

Dear Colleagues,

As we commemorate America's semi quincentennial, we have the opportunity to reflect not only on our history, but on the enduring principles that continue to guide our work every day.

No place is more deeply connected to our nation's founding than Pennsylvania. It was here that bold ideas about liberty, equality and self-government took shape. Those ideals have endured through generations, strengthened by institutions dedicated to preserving the rule of law and ensuring equal justice for all.

For 250 years, our courts have played a vital role in protecting the rights and freedoms envisioned by our founders. While the challenges facing our judiciary have evolved, our mission remains constant: to uphold the Constitution and apply the law fairly.

This anniversary is also an opportunity to recognize the people who make that mission possible. Every judge and member of our AOPC and county court staff — from probation officers to law clerks to administrators to interpreters — contributes to maintaining public trust and confidence in Pennsylvania's judicial branch of government.

So, I sincerely thank all of you for your continued hard work, dedication and service to the people of our Commonwealth. It is an honor to serve alongside you as we commemorate this historic milestone and reaffirm our shared commitment to justice.

Warmest regards,

*Chief Justice Debra Todd*  
*Supreme Court of Pennsylvania*





# PENNSYLVANIA'S KEY ROLE IN AMERICAN JUSTICE

Pennsylvania played a key role in shaping American government. Our state's early laws and constitution showed how a government could be organized - protecting people's rights, making laws and establishing courts - ideas that later became part of the federal system.

## PENNSYLVANIA'S EARLY CONSTITUTION

In 1776, Pennsylvania adopted a new state constitution. It was one of the most democratic at the time. Later in 1790, it was updated to establish separation of powers, support an independent court system and protect individual rights. Pennsylvania's laws demonstrated how these ideas worked in practice and helped lawmakers learn what worked and what needed to change.

## PHILADELPHIA SET THE STAGE

In May 1787, leaders from across the country met in Philadelphia where they used many of the ideas first tested in Pennsylvania to write the U.S. Constitution. Philadelphia was a natural place for this meeting, as the city had already played a major role in the American Revolution. Delegates gathered at the Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall, to discuss the nation's problems and build a stronger government.

Pennsylvania sent one of the largest delegations, including Benjamin Franklin, Gouverneur Morris and James Wilson, who were all active in the debates and helped shape important decisions about representation, the president's powers and the role of the courts.

## DEBATES ABOUT POWER

Pennsylvania was one of the largest and most important states at the time. Because of this, its delegates played a major role in debates about power.

They worked to balance two ideas - a strong national government and the rights of individual states - that helped shape the federal system which shares power between the two. James Wilson argued that government power should come directly from the people, and Gouverneur Morris helped write much of the final Constitution, including the Preamble, which famously begins with "We the People."



## RATIFICATION AND THE BILL OF RIGHTS

After the U.S. Constitution was written, it still needed to be approved by the states. In late 1787, Pennsylvania held a meeting in Philadelphia to decide whether to accept it, generating much debate. Supporters wanted a stronger national government, while opponents worried about protecting individual rights.

In the end, Pennsylvania ratified the Constitution. But the concerns raised during these debates helped lead to the creation of the Bill of Rights. The first ten amendments protect freedoms such as speech, religion and the rights to due process and criminal trial protections.

## PENNSYLVANIA'S LEGACY AND AMERICA250

Throughout the nation's 250 years of history, Pennsylvania's role in the founding of the U.S. remains clear.

From its early laws to its leadership at the Constitutional Convention, the Commonwealth helped shape the system of government we use today - and its history continues to illuminate how ideas about rights, laws and justice can shape a nation.

# HOW PENNSYLVANIA'S APPELLATE AND COUNTY COURTS ARE RECOGNIZING AMERICA'S 250<sup>TH</sup>



## APPELLATE COURT RECOGNITIONS

**1** On May 27, the Commonwealth Court Historical Society hosted a CLE program, "The Declaration's Journey: 250 Years of Liberty, Equality and Self-Government" in the Supreme Court courtroom in Philadelphia. Judges and attorneys from across the state gathered to reflect on the enduring impact of the Declaration of Independence, the role of lawyers in protecting individual rights and the importance of history in our society.

**2** The program also honored Judge **Robert W. Williams, Jr.** for his trailblazing service to the Commonwealth and the nation.

**3 4** On April 29, Justices **Christine Donohue** and **David Wecht**, along with Chief Justice Emeritus **Thomas G. Saylor**, joined Dean of University of Pittsburgh School of Law Jerry Dickinson, and then-Allegheny County Bar President Amy Coco for a PA Constitution Town Hall in the Supreme Court courtroom in Pittsburgh.

Hosted by Carpenters' Hall, the panel discussion explored the legacy of the 1776 Provincial Conference and the drafting of Pennsylvania's once "radical" Constitution, while also examining the vital role state constitutions continue to play in shaping American law, from partisan gerrymandering and eviction moratoria to judicial independence and the Commonwealth's strong protections for privacy rights. The Allegheny County Bar Association, the Public Interest Law Center, PA Humanities and the Pennsylvania Commission for Judicial Independence were all partners for the event.





**5** On May 28, Justices **David Wecht**, **Sallie Updyke-Mundy** and **Daniel McCaffery** joined Commonwealth Court Judges **Lori Dumas** and **Stella Tsai** (not pictured), along with Philadelphia Municipal Court Judge **Lydia Kirkland**, to visit the Walnut Street Theatre School for their production of "1776."

## COUNTY COURT EVENTS AND ENGAGEMENTS

### FRANKLIN COUNTY



**FRANKLIN** - On June 14, Franklin County President Judge **Shawn D. Meyers**, along with the county's beloved courthouse facility dog, Officer Dudley, had the opportunity to participate in the Shippensburg America250 Parade. Dudley proudly represented the 39th Judicial District alongside fellow Franklin County Adult Probation officers, the Franklin County Sheriff's Department and Franklin County Court Administration.

"We were honored to take part in this special community event together celebrating our nation's history and the spirit of service that continues to strengthen our communities," President Judge Meyers said.

## LANCASTER COUNTY



## BRADFORD COUNTY



**LANCASTER** – The Lancaster County Court of Common Pleas welcomed the public to its historic courthouse in July for an America250 open house celebrating the nation's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The family-friendly event featured courthouse tours, educational presentations on Lancaster County's judicial history before and after 1776, children's activities and opportunities for visitors to learn about the role of the courts in the community.

**BRADFORD** – As part of its America250 celebration, Bradford County brought history to life by reviving a dairy cow beauty pageant first held in 1926. Inspired by a historic photograph discovered in the Bradford County Courthouse archives, the event celebrated the county's agricultural roots with a cow pageant, livestock exhibits, ice cream and family-friendly activities. The celebration showcased how Pennsylvania's historic courthouses continue to

connect communities with their local history.

**MONTGOMERY** – Montgomery County has embraced the theme of civic engagement through a variety of community service and outreach efforts this year to celebrate America's 250<sup>th</sup>. Throughout the spring, judges, chambers staff, court administration and Domestic Relations employees participated in projects including the Montgomery Bar Association's "Keep Norristown Beautiful – Adopt a Road" initiative, mentoring students through classroom visits and career days, hosting interns, organizing food drives and supporting youth through donations to the Montgomery County Youth Center.

**PHILADELPHIA** – The Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas and the Philadelphia Municipal Court have worked together to produce a short video of PJ **Nina Wright Padilla** and PJ **T. Francis Shields** speaking about the significance of America 250. The video was filmed on the

## MONROE COUNTY



pavement of Philadelphia City Hall and is uploaded onto our FJD website. They also designed America's 250<sup>th</sup> T-shirts for the court as well.

Visit the [Philadelphia Courts YouTube page](#) to watch the videos.

**MONROE** – In Monroe County, the Court of Common Pleas joined county officials and community partners in marking the county's 190th anniversary with a Founders' Day celebration at the courthouse in Stroudsburg. As part of the festivities, the county's PA250 Committee unveiled its Keystone Art Project, featuring artist-designed keystones representing



each of Monroe County's 20 municipalities and highlighting the people, places, and events that have shaped the region's history.

**BLAIR** – Blair County celebrated America250 with the restoration and rededication of the historic clocktower at the Blair County Courthouse in Hollidaysburg. Led by Fort Fetter American Legion Post 516 and supported by community donations, the project restored the clock which had been silent for decades. Built in 1876 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the courthouse's restored clocktower was dedicated during a July 4th ceremony honoring the nation's 250th birthday and the courthouse's enduring place in the community.

BLAIR COUNTY



**SNYDER / UNION** - Snyder County officially launched its America250 celebration with a kickoff ceremony at the historic Snyder County Courthouse in January. The event brought together local and state leaders, including Union-Snyder President Judge **Lori R. Hackenberg**, to reflect on the nation's founding, honor local history and inspire civic pride – marking the beginning of a yearlong series of America250 events and activities across the county.

SNYDER/UNION COUNTY



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#### Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

*Debra Todd*  
Chief Justice of Pennsylvania

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Justice

*Kevin M. Dougherty*  
Justice

*David N. Wecht*  
Justice

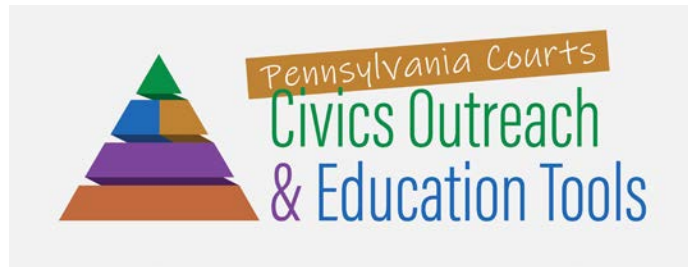
*Sallie Updyke Mundy*  
Justice

*P. Kevin Brobson*  
Justice

*Daniel D. McCaffery*  
Justice

# NEW CIVICS RESOURCES CELEBRATE PENNSYLVANIA'S JUDICIAL LEGACY

As part of our America250 commemoration, new civics education resources are helping students discover how Pennsylvania's courts have shaped our Commonwealth's past and continue to serve its future.



Now available on the PA Courts [civics education webpage](#), these classroom-ready materials encourage students to explore the history, evolution and role of the courts through engaging, interactive learning. The new resources include:

## Kahoot!

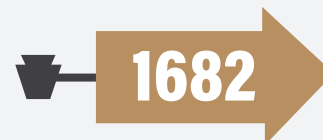
**TWO "UNDERSTANDING THE PA COURTS" KAHOOT! GAMES** – Online quizzes for both [primary](#) and [secondary](#) grade levels, giving students a fun and interactive way to test their knowledge of the state's court system.



**COURTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY** – Classroom activity that helps students connect with the courts and judicial services that shape everyday life.



These additions join a growing collection of court and civics education resources already available on the webpage – including prior materials created for the PA Supreme Court's 300th anniversary on the [History of the Court](#), [Top 10 Interesting Facts](#), [Important Court Cases](#), [Early Justices and Lawyers](#).



**EVOLUTION OF JUSTICE IN PA AND THE U.S.** – Timeline highlighting the evolution of Pennsylvania's courts alongside key milestones in our nation's history.

Whether used by judges during school visits or community engagements, or by educators in the classroom, these resources are intended to offer engaging ways to spark conversations about Pennsylvania's judicial history and the role of our courts today.



# The Evolution of Justice in Pennsylvania and the U.S.

## PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

### First Court Established

The Provincial Court was established by William Penn after founding and drafting the original Frame of Government

1684

### PA Supreme Court Established

Judiciary Act of 1722 renamed the Provincial Court and enshrined the PA Supreme Court as the colony's highest court

1722

### First PA Constitution Signed

Laid groundwork for the development of the state's judicial system and established the Courts of Common Pleas

1776

### Judiciary Organized

Second PA Constitution recognized the judiciary as a co-equal branch of government and divided the state into judicial districts led by president judges

1790

### Judicial Independence Strengthened

Third PA Constitution required two-thirds legislative approval to remove judges, giving the judiciary more independence from political pressure

1838

### PA Supreme Court Elections

Adopted a constitutional amendment requiring all Supreme Court justices to be elected

1850

### PA Supreme Court Expanded

Fourth PA Constitution added two new justices to the Supreme Court for the current total of 7

1874

### Superior Court

Established by the General Assembly and gave each appellate court separate jurisdictions

1895

### Commonwealth Court & Judiciary Reorganized

Fifth PA Constitution created the Commonwealth Court and reorganized Pennsylvania's judiciary into a unified system of current and future courts; Also decreased term limits for justices from 21 to 10 years

1968

## UNITED STATES HISTORY

### Declaration of Independence Signed

Signed in Philadelphia, declaring freedom and self-governance

### U.S. Constitution Signed

Created the foundation for federal government and the judiciary as a co-equal branch

### U.S. Supreme Court Established

Judiciary Act of 1787 established the high Court and federal court system under the authority of the U.S. Constitution

### Marbury v. Madison

Established judicial review, empowering courts to invalidate unconstitutional laws

### Dred Scott v. Sandford

Denied citizenship to Black Americans; later overturned by the 14th Amendment (1868)

### 14th Amendment Ratified

Guaranteed equal protection under the law; greatly expanded federal judicial oversight

### Brown v. Board of Education

Landmark civil rights decision that ended racial segregation in public schools

### Civil Rights Act of 1964

Prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

### Voting Rights Act of 1965

Protected voting rights and prohibited racial discrimination in voting.



# PENNSYLVANIA SUPREME COURT ARTIFACT SPOTLIGHT

Pennsylvania's highest court's history reaches beyond its decisions. From the earliest days of the Commonwealth to today, the Supreme Court's story is preserved through unique artifacts, historic objects and the people who built its legacy.

This Artifact Spotlight features pieces from the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania History Center that show how the Court has changed over time. Each item shows a different chapter in Pennsylvania's judicial history, from past traditions and landmark moments to the role of the courts in public life.



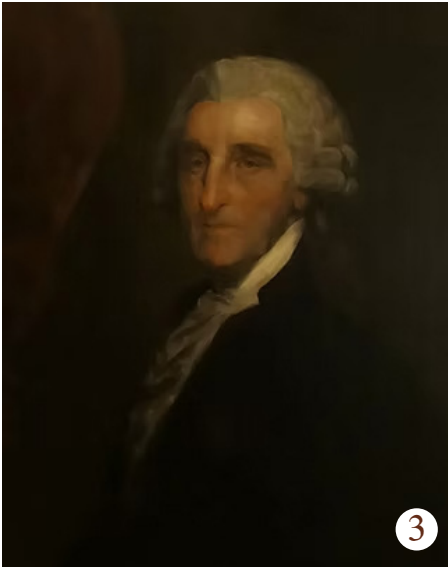
## 1 WHEN PENNSYLVANIA JUDGES WORE WIGS

The Wiggling Mirror is one of the most unusual judicial artifacts in Pennsylvania. In its early days, the Supreme Court Justices adopted the English tradition of wearing powdered wigs. This late-nineteenth-century "wiggling mirror" is constructed in the Shaker style, and it was initially displayed in the courtroom at [Independence Hall](#) before being moved to [City Hall](#). Currently, it's on display in the Pennsylvania Judicial Center in Harrisburg in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania's History Center.

## 2 KEEPING TIME IN PENNSYLVANIA'S HIGHEST COURT

A renowned local jeweler and silversmith, J.E. Caldwell & Co., created a mechanical clock with a hand-painted, pink Tennessee marble face and wrought iron hands for the [Philadelphia Courtroom](#). That clock hung behind the bench from 1891 to 2002, when it was replaced by a mural of [Independence Hall](#) painted by two local artists.





Thomas McKean - Oil Painting on Linen - Undated - Artist Unknown



John Bannister Gibson - Oil Painting on Linen - Undated - Artist Unknown



Walter H. Lowrie - Oil Painting on Linen - Undated - Artist Unknown

### 3 SOME FACES THAT SHAPED PENNSYLVANIA LAW

The Pennsylvania Judicial Center and Supreme Court courtrooms contain portraits of former Justices dating back to the nineteenth century. Below are a few faces that shaped Pennsylvania law. Find more on the [Supreme Court History Center website](#).

#### Thomas McKean

Thomas McKean was elected as a delegate from Delaware to the First and Second Continental Congress. He voted to declare independence and immediately went to command a militia against Britain, only later returning to Philadelphia to sign the Declaration, becoming the last signer.

McKean was appointed as the Court's first Chief Justice under the newly formed Commonwealth Constitution in 1777 and was later elected governor in 1799. His most important decision established judicial review as precedent in Pennsylvania ten years before it was established on the federal level by U.S. Chief Justice John Marshall in *Marbury v. Madison*.

#### John Bannister Gibson

John Bannister Gibson is the Court's longest-serving Justice. In 1816, Governor Simon Snyder appointed Gibson to fill his seat at only 36 years old.

He later became Chief Justice in 1827 and served in that position until 1851. Pennsylvania amended its Constitution in 1850 to require the election of judges, and in the first-ever judicial election, Gibson was the only Justice to win their seat back. The Justices drew lots to determine seniority, and he served as an Associate Justice until his death in 1853.

Gibson authored over 1,200 opinions, but his most famous was his dissent in *Eakin v. Raub*, 12 Sergeant and Rawle 330 (Pa. 1825), in which he questioned the concept of judicial review and, as rumored, may have cost himself a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. In addition to a number of portraits on display, Gibson is also honored with a marble bust in the Philadelphia Courtroom.

#### Walter H. Lowrie

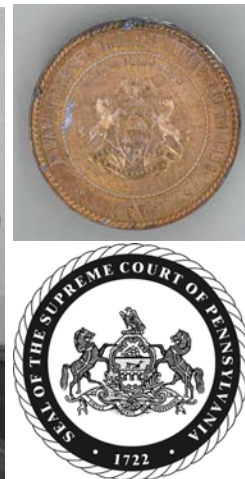
Walter H. Lowrie was first appointed a judge in 1846 and in 1851, he was among the first Justices ever elected to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, becoming Chief Justice in 1857. During the Civil War, U.S. Marshals seized the Jeffersonian newspaper in West Chester, a paper critical of the federal government. Chief Justice Lowrie presided over the trial in which the jury found the seizure unconstitutional and ordered its return to the owner. Lowrie completed his public service as President Judge of Crawford County and died in office in 1876.

## 4 THE SYMBOLS OF JUSTICE THROUGH 300 YEARS

Court seals often reveal how Pennsylvania viewed justice during the colonial and early republic periods.

Governing bodies use their seals to assure readers of a document's authenticity. After declaring independence, Pennsylvania wrote a Constitution in 1776 providing that "all commissions shall be sealed with the State Seal." On Jan. 2, 1778, the Legislature passed a statute establishing a new seal for the Supreme Court.

The prothonotary procured the seal pictured from a Philadelphia engraver, David Tew, for £15 (roughly \$2,500 today). The design is still used by the Prothonotary; however, the year was changed from 1776 to 1722 – the year the court became independent.

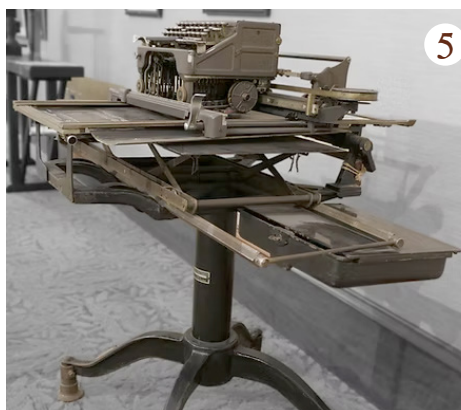


## 5 THE CASEBOOKS OF THE FOUNDING ERA

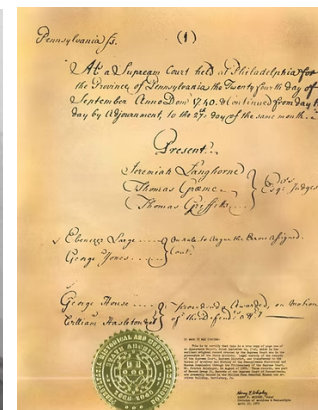
Historic docket books are among the most important surviving judicial records. Supreme Court collections commonly preserve them, and Pennsylvania likely has early examples.

This purpose-built docketing machine used a mechanical Underwood typewriter to record the filings and orders in the cases before the Court, replacing the early handwritten dockets. Today's dockets are maintained electronically and are available on the court's website.

The oldest available Supreme Court docket in the State Archives documents a case that took place in Philadelphia from Sept. 24 - 27, 1740. Chief Justice Jeremiah Langhorne and Justices Thomas Graeme and Thomas Griffiths presided over the case.



Docketing machine



Supreme Court docket - Philadelphia Sept. 24 - 27, 1740

**Special thanks to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania Historical Commission for providing this historical information and pictures. More information about the work of the Commission is available at <https://www.pasupremecourthistory.org/>.**



# PENNSYLVANIA'S OLDEST SURVIVING COURTHOUSES FROM AMERICA'S FIRST 50 YEARS

Before modern court buildings, Pennsylvania's earliest courthouses symbolized law, order and civic life in a new nation. The historic structures below date back to America's first 50 years, reminding us that justice has deep roots, with buildings that saw the birth of American democracy and sometimes still serve today.

This list includes Pennsylvania courthouses surviving through 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the year Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died.



## 1 1724 CHESTER COURTHOUSE (1724)

The 1724 Chester Courthouse, located in Delaware County, is the oldest surviving courthouse in Pennsylvania and the oldest public building in continuous use in the U.S. Built in 1724, the Chester Courthouse (at 412 Avenue of the States in Chester, PA) has a history spanning nearly 300 years. It was once the Courthouse for Chester and Delaware Counties, and the city hall for Chester.

The building is currently owned by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and leased by Delaware County. Recently, Delaware County received a grant from the National Park Service to rehabilitate the building, scheduled for completion in August. In September, the Delaware County Court of Common Pleas will preside over naturalization court, and the Pennsylvania Superior Court will hold a two-day special session at the courthouse.

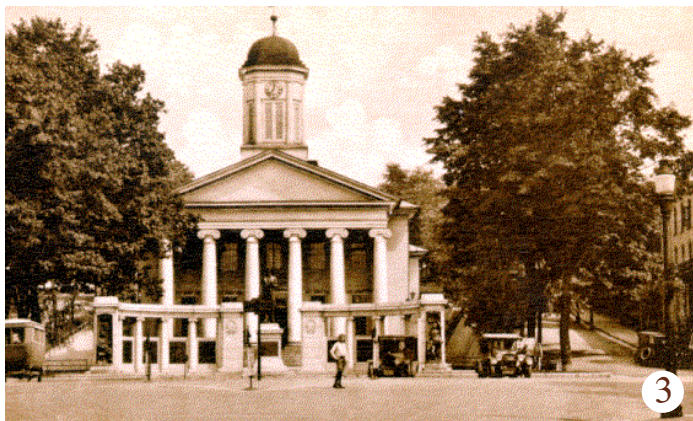
- **Colonial & Revolutionary Era (1724-1789):** Initially built to serve the expansive Chester County (which previously included present-day Delaware County).

- **Delaware County Seat (1789-1850):** The Chester County seat was relocated to West Chester in 1789, and the following year, Delaware County was carved out of Chester County.
- **City Hall & Preservation (1850-1967):** When the Delaware County seat moved to Media, PA, the building was transitioned into a City Hall for the city of Chester.

## 2 OLD GREENE COUNTY COURTHOUSE (1797)

The Old Greene County Courthouse is a log structure built on Greene Street by George Graham and George Ullom in 1797, a year after Greene County was established in 1796. It was used as the county's seat of government until about 1800, when a brick courthouse was built on High Street.

It is believed to be the oldest log courthouse on its original lot in Pennsylvania and possibly in the U.S. The building now houses the Cornerstone Genealogical Society and its library.



### 3 CENTRE COUNTY COURTHOUSE (1805)

The courthouse's original core dates to 1805 – and in 1855, portions were demolished and rebuilt using the original core. Over time, it was enlarged and remodeled into the Greek Revival building seen today. It remains one of Pennsylvania's oldest active courthouses and is generally considered the state's oldest still performing judicial functions.

### 4 OLD STONE COURTHOUSE IN PIKE COUNTY (1814–1815)

The Old Stone courthouse is Pike County's first courthouse. When a new courthouse was completed in 1874, the original courthouse then served as the county jail. Built immediately after the county's creation, this historic site is still standing in Milford's historic district – and currently houses the Milford Police Department.

### 5 OLD LEHIGH COUNTY COURTHOUSE (1814–1819) – NOW KNOWN AS THE HISTORIC LEHIGH COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The Old Lehigh County Courthouse was built in four phases, with the first phase built between 1814 and 1819. The courthouse was opened in 1817 while

still under construction and is one of Pennsylvania's earliest monumental courthouses. The Federal-era structure remains as the central feature of the current courthouse complex.

An addition was made between 1864 and 1865, and the law library was added in 1880. Between 1914 and 1916, the back annex was built. Most recently, a multi-year restoration was completed in 2023, and the building was renamed the Historic Lehigh County Courthouse.

### 6 OLD UNION COUNTY COURTHOUSE (1815)

Located at the intersection of Market and Vine Streets in the town square of New Berlin, PA, the historic first courthouse of Union County is preserved today as a museum, post office and community landmark. It served as the original county seat from Union County's establishment in 1813 until the local government moved to Lewisburg in 1855.



# HISTORIC COURTHOUSES RING IN AMERICA250PA

To celebrate America's 250<sup>th</sup>, counties across Pennsylvania have used their historic courthouses as the centerpiece of their celebrations and launch events. One of the statewide America250PA initiatives is Bells Across PA, which places artist-designed commemorative bells in all 67 counties. Many of these bells are displayed at or near courthouses.

*The photos of bells located at county courthouses have been reprinted with permission from America250PA.*



BEDFORD COUNTY



BRADFORD COUNTY



BUTLER COUNTY



CAMBRIA COUNTY



CLINTON COUNTY



ELK COUNTY



FAYETTE COUNTY



INDIANA COUNTY



MCKEAN COUNTY



MIFFLIN COUNTY



NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY



UNION COUNTY



## LOOKING AHEAD

As we celebrate this milestone, we're reminded that the work of Pennsylvania's courts is part of a much larger story – one that helped shape our Commonwealth before the nation's founding and continues every day in communities across Pennsylvania.

Thank you for being part of that story. We hope this special edition inspires you to reflect on our shared history, celebrate how far we've come and look ahead to the future with pride.



These beautiful, historic murals inside the Harrisburg Supreme Court courtroom painted by the famous artist, Violet Oakley, around 100 years ago. The murals grace the walls of its chambers in the state Capitol Building with the goal of inspiring judges and lawyers to a higher set of principles in administering justice. For more information watch the [Courtroom Murals by Violet Oakley](#).