



In the early 1990s the Middle District of Alabama began work with the AO and GSA on plans for a major expansion, or replacement, of the historic Frank M. Johnson, Jr. Federal Building and United States Courthouse

in downtown Montgomery. Named for the District Judge whose many landmark decisions of the Civil Rights Era resulted from cases tried there, the stately five-story Federal style building, which was constructed in 1932 and is on the National Register of Historic Places, had become greatly overcrowded and antiquated.

Because of existing streets and surrounding buildings, only a small space in back was available for expansion, apparently presenting a choice between abandoning the Johnson building or dwarfing it with a high-rise addition. Determined to maintain the historic federal courthouse as a downtown presence, however, while at the same time maintaining its aesthetic and functional integrity, the judges worked with city authorities and others to close a block of a city street, acquire and remove several buildings, and make the resulting 5 ½ acre site available for a complex which would include a large new district courthouse as well as a completely renovated existing building to house both district and 11th Circuit Court of Appeals space.

The concept of a federal judicial complex incorporating an existing historic building and a new, much larger, modern courthouse, contributing to ongoing rejuvenation of downtown Montgomery, is now on the verge of completion. The new district courthouse was occupied in late 2002 and renovation of the historic building will be completed in August, 2005.

The Frank M. Johnson, Jr. United States Courthouse Complex consists of the new curvilinear five-story building, entered after crossing a large public plaza, connected to the original courthouse by a pedestrian bridge and a secure underground passageway. The 291,000 gross square foot new building is clad in limestone from the same quarry as the 1932 structure, and was designed to be the same height and reminiscent in appearance of the Johnson building. Architecturally, it blends a classical profile echoing the imagery and dignity of the Federal style courthouse with the clean lines and simplicity of Modernism.

To enter the new courthouse, the public crosses a 200-foot elliptical brick and granite plaza, surrounded by grass and a row of maple trees, and flanked by a grove of 50 crepe myrtles. Centered in the plaza is a large granite pool and fountain bearing a stainless steel sculpted head of Themis, the ancient Greek goddess of justice, with water flowing over two stainless steel bowls representing the scales. The entryway, through bronze and glass doors, is crowned by a huge eagle poised for flight, sculpted from a single block of limestone.

After entering an intimate 15-foot high vestibule with pink sandstone walls and an elaborately stenciled beamed ceiling, the visitor passes through security, discretely tucked into one side, into a small lobby flanked by the U. S. Marshals offices, the Jury Assembly Room, and the District Court Clerk's offices located on the first floor, and up the broad grand staircase to the building's dramatic main lobby on the second floor. The lobby features a three-story atrium with a glass wall looking out over the sculpted entryway eagle and across the plaza, historical displays along two walls, and a coffered ceiling painted with oversized renderings of rosettes, magnolia blossoms, and a Japanese camellia (Alabama's state flower). Curving in both directions off the atrium are wide hallways with plate glass windows overlooking the plaza on the outside. On the inside are six glass doors entering sound locks lined by witness and conference rooms, and then leather doors into the five district courtrooms and one larger district/special proceedings courtroom.

The second-floor district courtrooms were designed to be "user friendly" after several meetings of trial lawyers with judges and architects in a warehouse with full-sized plywood mockups of tables, bench, witness and jury box, etc. The size of the wells was emphasized over unnecessary spectator space and they contain counsel tables sufficient and comfortable for multi-party trials. Excellent sound projection was achieved with fabric covered acoustic wall panels and the most advanced sound system, and windows add natural light to the full lighting system. From the bench through the well the courtrooms are two stories high. Custom carpet and painted murals in shallow niches behind the benches, following a consistent theme but in different colors and detail, give each courtroom its own flavor. The stained cherry-wood "smart" counsel tables, matching the wainscoting, benches, spectator benches, and jury rails of the room, plug into receptacles in the raised flooring, with access to real time transcriptions and a "state-of-the-art" evidence presentation system. Large viewing screens are placed throughout the courtrooms, with smaller ones at the bench, witness box, counsel tables, and at intervals in the jury boxes. Also fully wheelchair accessible, these courtrooms combine the most advanced features of technology and comfort with the beauty and dignity of a classical tradition. The second floor also houses an attorney lounge and a press room.

The third floor is a "collegial floor" for the district court, housing chambers for each of the courtrooms below and a very large formal conference room. With a table seating twenty-two comfortably, and a seating area with sofa and club chairs, the conference room is used frequently for attorney/judge committee meetings as well as luncheon meetings for all judges in the building. Each district judge's chambers features floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the plaza, connection to the audio system in the courtroom, a viewing window into the courtroom, and access to the robing room of the courtroom below by a private stairway and elevator located between each pair of chambers.

The new building's fourth and fifth floors house four magistrate judge courtrooms and four bankruptcy courtrooms, all cherry paneled and electronically equipped, together with

chambers for the judges. One of the bankruptcy courtrooms is designed to accommodate video-conferencing, available to all judges in the building. The fourth floor also now provides space for the bankruptcy administrator and a 341 hearing room, and the fifth floor now provides temporary chambers for two active and one senior circuit judges and a circuit branch library, all of which will be moved in August back to the Johnson building.

The building also has a ground floor below the entry level, on which is located the offices of the Bankruptcy Clerk, a snack bar, and a large stainless steel plaque covering part of one wall of the floor's lobby and engraved with the names of every workman and other person who contributed significantly in any way to the design and construction of the building.

A widely varied collection of original works of art by Alabama artists, including classical style, primitive, print, poster, photographic, glass, and welded iron and aluminum is featured throughout the building.

When the original Johnson courthouse is completed, it will include chambers for two active and one senior circuit judges, two sets of visiting circuit judges chambers, a circuit courtroom, circuit clerk offices, an attorney conference room and lounge, and an expanded joint circuit/district court library. The historic Johnson courtroom and chambers will be restored and maintained in use by a district judge, the probation and pretrial services offices will be moved in from previously leased space, the bankruptcy administrator and 341 hearing room will be moved there, and senatorial and congressional offices will be provided. GSA offices will be located there, as well as a spacious joint use conference room accommodating large meetings, a fitness center, and space for a court archives.

With the completion of the Frank M. Johnson, Jr. United States Courthouse Complex, the citizens of the Middle District of Alabama will have an exceptional landmark federal judicial complex, built for the ages.