Judicial *History*

The federal court system in Texas began in Galveston with the appointment of John C. Watrous (former Attorney General of the Republic of Texas) on May 26, 1846. Judge Watrous was one of only two federal judges serving in states joining the Confederacy to resign from the bench rather than serve as a Confederate judge.

When the U.S. Post Office & Courthouse was completed in 1937, the sitting District Judge was Judge Thomas M. Kennerly, who was joined by Judge James V. Allred in 1938 when a second District judgeship was added. Today, that history continues through the continued use of this courtroom by the Galveston Division of U.S. District Court, Southern District of Texas.

The scales of justice (pictured above), represented in the light fixtures that hang in the ceremonial courtroom, are one of the ornamental features to grace this historic space. The rich walnut paneling enhanced with geometric designs behind the judge's bench also give the courtroom a dignified presence intended to impress on its visitors the strong foundation of the judicial system.

Fill Every Pause Along The Way

"Galvestonians have always responded to both the ferocity and beauty of the gulf. The mural and the poem are intended as a reminder to take solace in the abundant gifts around us, and to celebrate the beauty of the island," explained Houston-based artist Rachel Hecker, speaking of her six hand-painted acrylic canvases that hang in the lobby of the Galveston U.S. Post Office and Courthouse. The vibrant works, depicting three images from the land and three from the sea, are to be viewed as one mural celebrating the natural world in a state of tranquility.

Historically, federal buildings were designed to welcome the visiting public and convey the important role the government played in the daily lives of its citizens. As the stewards of this historic building, the General Services Administration (GSA), U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, the U.S. Postal Service, Department of Homeland Security and other tenant federal agencies, hope that this property continues to serve the local community for years to come.

GSA U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

U.S. Post Office & Courthouse

601 Rosenberg
(25th Street)
Galveston, Texas

Federal Buildings in Galveston

The City of Galveston has the unique distinction of being the location of the first nonmilitary building constructed by the federal government in Texas. The 1861 two-story brick U.S. Custom House, although it is no longer in federal ownership, still stands at 21st and Post Office streets (pictured to your right). Completed in just 114 days, the building has survived a Civil War, fires, an explosion, and hurricanes.

After Reconstruction, Galveston continued to grow, and its needs outpaced the federal building leading to some government tenants having to relocate until a larger building could be constructed. That finally occurred in 1887 when construction was initiated on a new federal building between Avenues F and G, facing Rosenberg (25th Street). Completed in 1891, the new Richardsonian Romanesque-style building (pictured below) was the most expensive federal building in the state, costing $254,797.50. Despite its rich architecture and size, it would only remain in use for 44 years, when again growth in government services necessitated the erection of an even larger building. The building was demolished in 1935 to make room for Galveston's third federal building.

On January 1, 1936, ground was broken for the construction of a combined U.S. Post Office, Custom House & Courthouse. The citizens of Galveston and the civic leaders saw the new construction project as more than a new building; they viewed it as an employment opportunity for hundreds of skilled and unskilled workers during the Great Depression. This great federal edifice was designed by Houston commercial architect Alfred Finn, and completed under the direction of Department of Treasury Supervising Architect Louis Simon. Its design is an example of Art Deco architecture known as "PWA or WPA Modern" for its use in the design of public buildings during the government sponsored New Deal work programs of the 1930s. This style is revealed in the central massing, the rectangular form, the vertical flow of the window bays, the decorative metal grilles, and the geometric details of the building (pictured above).

The structure's cladding is handsomely enriched by fossiliferous limestone. Interestingly, the use of this material was quite controversial at the time of the building's design. Local officials supported the use of brick on the face of the building. Congressman J. J. Mansfield, however, declared that stone would be the only proper choice for an architecturally monumental structure. Today, the limestone cladding is an appreciated characteristic of the building's appearance.

Following its completion in 1937, the building housed the post office on the 1st floor; postal inspectors on the 2nd floor; various governmental offices on the 3rd floor; the U.S. Customs Department on the 4th floor; a petit and grand jury space on the 5th floor; U.S. attorneys, U.S. marshals, and a ceremonial courtroom on the 6th floor (pictured below); and cotton classifying rooms, the Bureau of Navigation, and the Bureau of Agriculture on the 7th floor. Over the years, the occupants of the offices have changed, but the central functions as a post office and a courthouse remain the same. As a consequence, the building retains a high degree of architectural integrity, particularly in the postal lobby, public corridors, and ceremonial courtroom. The building became listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001.