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News release

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Jeffris Family Foundation awards challenge grant to support restoration of Kenosha County Ceremonial Courtroom

KENOSHA — The Jeffris Family Foundation will provide a \$675,000 challenge grant to help fund the restoration of the Ceremonial Courtroom in the Kenosha County Courthouse, provided additional funds can be raised locally, County Executive Jim Kreuser announced today.

To earn the \$675,000 award, Kenosha County must raise \$1.35 million in private donations over the next three years, Kreuser said. A committee is being formed to oversee that effort, with more details to be announced in the coming months, Kreuser said.

Based in Janesville, the Jeffris Family Foundation supports the preservation of regionally and nationally important historic buildings and decorative arts projects throughout the Midwest including such prestigious locations as President Warren G. Harding's Marion, Ohio, home, President William Henry Harrison's home in Vincennes, Ind., and buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan.

"We are pleased and honored that the Jeffris Family Foundation is making this generous contribution to our efforts to restore a historic gem in Kenosha County," Kreuser said. "Provided we're able to garner the private support needed to match the grant two to one, another significant investment in the preservation of our beautiful Courthouse will be made, and some of its most significant architectural features will be uncovered and restored."

"It's been a real pleasure working with county officials on this project," said foundation President Thomas M. Jeffris.

The Ceremonial Courtroom, today's Circuit Court Room 209, is the remaining one of two grand, double-height courtrooms included in the Courthouse when it opened in 1925.

While the other large courtroom was subdivided into two, single-story courtrooms in the 1960s, the Ceremonial Courtroom retained its original size but had its decorative plaster ceiling with inlaid art glass skylights covered and damaged by a drop ceiling as part of a renovation that added central air conditioning to the room.

Concealed above that drop ceiling but still largely intact is a frieze that rings the room with a quote from Abraham Lincoln on “Law”:

“Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others.”

This quote is an excerpt from one of Lincoln’s earliest published speeches given in Springfield, Ill., on Jan. 27, 1838, in response to the burning of a Black man who had just been freed in St. Louis weeks prior.

The proposed restoration project includes relocating heating, ventilation and air conditioning infrastructure — which is in need of replacement — into the attic above the courtroom, removing the drop ceiling and restoring the original features of the ceiling and the room’s lighting. The 1925 lights would be reproduced by St. Louis Antique Lighting Co., a leading firm in the nation for restoration lighting that has done work for the U.S. Supreme Court and 16 state capitols.

Located at 912 56th St., the Courthouse listed as an individual landmark on the National Register of Historic Places and is an important contributor to the downtown Kenosha Civic Center Historic District. The district, which remains intact, is unique in that it represents various units of government — city, county and federal — executing a unified vision for a town square in the neoclassical style.

More information about the Ceremonial Courtroom project is available at <https://www.kenoshacounty.org/2055/Ceremonial-Courtroom-Restoration-Project>.

Tax-deductible donations to support the project may be made to the Kenosha Community Foundation, the fiscal sponsor of the courtroom restoration project. To donate online, visit <https://www.kenoshafoundation.org/donate>, and click on the Ceremonial Courtroom Restoration Project image.

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A computer-generated rendering depicts the Ceremonial Courtroom ceiling and frieze, post restoration.