



Douglas County Courthouse
Commission Chamber

Project Team





Courthouse Background

Courthouse Information

Built in 1903, the historic Douglas County Courthouse was designed by John G. Haskell and Frederick C. Gunn in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, and it is a late example of the style. The commission chamber, formerly the courtroom, occupies the southeastern corner of the second story.

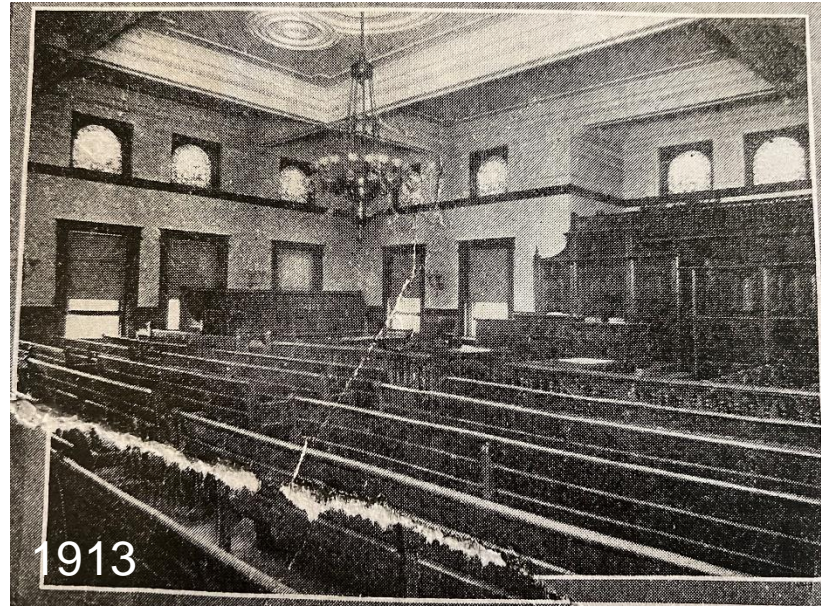


1913 Book Photo

The black-and-white photo to the right is from the book “Lawrence—Today and Yesterday,” published by the Lawrence Daily Journal-World in December 1913, nine years after the building opened in 1904. It is likely the earliest existing photo of the historic courtroom/commission chamber.

The most striking difference between the 1913 photo and the appearance in 2023 is that the layout of virtually all furniture in the room was rotated clockwise 90 degrees. This also applies to the railing dividing the public from the court.

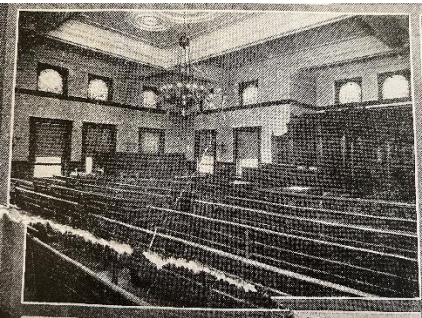
The photo to the right was taken from the same angle as the historic photo.



2023



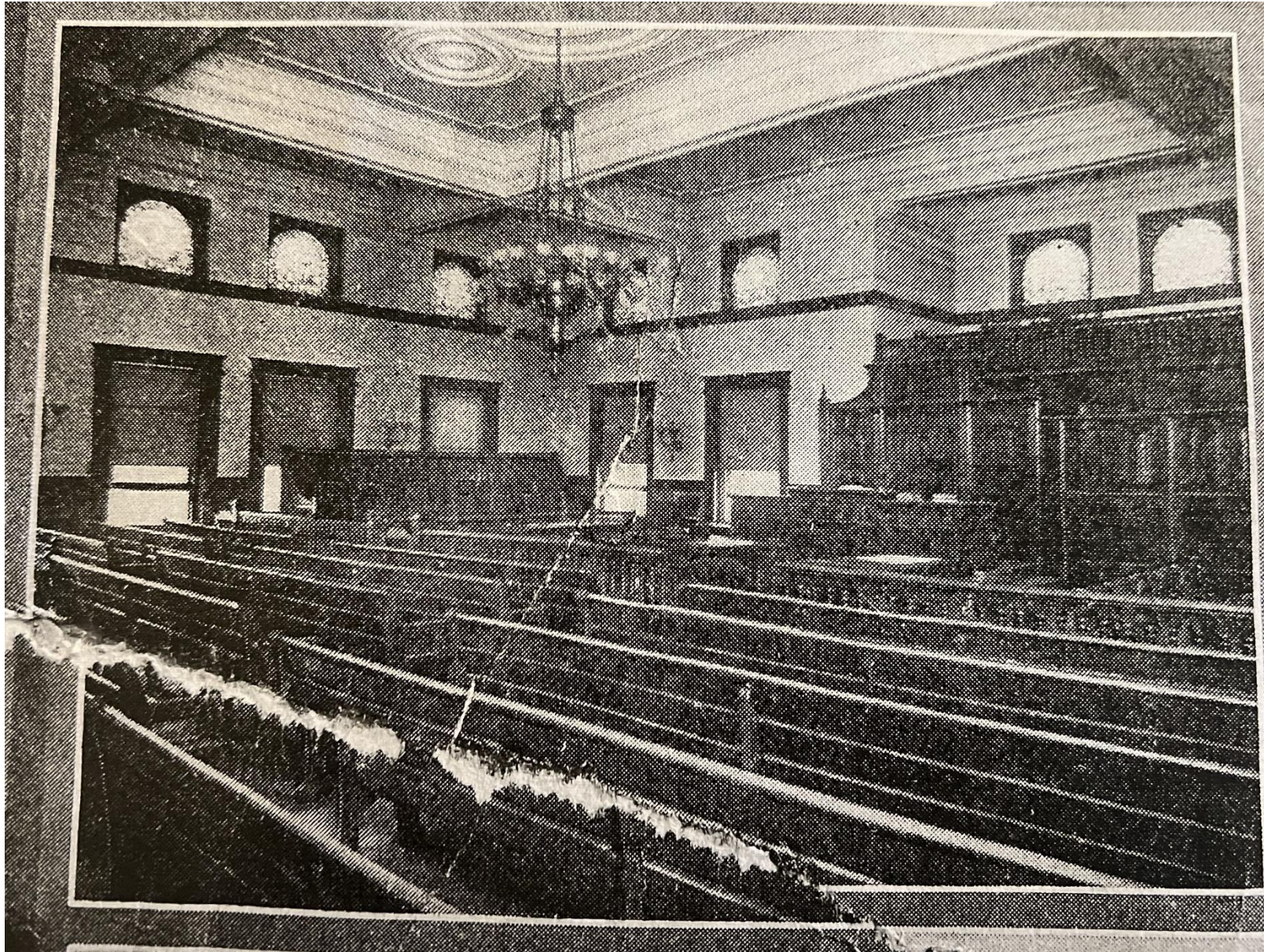
1913



2025



1913



2025



2023



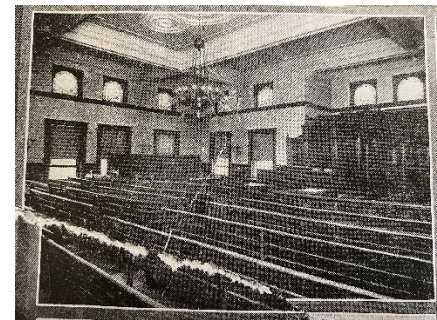
2025



2023

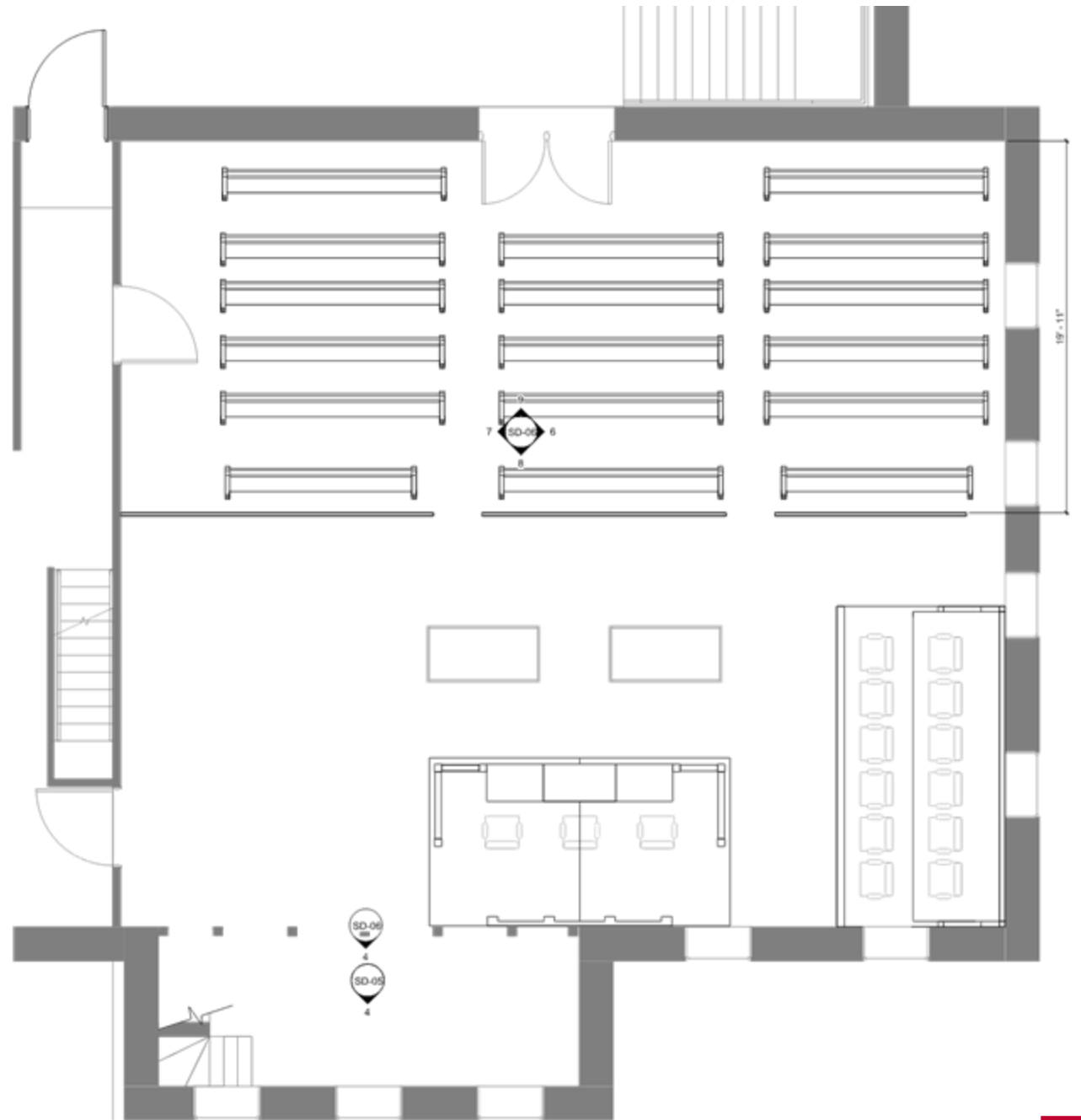
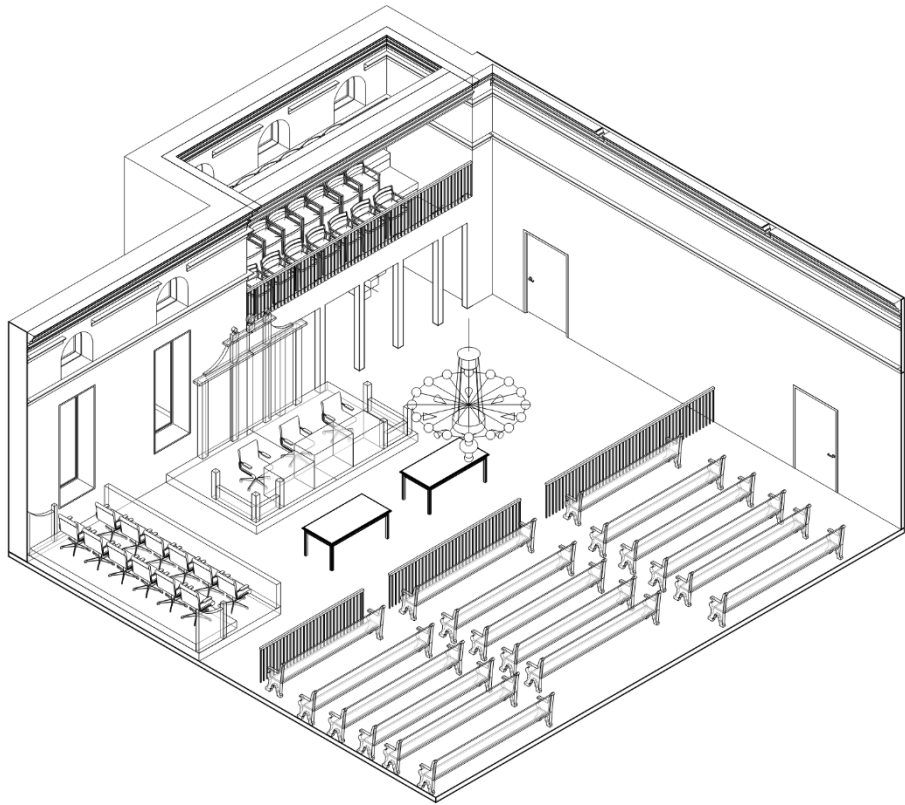


1913



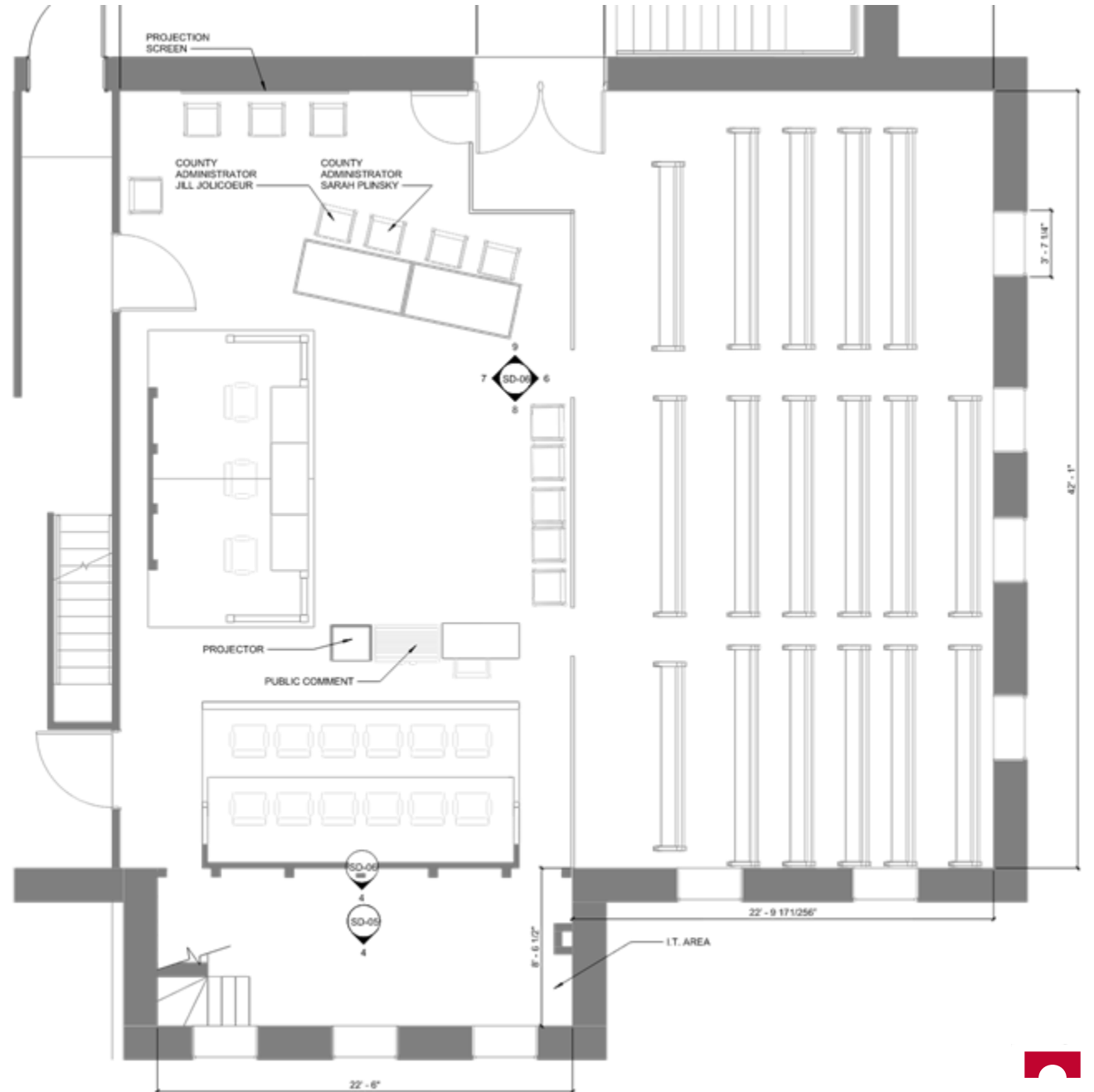
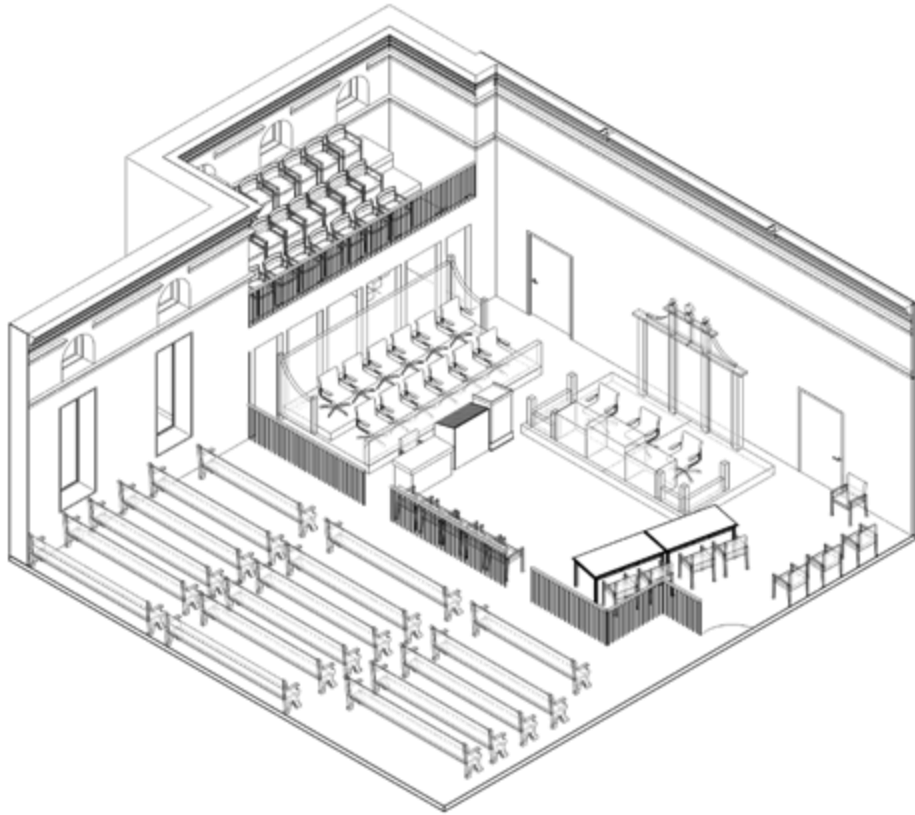
1913 Layout

Chamber roughly as it appeared in 1913,
based on the historic photo.



2023 Layout

Chamber as it appeared before this renovation.

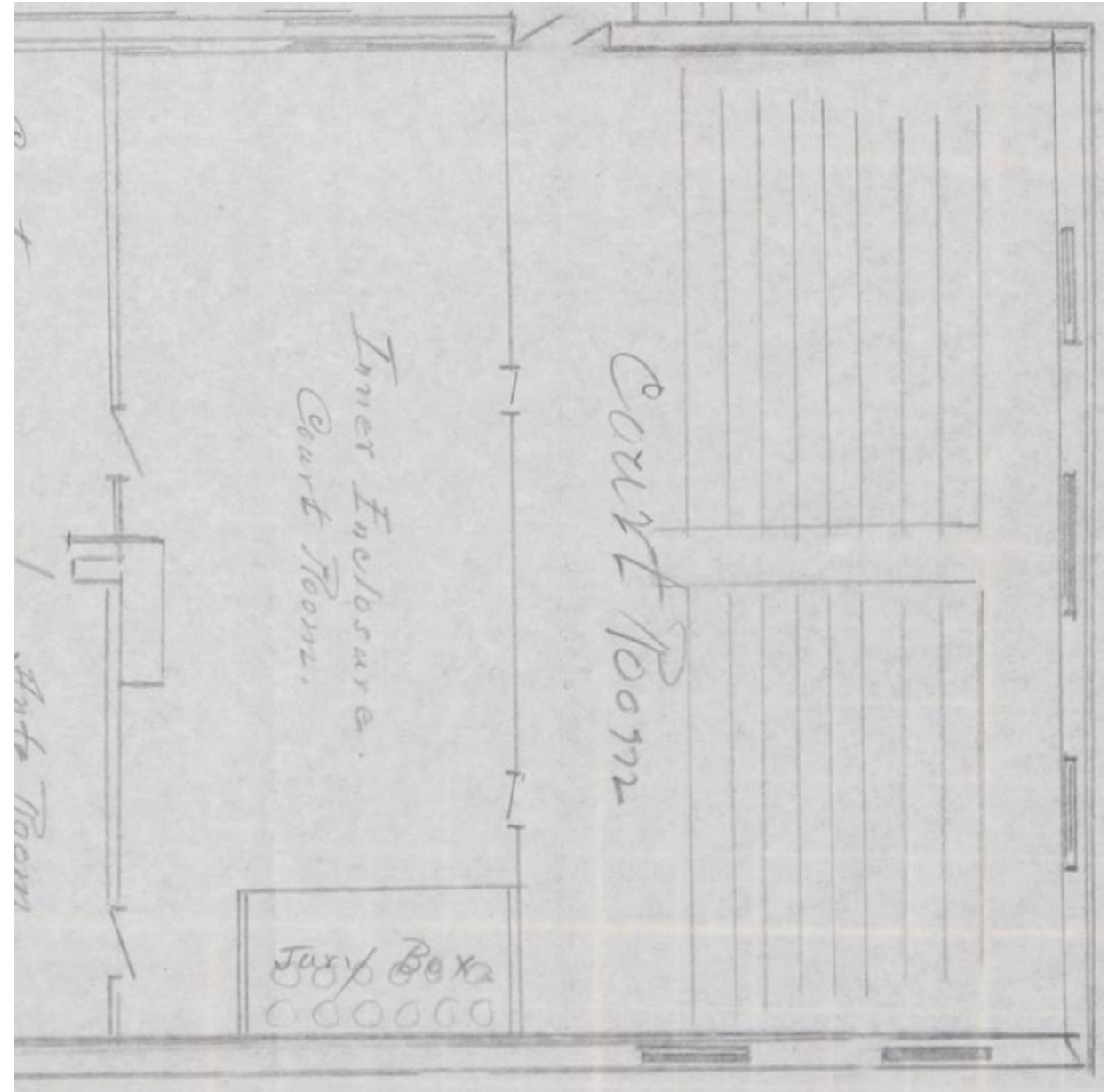




Alterations Through Time

1937 Plans

By 1937, according to historic drawings from the Kansas State Historical Society, the courtroom had been reconfigured near its later condition.



1954 Photo

This photo shows the jury bench in its non-historic location, and the dais has been moved to the west wall.



1955 Photo

This photo gives a good view of the court – or business side of the courtroom. At the lefthand side of the image, the dais is pressed against the west wall. The floor is covered with a material that appears to be a linoleum tile, instead of or installed over the historic hardwood floors.



1955 Photo

This photo shows the pews and railing in their current configuration but also show what appear to be radiators at the windows, in the background.



2006 Treanor Report Findings

In 2006, Treanor produced a preservation plan for the Douglas County Courthouse, which made observations about the courtroom, and speculated on certain elements. It noted that “the doors have been replaced” and “during the work to expose the wood floor a layer of 6x6 linoleum arranged in red and brown diamond pattern was uncovered (this pattern can still be seen in the County Administrator’s office closet)” and that the platform the desk sits on was “enlarged” in the 1976-78 remodel.



Courtroom – Stained Glass and Door Trim Details

Public seating is accommodated in pew-type benches in the eastern half of the room separated from the court proceedings areas on the west side by a wood railing. The alcove has been fitted with a viewing balcony, accessed by a stair that begins underneath it in the alcove. The ceilings are adorned with ornamental plaster and the walls with a wide band of decorative plaster crown molding. These elements appear to be largely intact. However, the areas between the decorative plaster beams, which divide the ceiling, have been in-filled with acoustic ceiling tiles. These tiles may be obscuring decorative plaster rings, a common ornament around light fixtures, or decorative paint, or both. The original plans for the Courthouse support this supposition by showing decorative elements. The wood rail that separates the public side of the room from the court business side of the room has openings for three gates (two of which are stored in the attic) and is made up of newel posts and balustrades with a top and bottom rail. The balustrades match those of a stair that joins the second and third floors on the other side of the west Courtroom wall and all are believed to be part of the original construction. The wood floor has been exposed east of the dividing rail and appears to be fir. Carpet covers the remainder of the room. During the work to expose the wood floor a layer of 6x6 linoleum arranged in red and brown diamond pattern was uncovered (this pattern can still be seen in the County Administrator’s office closet).



Douglas County Courthouse Courtroom - Judge’s Dias and Dividing Rail

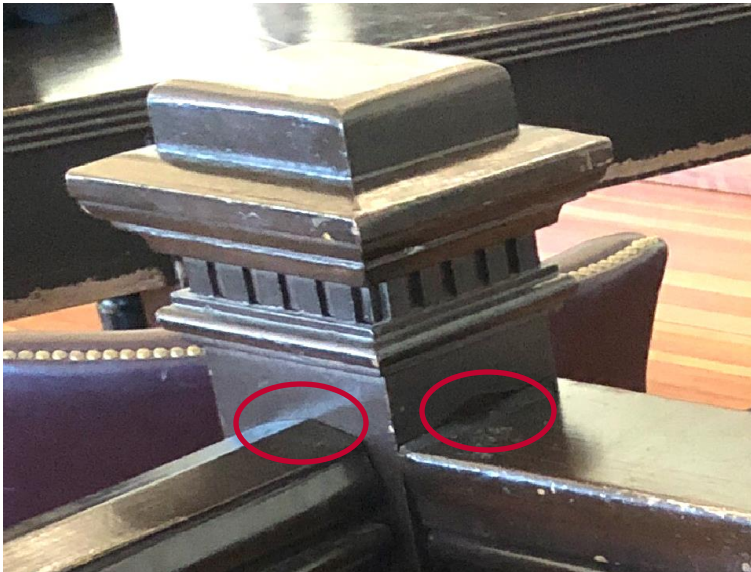
2006 Dais

Between 2006 and 2023, the dais was remodeled, with the carpet stripped off and a new set of railings attached to either end of the desk. Note that the carpet on the floor was removed during that time, exposing the hardwood floors.



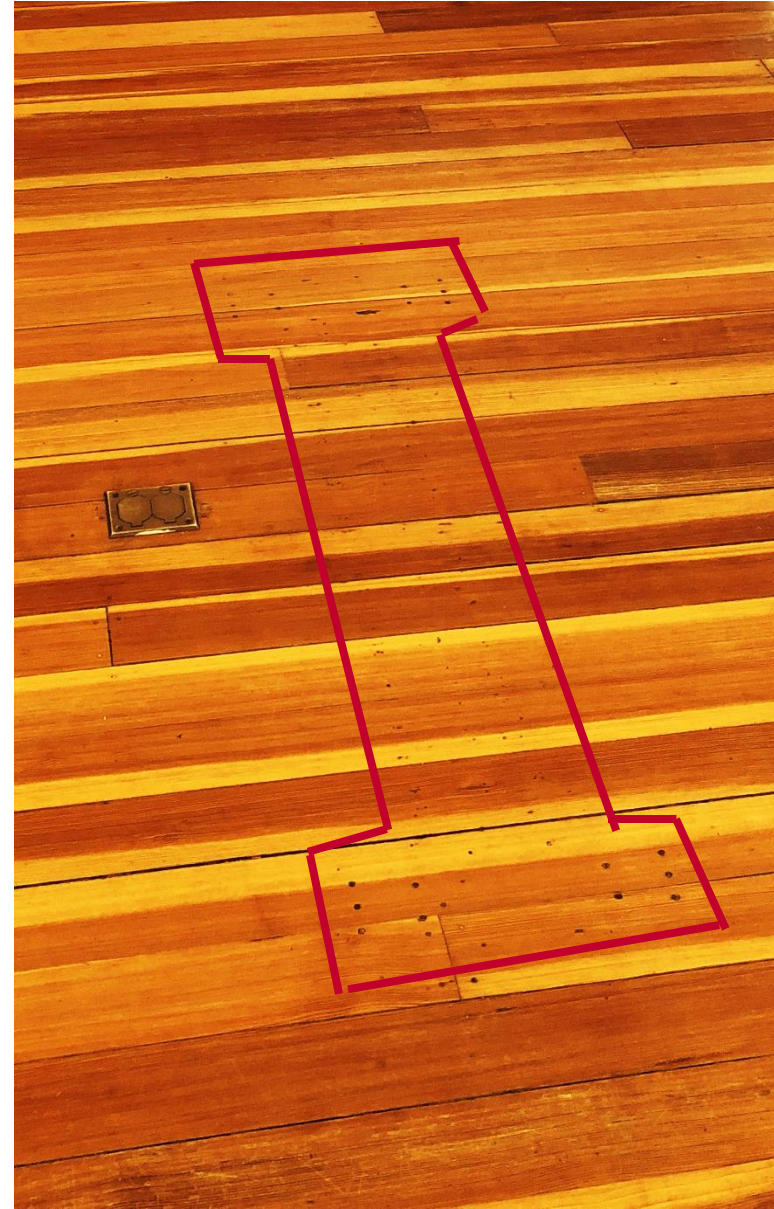
Railing Characteristics

The dividing rail showed signs of its complicated history. Two of the gates were removed and stored in the attic. Scars from the hinges were visible on the insides of the posts. The jog the railing took around the north door was not original, and some damage could be seen on the posts around that location.



Railing Position

A scar of the original railing location could be seen on the floor, approximately 19' – 11" from the north wall.



Jury Bench

The Jury Bench showed signs of modification, such as non-original wood and anachronistic carpentry.



Plaster Condition

The plaster was in fair condition, though serious damage was present in the northeast corner of the room.



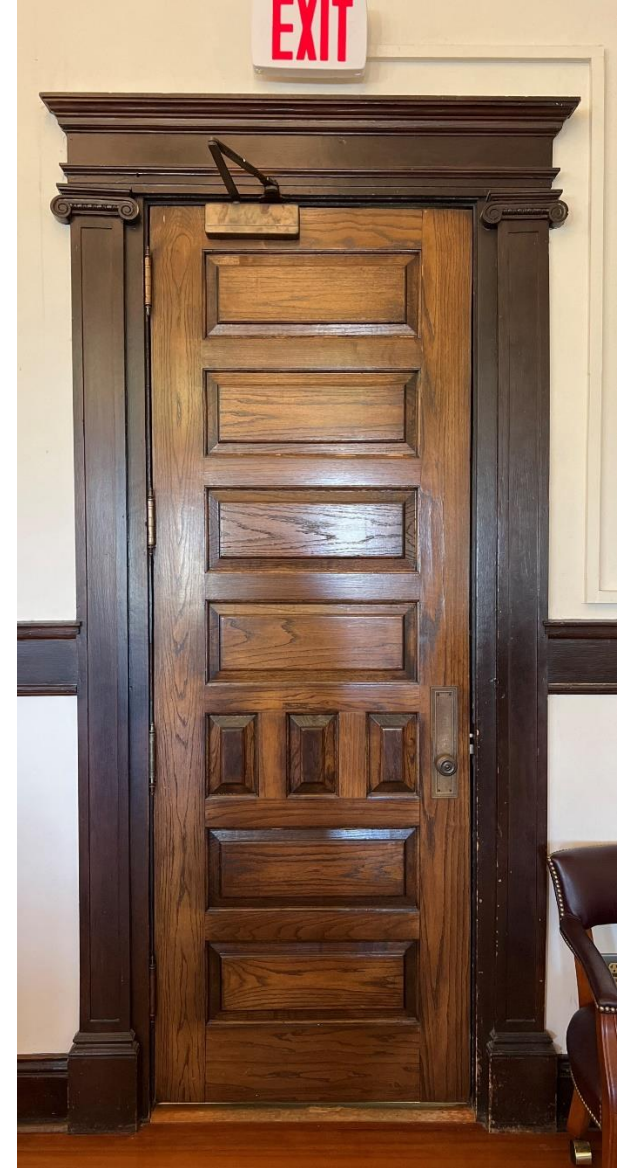
Windows

Stained glass windows appeared to be in good condition, though their surrounds had developed cracks. All other windows appeared to be in good condition but needed some cosmetic improvement.



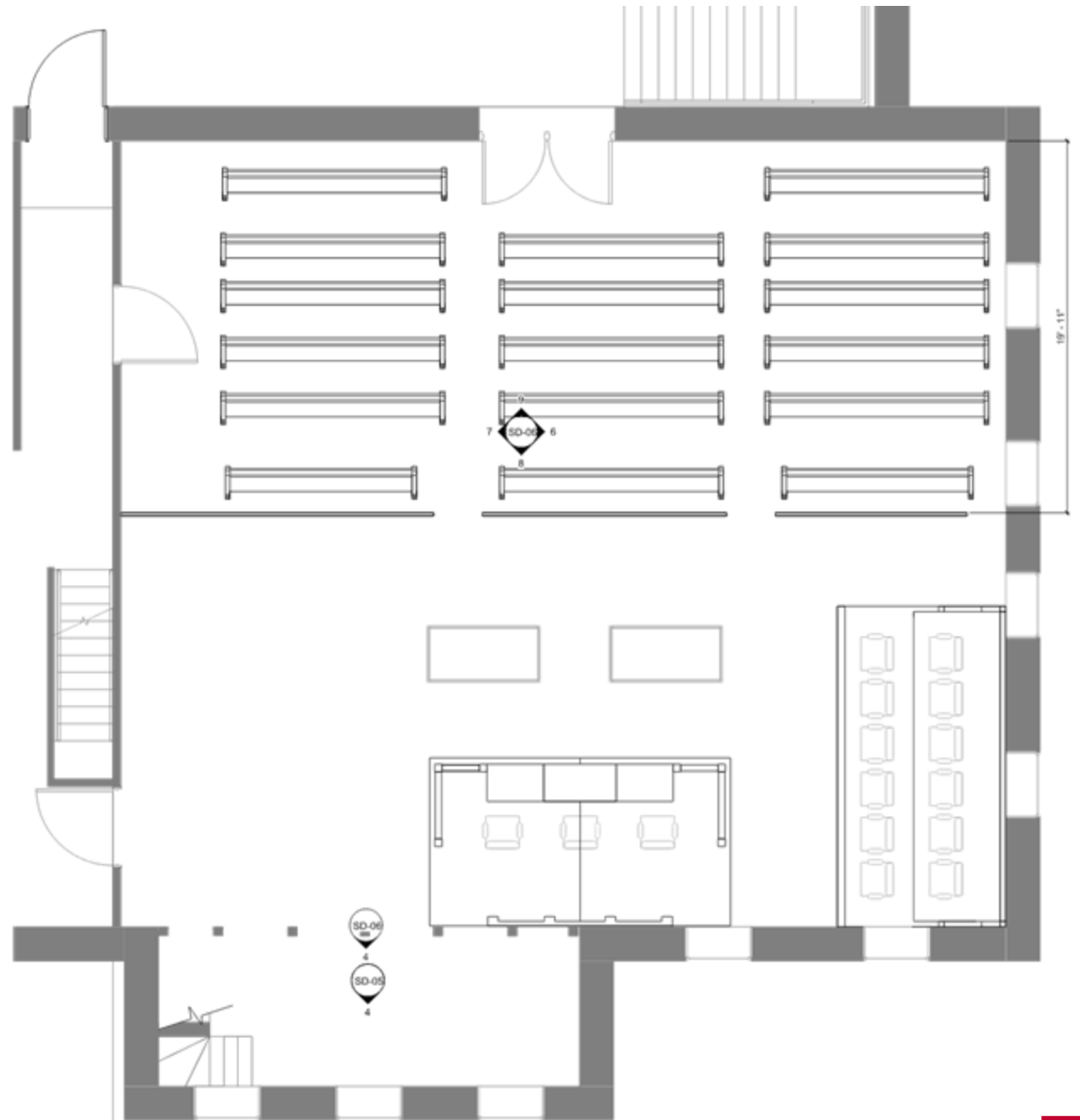
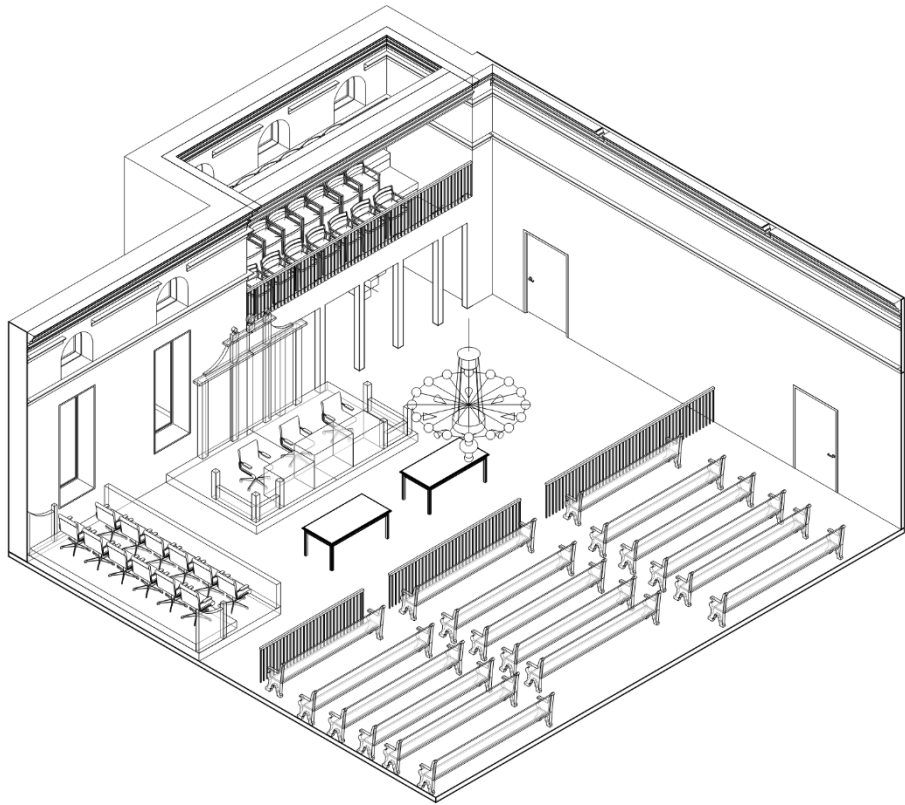
Doors

Existing doors are not original but are somewhat like the doors that existed in the 1950s. Compare images of the north double doors (below) in the 50s and 2023. See the southwest single door (right) in the 50s and 2024.



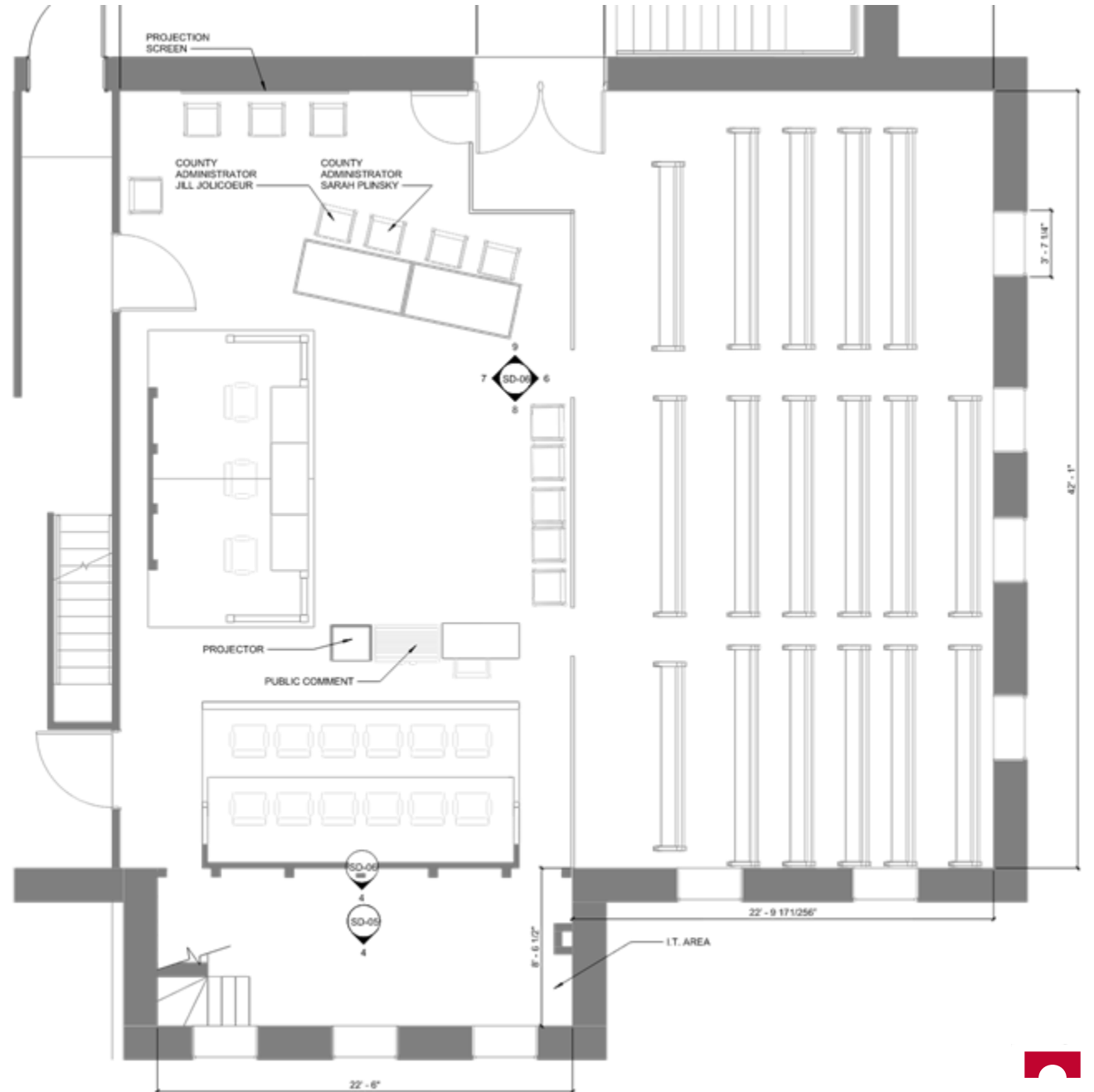
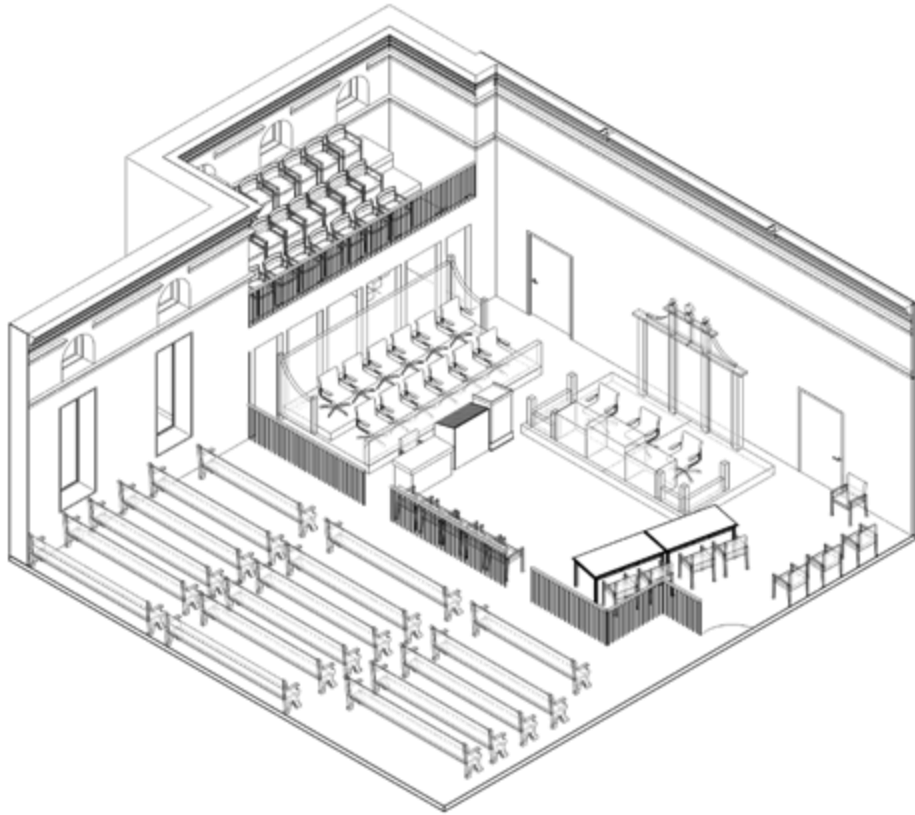
1913 Layout

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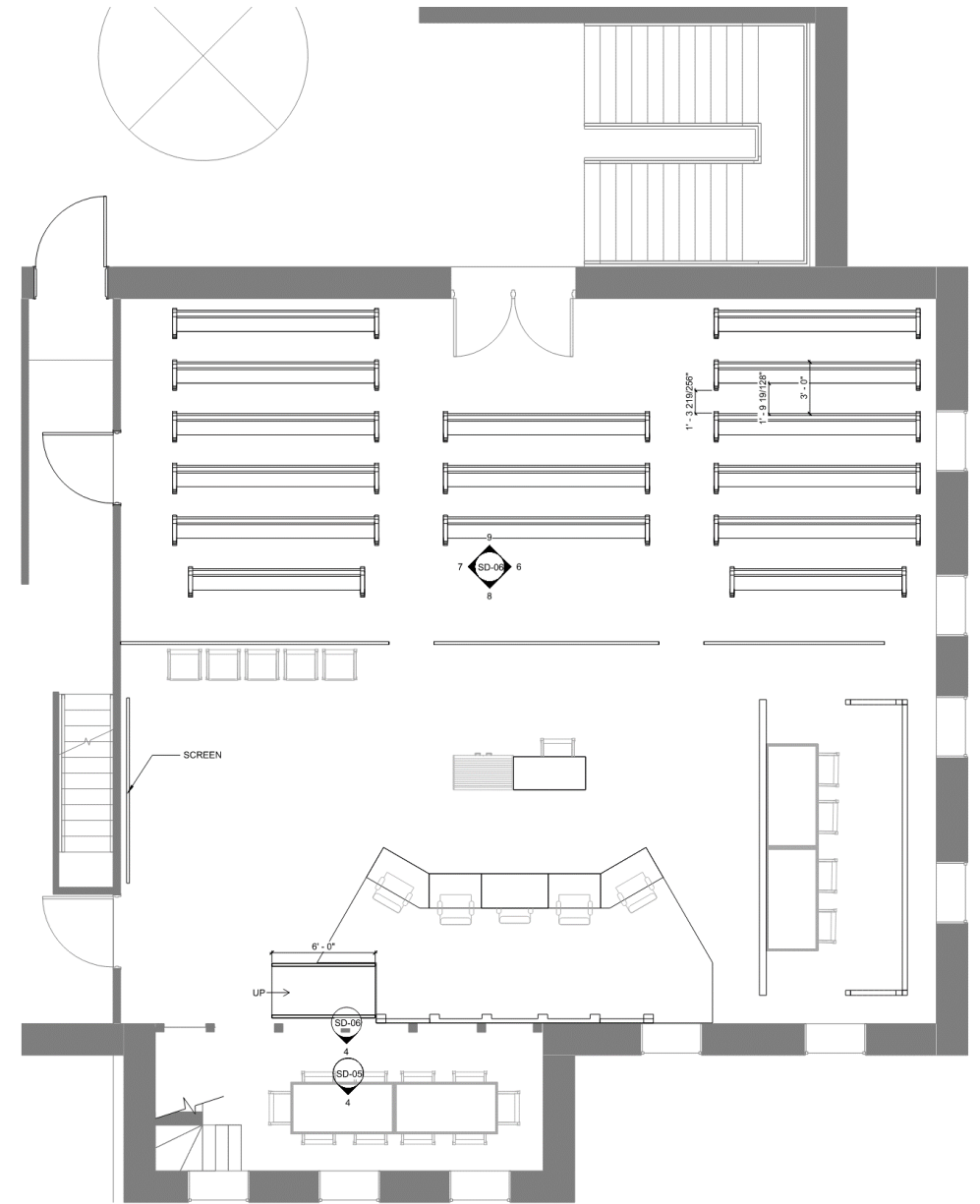
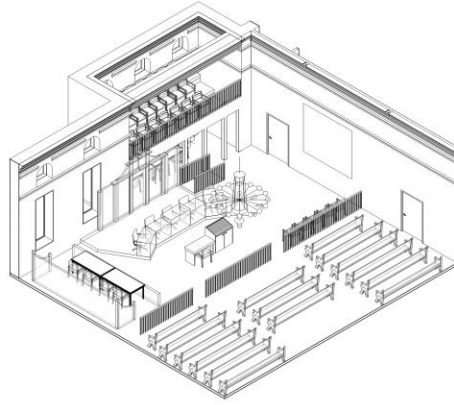
2023 Layout

Chamber as it appeared before this renovation.



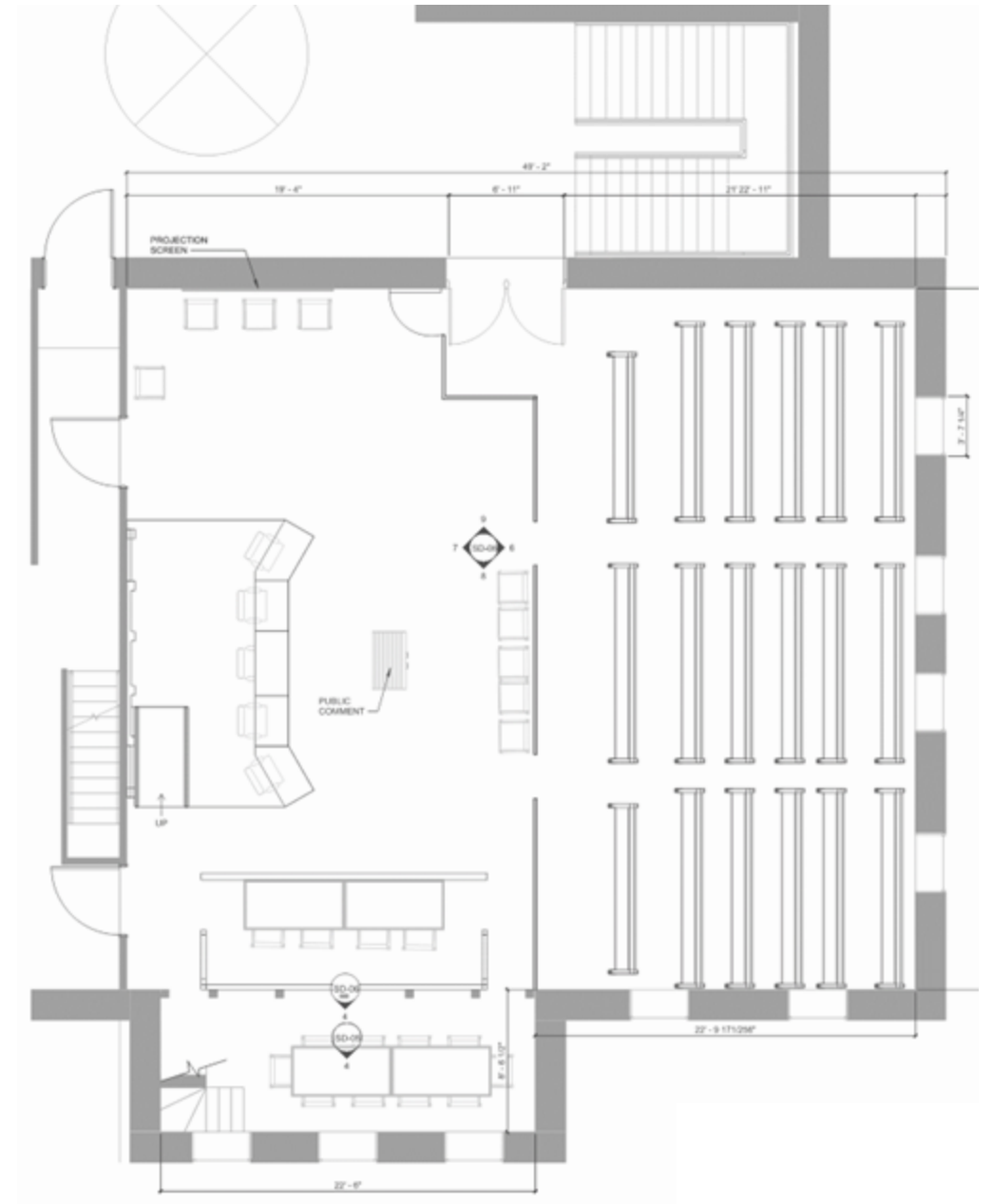
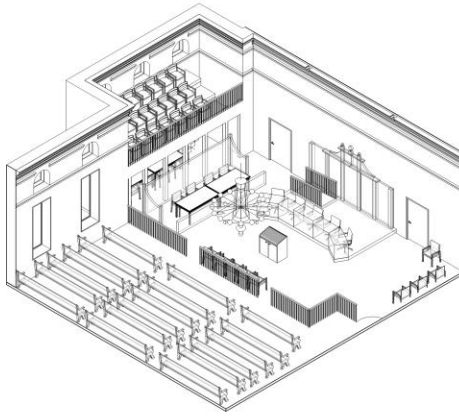
Layout Option 1

This option returns the chamber to a configuration closely resembling the 1913 layout.



Renovation Option 2

Option 2 would have retained the pre-renovation arrangement



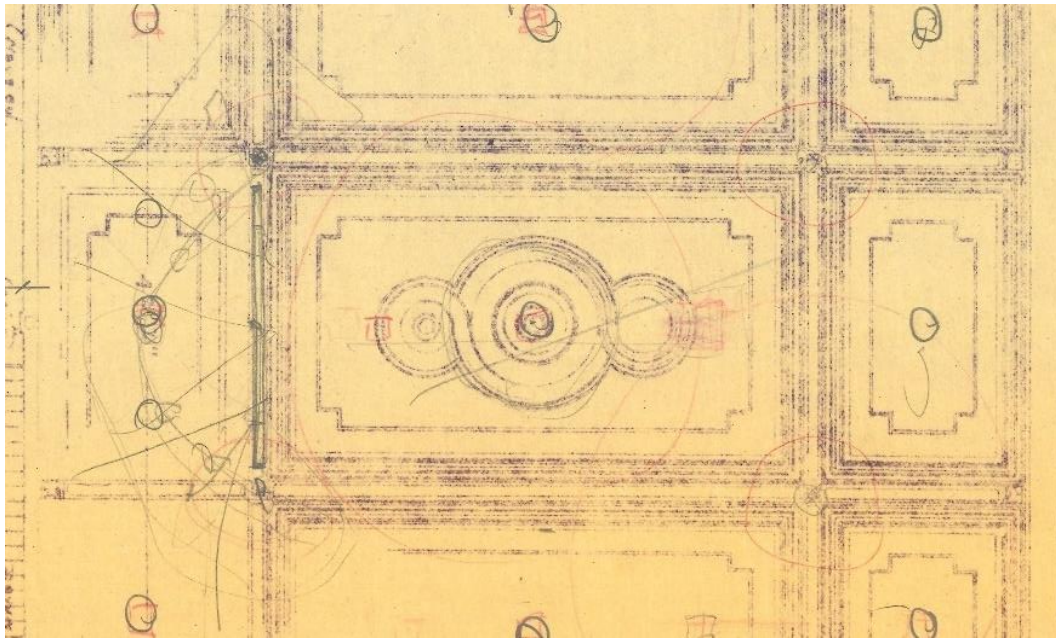
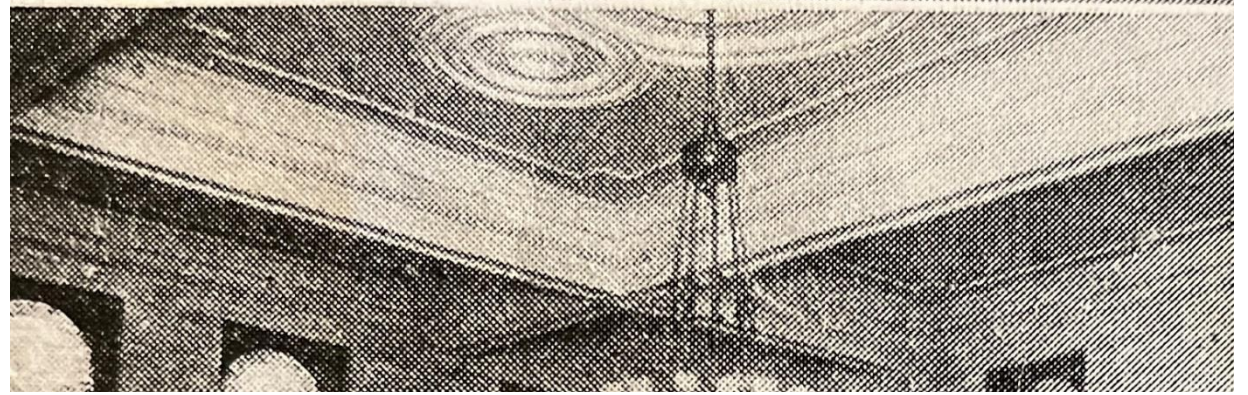
Layout Consideration

The Douglas County Commission Chamber had two historic configurations, both of historic significance. It was our recommendation that the room be rearranged to evoke its 1913 layout. The principal reasons were that it was almost certainly the original orientation of the space when it was completed in 1903 and that original door openings, on the north and west, were intended for use on the public side of the dividing rail. The 1913 arrangement also allows the public to view all the stained glass. These aesthetic, historic, and functional considerations led us to recommend that the reorientation of the room into its 1913 layout was the right choice for this renovation.



Plaster Ceiling

The room's plaster ceiling largely survived. However, within the coffers, the historic plaster was replaced by acoustic tile. The historic plaster was destroyed in the process but was replicated with the help of the original drawings, which recorded a reflected ceiling plan, shown below.



Acoustical Ceilings

There were acoustical issues with the space that audio equipment could not overcome. Acoustically absorptive materials were researched.



Ceiling Prior to Acoustic Plaster Installation

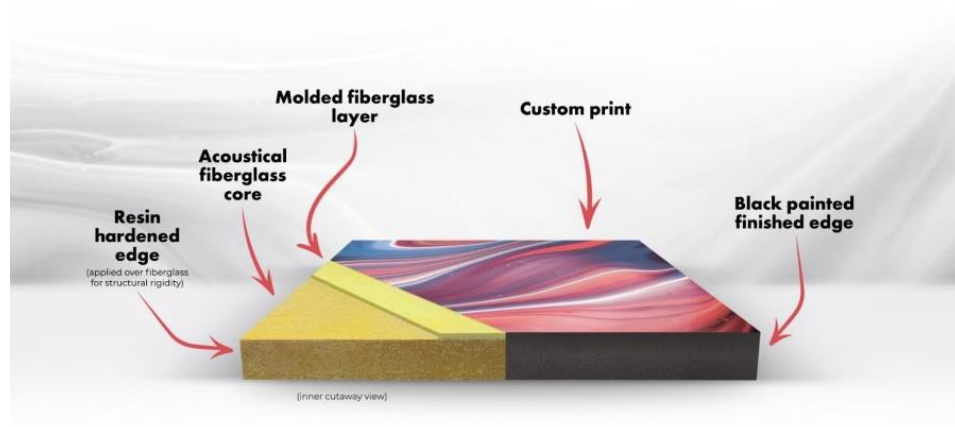


Acoustic Ceiling Installation



Acoustic Wall Panels

The research considered applications of acoustical plaster at the ceiling plane and panel materials at the wall.

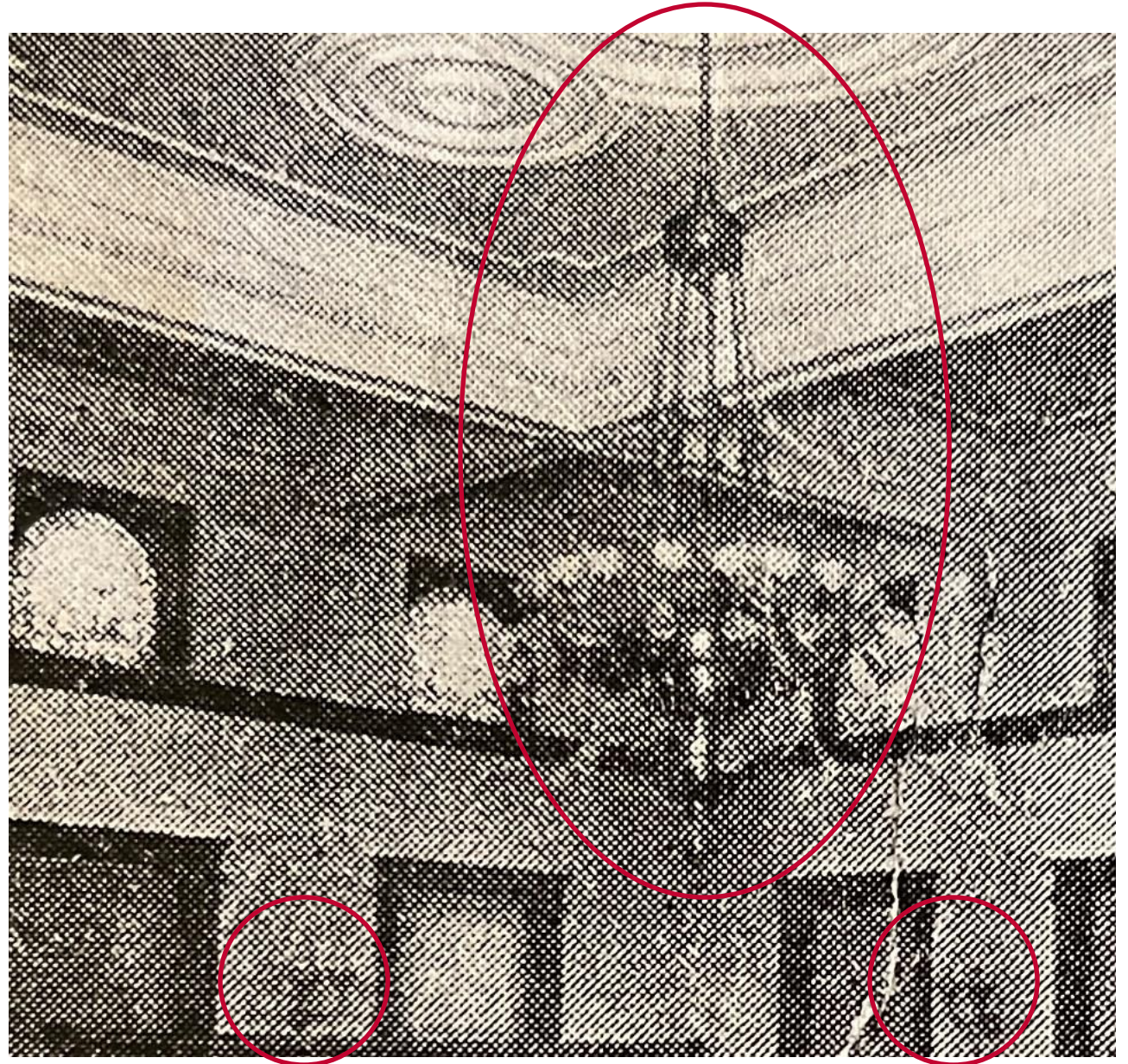


Acoustic Wall Panels



Chandelier and Sconces

The original central chandelier (*right*), which hung below the ceiling's plaster motif, was at one time replaced by non-historic fixtures (*below*). Lacking original drawings of the fixtures, we used the one existing photo to reconstruct facsimiles of the originals.



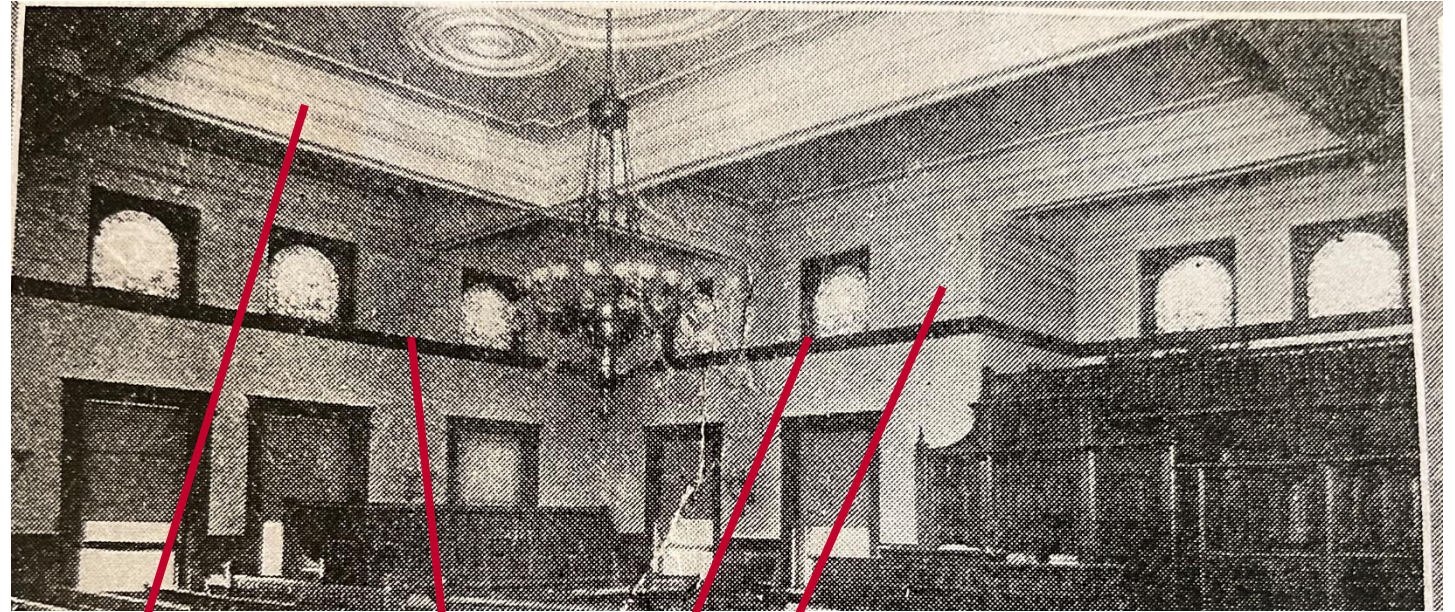
Chandelier Installation



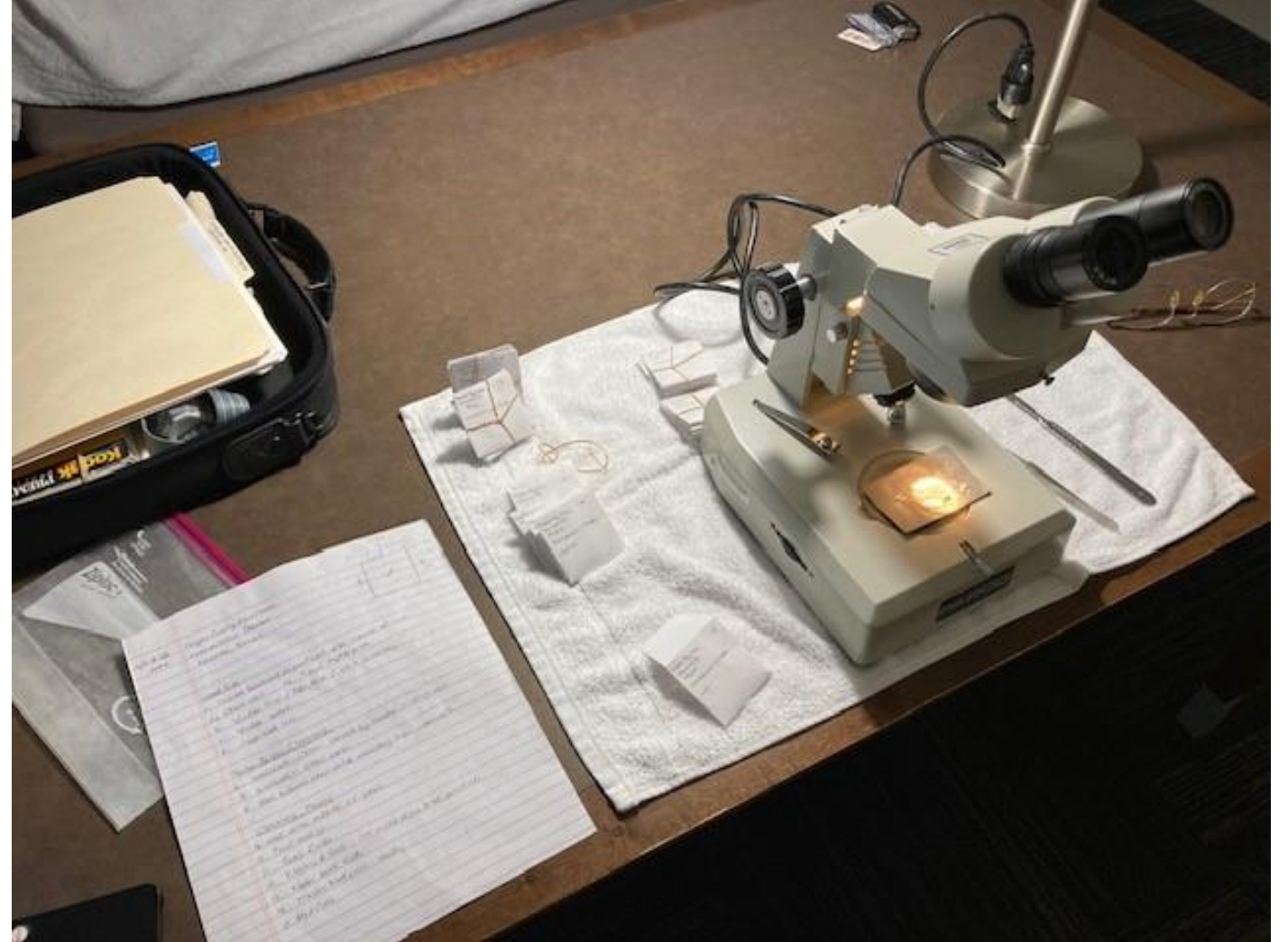
Colors

Though the 1913 photograph is in black and white, we can tell that the room's colors were originally quite different.

This led our investigation to determine where paint samples need to be taken from, to determine original coloring.

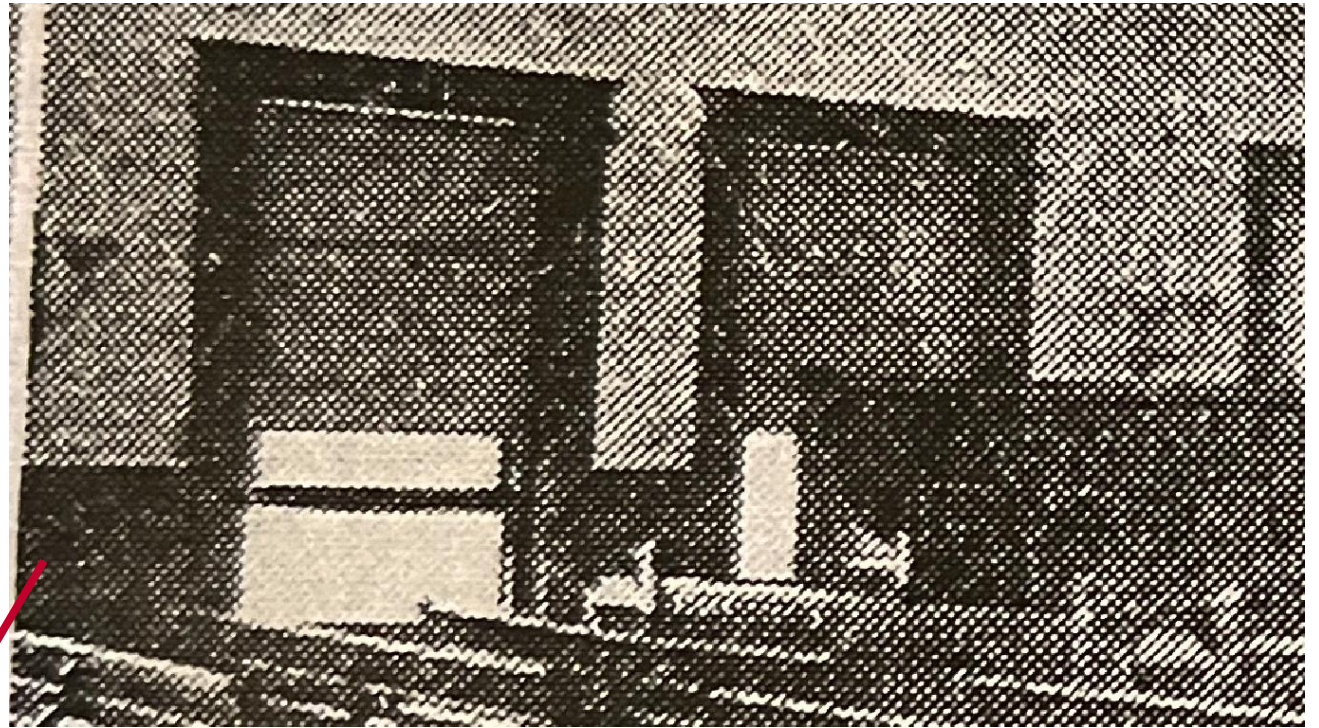


Paint Analysis



Wainscot

Based on drawings and photos, the wainscot in this room featured a stone-course pattern on the walls. This was missing but could be restored or replicated.



Discovery and recreation of marbleized wainscot



Meeting Room Under Balcony

The space under the balcony was changed into a small meeting room.

Before



After



Audiovisual Findings

Audiovisual systems are critical to the operation of the commission, which are broadcast to the community and recorded for open records purposes.

The intent of this renovation was to integrate the existing functionality into the new room configuration and to extend the system where possible to provide additional functionality commonly found in council and commission chambers.



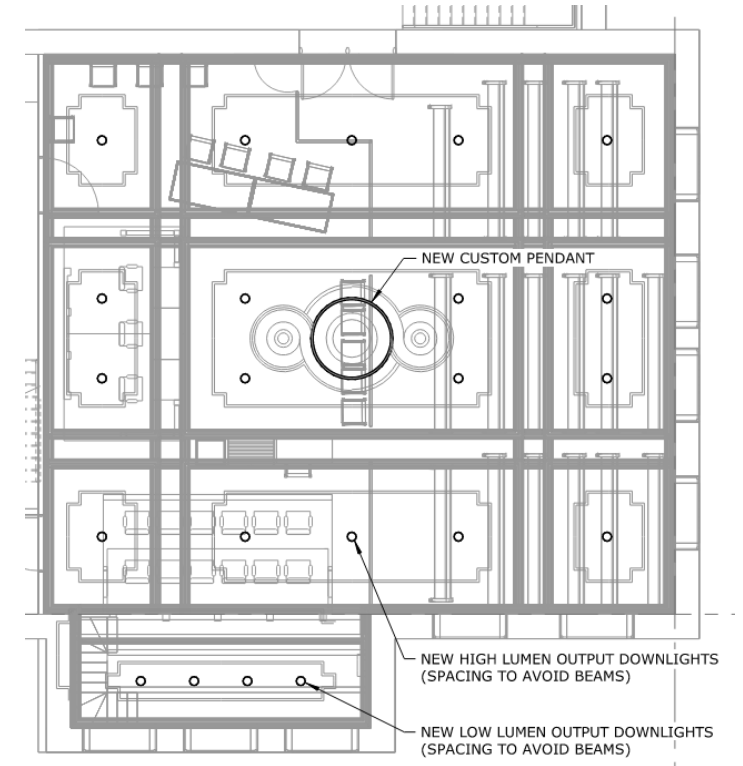
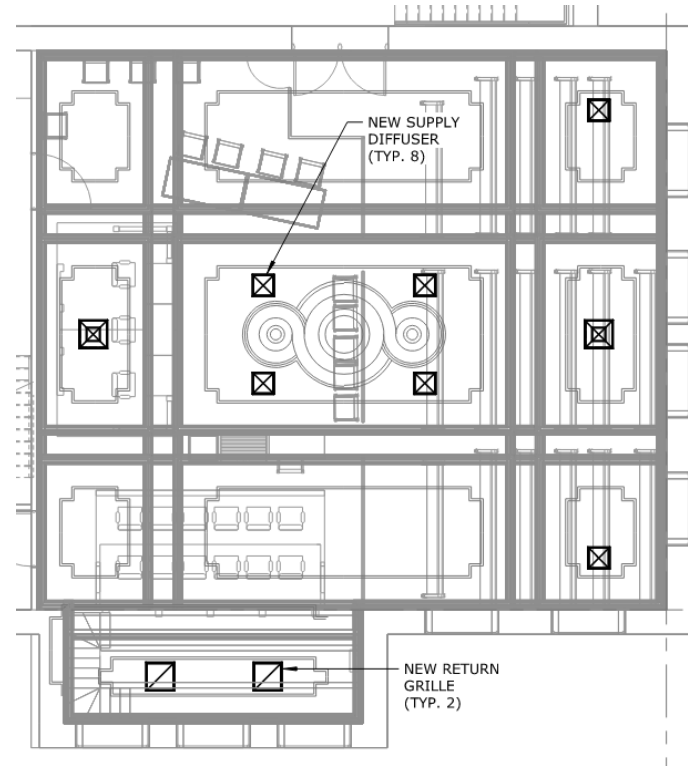
Gallery Treatment

To help the acoustic issues, the floor surface was included in the research. It was recommended that carpet runners remain in the gallery area walkways. In addition, the rows of wood benches could be provided with padding along the full extent of the seating area. Using a combination of all three options provided the solution.



Lighting and HVAC

In addition to poor acoustics, the air distribution and lighting were not adequate. Mechanical ductwork was reconfigured in the attic above and connected to new devices. The electrical conduit was hidden, and the original lighting was replicated. The reintroduction of lost features such as light fixtures, ceiling ornamentation, and historic finishes enhanced the space, and the addition of improved lighting, systems, and acoustics brought the facility up to current standards.



Dais Expansion

Douglas County voters chose to expand the Board of County Commissioners from three elected officials to five. This necessitated expanding the historic dais, which had once served as the judge's desk when the room was used by the court.

New angled wings were designed and added to the historic bench, and the non-historic platform was replaced. The new wings are designed to blend with the historic desk, sympathetically expanding it to serve the Commission for years to come.



Dais Construction

