

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
March 24, 1981, Designation List 141  
LP-1124

NEW YORK COUNTY COURTHOUSE INTERIOR, main floor interior consisting of the main entrance vestibule, the west lobby hallway, the central rotunda, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, the five court lobby hallways; second floor interior consisting of the upper level of the west lobby hallway up to and including the ceiling, the upper level of the central rotunda including the dome, drum, and skylight, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, and the five hallways leading from the rotunda; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces; including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, lamps, chandeliers, murals and other painted decoration, balcony railings, grilles, stained glass and leaded glass, drinking fountains, mailbox, wall clocks, doors, and wrought ironwork; 60 Centre Street, Foley Square, Manhattan. Built 1919-1927; architect Guy Lowell.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 160, Lot 21.

On January 8, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the New York County Courthouse Interior, main floor interior consisting of the main entrance vestibule, the west lobby hallway, the central rotunda, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, the five court lobby hallways; second floor interior consisting of the upper level of the central rotunda including the dome, drum, and skylight, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, and the five hallways leading from the rotunda; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, lamps, chandeliers, murals and other painted decoration, balcony railings, grilles, stained glass and leaded glass, drinking fountains, mailbox, wall clocks, doors, and wrought ironwork; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 17). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The New York County Courthouse is located near Foley Square in the heart of the city's civic center, an area of Manhattan that has been the object of urban planning projects for decades. One city administration after another has envisioned a cohesive complex of buildings that would create an identifiable physical environment evocative of civic order and pride. Although that has never been accomplished, several individual structures have achieved permanent recognition as architectural triumphs. Few can find fault with the superb design of J.R. Thomas' Hall of Records (1899-1907), and the new Police Headquarters completed in 1973 by Gruzen & Partners has earned considerable praise in recent years. Even better-known, perhaps, is the old Criminal Courts building, or "Tweed Courthouse" in City Hall Park, the notorious symbol of muni-

cial corruption that fattened "Boss" William Marcy Tweed's private wallet with a reputed \$12 million of skimmed profits during the 1860s.

The New York County Courthouse, which opened its doors in 1927, has had its own share of both troubles and praise. Completed in 1927, the courthouse was built to relieve the overcrowded and outdated Criminal Courts building of 1872. The new structure housed, as it does today, the New York State Supreme Court and the archives of the County Clerk. The design of the imposing ten-story hexagonal building, a revised version of the original 1913 plans, was executed beginning in 1919 by the accomplished Boston architect Guy Lowell. Dominated by a Roman temple portico, the courthouse was one of the last neo-Classical government buildings erected in New York City. It was conceived as the cornerstone of a new civic center planned to eradicate in one fell swoop, the remains of the squalid Five Points slum district. The quality of design and classical elegance of the exterior was equalled by a monumental interior, innovative use of radial corridors, and splendidly-designed central rotunda. The rotunda reveals an opulent variety of materials and colors, particularly favored for neo-Classical public architecture, and a wonderful, 30-foot high mural by Attilio Pusterla entitled "Law Through the Ages." The mural was completed in 1936 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration which provided thousands of destitute citizens with employment during the Depression.

#### HISTORY

The cluster of civic, state, and federal buildings and the weekday bustle that characterize Manhattan's civic center belie the festering slum that it replaced. During the 18th century the area had consisted of marshland and the Collect Pond, the major source of the city's drinking water. The area had earned notoriety as one of the world's worst slums, attracting unsavory characters with its cheap rents and accommodations to match. Known as Five Points, the neighborhood was located just east of the present-day County Courthouse where five streets -- Worth, Baxter, Little Water and Mulberry -- converged on what was then paradoxically known as Paradise Alley. Little Water Street has since disappeared, but in 1823 it was the filthiest and most dangerous street in the area, populated by murderers, thieves, and prostitutes. By mid-19th century, conditions were unendurable in Five Points, where it is said, more than one murder a day occurred.

These vile slums were long a thorn in the city's side, and Manhattan residents breathed a sigh of relief when a planning board for the new courthouse and greater civic center was established in 1903 by an act of the State Legislature. With Walter Cook as consulting architect, the Board supervised a preliminary competition for the courthouse design and announced a final competition in December, 1912. Ten firms chosen

from 71 applicants competed while an additional twelve New York firms participated by invitation.<sup>1</sup>

Guy Lowell, a well-known Boston architect, netted his first New York City public commission by winning the contest in April, 1913. Lowell maintained an office at 225 Fifth Avenue but his work in the metropolitan area had been limited to private estates and gardens. Guy Lowell was then a better-known name in Boston, where the architect had launched a successful career after training at M.I.T. and the Paris Ecole des Beaux Arts. He won wide recognition as the designer of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (1908), a comprehensive building plan for Philips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts (1903-1923), a host of state and institutional buildings, and numerous private residences for prominent families throughout New England. Lowell's career was distinguished by skill and variety. He was an accomplished landscape architect who lectured and wrote on the subject<sup>2</sup>, and he designed formal gardens for the New York residences of Andrew Carnegie, J. Pierpont Morgan, and Morton F. Plant.

Lowell favored conservative classicism and ordered planning, but he was also clever and original. His courthouse design stood out sharply from those of his competitors and was considered far more imaginative than the classical boxes and towers submitted by his colleagues. Lowell's design was round. Distinctly reminiscent of the Roman Coliseum, it features four entrances, four porticos, five major cornices, three setbacks, and would occupy some 120,000 square feet. The plan was distinguished by a central rotunda from which long corridors radiated like spokes, creating, in a sense, a giant wheel of justice. The plan was unprecedented in American architecture.<sup>3</sup> It was new, and not everyone liked it. The court justices objected to the circular form, dubbing it "experimental," "unreasonable," and "of doubtful efficiency."<sup>4</sup>

The judges bid to reject the design was overruled, by the intervention of other circumstances still prevented its execution. There were problems right from the beginning. Between 1903 and 1912, six sites were

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<sup>1</sup>The invited firms were: McKim, Mead & White; Carrere & Hastings; LaFarge & Morris; Tracy, Startwout & Litchfield; James Reily Gordon; H.V. Magonigle; York & Sawyer; Charles Butler & Charles Morris; Trowbridge & Livingston; A.W. Brunner; Cass Gilbert; George B. Post & Sons. The additional firms were: Howells & Stokes; Maynicke & Kranke; Charles C. Haight, A.M. Githers & Aymar Embury III; Griffen & Wynkoop; Kenneth Murchison & Howard Greenly, Ass.; Wilder & White, Shire & Kaufman; Walker & Gillette; George & Edward Blum; Guy Lowell.

<sup>2</sup>Lowell published American Gardens (1902), Small Italian Villas and Farmhouses (1910) and More Small Italian Villas and Farmhouses (1920), illustrated largely by his own photographs.

<sup>3</sup>"The Courthouse Award", Architectural Record, Vol 33 (May, 1913), p. 469.

<sup>4</sup>New York City Municipal Archives, Courthouse Board Minutes, June 16, 1913.

selected and summarily disapproved before the city purchased a plot bounded by Leonard, Lafayette, Baxter and Park Streets in 1913 for \$6 million. Soggy ground and subway vibrations rendered that site inappropriate, necessitating the 1915 purchase of additional land east of Park Street at a cost of over \$5 million. The outbreak of World War I postponed the work while soaring post-war prices doubled the estimated cost of construction to a prohibitive \$21 million. In 1923 the Fuller Construction Company was sued for substituting inferior granite, vandalism delayed the 1927 opening of the building, and disputes over inadequate construction and unpaid fees raged long after Lowell's death.

In July 1919, the circular plan was dropped in favor of a more modest design revised by Lowell and State Architect Louis Pilcher. They proposed a smaller, hexagonal building that would substantially reduce expenses and free 75% of the site for other development. Ultimately, the building cost \$30 million, and had to be remodelled even before it opened.

Lowell's new design was still dignified and strictly classical but no longer the "palace of justice" considered essential prior to the War. The national passion for extravagant, strictly classical public architecture still prevailed, but it was tempered by the reality of empty municipal coffers, shifting tastes, and the growing popularity of streamlined skyscraper architecture.

The new hexagonal courthouse scheme preserved and perfected the principles of the original design. Composed of a rotunda with six radiating corridors surrounded by a hexagonal band, the plan was wonderfully efficient and extremely inventive. Symmetrically placed around six light courts, the radial corridors reduced the number of cubic feet necessary for circulation, facilitated ventilation, and offered quiet access to judges' chambers and courtrooms. Business offices were located on the lower floors to reduce congestion, while the judges were provided with private entrances. The basement and main floors housed the general offices of the county clerk, record vaults, store rooms; and court, jury, and robing rooms. The trial term courts, judges' chambers, library, reading room, dining room, kitchen, and private bar were secluded on the upper floors.

#### THE MURALS AND THE WPA

The murals in the County Court House were designed and executed under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. Sketches for the courthouse murals were begun upon the building's completion in 1927, but the first paintings, located in the main vestibule, were not commenced until 1934. These were executed under the Public Works of Art Project, the first federal, non-relief project in America funded by the Civil Works Administration, the PWAP existed for seven months between December, 1933 and June, 1934, and employed 3,749 artists nationally. An enormous dome mural located in the central rotunda, "Law Throughout the Ages," was completed by Attilio Pusterla and a staff of assistants in 1936, and was one of the earliest and largest projects in New York City done under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project.

Directed by Holger Cahill, the Art Project engaged artists, 90% of whom had to be on relief, to furnish schools, jails, and public building throughout the nation with artistic works. During its peak year of 1936, the program employed 5,000 artists. Throughout the project's entire existence 2,500 murals were completed, as were thousands of sculptures, prints, and paintings. Several murals in the County Courthouse were painted under the project. Many appearing in the judge's chambers and jury rooms of the County Courthouse were designed by Pusterla, while others are the work of Robert K. Ryland, Andrew T. Schwarts, Winthrop Turney, and John Edwin Jackson.

The Federal Art Project stimulated a remarkable revival and interest in the art of mural painting. In the later 19th century, the well-known artist John LaFarge had inspired a wave of enthusiasm among his American colleagues, with his murals for Boston's Trinity church. At the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 mural paintings were extensively displayed and well received. The World's Columbian Exposition was extremely influential in the development of mural painting. At the turn of the century a school of American painters who specialized in mural painting evolved. Among these artists were Maxfield Parrish, Kenyon Cox, Edwin Austen Abbey, Edwin H. Blashfield and H. Siddons Mowbray. In the 1920s the Mexican government sponsored public mural projects that were received with great interest in the United States. This was particularly true of the works of Diego Rivera and Don Jose Clemente Orozco. In 1932, an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art of designs by 35 painters highlighted the importance of mural art, and the Federal Art Project gave this movement the financial impetus it needed for continued development.

Mural painting was especially suited to the aims of the WPA. Most often located in public places, murals were considered a social art by nature, rather than a studio art. They had been associated throughout time with the expression of the history, ideas and social conscienceness of the community. The Project also offered a special chance to the artists, many of whom were launching careers: "The country was asking for murals. The many problems involved, problems of large space, architectural limitations, technical complexities, the handling of subject matter, were a challenge which the artists accepted. Courage to meet these problems was born of opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

#### COURHOUSE INTERIOR

Lowell specified an opulent interior indeed for his monument to justice -- 24 types of marble, polished cast-iron radiator grilles and elevator doors, gold leaf detail, and splendid murals. Even the courtrooms were to have cork tile floors to minimize noise. The magnificent light fixtures were commissioned from the Tiffany Studios, and every detail, from phone booths to marble water fountain, was conceived by Lowell as an essential component of interior design.

The main floor of the County Courthouse is dominated by the vast, central rotunda with a 75-foot dome. Six corridors radiate from the

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<sup>5</sup> Holger Cahill, "Mural America," Architectural Record, vol 82 (September 1937), p. 66.

rotunda, and connect with an outer band of courtrooms that forms a hexagon around the central hall. Both the rotunda and the hexagon are free-standing structures, creating a series of light courts between the corridors that permit maximum light and ventilation.

One enters the building on the west side where a set of bronze and glass vestibule doors with anthemion leaf cresting give access to the main foyer. The classical elegance of the high domed ceilings, the warm-toned, delicately detailed murals, and the impressive view down the wide, columned corridor that leads to the rotunda immediately signify the importance of the building. Three small domes resting on travertine piers crown the main foyer and a splendid mural painted by Attilio Pusterla (1862-1941) enlivens the main dome. An accomplished painter, Pusterla was born in Milan and educated in Italy where he was a leading member of the "Sunlight Revolutionaries," a school of muralists who worked in the open air. Pusterla emigrated to North America in 1899, continuing his career as a professional muralist. Among his known works are the murals in the Lewis and Clark Memorial, Astoria, Oregon, the Parliament building in Ottawa, and the home of Edward Stettinius, Jr. in New York. In 1915, Pusterla collaborated with Guy Lowell on the design of "Farnsworth" a magnificent Georgian Revival mansion built in Locust Valley, Long Island for C.K.G. Billings. The house (demolished in 1966) was famed as the scene of gala parties (at one Billings' party, the guests were served dinner on horseback) and as one of the most elegant of Long Island's "Gold Coast" estates. The lavish interior boasted fine Adamesque murals designed by Pusterla. Many of the classical motifs that Pusterla used in "Farnsworth" appear in his County Courthouse murals, as do the warm earth tones favored by the "Sunlight" school.

The foyer murals, painted in "Raffaelschi design," decorate the ceiling, depicting the general theme of "The Administration of Justice." The first murals to be painted in the courthouse, they cost an estimated \$20,000. They were reportedly designed after paintings in the Palazzo Madama in Rome. The colors are earth tones with predominant yellow highlighted by reds and blues. The central dome depicts the figures of Learning, Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, while Authority, Justice, Clemency, and Judgement are personified in trompel'oeil niches on the pendentives. Delicate, classical detail includes bracketed pediments, plaques, satyrs, and a yellow and blue fret border. Coffered stone archivolts make a handsome division between the domed spaces. The flanking sections of the main vestibule boast similarly decorated ceilings. Bronze and glass doors mark the west walls while curved niches appear opposite. At each end of the vestibule, imposing doorways with marble architraves and a bracketed cornice marked by a cartouche, lead to circular stair lobbies. Above the doors are painted trompel'oeil clocks with real mechanical faces flanked by Pilgrims and Indians sitting back-to-back. The wall is lit by large multi-paned windows over the main entrance and three magnificent bronze lanterns suspended from chains.

These were designed by Tiffany studios, as were all of the original light fixtures.

The main corridor, sloping eastward from the vestibule to the rotunda, displays a rich variety of colors and materials. Screens of four sharply striated purple and white marble columns and flanking travertine piers mark the sides of the hall. Mounted on octagonal limestone bases, the columns are designed in the Ionic order and support a plain entablature. The ceiling is composed of a barrel vault with a shallow central dome. Here, ceiling murals depict the themes of "protection and security," "army and navy," and truth and error" in a richly decorative style reminiscent of Italian Renaissance murals. Five casement windows that admit light from the inner courts appear on the exterior walls behind the columned screens, and a wonderfully designed lantern composed of classical human figures hangs from the ceiling. A handsome arched bronze grille appears over the rotunda door.

The five remaining court lobbies have less ostentatious designs. The northwest and southwest corridors, crowned with barrel vaults, terminate in small lobbies where three leather-covered doors give access to three courtrooms. The northeast and southeast corridors house staircases with central brass railings. The eastern lobby is a simply designed hall that leads to the Division of Jurors. Simple painted foliate and geometric motifs in varying color schemes decorate the walls and ceilings of the halls, while handsome bronze chandeliers hang from painted medallions. Each corridor is lit by side windows that open onto the surrounding light courts.

While the entire building was carefully composed, it is the rotunda that was clearly the focus of Lowell's architectural design and Pusterla's artistic efforts. A two-story screen composed of six pairs of marble Corinthian columns set on axis with the corridors and six flanking travertine piers, circles the room, separating a circular elevator lobby from the central space. The piers, designed with arched portals at ground level, and windows opening onto false balconies above, lend a human scale to the imposing room. A bronze balcony runs behind the columns at second story level, creating a handsome gallery. One of the most striking features of the room is the magnificent, dark-toned marble floor designed as a compass and bordered by circular bands with the signs of the zodiac cast of bronze in low relief.

Nothing, however, overshadows the powerful mural painted in the rotunda dome by Attilio Pusterla and his assistants. Entitled "Law Through the Ages," the mural is divided into six sections, each depicting a pair of influential law-makers sitting back-to-back from the Greek and Roman, Byzantine and Frankish, Hebraic and Persian, English and Colonial, and early American historical periods, when law was codified. The six sections are connected by a continuous, monochromatic frieze of smaller background figures showing the evolution of the races during these various periods.

A starlit sky forms the background, while painted pendentives above reveal the heads of Hammurabi, Moses, Solon, Justinian, Blackstone, and Chief Justice John Marshall, influential figures in the history of law. The dome is capped by a handsome lantern composed of eight stained glass windows with flanking Ionic columns. The windows were installed in 1936 with WPA labor, replacing the original cast-iron sash that Pusterla felt to be incompatible with his mural. A magnificent bronze chandelier is suspended from the center of the dome.

#### CONCLUSION

Today the splendid interior of the Courthouse is remarkably unaltered. Judiciary proceedings continue to serve the citizens of New York County, and the impressive Archives of the County Clerk, open to the public, offer historian an invaluable collection of court records dating to Colonial times. The spectacular rotunda, in essence the recreation of a splendid Roman hall, reflects the classical spirit that so strongly influenced American architecture during the early twentieth century. A tribute to the talents of Guy Lowell, the building is as much a civic monument today as it was when it opening in 1927.

Report prepared by Rachael Carley  
Research Department

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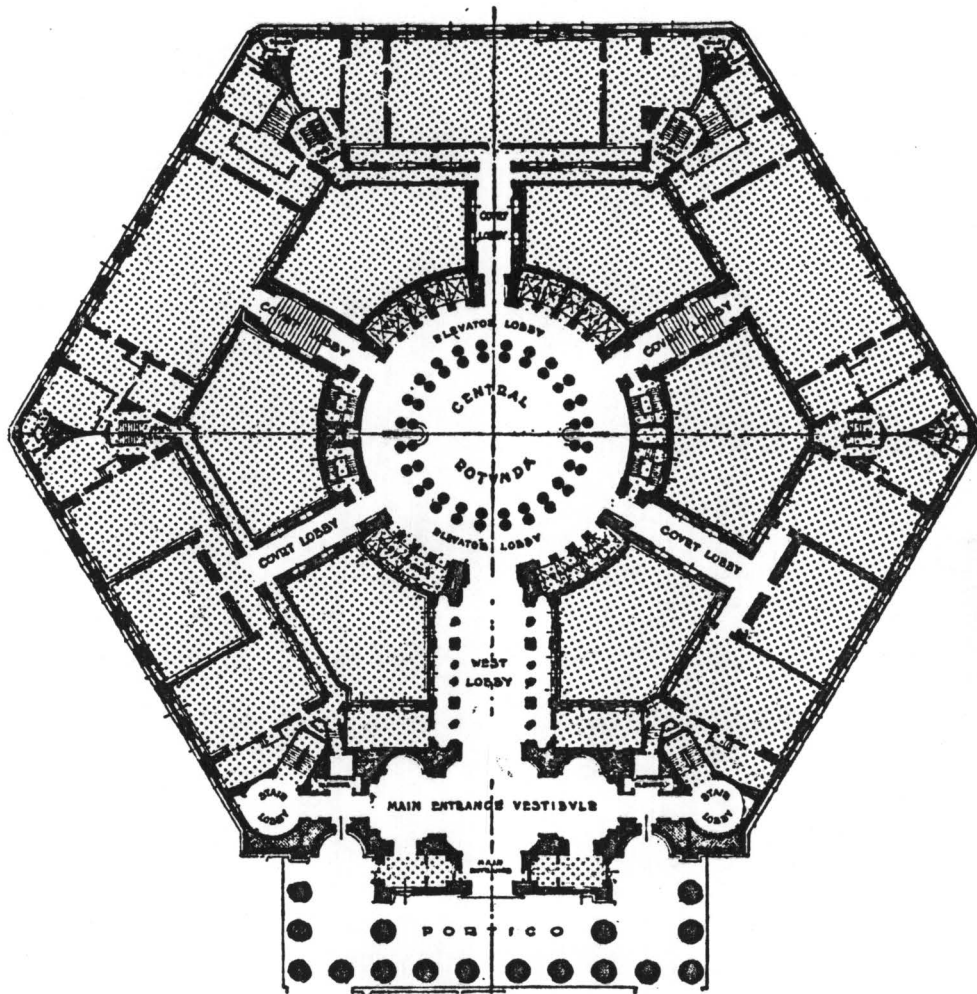
## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New York County Court House Interior, main floor interior consisting of the main entrance vestibule, the west lobby hallway, the central rotunda, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, the five court lobby hallways; second floor interior consisting of the upper level of the west lobby hallway up to and including the ceiling, the upper level of the central rotunda including the dome, drum, and skylight, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, and the five hallways leading from the rotunda; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, lamps, chandeliers, murals and other painted decoration, balcony railings, grilles, stained glass and leaded glass, drinking fountains, mailbox, wall clocks, doors, and wrought iron-work; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City, and that the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Interior of the New York County Court House is one of the last neo-Classical public buildings erected in New York City and ranks as one of the best; that it was the only public commission in New York by Guy Lowell, and accomplished Boston architect; that the plan was extremely imaginative and innovative for its time and unprecedented in American architecture; that the interior design reveals maximum attention to detail, a rich variety of materials, and elegant classical symmetry and design; that it is distinguished by excellent murals designed by Attilio Pusterla under the Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Art Project; that the murals are some of the earliest executed in New York City under the Projects; that it houses the Archives of the County Clerk, an invaluable collection of court records open to the public, and that it reflects the Classical spirit that so strongly influenced American architecture during the early 20th century.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated as a Landmark, the New York County Court House Interior, main floor interior consisting of the main entrance vestibule, the west lobby hallway, the central rotunda, the elevator lobby encircling the central rotunda, the five court lobby hallways; second floor interior consisting of the upper level of the west lobby hallway up to and including the ceiling, the upper level of the central rotunda including the dome, drum, skylight, the elevator lobby encircling the

central rotunda, and the five hallways leading from the rotunda; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, lamps, chandeliers, murals and other painted decoration, balcony railings, grilles, stained glass and leaded glass, drinking fountains, mailbox, wall clocks, doors, and wrought ironwork; 60 Centre Street, Foley Square, Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 160, Lot 21, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark site.



**New York County Courthouse Interior  
Foley Square and Centre St.  
Manhattan**

**Architect: Guy Lowell  
Date: 1912-27**

**Not Drawn to Scale  
Areas Deleted**



NEW YORK COUNTY COURTHOUSE INTERIOR  
60 Centre Street, Foley Square

photo:Landmarks Preservation  
Commission

Architect: Guy Lowell  
Murals: Attilio Pusterla