PRESERVING THE PAST

Preserving Delaware's rich historical legacy and adapting it to meet the present and future needs of Delawareans is a delicate balance, one ably met by the recent completion and renovation of the Kent County Courthouse and Eden Hill state facility. These projects are part of a wider plan to modernize the courts and provide greater capacity to accommodate the demands of modern court operations, including security, community interaction, and increasing caseloads and volume of court users. The Kent County Courthouse's new wing and renovations, as well as Eden Hill, successfully accomplish these goals within the confines of Delaware's architectural and legal heritage.

Kent County Courthouse

A courthouse dispensing justice has been present on the Green since 1699. On June 14, 2011, the new wing of the Kent County Courthouse perpetuated this tradition when it officially opened its doors to the public.

The new wing of the Kent County Courthouse is the result of a process begun more than a decade ago as part of the Fiscal Year 1999 Bond Bill. This Bill directed the Department of Administrative Services ("DAS") to conduct a study to determine how to best meet the judiciary's future requirements.

One of the many sites identified by the study that needed attention was the Kent County Courthouse. Conditions at the 1874 Courthouse had seriously deteriorated. The facility was antiquated, overcrowded, and unsafe. It could no longer efficiently serve its numerous users. Indeed, the last major renovations made to the 1874 courthouse dated back to 1918; a dance and town hall center located on the 4th floor of the building were removed, the building was expanded, and the building's exterior façade received a stylistic facelift. Additional minor alterations in 1983 were still insufficient to address the physical limitations imposed by the building on its users in 1999.

Entrance/Lobby Area

The 1874 Courthouse was itself built as a response to overcrowded conditions. Prior to 1874, the Court adjudicated out of what is now known as the Old State House Building. Although the 1791 Old State House Building was built for the Court, the Court shared the building with the General Assembly. By 1870, the General Assembly had encroached on the Court's domain, prompting the Court to find a new home in the 1874 Courthouse. The 1874 Courthouse stands on the site of the 1699 Courthouse that burnt during the Civil War.

Based on the DAS study and the Judiciary's desire to remain on the Green, the decision was made to acquire the 1874 Courthouse and adjacent property known as the O'Brien Building from Kent County. The 1874 Courthouse and O'Brien Building were bought in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The initial plan envisioned renovating the O'Brien Building. A structural survey concluded that the O'Brien Building could not be renovated or altered to support a fully functioning

modern courthouse that could meet the needs of the courts – Court of Chancery, Superior Court, and Court of Common Pleas – located in that facility. The O'Brien Building was demolished and construction of the new courthouse commenced on its site.

Kent County Courthouse Courtrooms

The result is a facility whose brick façade blends with the surrounding architecture but whose interior space is modern and user-friendly. Courtrooms are equipped with state of the art technology that will promote greater judicial efficiency. Green technology has been incorporated in the structure. Solar panels generate energy and an integrated light-sensing system dims interior light when sufficient natural light is perceived. Additional courtrooms were included to allow for future growth.

Renovations are ongoing in the 1874 Courthouse, which is physically and symbolically linked to the new courthouse by an enclosed walkway. The 1874 Courthouse will re-open in the fall of 2012.

Walkway to old Kent County Courthouse

Eden Hill

Justice Ridgely's Chambers at Eden Hill

In April 2011, Supreme Court Justice Henry duPont Ridgely's chambers relocated from downtown Dover to historic Eden Hill. The decision to move the Justice's chambers to Eden Hill, an existing state property, fulfills the State's long-term goal of owning, rather than renting, all judicial space. It also preserves a property mentioned in Delaware's early records and which was the home of notable personalities that shaped Delaware's early legal and political history.

Kent County's Deed Book indicates that Nicholas Ridgely (1694-1755) bought Eden Hill Farm in 1748. Shortly thereafter, a house was built on the property. Nicholas Ridgely was a provincial justice for the Supreme Court of the Three Lower Counties when Delaware was still part of Pennsylvania. Nicholas Ridgely was appointed and served as Caesar Rodney's guardian when he was orphaned in 1745. When Nicholas Ridgely died in 1755, he left the house to his third wife, Mary, for the remainder of her natural life then to his son, Charles. Eden Hill was still under construction at his death. Testamentary instructions were left to complete an adjacent brick kitchen.

Public Waiting Area

Fireplace in Kitchen Area

Caesar Rodney included an early depiction of Eden Hill in a plot plan of Dover drawn in 1768. A house with five-bay windows is sketched. Although there is a distinct possibility that this is an accurate representation of the house, a modern architectural study of the house cannot confirm that this was the house's original configuration.

Nicholas and Mary Ridgely's grandson, also named Nicholas (1762-1830), inherited Eden Hill Farm in 1810, at the death of his step-mother, Ann. He lived at Eden Hill until his death in 1830. Nicholas Ridgely was a member of the Delaware state convention that ratified the United States Constitution in 1787, served as Attorney General and thereafter as the second Chancellor of Delaware (1801-1830). Records indicate that additional changes to the house were made either immediately prior to or during Nicholas Ridgely's tenure at Eden Hill.

Conference Area

Eden Hill was continuously owned by Ridgely family members from 1748 until it was sold to the State Department of Transportation in 2004 as a part of a proposed road expansion project. Structurally, the house has evolved with each new owner as it was adapted to meet the needs and taste of its occupiers. A northeastern extension was added by Henry Ridgely, a physician, in the 19th century to function as an office. Major internal renovations were made in 1950 by Mabel Lloyd Ridgely.

Justice Henry duPont Ridgely (who had no property interest in Eden Hill and was not involved in the transaction in which the State purchased the property) was pleased to have the opportunity presented to him by the Department of Transportation for Eden Hill to serve as a facility for the Supreme Court . When Justice Ridgely was appointed a Supreme Court Justice in 2004, there was no space available for Chambers in the Supreme Court building on the Green for a second Justice. Chief Justice Myron T. Steele maintains his Chambers in that building. Offices were rented in downtown Dover for Justice Ridgely's Chambers as a temporary solution. One of the goals established by the DAS study was that all facilities used by the Judiciary should be State owned. Eden Hill was considered a more cost-effective alternative for Justice Ridgely's Chambers than building an extension on the Supreme Court building or maintaining rental facilities, and approval was granted to begin the minor renovations to Eden Hill necessary to accommodate the Justice and his staff.

Given Eden Hill's rich history, care has been taken to ensure that renovations balanced the modern needs and requirements of the Judiciary and the public with Eden Hill's historical structure. Eden Hill is registered on the National Register of Historic Places.

Entrance Area