

The rebirth of Seneca County's Historic Courthouse



An artist's drawing at the time of construction in 1884.

By **TOM TROY**
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TIFFIN — It could have been squeezed into a smaller format, or even printed in black and white.

Instead, the "Project Portfolio" produced by the Columbus architectural firm Schooley Caldwell Associates on behalf of preservationists hoping to save the 1884 Seneca County Courthouse boldly fills out an 11-by-17-inch color book in an effort to vault the project from architects' drawings to reality.

The 53-page book contains nine watercolor renderings, most of them filling full pages, portraying a remodeled courthouse. It also has six pages of full-color floor and vertical plans depicting each room, staircase, window, vaulted arch, and hallway in the four-story building.

It contains, as well, nine pages of historic photographs and drawings of the courthouse in its heyday — one with an electric trolley passing by in front.

The plan estimates a restored courthouse at a "final cost to county" of \$6.04 million, compared with a \$6.99 million cost to the county for demolishing the historic courthouse and building a smaller replacement out of less durable materials. Tiffin preservationists pledge they will raise \$1.45 million in grants and donations to

help pay for restoration of the third-floor courtroom and the clock tower and dome.

Franklin Conaway, leader of the Seneca County Courthouse and Downtown Redevelopment Group, wrote that the purpose of the book and the results of the research that went into it were two-fold:

1. "To confirm beyond question that the historic courthouse can be economically restored" to meet the county's courthouse needs, and,

2. "To ensure that a properly restored courthouse — as the most monumental structure in downtown Tiffin — would become a major catalyst for realizing the goals of the Downtown Strategic Plan."

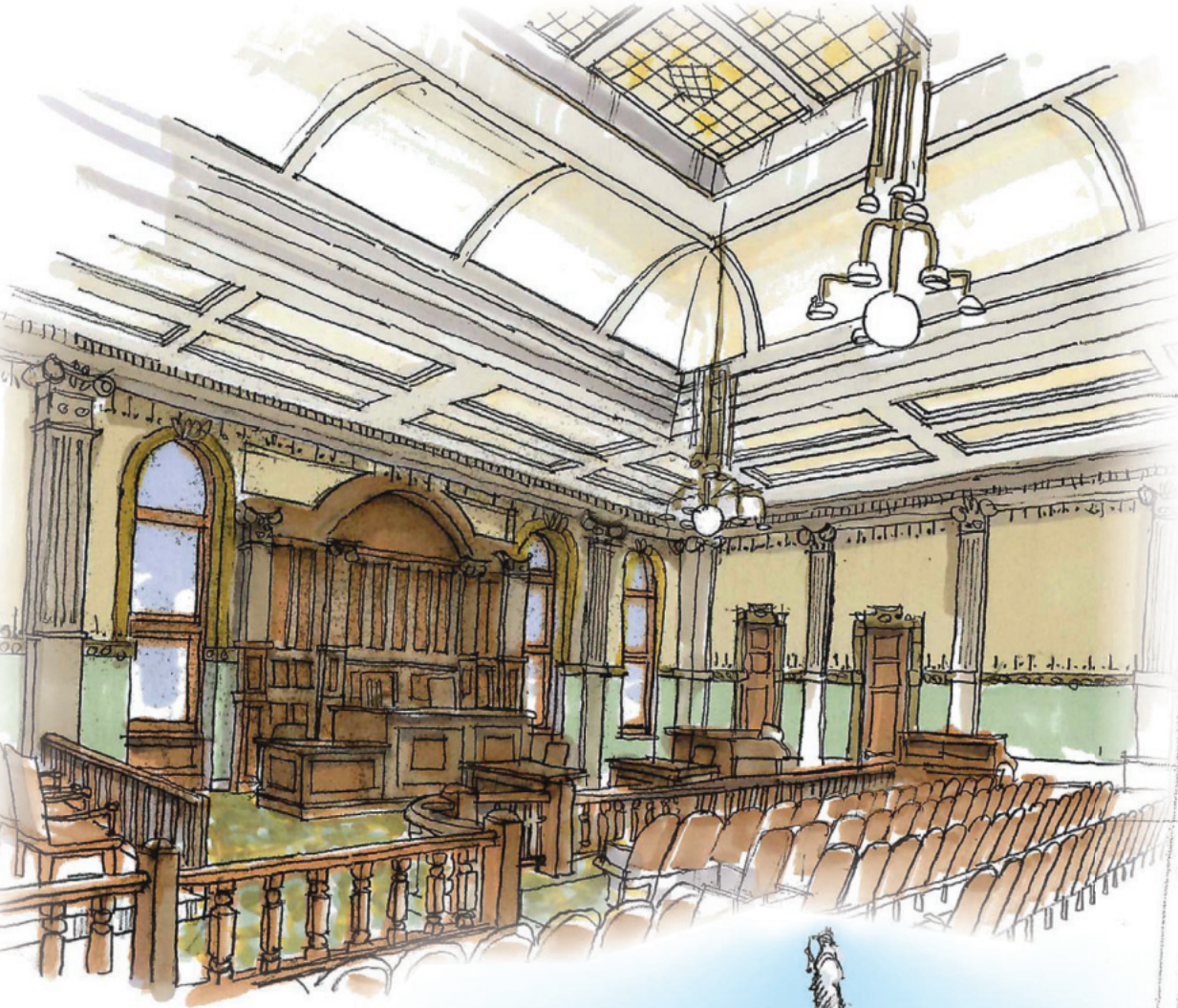
Prominently portrayed in the document is the case for restoring the courthouse dome, which was demolished years ago.

And it quotes the words of one of the speakers at the 1884 cornerstone-laying of the courthouse, which Tiffin preservationists hope will prove prophetic:

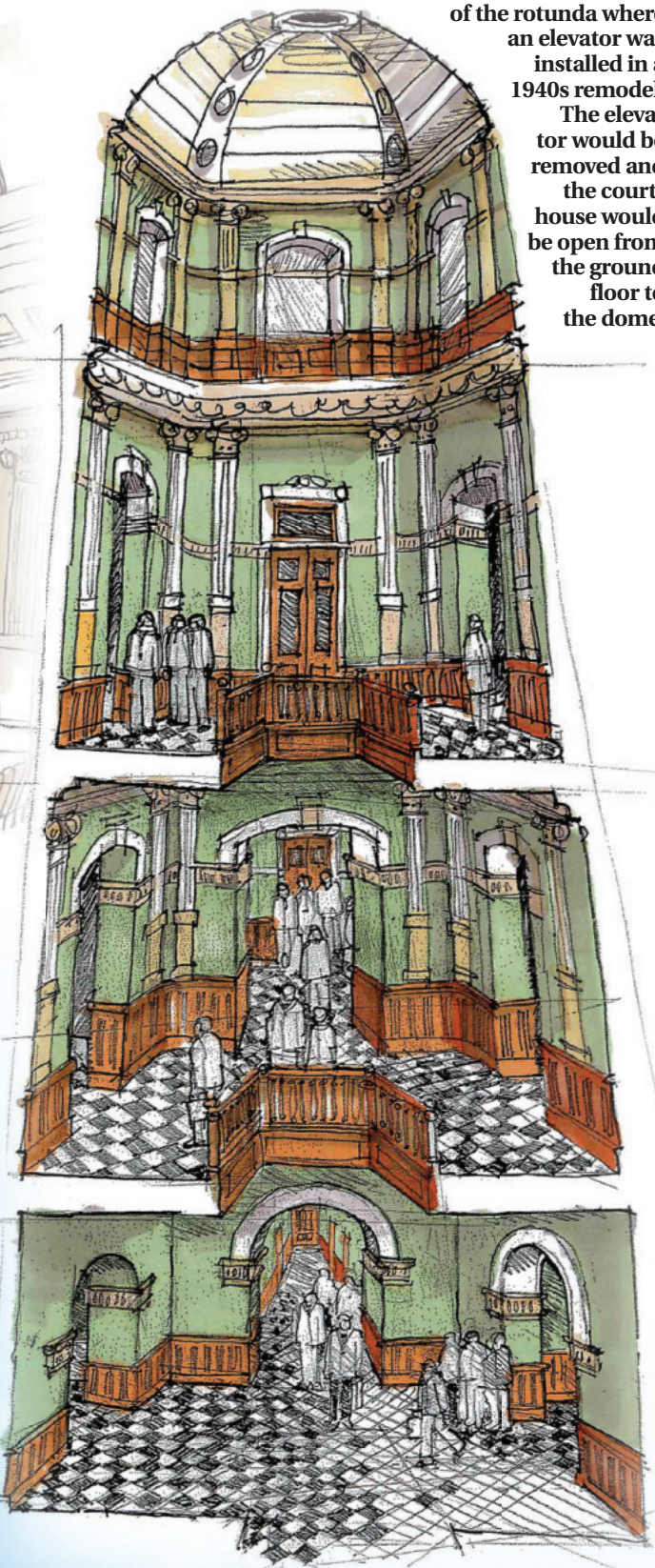
"We are not building for ourselves, but for countless generations, not for an age, but for the centuries."

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At left is a cross-section of the rotunda where an elevator was installed in a 1940s remodel. The elevator would be removed and the courthouse would be open from the ground floor to the dome.



Above is a third-floor Common Pleas courtroom as it would appear after the restoration. A false ceiling installed during a past 'modernization' would be removed, opening the courtroom to an original stained-glass skylight.



A restored Seneca County Courthouse, or the 'temple of justice' as it was referred to when it was built in 1884, would once again be the architectural centerpiece of Tiffin's historic downtown as envisioned by Elijah E. Myers, the building's designer. Mr. Myers, one of the country's pre-eminent architects of public buildings in the 19th century, also designed the capitol buildings of Michigan and Texas.

