

# LAWYERS JOURNAL

## U.S. District Court portrait collection nearly complete

By Tracy Carbasho

If a picture is worth a thousand words, the walls of the U.S. Courthouse on Grant Street could tell epic stories.

The third floor of the federal courthouse is adorned with the portraits of 54 of the 55 judges who have served in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania since it was established in 1818. Each portrait is 20-by-24 inches.

"The portraits provide all visitors, litigants, attorneys, and employees with a sense of history from the court's origination," said Clerk of Courts Robert Barth Jr. "All portraits also have a biographical plaque below them detailing the accomplishments of each judge."

The portrait collection is a project that was undertaken by the Historical Society of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania. The society, which is chaired by District Judge Joy Flowers Conti, is currently searching for a photo of Judge Thomas Irwin. As the third judge to sit on the federal bench, he served from 1831 until 1859. He was appointed an Indian agent in Louisiana where he practiced law from 1808 to 1810.

"We have searched the Federal Archives in Washington, D.C., our Federal Judicial Center, and the Daughters of the American Revolution," said Barth.

The society has also contacted the Beaver Area Heritage Museum for assistance in locating any type of photo that could be used to create a portrait of Irwin. The museum was unable to locate a photo, but has contacted Temple University for assistance and is currently awaiting a response.

The museum was extremely helpful in providing an old newspaper photograph that was used to recreate a portrait of Judge W.H. Seward Thomson, who served from 1914 to 1932. The portrait of Thomson gave the society its fifty-fourth portrait. A portrait of Irwin will complete the collection.

Conti said it may be difficult to find a photo of Irwin unless one of his descendants can be located. She stressed that the society and the court are grateful to the museum for its overwhelming efforts to track down a photo of Thomson.

"The museum and its staff have the deepest gratitude of the court because without their assistance, we would not



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BEAVER AREA HERITAGE MUSEUM

*District Court Judge Joy Flowers Conti, left, unveils the finished portrait of W.H. Seward Thomson, who served the court from 1914 until 1932. Joining her in showcasing the portrait are Mark Miner and Mildred Sefton, trustees of the Beaver Area Heritage Museum, which played a vital role in tracking down a photograph of Thomson.*

have the historical depiction of Judge Thomson," said Conti. "It's important to reflect on the history of the court and the individuals who have served. If you don't know your past, it's hard to improve on your future."

Mark Miner, a trustee of the museum, was approached in June 2006 about trying to find a photo of Thomson. He said Mildred Sefton, also a museum trustee and director of the facility's collections management, along with volunteers like Bob Mitchell spent countless hours searching through files to track down a photo.

"Our museum has a great team of volunteers who give their time every Thursday morning to build, organize, and catalog our permanent collection of thousands of artifacts," said Miner. "To think that one small piece of ephemera from our collection could be so meaningful to the Historical Society of the U.S. District Court reflects very well on the dedication of our volunteers and the creativity of our team."

Sefton said information regarding all acquisitions to the museum collection is placed into a database, making it easier to track specific items. She said it did not take long to find a reference to the Thomson photo in the database.

“We are always happy to assist researchers in finding any information that we might have in our collection,” she said. “It is important to preserve information for those who might at some point need access to it, but it is equally important to share that information with researchers. That is what makes the volunteer hours we devote to the Beaver Area Heritage Museum so rewarding. To be part of such an important historic discovery is very gratifying.”

The newspaper article that Sefton and the other volunteers found was dated Aug. 18, 1950. Volunteer Ken Weyand was actually the one who pulled the article from the file.

The article had been donated to the museum by Mitchell whose family is from Beaver County.

Once the article containing a photo of Thomson was found, it was sent to Graule Studios in Rochester, Pa.

“Graule Studios has been a great creative partner for our museum, not just in photographing some of our public events, but also in photographic preservation such as generating archival prints from hundreds of old glass negatives,” said Miner. “Their creativity can be found in the Beaver Area Heritage Foundation’s award-winning coffee table book, *Beaver Town*.”

Kevin Cooke, owner of Graule Studios, said re-creating the photo took artist Faith Holinda between seven and 10 hours to complete. The painstaking process involved making a series of enlargements of the newspaper clipping, determining the judge’s facial features, and comparing the clothing and hairstyles in the photo to those of photos of other men from the same timeframe.

“Because of our collection of historical photographs, the largest such collection of Beaver County history, we are interested in all historical images,” said Cooke.

Judge Thomson is best known for upholding restrictions against corporate campaign contributions in federal elections stating:



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BEAVER AREA HERITAGE MUSEUM  
**Mildred Sefton, a trustee and director of collections management at the Beaver Area Heritage Museum, holds the original newspaper clipping that contains a rare photograph of former U.S. District Court Judge W.H. Seward Thomson. The photo was used to create a portrait that is now part of the historical display at the U.S. Courthouse in downtown Pittsburgh.**

“...that an election is intended to be the free and untrammelled choice of the electors; that any interference with the right of the elector to make up his mind how he will vote is as much an interference with his right to vote as if prevented from depositing his ballot; that the concerted use of money is one of the many dangerous agencies in corrupting the elector and debauching the election; that any law the purpose of which is to enable a free and intelligent choice, and untrammelled expression of that choice in the ballot box, is a regulation of the manner of holding the election—the power of Congress to prohibit corporations of the state from making money contributions in connection with any such election appears to follow as a natural and necessary consequence.”

Conti said the society is currently working on other important projects, including the compilation of an oral history of district judges, magistrate judges, bankruptcy judges, and court clerks. So far, eight individuals have provided an oral commentary, reflecting on their early career, what drew them to the legal profession, and other

insightful questions.

The audio histories will be available in the court library and at the kiosk which is located in the federal courthouse. The historical perspectives are timely in light of the court’s one hundred and ninetieth birthday approaching in April.

Barth said a project is also under way to collect portraits of all prior magistrates who served on the District Court.

Anyone is welcome to become involved with the historical society, which currently has 14 members. Founding members included Conti, Barth, District Judge Maurice Cohill, Bankruptcy Judge Judith Fitzgerald, retired Magistrate Judge Ila Sensenich, court employees John Horner, Rodger Leasure, Joe Martin, Linda Schneider, and attorneys David Porter, Renee Colbert, Mary Austin, and Dennis Watson. ACBA Executive Director David A. Blaner is an ad hoc member. ■