by Kyle J. Wilson

An Enduring Symbol of Hope, History, and Justice: The Joel W. Solomon Federal Building

To a casual observer, the Joel W. Solomon Federal Building might seem monolithic, a stark representation of federal power out of place among its more genteel neighbors. To the innumerable men and women subject to judgment within, it is a place of high drama, where lives can—and frequently do—change in an instant. To those who practice law in its courtrooms, it represents a culmination of effort offered, hopefully, in the name of some greater good.

But apart from its present-day significance, the Solomon Building stands for something more. It is a proud centerpiece of a national architectural movement, and it embodies a forward-looking government, a belief in something greater than the sum of its parts, and the meaningful cooperation between the public and private sectors.

In 1930, the nation was mired in the depths of the Great Depression, and recovery seemed far from certain. In an effort to stimulate the national economy, the Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury—colloquially known as simply "the Office" – set about developing an ambitious architectural program. The Office served as the federal government's construction arm, and its federally-funded architects were directly involved in the design and construction of government facilities across the country. The Office was prolific, to say the very least: for a five-year period during the 1930's "New Deal" era, federal architects oversaw construction that took place at a staggering average rate of well over one building *per day*.

In 1913, Congress passed legislation prohibiting the Office from engaging private firms to design major federal projects. But as the Depression took hold, new building projects dried up, and many architects—like other Americans from all walks of life—found themselves struggling to find work. Conversely, the Office was rapidly expanding to meet the production demands of a legislature frantically attempting to rescue a faltering economy. Legislation passed in March 1930 permitted the Office to contract with private architects for direct appointments to design and construct federal buildings. These collaborative appointments proved to be a novel and successful way to develop a federal infrastructure.

Chattanooga's U.S. Post Office and Courthouse (as the Solomon Building was originally called) was the product of one such appointment. In July 1930, the Office publicly solicited design proposals for the Courthouse, which would stand as a new and contemporary symbol of the federal government's presence in the Tennessee Valley. Among others, Chattanooga native Reuben Harrison Hunt submitted a proposal for the new building. Hunt was one of the most productive American architects of his day, and he aggressively lobbied to ensure his selection. Known as much for his salesmanship as for his considerable architectural acumen, he even went so far as to write Adolph Ochs (publisher of the *New York Times* and the *Chattanooga Times*) in an attempt to secure public approbation of his bid. Although Ochs declined, citing a longstanding policy against such endorsements, Hunt prevailed in his efforts. He received the blessing of Louis A. Simon, the federal government's superintendent of architects, and on April 7, 1931, the R.H. Hunt Company contracted with the United States Government to design and construct the Courthouse.

Shortly before accepting his appointment, Hunt contracted with the New York architectural firm of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon. The precise depth of the firm's involvement is unclear, but it must have been significant, since Hunt agreed to a consulting fee of $10,000—nearly 25% of his own commission. The significant fee was no doubt informed by the firm's national reputation. Mere weeks after engaging themselves to Hunt, the New York consultants cut the ribbon on their most recent project, the Empire State Building, which stood for years as the tallest man-made structure in the world.

Despite the architects' widely divergent backgrounds, the Courthouse's general aesthetic goal was clear from the beginning: evoke classical themes, while simultaneously reflecting a modern spirit. Thanks in part to the influence of the out-of-town consultants, the building developed into an archetype of the *Art Moderne* style, a specific variation of Art Deco architecture that emphasized "streamlining" through long horizontal lines and broad curves. Simon complemented the private architects, ensuring that the Courthouse never lost its sense of purpose. It was, after all, a *federal* building, and any proposed ornamentation would either serve to welcome the public or to remind visitors of the solemnity of the proceedings they were about to witness.

A composite of Georgia marble and Midwestern metal, the Courthouse occupies half a city block and cost $493,000 (equivalent to roughly $8.5 million in 2012) to complete. Though it is

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The Joel W. Solomon Building: Built in 1931 of Georgia marble in the Art Moderne style.

imposing in stature, the Solomon Building is far from the solitary stone monument it appears to be at first glance. Approaching the west-facing main elevation, visitors will immediately notice straight, bold lines that form an uncompromising exterior. Thirteen recessed window bays call to mind the stripes on America's flag. Unbroken marble columns emphasize the building's height and are designed to recall a Roman colonnade. Above them, a band of eagles and stars carved into low relief reminds visitors of the federal presence within.

At the building's North and South ends, two towers—included over the objections of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon—stand sentinel over the entry pavilions. Their parapets are encircled with deep horizontal cuts known as "speed lines," meant to evoke energy and forward progress. Carved eagles look down on broad granite steps and prominently demonstrate the power wielded by a rapidly growing federal government. At the entryways, marble yields to aluminum, and authoritarian stone gives way to intricate metalwork. An awning above the doors is inscribed with metal roses so delicate they risk being overlooked. Elegant vegetal patterns snake down the curved window bay, echo into the fluted marble, enter the building, and finally terminate beneath four aluminum eagles, perched atop the interior doors. The last emblem a visitor sees before entry is the Great Seal of the United States, emblazoned above the doors, situated alongside the seals of the Department of Justice and the Postal Service.

Some have speculated that responsibility for the Courthouse's external appearance belongs primarily to Hunt and Simon, perhaps accounting for the omission of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon from the facility's cornerstone. The New York consultants' participation in the building's exterior design may be muddy, but their impact on the interior is beyond doubt. One of the most interesting elements of the Solomon Building is the striking design similarity it shares with its New York cousin, the Empire State Building, which was completed just as its designers began work in Chattanooga.

The Empire State and the Solomon Buildings both feature strong chevron patterns inlaid in their respective lobby floors. The terrazzo in Chattanooga and the marble in New York reflect long metallic ceilings, each lit from below to articulate decorative themes. At Simon's insistence, however, the geometric frills in the Empire State Building were replaced in the Courthouse with simple stars and conical light fixtures, which he believed to be "more appropriate" for a federal building. Elevator bays pay homage to those in the Empire State Building, including block lettering that is nearly identical to that which is employed throughout the skyscraper. Perhaps most profoundly, the Manhattan icon itself is reflected in the Solomon Building's symbolic heart. Just outside the third-floor courtroom, a large medallion displays the scales of justice, which balance on a stepped pillar. That pillar, set against a radiant black orb, bears a striking resemblance to the ascending profile of the Empire State Building. The similarity is drawn even sharper when the medallion is compared to a figure in the Empire State Building's lobby, which features an image of the skyscraper bearing a more-than-coincidental likeness to the scales depicted in the Solomon Building.

Setting aside other architectural and historical trappings, the Solomon Building's focal point is, and always has been, the third-floor courtroom. The space now known as the "ceremonial courtroom" features burled-oak paneling throughout and hand-carved cabinetry surrounding the judge's bench. Artisans devoted many long hours to planning and hand-painting the lofty ceiling. Even the courtroom's doorknobs, gallery benches, and custom rope stanchions were designed to blend seamlessly with the "modern federal" theme the building typifies. Portraits on the wall tell the story of the district through its judges. The men depicted include: Judge David M. Key, a Confederate Civil War veteran who endured the public criticism of no less a figure than Mark Twain; Judge Edward Terry Sanford, the District's only Judge to be appointed to the United States Supreme Court; and Judge Frank W. Wilson, who famously presided over the 1964 trial of Jimmy Hoffa.

A highly stylized Sword of Justice hangs prominently behind the judge's bench. Its visible presence symbolizes the power of the law and its objective enforcement. As is traditional, the blade is double-edged to represent truth and reason, which may be brandished by or against any party before the Court. Courthouse legend claims that the sword's placement—directly above the presiding judge's head—deliberately alludes to the Sword of Damocles, reminding both the public and the judge of the responsibility attendant to the Court's power.

Approximately 1% of the Solomon Building's funding was dedicated to interior "embellishments." Drawing from these funds, the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture commissioned the courtroom's most visible feature: a $1,500 mural entitled *Allegory of Chattanooga* (the remainder of the fund paid for *The Mail Carrier*, the cast-aluminum sculpture adorning the Post Office lobby). Painted by J. Hilton Leech in his Sarasota, Florida studios, *Allegory* was finished in 1937. At the time, the country's interest in murals was revitalized: large, sweeping panoramas conveyed emotionally charged visual messages radio could not.

Leech's studies for the mural, one of which has hung in the first-floor courtroom since 2010, give insight into the finished product. A content review removed some elements that were deemed to border on the offensive, at least as determined by standards prevailing in the 1930's. Originally, the mural's central figure was flanked by two African-Americans, a prisoner and a laborer, both bent at the waist from their exertions. The Treasury

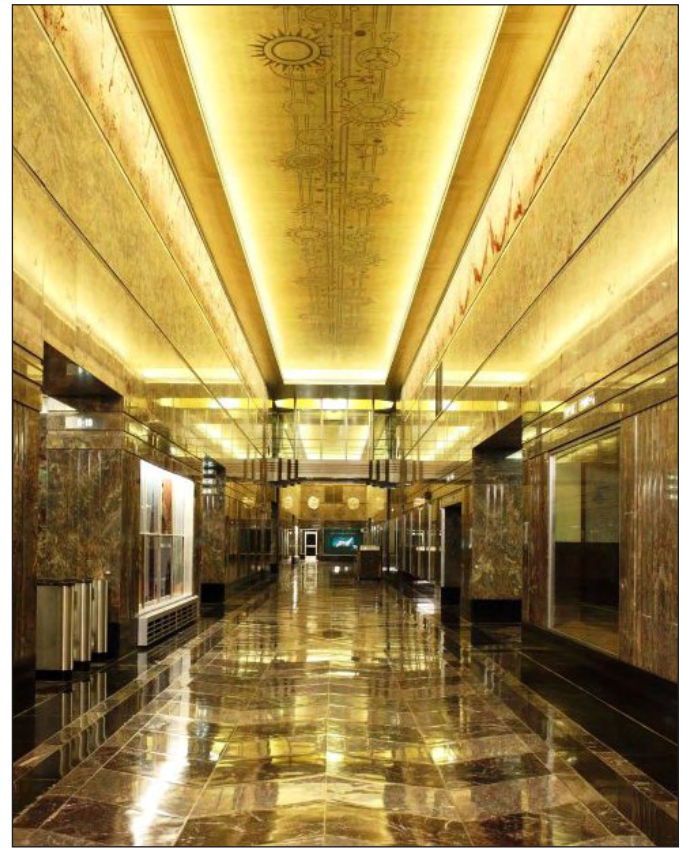
Department disapproved, and Leech substituted an architect for the figure of the prisoner. The laborer, still stooped to retrieve his bale of cotton, remains the sole African-American represented in the mural.

The personal intervention of R.H. Hunt saw a second change. Hunt suggested the removal of a missionary dressed in the *Cappello Romano* and cassock typical of a Catholic priest. In his place, Leech substituted a bible-carrying clergyman attired in a suit, likely in homage to Samuel Worcester, a Christian minister whose remains are interred in Chattanooga's Brainerd Mission Cemetery. Worcester, a Caucasian activist for the Cherokee, fought the government's treatment of Native Americans, ultimately taking his case to the Supreme Court. Through John Marshall's 1832 decision in *Worcester v. Georgia*, he secured victory and nominal sovereignty for the Cherokee Nation, and he incited President Jackson's famous (though likely misattributed) quote mocking the Chief Justice: "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it!"

The remainder of *Allegory* was designed to illustrate historical and contemporary elements of the community. Civil War veterans pay homage to soldiers, and a cross marked "1863" likely refers to the war's costly Chattanooga Campaign. Power lines arc across the mural and connect to the Chickamauga Dam, which was under construction at the time *Allegory* was completed. A locomotive steams through the painting, signifying both Chattanooga's status as a prosperous rail hub and the city's irrepressible progress. The background action frames the mural's central figure: a woman clad in white, clutching an infant to her breast. The inclusion of mother and child at the forefront of the mural suggests that the community depicted in *Allegory* is one of great promise and limitless possibilities.

On completion, the Courthouse's effect was immediately felt. Initially, it inspired regional designs, influencing such buildings as the Polk County Courthouse (another of Hunt's public works) and the U.S. Post Office in Nashville (now known as the Frist Center for the Visual Arts). Shortly thereafter, the Courthouse garnered significant national attention. Publications such as *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Forum* hailed it as typifying a new character of American design. The building was included alongside the Washington Monument, the Treasury Building, and other great landmarks in the 1938 murals *Architecture Under the Government, Old and New*, which hung for years in the Department of Treasury's Washington, D.C. Procurement Office. Ultimately, the Solomon Building was the object of worldwide acclaim. In 1938, the Courthouse was selected to appear in an international exhibit sponsored by the American Institute of Architects. The touring exhibit showcased 150 American buildings, each selected "to show 'what is considered by architects as fine in design and representative of the best work in the United States.'"

As the years progressed, the Solomon Building underwent many changes. Extensive renovations saw the addition of several



One of the most interesting elements of the Solomon Building is the striking design similarity it shares with its New York cousin, the Empire State Building, which was completed just as its designers began work in Chattanooga. Left photo, Joel W. Solomon Federal Building in Chattanooga, Tenn. Right photo, Empire State Building in New York, N.Y.

courtrooms. In 1981, it was renamed after Jay Solomon, President Carter's Chattanooga-born Administrator of the General Services Administration. Government agencies shuffled in and out, and elected officials came and went. But throughout the decades, one thing remained constant: from the day it was completed, the Joel W. Solomon building has been a representative work with a distinguished legacy. Designed in a style that embodies progress and optimism, the Solomon Building stands as a monument to the spirit of Chattanooga. It is a reminder that cooperation and hope are aspirations shared across generations, as present and profound today as they were in 1933. ⊙

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- Material information provided by correspondence/interview with:
  - Gavin Townsend, Professor of Art, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
  - Don Ferguson, U.S. District Court Historical Officer, Eastern District of Tennessee.
  - John Medearis, U.S. District Court Chief Deputy Clerk in Charge, Eastern District of Tennessee.

KRESSEL continued from page 25

this day, she remembers the impromptu marriage proposal.[2]

The District Family

Not too long after his appointment, three new judges, who have been Judge Kressel's colleagues for the majority of his career, were appointed in rapid succession. Judges Dennis D. O'Brien and Gregory F. Kishel were both appointed in 1984. In 1988, the district court appointed Judge Nancy C. Dreher. These four judges, representing a complete turnover of the bankruptcy bench and appointed in the span of six years, served the District of Minnesota together for 24 years. Each of them had a special relationship with the district's "bankruptcy guru" and longtime chief deputy clerk, Raeder Larson. Judge Kressel and Raeder were part of a group that ushered the newly passed Bankruptcy Code into practice beginning in 1978. Judge Kressel considered Raeder a teacher, mentor, and friend. Raeder retired from the Clerk's Office in 1994 and passed away in 1998. To this day, if you appear before Judge Kressel, you will see one of Raeder's quirky clip-on ties peeking out from behind his black robe.

The four judges shared many weekends together at Judge Dreher's cabin in Cable, Wisc. They cheered every milestone and felt each setback as their families grew, first with children and then with grandchildren. Each judge took at least one turn serving as the chief bankruptcy judge. In 2004, the bankruptcy judges for the District of Minnesota appointed the first woman to serve as the clerk of a federal court in the District of Minnesota: Lori A. Vosejpka, one of Judge Kressel's former law clerks. It is rare today to spend your entire career with one organization; it is even rarer to spend your entire career with the same colleagues and friends. Lynn Hennen, Judge Kressel's judicial assistant, has been with him for 26 years; his court recorder, Kathy Barksdale, 24 years; and his calendar clerk, Carrie Nordstrom, was with him for 21 years.

For the first time in a quarter of a century, the bankruptcy bench in Minnesota is turning over. Judge Dreher lost a lengthy battle with lung disease and passed away on Nov. 23, 2012. Judge O'Brien will retire this summer. By next fall, three new judges will be a part of the Minnesota bankruptcy bench. While he has never said as much, I personally believe that one of the reasons Judge Kressel is volunteering his time on recall is so he can "Raeder" the newly appointed judges. Hopefully, all three of them will take advantage of coffee time. ⊙

Endnotes

[1]The one exception: the largest naturalization ceremony in the history of the District of Minnesota, swearing in 1,509 new citizens. *See* www.startribune.com/local/minneapolis/169399466.html.

[2]Judge Kressel later had the honor of presiding over the marriage of his first law clerk, Jane Welch, and her husband Dan, and the marriage of his son and daughter-in-law, Ben and Jane.