

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System. I'm John Caher.

Today our guest is Robert Pigott, vice president and general counsel of Phipps Houses and author of the book, *New York Legal Landmarks: A Guide to Legal Edifices, Institutions, Lore, History and Curiosity on the City Streets*. On February 27th, Bob will be part of a program sponsored by the Historical Society of the New York Courts on the history of Foley Square, a place in lower Manhattan dominated by civic buildings, including the US Courthouse, the Manhattan Courthouse, the Thurgood Marshall Courthouse, the New York County Municipal Building, and many others.

Foley Square, named for a Tammany Hall saloon owner, is familiar to millions of people—and not just those in New York City. There's a scene in *12 Angry Men* with Henry Fonda on the steps of the New York County Courthouse. Foley Square routinely appears in episodes of *Law and Order*, often with Mariska Hargitay on the steps. In *The Godfather*, an assassination takes place on the steps of one of the Foley Square buildings. And there is even a *Spiderman* scene shot in Foley Square.

The program at the New York City Bar Association, which is on West 44th Street, will also feature former Court of Appeals Judge Albert Rosenblatt, president of the Historical Society; Jon Ritter, a clinical associate professor at New York University; Charles Starks, an adjunct lecturer on urban policy and planning at Hunter College. And Judge Dennis Jacobs of the Second Circuit US Court of Appeals.

Bob, welcome to the program. For those of us who are not from New York City, and are vaguely, if that, aware of Foley Square, can you set the scene? What is Foley Square?

Robert Pigott: Well, Foley Square, first of all, like most squares in New York City, it isn't a square or even rectangle. It's an open area in downtown Manhattan, bounded by Reade Street on the south, Worth Street on the north, Centre Street on the east, and Lafayette Street on the west. But what's significant about it is that it's the locus of all the state and federal courts in New York City, and other government buildings.

John Caher: Was that the original plan for New York City? Was that always a government section of the city?

Robert Pigott: Actually, no, Foley Square was only developed beginning in the 1920s. Before that, most government buildings were either in or around City Hall Park.

City Hall was built in 1812, and there's this nice triangular park below Chamber Street, with Broadway on one side, and Park Row on the other. And the original design was that you would just have City Hall in City Hall Park, and a very nice fountain, and that's the way it was for the first 10, 20, 30 years of the 19th century.

But then, and probably because it was a cheap source of land, more and more buildings, government buildings, began encroaching on City Hall Park, and the original design was really marred. But by the turn of the century, around 1900, there were probably half a dozen government buildings in City Hall Park.

John Caher: You said it was a region of somewhat affordable, or cheaper land. That surprises me. It seems like a very expensive area. Is that not the case?

Robert Pigott: Well, by that I only meant that the city would not have to go out and buy land, or rent land for office space. They already owned City Hall Park.

John Caher: I see. I see. Okay. So how did it become developed? Tell me about George McAneny and his role in making all this happen.

Robert Pigott: McAneny got on the scene the first few years of the 20th century, McAneny was a Manhattan borough president from 1910 to 1913, and from 1914 to 1916 he was president of the Board of Aldermen, which is a forerunner of our current City Council.

When he got on the scene, there were two courthouses in City Hall Park. the Tweed Courthouse, which is still standing, and actually quite a nice building, but was always very unpopular because of its associations with the graft and corruption of the Tweed ring. So, you had the New York County Courthouse, the Tweed Courthouse, right behind City Hall on Chamber Street, and you also had, at the very tip of City Hall Park, you had a federal post office and courthouse, where the United States District Court and the Second Circuit Court of Appeals met. But it was primarily a post office and the courts were on the upper floors.

So, as McAneny gets on the scene, there's this perception that City Hall Park is overrun with government buildings, that the government buildings there are inadequate, and there's a need for something new.

One plan that was considered, was to raze the Tweed Courthouse, and build a much larger courthouse on that site. However, under McAneny's guidance and vision, the thought of building a new civic center above Chamber Street was developed. And that was really the origin of Foley Square.

The first government building there was the current state courthouse, the New York County Courthouse at 60 Centre Street. New York City had a court building commission, and they had a competition and an architect from Boston named Guy Lowell won the competition and designed this very large, circular courthouse that would've taken up much of what is now Foley Square. But World War I intervened. There was delay, there were budget overruns. So, the design for the courthouse was scaled back to the hexagonal structure that we now know at 60 Centre Street as the New York County Courthouse. And that was the first government building on Foley Square.

John Caher: Was it always known as Foley Square? And by the way, who's Foley?

Robert Pigott: It's interesting that Foley has been memorialized in this way, because he was one of several Tammany bosses, but not the most prominent one by any means. He was a saloon keeper. But he died in, I believe, 1925, and he had a profound effect on then governor Al Smith, because Foley had given Smith his start in local politics 30 years earlier. So Governor Smith was very attached to Tom Foley, and for that reason, I think, the Board of Aldermen decided to name this new square where these government buildings would be Foley Square.

John Caher: I see. Since this is a Historical Society event, let's discuss the history a little bit. What historic events have taken place, and what historic trials have occurred at Foley Square?

Robert Pigott: Well quite a number. And as I said, you have the State Courthouse at 60 Centre Street. Across the street at 40 Centre Street you have the Federal Courthouse, United States Courthouse, which is actually now known as the Thurgood Marshall Courthouse in honor of Justice Marshall, who was a judge on the Second Circuit in the early 60s. So, from 1927 on, you had the state courthouse. From 1936 on, you had the federal courthouse. The federal courthouse saw such trials as the Alger Hiss perjury case in 1950, the trial of the Rosenbergs, who gave the secret of the atomic bomb to the Russians.

Across the street, at 60 Centre Street, you had, for example, the custody trial of Gloria Vanderbilt, which was thought of as one of the trials of the

century. And these two buildings have really become icons, and they've been used in so many movies, so you've had a lot of fictional trials. The trial of Santa Claus in *Miracle on 34th Street* took place at 60 Centre Street. And there are a lot of location shots at 60 Centre Street in that movie from the 1940s.

John Caher: What's the significance of this area to lawyers, and judges, and the legal community?

Robert Pigott: Well, it's related to the significance of New York City to the world. New York City, by many measures, is the financial capital of the world, and some of the most important commercial disputes arise in New York City. Where is the Court of General Jurisdiction in New York City? At 60 Centre Street on Foley Square. The Southern District of New York at 40 Centre Street is the oldest, and perhaps the most prestigious United States District Court. And where is that? At 40 Centre Street on Foley Square.

So, it really is the epicenter of all legal and judicial activity in New York City. In some of the outer boroughs, there are centers like Court Street in Brooklyn, or the St. George Terrace area in Staten Island, and you do have clusters of courthouses and government buildings, but it really can't compare to Foley Square, either in terms of the buildings, or what happens inside those buildings.

John Caher: How do you expect the event on the 27th to unfold? What do you expect to come out of it?

Robert Pigott: Well, one thing that's nice is that we have a really diverse panel. I've been writing about old courthouses for about five years now, and in New York City. But we also have former Chief Judge Jacobs, who will be participating on our panel. We have Jon Ritter, who's an architectural historian from NYU. We also have Charles Starks, who has written about George McAneny, who, as I said, spearheaded this plan for Foley Square.

So, I think we have a nice, diverse panel. Each member which will be able to contribute something different to the program.

John Caher: And what's your interest in all of this? How did you develop such an interest in this to the extent where you wanted to write a book about it, about legal landmarks?

Robert Pigott: Well, I've lived in New York City for 58 years now, all my life, and I've always been a student of New York City history. And now, I've been a lawyer or over 30 years, and it really happened almost by chance.

A little over five years ago, one summer afternoon, I was exploring the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, and I came upon this spectacular courthouse, that now is being used as the home for the local Community Board. But it was this majestic building and over one door it said “Municipal Court,” over the other door it said “Magistrate's Court,” and as long as I'd been practicing law, I'd never heard of such courts. I did a little research, and learned that these courts were done away with in 1962, but before that, these Magistrate's Courts, and Municipal Courts had been scattered throughout the entire city, these neighborhood courthouses for small civil cases and small criminal cases. And this Sunset Park Courthouse was just one of them, and that's what got me researching, and caused me to form the view that there was a book here. I came out with *New York's Legal Landmarks* in 2014, and I'm actually about to come out with a second edition, which will be about 50 pages longer, which has a lot of material that I learned after the first book came out.

John Caher: That's fantastic. It seems like this is really kind of the center of justice in New York City.

Robert Pigott: Absolutely.

John Caher: Bob, thanks for your time, and good luck with the program. Again, the Historical Society event is the *History of Foley Square*, and it begins at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, February 27th. For more information, check out the website of the Historical Society of the New York Courts.

Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our podcasts, which now number more than 50, on the New York State Court System website at www.nycourts.gov. And you'll also find many of them in the iTunes podcast library.

If you have a suggestion for a topic that ought to be covered on Amici, or someone who ought to be interviewed, please give me a call. I'm John Caher, and I'm at 518-453-8669. Or send me a note at JCaher@nycourts.gov. In the meantime, stay tuned.