

NEVADA'S FIRST FEDERAL OFFICE BUILDING IS HOME TO THE STATE'S LEGAL HISTORY

BY PATTY CAFFERATA, ESQ.

Nevada had been a state for 25 years before congressman George W. Cassidy successfully arranged for Congress to pass a \$100,000 appropriation to construct a federal office building in Carson City in 1885. The post office, federal courts, land office and weather bureau would be housed in the new federal building.

The next year, the national government bought the Carson City Opera House property on the corner of North Carson and Spear streets. The theater was moved and construction of the four-story courthouse began.

Judge Thomas P. Hawley, the first presiding federal judge, officiated at the Masonic cornerstone ceremony on September 29, 1888. At the time, he was a Nevada Supreme Court justice. He was elected on the Republican ticket in 1872, defeating District Court judge William Seawell from Lyon and Esmeralda counties. Hawley was re-elected in 1878, beating District Court judge Frederick Cole from White Pine and Eureka Counties, and re-elected in 1884, defeating Seawell again by a mere 712 votes. Hawley resigned from the Nevada Supreme Court in 1890 and was appointed to the Ninth Circuit bench.

Three supervising architects of the U.S. Treasury, Mifflin E. Bell, William Frost and James Windrim, designed the federal building. Bell selected the then-popular Richardsonian-Romanesque style for the office building. Richardson's buildings were usually constructed of stones or bricks and featured arches and towers. Although the architectural style was used in the last two decades of the 19th century for federal buildings and churches around the country, Nevada's first federal building is the only example of this type of architecture in Nevada.

The granite stones for the five-foot-high foundation were brought to Carson City from Washoe Valley. The upper stories



of the building are made of red brick. Distinctive horizontal bands of brick mark the separate levels of the building. Light-colored sandstone lintels over the windows offer a contrast to the red brick and support the upper portions of the courthouse. A granite stairway leads up to the arcade of four arches

Nevada's first federal office building, now named the Paul Laxalt State Office Building.



with brick columns that frame the recessed entrance. The separate sections of the red roof of the building are made of seamed sheet metal.

The distinctive 106-foot clock tower on the northwest corner of the building is topped with a golden ball on a slender rod. The government



Photo from the Pat Cuellar Collection, courtesy of the Nevada Commission on Tourism.

The Federal Office Building and courthouse decorated for President Theodore Roosevelt's appearance in Carson City in 1903.

purchased a three-faced clock from the Joseph Borborka Company in Iowa. The company built numerous clocks for towers from 1876 to 1921. The courthouse timepiece runs on a lengthy weight system from the top to bottom floor and must be wound by hand every seven days.

The federal government spent \$134,605.53 to complete the building. When the 16-room, 20,616-square-foot structure opened in May 1891, the post office took up the first floor; on the second floor were the courtroom, judges' and clerks' chambers, and on the third floor were the jury room and other offices.

The cast-iron columns on the first floor support the second story. In the base of the pillars are fancy grills that provide heat to the first floor. The courtroom's 20-foot ceiling is the highest ceiling in the building. The offices on the second and third floors have the original marbled fireplaces with wooden mantles. Craftsmen painted the mantles to resemble black marble. The National Safe and Lock Company supplied walk-in safes with decoratively etched patterns and elaborate paintings on their metal doors.

Over the years, some sensational trials took place in the federal courthouse. Hawley presided over the trials on the embezzlement of \$75,000 from the U.S. Mint. In *U.S. v. James Heney* (Heney was a refinery helper at the Mint), the first jury deadlocked seven to five for acquittal in 1895. Convicted after the second trial, Hawley sentenced Heney to eight years in prison and ordered him to pay a \$5,000 fine. He served six years and paid a small part of his fine.

In *U.S. v. John T. Jones* (the assistant melter and refiner), the first trial also ended in a hung jury. In the second trial, Jones was found guilty and received the same sentence as Heney. Jones served six years and paid his fine in full.

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In *U.S. v Henry Piper*, after a one-day trial, Hawley waived the jail time for Piper but imposed a \$300 fine for his attempted theft of amalgam, a mixture of metals including silver, hidden in his lunch pail. Other mint employees were tried and either escaped punishment or paid small fines and spent a few days in jail.

Famous politicians also visited the courthouse. In May 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt traveled to Nevada by train. He rode the V & T Railroad from Reno to Carson City. The town was decorated in his honor with red, white and blue banners and flags. He gave a major speech on water reclamation and irrigation before returning to Reno.

The use of the federal post office and courthouse changed over the years, so the interior and exterior of the building were slightly transformed. For example, in 1935 an elevator was added. In 1955, the building was expanded to include a loading dock at the back of the building. The lobby was also enlarged at the time.

Bruce Thompson, the last federal district court judge to preside over court in Carson City, moved to the new federal courthouse in Reno in 1965. The post office, the largest federal agency in the first federal office building, moved into a new post office in Carson City in 1970.

When the building was declared surplus federal property in 1971, Nevada acquired the structure. The state extensively remodeled the interior to house the state library until the new library opened behind the capitol in 1993. In 1997, the state restored the building and the Nevada Commission on Tourism and Nevada Magazine moved into the structure. The renamed Paul Laxalt State Office Building is located at 401 N. Carson Street in Carson City.

The federal courthouse in Carson City was the scene of all litigated federal civil and criminal matters in Nevada from 1891 until 1965. Fittingly, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. The red brick structure is unique in Nevada and stands tall above the surrounding buildings. [NL](#)