

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 18, 2023

Delaware Judiciary holds groundbreaking ceremony for renovation and expansion of historic Custom House in Wilmington

A groundbreaking ceremony was held Monday, December 18, 2023 in Wilmington at the historic Custom House in front of the Leonard L. Williams Justice Center to kick off a renovation and expansion of the building.

The project marks both the Delaware Judiciary's commitment to downtown Wilmington and to historic preservation as it moves to secure a permanent home for New Castle County Supreme Court offices and branch administrative offices in Wilmington that are currently in leased space. The Supreme Court will continue to hear cases in its Dover Courthouse.

"We thank the Governor and the General Assembly for helping us secure needed office space for the Supreme Court and its administrative functions and preserve this important part of Delaware's legal history," said Chief Justice Collins J. Seitz, Jr. "The Custom House was the home to the first federal courtroom in Delaware and it played a consequential role in Delaware and Wilmington history. It is a unique and important architectural landmark in the First State but, in recent years, has become an eyesore with broken windows and a crumbling exterior. This project will not only restore the Custom House to public use but also turn it into a showpiece for the City of Wilmington and the Delaware Judiciary."

The renovation and expansion, projected to cost \$76.7 million, will add a 51,650-square foot wrap-around addition to the 15,000 square foot historic building. The resulting 66,650-square-foot facility is set to be completed in 2026. The construction will also restore the second-floor courtroom in the building, which will be used for ceremonial functions and non-jury legal proceedings. Finally, in addition to administrative offices, the building will become the new home for the branch's Community Resource Center, which provides access to treatment services and employment resources and is currently located in the Justice Center's law library.

Speakers at Tuesday's ceremony, in addition to Chief Justice Seitz, included Gov. John Carney, Wilmington Mayor Michael S. Purzycki, State Senate Majority Leader Bryan Townsend and State Senator Darius J. Brown.

In 1855, the Custom House was one of the first federal buildings ever constructed outside Washington, D.C. or New York and the first federal building in Delaware. It was also one of the first built from a standard plan by noted architect Ammi B. Young to be used for all federal buildings, a unique concept at the time. At least a half dozen similar structures were constructed and one, a twin of this building, still stands in Bath, Maine.

The first floor of the Custom House – built before the widespread use of indoor plumbing and electrification – was the primary post office for Delaware and offices for the Custom Service. The second-floor courtroom was host to not only the U.S. District Court for Delaware, but also the Circuit Court of Appeals. The federal court would also occasionally sit "in admiralty" in that

courtroom to adjudicate maritime matters including mutiny and piracy. When the court was sitting in admiralty a small model of a ship would be placed above the bench. During prohibition, the basement of the Custom House – where there were bars on the windows – was used to store alcohol seized from “rum runners” on the Delaware River.

In its later years, the building was home to a number of different federal offices, including military recruiting, before being vacated by the federal government in 1973. The city of Wilmington later saved the building from demolition and it was placed on the National Register for Historic Places in 1974. It was home to developers’ offices for a time and from 1988 to 2004 it was home to Wilmington College (later Wilmington University). The building was vacant from 2004 until the courts acquired the property in 2018.

In becoming a part of the Delaware Judiciary, the 1855 Custom House will be the second-oldest court building in the State, following the Sussex County Courthouse in Georgetown that dates to 1840, and older than the original portion of Kent County Courthouse that dates to 1874, and the Supreme Court building in Dover that was built in 1910. The nearby Leonard L. Williams Justice Center was opened in 2002.

Monday’s ceremony concluded with a presentation by building architect William J. Lenihan of Tevebaugh Architecture.