

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



February 2001



A MYSTERY—This safe has been in the custody of U.S. District Court for more than 67 years and remains in a vault on the second floor of the old federal courthouse on Main Street in Knoxville. The court left the safe behind when it completed its two-stage move from the old building in 1998 but is now exploring a way to move the safe to the present courthouse.



LEFT BEHIND—This large, wooden cabinet, which was used by U.S. District Court in Knoxville for years, has become the focus of a search project by the court and the Historical Society to learn more about its origin. The cabinet still stands in the old federal courthouse on Main Street, where it was left when the court completed its move from the building in 1998.

A History Challenge

The court and the Society are trying to establish the history of a safe and an old cabinet (see photographs at left) that the court left behind when it moved from the old federal courthouse in **Knoxville** in 1998. The two items present a mystery.

The court clerk's office chose to delay the moving of the safe and the cabinet at the time of the 1998 move—the safe because it presented special handling problems, and the cabinet because of its size and the uncertainty of a use for it in the new building.

The safe is inside a concrete vault room that has a steel door frame that is narrower than the safe. It is

possible that the safe was placed in the vault before the vault door was installed or maybe even before the construction of the vault was completed. Getting the safe out of the vault will require removing the doors from the vault. The vault room is about eight feet square.

The old courthouse was completed in 1934. It is likely that the safe was moved to its present location from the former federal courthouse at the corner of Market Street and Clinch Avenue—the building that is today the East Tennessee Historical Center—at some time during the construction of the Main Street building.

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A Milestone at Greeneville

The new federal courthouse under construction at Greeneville is the first building in 35 years to be built in the Eastern District of Tennessee as a federal courthouse. Until now, the federal courthouse at Winchester, which opened in 1966, was the district's last one to be built as a federal courthouse.

The federal courthouse to be vacated in Greeneville was completed in 1904, the federal courthouse in Chattanooga was completed in 1933, and the courthouse on Main Street in Knoxville formerly used by the court was completed in 1934.

Three years ago, a courtroom addition to the building that houses the Knoxville offices of the court was completed, but the main building was six years old at that time, built for the former Whittle Communications firm. The government's purchase of the Whittle building marked the first time that the General Services Administration had bought an existing building for use by government agencies.

The target date for completion of the new courthouse at Greeneville has been changed to June 15, six weeks beyond the most recently announced completion date, but officials say this new date is firm.

Challenge

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The ownership of the safe is uncertain. Veteran court employees now retired have said through the years that the safe belonged to **Judge George C. Taylor**, who served the court from 1928 to 1949, but no one can say with certainty that this is correct. Retired deputy clerk **Mary Johnson**, who started with the court in 1945, recalls that the judge would store his silverware and other valuable items in the safe when he would go out of town. She said that it was her recollection that he was the only one who had the combination to the safe.

The size of the safe indicates, however, that it was not a personal safe. It is six feet tall, 40 inches wide, and 31 inches deep. Safe experts estimate its weight at 2,000 pounds or more. About 10 years ago, the clerk's office had the safe opened and it was empty. The court then started using it to secure various documents.

The wooden cabinet that was left in a large storage room of the Main Street courthouse was thought for years to be just a typical shelf cabinet until

court personnel moved it from one storage room to another about 10 years ago during a remodeling project. When the shelf part of the cabinet was lifted off its wooden base for the move, an inscription could be seen on the base. It read: "Steger & Sons Piano Manufacturing Co. 1920 - Knoxville, Tennessee." Court personnel took note of the information but did not pursue the matter further at that time. The cabinet is seven feet tall, seven feet wide, and two feet deep.

With the plan now to relocate the cabinet, we went to work to pursue its background. The wording on the base leads one to think that the company was local, but it was not. Information from veteran Knoxville piano tuner **Tom Graves** showed that the company was in business in Steger, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, from 1893 until 1925. Descendants of the owners of the piano company said Steger made pianos for a number of companies, including Sears, Roebuck & Co. The Steger descendants could offer no information on why the company might have made the rather unusual shelf cabinet for the court. The background search continues.

Last Truman Appointees

When did the last federal judges appointed by **President Harry S. Truman** die? The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts published an article on this subject in December, noting that the last two of the "class of 142" Truman appointees died in 2000. They were **Judge Seybourn H. Lynne** of the Northern District of Alabama and **Judge David N. Edelstein** of the Southern District of New York.

The only Truman appointee to serve the Eastern District of Tennessee, **Judge Robert L. Taylor**, died in 1987 at the age of 88, two years after taking senior status. He served on the bench for 38 years.

Another of the Truman appointees, **Judge William Henry Hastie**, was a native of Knoxville. He was named to the Third Circuit Court of Appeals in 1949 after serving as a district judge in the Virgin Islands for 12 years. He was appointed to the district bench in 1937 by **President Franklin Roosevelt**, becoming the first African American to hold a federal judgeship. He died in 1976.

Oral Histories

The Historical Society and the court have added two oral histories to their collection of such histories, bringing to 26 the number of such histories now on file. The new histories are from retired **State Appeals Court Judge James W. Parrott**, who served as clerk of the court from 1959 to 1964, and from **Don K. Ferguson**, who served the court as chief deputy clerk from 1974 until last December 31.

*THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF
THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
TENNESSEE, INC.*

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Don K. Ferguson
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