

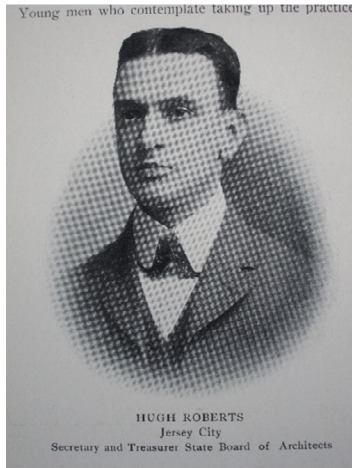
*The Hudson County Court House and Hugh Roberts:
A Building and Architect in Perspective*

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Hugh Roberts, the architect of the Hudson County Court House, has had his career identified in totality with this building that brought him fame for its artistic stature and shame for his envelopment in the graft scandal that followed its 1910 opening. History has been kinder to him than were his contemporaries. Accusations against him are now considered to have been unjustified, but the imbroglio derailed his practice. The court house and much of the Roberts oeuvre originated through the influence of and his relationships with the politically powerful. Examination of the court house project, Roberts' other work and the law suit place both architect and building in sharper focus.

Early Life and Influences



Photograph of Roberts from Meeker, Ellis R., *The State of New Jersey*, 1906.

Hugh Roberts, born in Brooklyn in 1867 and educated at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, was established in Jersey City at least by 1893 (when he began appearing in city directories). He had early New York addresses at 287 Fourth Avenue and 1123 Broadway, but they were likely offices of convenience (which numerous New Jersey architects maintained). An 1899 guide to New York architects claims, “He is at his office very little. Main office is at 76 Montgomery Street, Jersey City,” where he had been established by 1896.¹ Roberts

¹ Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice, New York City, 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979).

whetted his appetite for public work during that period when he entered a submission for a municipal hall for Jersey City, a competition won by Lewis H. Broome (who went on to design the extant Jersey City City Hall at 280 Grove Street). Roberts, who finished second, was awarded \$250 for his design.²

Roberts, who early in his career was active in professional circles, was a co-founder of the New Jersey Society of Architects and later the New Jersey Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. He also benefited from political connections. His brother-in-law, William D. Edwards (1855-1916), was a leading Jersey City lawyer and elected official who held a number of influential positions and provided a key family tie to the political and business power centers that propelled Roberts' career. Edwards served at various times as chairman of the Hudson County Democratic Committee, Hudson County State Senator, and Corporation Counsel for Jersey City and Bayonne. Edwards was responsible for directing the court house commission to Roberts. William's younger brother Edward I. Edwards, who studied law in William's office, later became governor of New Jersey. Roberts designed houses for both William and Edward.

Roberts also enjoyed the favor of Edward F.C Young (1835-1908), arguably the most powerful financial, business, and political figure in Hudson County during the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Educated in Jersey City, Young, after a modest beginning, rose steadily in banking circles, in time attaining the presidency of the First National Bank of Jersey City. Young, who repeatedly took positions with firms he aided, notably as president of the Joseph Dixon Crucible Company, held numerous directorships in other financial institutions, business concerns and rail and traction companies. He was a director and ruling spirit of the important New

² *Jersey Journal*, August 4, 1892.

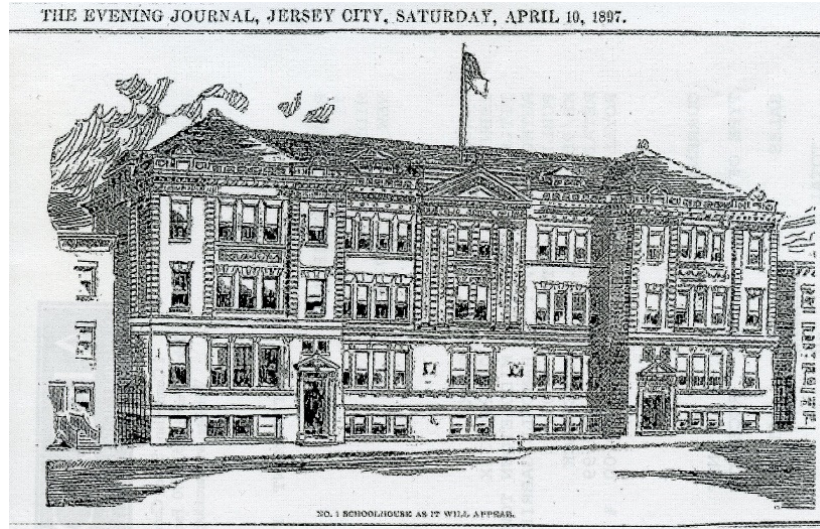
Jersey Title Guarantee and Trust Company. Young held public office at times, including two terms on the Hudson County Board of Chosen Freeholders, but more significantly was a behind-the-scenes Democratic power broker. Young's power and authority are suggested by homage that his son-in-law, George T. Smith, paid in his own biographical sketch a decade after the former's death in *Scannell's New Jersey's First Citizens*, writing: "He was of such dominant influence that it used to be said in the county that 'all lines lead to the First National Bank.'"

Roberts enjoyed a third link to the thrones of power, in the form of Robert "Little Bob" Davis, the prototypical political boss who ruled Hudson County. Davis began as a district election board worker at age twenty and steadily rose through the ranks, all the while honing his sharp political acumen. He was elected city alderman in 1885 and sheriff in 1887 prior to appointment by Governor Leon Abbett as police judge in 1891. In 1893 the Hudson County Board of Chosen Freeholders appointed Davis as warden of the Hudson County jail. By 1890, having battled through a rough and tumble political rise, Davis had become the recognized leader of the Hudson County Democratic machine. His death in 1911 preceded the court house graft trial by a year.³ One of his disciples, Frank Hague, would take Hudson County bossism to a new level.

Public and Political Work

The earliest public appointment of Roberts appears to have been as architect for the Bayonne School Board. The *Jersey Journal* reported on June 30, 1896 that his plans for new Public School No. 1 and No. 5 were accepted. His 1897 design for P.S. No. 1 portrays an early Roberts

³ *New York Times*, January 10, 1911.



leaning towards classical motifs. However, it appears that this design, pictured in a rendering published by the *Jersey Journal* on April 10, 1897, may not have been built as the Board voted instead to expand the existing building.

The Bayonne School Board also accepted Roberts' plans for a new P.S. No. 3, according to the *New-York Tribune* May 28, 1896; and the Bayonne High School, as noted in the *American Architect and Building News* on November 20, 1897. His design for P.S. No. 3 was completed in 1897, but Bayonne's high school was not built until 1910 when it was designed by John T. Rowland (1871-1945), Hudson County's most prolific architect who during his long career produced many fine schools and most of the buildings of the former Jersey City Medical Center. Roberts' tenure with the Bayonne School Board may have been cut short as Rudolph W. Sailer, a Bayonne resident, was appointed architect for Public School No. 8 as reported by the *Jersey Journal* August 5, 1900.

Robert Davis gave Roberts a noteworthy early commission that reflected the latter's link to the political world. In 1898, Davis, who was also an ex-sheriff and then collector-elect, was the namesake of "the leading and most powerful Democratic club in Hudson County, the Robert Davis Association."⁴ Davis, then owner of the row house at 46 Mercer Street, bought the adjoining house

⁴ *Jersey Journal* November 19, 1898.

at no. 44 and hired Roberts to remodel and connect of the two buildings to create an expanded and well-appointed clubhouse.⁵

Other minor Roberts public work included overseeing the demolition of former Jersey City Public School No.1 and the converting of the former city hall for a temporary school;⁶ and installing storm doors at the Jersey City Public Library.⁷

Residential Work



**150 Harrison Avenue; Collection of Jersey City Public Library.
Used with permission.**

Residential work formed a significant and apparently dominant part of the early Roberts practice. Contemporary images of his Jersey City work are virtually non-existent other than his own house at 150 Harrison Avenue which was demolished. As Jersey City architectural historian John Gomez pointed out in his paean to the

architect, “Roberts’ architectural legacy, defined by the Brennan Court House, the Dixon Mills and numerous Victorian mansions on Bentley and Gifford avenues is unmatched.”⁸ Few of the Roberts’ residential commissions alluded to therein have been identified, other than 39 Bentley Avenue which he designed for lawyer John S. McMaster.⁹

⁵ *Jersey Journal* August 1, 1898.

⁶ *Jersey Journal* May 21, 1897.

⁷ *Jersey Journal* December 10, 1904.

⁸ *Jersey Journal* November 30, 2000.

⁹ *Jersey Journal* May 15, 1897.



**39 Bentley Avenue
(Google Street View)**



33 Gifford Avenue (Google Street View)



**119 Gifford Avenue
(Google Street View)**

Several other Jersey City houses by Roberts have been newly identified by linking recently accessible news accounts together with city directory listings. These newly revealed Roberts designs provide additional insight to his work. Some sites of named clients, however, have defied attempts to be identified while other of his houses are no-longer standing.

One of Roberts more ambitious projects may have been 33 Gifford Avenue, the home of Samuel G. Negus. The *Jersey Journal* noted on May 15, 1897 that it was “not confined to

any particular style of architecture,” a kind reference to its confused styles. The house that the *Jersey Journal* reported about on March 2, 1903 that James Hamilton Jr. was building on Gifford Avenue located near his present home appears to be number 119 Gifford.

Edward I. Edwards, the brother of William D., was the secretary of the Commissioners of Adjustment

when Roberts was designing his new house according to the *Jersey Journal* on September 28, 1901. Edwards, then a bank clerk living at 242 Harrison Avenue in 1905, would ascend to the governorship in 1920. One of Roberts’ costliest and perhaps finest projects in Jersey City was the house built for William D. Edwards, the brother of Edward. Reported by the *American*



**242 Harrison Avenue
(Google Street View)**

Architect of October 29, 1909 as located on a corner of Hudson Boulevard and Montgomery Street, the handsome Colonial Revival, one of the most distinguished houses in the area, was actually one lot beyond the southwest corner. The Edwards residence at 2627 Kennedy Boulevard is now known as Lee House, Saint Peter's University, and serves as its admissions office.



**2627 Kennedy Boulevard
(Google Street View)**

Other Jersey City works were lesser projects. The four-story brick dwelling built for Henry Byrne at 180 16th Street listed in the *American Architect and Building News*, March 9, 1901 has been effaced by development at the western edge of Newport. The two and one-half story frame residence built for Anna M. Mitchell, located at 28 Boyd

Avenue and also featured in the *American Architect and Building News* on June 10, 1899, was later marred by alterations. Roberts designed a three-story double frame flat for Mrs. Josephine Smith, the wife of Freeholder William E. Smith, which is probably the prosaic tenement that stands at Stuyvesant and Corbin Avenues, the locale specified in a *Jersey Journal* item on August 2, 1905. The erection of apartment houses became prevalent in Jersey City during the post-1910 era. Their construction appeared in what is now known as the West Bergen-East Lincoln Park Historic District (added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2016, the area embraces the

aforementioned streets). When the George M. Perkins house site, an 1897 Roberts commission, was sold for an apartment house in 1938, the transaction, which included another ancient Perkins residence, was “one of the largest transactions in Jersey City for some time.”¹⁰ Patrick T. Powers, a sports promoter, built a Roberts design in 1907 at the northwest corner of the Boulevard and Fairmount Avenue, but the house was destroyed when the property was foreclosed in 1932.¹¹ Roberts was reported to have designed a large apartment for Joseph Reed to be located on the north side of Harsion Avenue adjacent to Roberts’ house according to the *Jersey Journal* of November 1, 1907, but historic maps suggests that it was not built.



Col. Asa W. Dickinson residence

Scientific American Building Edition, June 1, 1899

Roberts’ finest residences appear to have been suburban commissions where greater lot sizes permitted large, expansive dwellings. The earliest appears to have been the Prospect Avenue, Hackensack, NJ home of Col. Asa W. Dickinson, that was published in the June 1, 1899 edition of the *Scientific American Building Edition*. The Shingle Style house featured

a front gambrel gable that Roberts utilized in his own house. The commission from Dickinson, a politically well-connected Jersey City lawyer and partner of John S. McMaster, reflects an early example of Roberts’ repeated use of his political ties to obtain business. Dickinson, born in 1853 in Amherst, Massachusetts and a journalist in his early career, was appointed by President Arthur

¹⁰ *Jersey Journal*, March 6, 1938.

¹¹ *Jersey Journal* March 6, 1938; *New York Times* August 27, 1932.

as Deputy Collector of the Port of Jersey City and assistant clerk of the New Jersey Assembly for two years, died in 1899.¹²

Edward F.C. Young's large Queen Anne style house, built in the early 1890s on Hudson (now Kennedy) Boulevard and Glenwood Avenue, was regarded as one of Jersey City's finest homes. The building was razed in the 1930s prior to the site's acquisition by Saint Peter's College (now University). Edward and his wife Harriet had been summer visitors to Elberon, a fashionable section of Long Branch, which for a long time had been one of the most important seaside resorts in America. Roberts' design for their country house, one of his finest, was completed in 1904 to commemorate the Youngs' fiftieth wedding anniversary.¹³ Their summer residence, appropriately named *Golden Crest*, is a large Classical Revival with elaborate, expansive interiors that stands at 62 Norwood Avenue, a locale now identified as part of its municipality, Ocean Township. Young, who lived for only another four years, left a will that recommended that the house be sold, but Harriet remained there until her death in 1924.



Golden Crest

Township of Ocean Historical Museum; Used with Permission

James. E. Hulshizer, president of the New Jersey Title Guarantee and Trust Company, may have been impressed with colleague Young's *Golden Crest* as the *Jersey Journal* reported later in 1904 (October 27) that Roberts "is preparing sketches ... for the erection of a brick and stone

¹² *New-York Tribune*, January 9, 1899.

¹³ *Jersey Journal* August 20, 1904.



Hulshizer Residence

Undated photographic post card; Author's Collection

mansion on his recently acquired property at Bernardsville, New Jersey.” The house, built along classical lines, included a nod to the by-then faded Queen Anne style, a conical-roofed tower, along with expansive porches.

In November, after Hulshizer left New Jersey Title to enter the financial business in New York, Young was elected First Vice President.¹⁴

Commercial Work

The most significant Roberts commercial project also arose from his tie to Young, who, as noted, was president of the Joseph Dixon Crucible Company. Dixon, after initially importing graphite from Ceylon, operated what was said to have been the only successful graphite mine in America at Ticonderoga, New York, opened in 1873 a pencil factory on Railroad Avenue, now Christopher Columbus Drive, in downtown Jersey City. Dixon, which turned the graphite writing instrument into a major industry, became the largest manufacturer of pencils in the United States and the world. The firm extended its plant to nearly all the block bounded by Varick Street on the west, Monmouth Street on the west, and Wayne on the south and later an additional two and one-half blocks beyond. In 1908, Roberts planned for two more Jersey City factory buildings for Dixon which had “almost doubled the size of its plant in the last four years.”¹⁵

An addition to the New Jersey Paint Works plant represents a second manufacturing project. Reported by *The Construction News* of May 8, 1909 as a five-story structure at Wagner and Fremont Streets, the work appears to be the three-story building pictured in the 1910 *Jersey*

¹⁴ *New York Times* November 23, 1904.

¹⁵ Randall Gabrielan, *Jersey City – A Monumental History* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishers, 2007).



New Jersey Paint Works
Walter G., *Jersey City of Today*, 1910

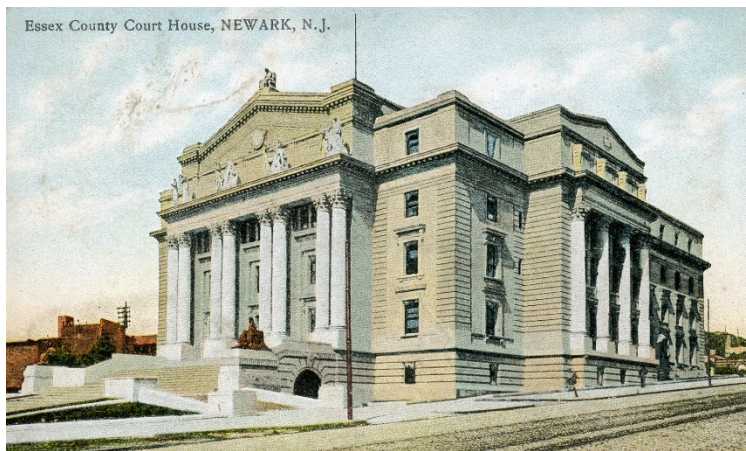
City of Today, edited by Walter G. Muirheid. The intersection was later vacated by development. Roberts was also reported to have designed a Sunday school and hall for St. Mary's P.E. Church on Hoboken Avenue, Jersey City, but this structure, briefly mentioned in the

Jersey Journal of October 15, 1895, has not been located.

An Essex County Forerunner

The New Jersey State Legislature passed an act in March, 1900 (amended the following year and subsequently) that permitted the Board of Chosen Freeholders in any county which deemed its court facilities inadequate to adopt a resolution declaring that inadequacy and to appoint a building commission to secure new facilities. This commission, which would consist of the freeholder director and two citizens appointed by him, would stay in existence at least until the new court was completed and furnished. The Essex authorities promptly appointed a commission to plan and build a new court house. *The New York Architect* of September, 1908 detailed their process, which began with the appointment of A.C. Neumann of Newark as a preliminary architectural adviser, the drafting of space needs, idea gathering through the visitation of other public buildings, and the drafting of specifications for the designing architect. The choice of architect process represents the first significant difference between the Essex and Hudson projects. Essex held a competition, the accepted procedure for large public buildings, one which drew submissions from several leading architects including McKim, Mead and White, George B. Post,

Babb, Cook and Willard, and Carrere and Hastings, along with Cass Gilbert, the winner. Gilbert, a recognized master, had several significant projects on his early resume including such public buildings as the Minnesota State Capital, St. Paul; the Arkansas State Capital, Little Rock; and the United States Customs House, New York; a number of appealing churches and office buildings; as well as the Palace of Fine Arts at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, now the St. Louis Art Museum. Gilbert would go on to design numerous other significant buildings during a long and distinguished career. They include many government buildings including the United States Supreme Court; landmark office buildings including, in New York, the West Street, Woolworth, and New York Life buildings; and a number of important libraries. *The New York Architect* in September, 1908 lauded the Essex courthouse, congratulating the County "...in having secured a building which has been thoroughly, well and honestly built, and which represents the highest standard of construction and equipment. ... It is very properly considered one of the best public buildings of its type in the country." The author concluded with the claim, "this new building does credit to the community of Newark and all those concerned in its production. It points clearly the way for other public buildings commissions who are now or will soon be in a position to repeat the experience of the Essex County Court House."



Post Card c.1910; Author's Collection

The new Essex courthouse clearly reinforced existing motivation for Hudson County officials to replace their long-inadequate courthouse. Several similarities would characterize the two projects, but Hudson began with

a sharp contrast in the selection of architect. There was no competition: Roberts was handed the job as a political anointment. Roberts had no background with large public buildings and never would. However, he planned a building similar to the Essex Courthouse, then provided a preliminary cost estimate. His early revelation of a projected cost would result in a political maelstrom. For a project of size and scope without precedent in his career, Roberts would require able assistance and would secure an able architect as his chief designer.

Planning the Hudson County Courthouse

It took a long time for the Hudson County authorities to effect plans for a courthouse similar to the one underway in Essex. Their obstacles included site selection, dual claims over authorization to undertake the project, acquisition of land and a dispute over the selection of a contractor. Nevertheless, Roberts was able to make a preliminary cost projection as early as December, 1903. Newark was already under construction, but Roberts was guided by plans, models, and the projected size of the Hudson building. The style would be Beaux-Arts, then called Modern Renaissance. Cost figures, based on preliminary sketches, were conveyed via a letter he wrote to the Courthouse Committee on December 6, findings that were published in the *Jersey Journal* three days later:

“Gentlemen: I herewith submit a tentative plot plan and list of requirements for the proposed new Court House. This list is prepared after a careful study of the requirements of the courts and the various departments to be placed in the proposed structure. Upon estimating the entire cost of the Court House upon the basis of the requirements, as stated, I find that the total cost will not exceed the sum of \$990,000. Respectfully, Hugh Roberts”

Roberts determined a need for a building of 2,000,000 cubic feet with an estimated construction cost of fifty cents per foot. He reduced the round \$1,000,000 cost to \$990,000, no-doubt thinking that a six-figure sum would be more politically palatable. He would rue the day the number was submitted as the committee failed to realize the number was a preliminary estimate for only the

basic building, a fact not revealed in his letter. The committee members welcomed the low estimate as it helped dispel cost objections to the project. However, the county made the figure an *idée fixe* and regularly cited it even after it became evident that costs for the finished and furnished building would soar. Accusations in the graft case would hinge, in part, on Roberts' presentation of this incomplete estimate.

Roberts Hires Theodore Fraenkel

Significant design contributions were made by architect Theodore Oscar Fraenkel who was hired by Roberts. The "New York Letter" in the *Builder* of June 1, 1905 reported, "The many friends of Theodore Fraenkel will be interested to know that he has entire charge of the new Jersey City (sic) court house for Architect Hugh Roberts. Mr. Teddy is making this his 'life work.'" If tempted to suspect that the brief announcement has the appearance of a hyperbolic press release, Fraenkel reiterated the claim in court testimony. Fraenkel's biographical record may be even more obscure than Roberts'. He was born on March 17, 1857 in Illinois to a Swedish father and German mother and appears to have had a peripatetic career as both artist and architect. Fraenkel's earliest recorded mention covered his sketching trip in the south wherein *Engineering Magazine* of November, 1894 quoted him about his series of drawings made for *The Inland Architect*. The *Encyclopedia of New Orleans Artists* lists him as both a painter and an architect. Fraenkel's architectural affiliations appear to have been brief and numerous. By that year he had formed the firm Fraenkel and Schmidt in Chicago, indicated by a *Chicago Daily Tribune* report of a commission on October 28, 1894. Fraenkel was with the notable firm of Holabird and Roche in that city in 1903, an affiliation noted in *St Louis Architectural News* January 1, 1904. In between he entered a New Orleans partnership with Hayward M. Burton known as Burton and Fraenkel. Extensive planning was required prior to final design work.

Site Acquisition and Political Opposition

Selection of a site for the new court house became a political issue after Republicans voiced opposition to building on the site of the existing court house. The courthouse, a fine Greek Revival building erected in 1844, stood in the middle of a block bounded by Pavonia Avenue on the west, Baldwin Avenue on the south, Newark Avenue on the east and on the north, a street that was later eliminated, Willow Court. The Hudson County Jail was located to the north of the court house, while a small frame office for the freeholders was on the southern edge of the county property.



Excerpt from Plate 15 of Volume 3 of the 1898 Sanborn Insurance Maps of Hudson County.

The County would need to acquire three rows of lots of occupied buildings, primarily residences, on Baldwin and the adjoining streets, as outlined below.

In January, 1904 the freeholder board authorized the purchase of the remainder of the block and the issue of \$150,000 in bonds. A review of the needed parcels and the expectations of their owners suggested that acquisition of the property might be a protracted process and prove costly.¹⁶ In addition, political opponents mounted a vigorous

¹⁶ *Jersey Journal*, January 28, 1904

fight led by the Republican Secretary of State, Samuel D. Dickinson who in December 1903 appealed to Supreme Court Justice Jonathan Dixon to have the issue of building the court house taken to the Supreme Court based on lack of affordability. He was not successful. After he subsequently appealed to the State Legislature for relief, Dickinson was again turned down. An issue came before the New Jersey Court of Errors and Appeals over whether the Court House Commission or the freeholders had the authority to build the courthouse. The court decided on March 6, 1905 that the Commission could proceed.¹⁷ Other challenges would later impede progress, as well. Some wished that the court house be part of a new civic center to be located in the thriving downtown section, but an area where land costs would be greater. The committee received a financial boost unconnected to the removal of legal objections by the 1905 passage of the Duffield Act, which provided for the taxation of second class railroad or canal property at local rates with the receipts to be used for local purposes. The act's provisions transferred substantial ratables from the State Board of Assessors' list to local assessors. Thus, Hudson County, which contained an enormous amount of railroad property, became a major beneficiary with enhanced revenue raising capability. The committee became able to spend much more on the court house than what had been allowable.

Work Begins

Site preparation and construction advanced slowly. Bids for excavation and removal of the freeholders' building were received in August, 1905. The commission awarded the general contract to Wells Brothers in January, 1906, with the belief that it had good reason not to hire the lowest bidder, E.M. Waldron and Company. Roberts preferred the former because Wells would

¹⁷ *Jersey Journal*, March 7, 1905.

use a costlier granite from Hallowell, Maine. Their contract required completion within eighteen months with a per diem penalty for lateness. A second low bidder, M.T. Connolly Company, was turned down, in part because their bid did not meet the specifications. Objections by Connolly and the master Builders' Association were rejected.

John M. Lathrop, the excavation contractor, broke ground for the new courthouse on October 24, 1905. There was no ceremony, but rather an air of hurried eagerness to complete excavation prior to the onset of frost. Most of the prior existing buildings on the site had been relocated. A plaster model of the building had been prepared during the time Roberts was drawing specifications. The cost was still being bandied about during this time as an estimate "in the neighborhood of \$1,000,000."¹⁸

A long span of preliminary work was required prior to a meaningful sign to the public of emerging progress. Contracts needed to be bid and signed and a foundation poured. After the foundation was completed, work halted for a spell to await the arrival of stone and steel. Stone had to be inspected to assure the desired quality. Thus, when at last the cornerstone was ready to be placed, an impressive ceremony was planned for the December 12, 1906 event. A band led by Professor John Beggs entertained visitors as judges, county officials, and invited guests gathered in the corridor of the old courthouse prior to their procession to the northeast corner of the new building. New Jersey Supreme Court Justice J. Franklin Fort, who was presented with a silver commemorative trowel inscribed with his name, date and the occasion, utilized same after contractor Wells supervised the lowering in place of the cornerstone. A box inside the cornerstone contained the usual souvenirs which included newspapers and coins, but also an item now of historic interest, the specifications for the building. In his address Justice Fort congratulated the

¹⁸ *Jersey Journal*, October 24, 1905.

people for having erected a building that would overcome the inadequacies of the existing courthouse. Fort claimed that at this hall of justice, “the civic liberties of the people would be protected irrespective of wealth, power or religion.”¹⁹ His remarks were noble, although not prophetic for the course of justice in America. The festivities continued at night at a dinner, an elaborate affair that the Die Wilde Gans Club gave at the Beaux-Arts Foundation in New York to honor High Roberts. The club presented the architect with a magnificent silver loving cup.

Although construction was slow, signs of progress caught the attention of the public and reporters. Occasional reports were provided by the *Jersey Journal*, which noted on January 11, 1907 that work had stopped due to non-delivery of steel, but at the same time facilities for derricks were being installed to permit activity throughout winter. The placement of steel girders on the second floor and the arrival of large quantities of stone (April 13) were visible signs of progress, as were the installation of sixteen-ton blocks of granite that were to support the second story balcony (May 1 and 3). The need to complete the new court house took renewed urgency as repairs on the now dilapidated old court house had ceased (January 14). The dangerous condition of the building became evident when plaster twice fell from ceilings nearly causing injury (April 23). The raising of major pieces of stone became newsworthy when it gave the structure “a stately appearance” (July 5) or when stone newly arrived to permit a resumption of lapsed work (September 12). Optimism prevailed as indicated by projections headed under “Court House News” that “the building will be done in the time originally set two years from the setting of the first stone on the foundation” (June 3) or “the building will, weather permitting, prove to be the most rapidly constructed building of its kind in the East,” reported June 11. However, the optimism was not warranted; these hopes were not fulfilled. Construction progress would be slowed by

¹⁹ *Jersey Journal*, December 12, 1906.

financial issues, notably the need to raise funds by the sale of bonds. Officials initially offered the bonds at four percent interest, but the market was not receptive. The commission was then authorized to sell at five percent, but was able to find willing buyers at four and one-half percent. The lower rate represented a savings on paper, but as costs soared, the public could hardly perceive savings.

Completion of the exterior resulted in little news on progress during 1909 in part. Interior work was not visible, while the principal contract would not be awarded until June 12, 1908. (June 13, 1908) The successful bidder was John F. Gill & Son.

The construction of a separate power house, another need that was yet to be addressed, brought a major controversy, although one not directly involving Roberts. Boss



Photography by the author.

Davis received an inappropriate \$8,000 for acting as middleman in the acquisition of land. Bids for decorators and furniture were awarded in February, 1910.

Mural Decoration

Roberts continued his emulation of the Essex Court House in 1910 through his advocacy for fine art mural decorations, “provided the services of the best artists in American can be secured.” The *Jersey Journal* of March 2 expressed his desire for historical rather than allegorical subjects, in part for his dislike of the latter, but also in view of the rich history of Hudson County. The county hired five of the eight Essex muralists: Edwin H. Blashfield, Kenyon Cox, Charles Yardley Turner, Howard Pyle and Francis Davis Millet. Whereas Gilbert had incorporated the muralists in his overall plan, Roberts made Millet his director of decoration. The history of the magnificent court house art work, outside the scope of this piece, is best accessed through, *Heros in the Fight For Beauty – The Muralists of the Hudson County Court House*, a catalog by Cynthia Holthusen Sanford for a 1985-6 exhibition at the Jersey City Museum and *Justice William J. Brennan Court House – A Walking Tour Guide* by the Hudson County Office of Cultural & Heritage Affairs.

The New Court House Opens

The first official act upon the September 19, 1910 opening of the courthouse was the sentencing of John Kysilka for his second degree murder conviction for having killed Stephen Glazer on July 4th in a quarrel over a cent, a trifling sum commemorated in a costly building. Later that afternoon Judge Blair presided over the first trial. That day the editors expressed their belief “that the people of this county have faith in its future, else they would not have permitted the

erection of so stable and beautiful a building.”²⁰ Surely no one then thought that in a mere two generations neglect would see the building in near ruin and threatened with destruction.

Dr. Woodrow Wilson, the president of Princeton University and that year’s Democratic gubernatorial nominee, spoke as the honored guest at a September 20, 1910 banquet that celebrated the courthouse opening. The dinner given by Die Wilde Gans Club at the Down Town Lunch Club honored architect Roberts. Dr. Wilson, arguably New Jersey’s foremost progressive, praised the architect and expounded on the law. “Dr. Wilson declared his faith in precedent, but only when that precedent is valid in reason. His praise of law is praise of no static force, but one of dynamic and capable of extension.”²¹ One may wish his sage views were instilled in contemporary “originalists” who appear still to be mired in the late eighteenth century.

Opponents Charge Mismanagement

The Republicans, who opposed this court house project from the outset, campaigned against excessive cost prior to the November 8, 1910 election. Ralph S. Young, candidate for county supervisor, asserted that an extravagant Court House Commission took advantage of a legal change that enabled the Commission to base their expenditures on tax ratables (the aforementioned Duffield Act) rather than a specified appropriated sum. As Hudson County ratables were enhanced significantly, Republicans believed the Court House Commission liberally exerted its spending capability rather than utilize need-based fiscal restraint. Young’s accusations included inaccessible records of the commission, the appointment of an unneeded commission lawyer, the purchase of a costly law library, the use of expensive marble and stone and the expense of artistic decoration. He also claimed a lack of fiscal prudence at other County buildings and in the operation of the

²⁰ *Jersey Journal*, September 19, 1910.

²¹ *Jersey Journal*, September 21, 1910.

Boulevard Commission.²² Ralph Young was soundly defeated at the polls. In Jersey City, he was outvoted in each of its twelve wards.²³ The charges of fiscal mismanagement remained much alive when Judge Charles L. Carrick and twenty-five freeholders including Felix E. Tumulty applied to Supreme Court Justice Francis J. Swayze for an investigation of the affairs of the Building Commission, which the justice granted at a hearing on December 3, 1910. In this instance, the term “freeholder” was apparently used for the legal meaning of real property owner rather than in the New Jersey context of “member of a county governing body.” During that session, Roberts reiterated the background of the preliminary \$990,000 estimate and highlighted practices that characterized construction.²⁴ Two days later, when considering whether or not the investigators should be required to post a bond, Justice Swayze took note that the word “unlawful” must be give a reasonably broad meaning and that expenditures could have been so profuse and extravagant as to show negligence in the performance of the public duty imposed upon the Court House Commission. Swayze also conceded that the investigation may lead to nothing.²⁵ Carrick and Tumulty would serve on the executive committee of the Hudson County Court House Investigation Committee. After the word “graft” surfaced that month with reference to the expenditures, one might infer from press accounts that some had already predetermined guilt. On December 24, Justice Swayze assumed a position on the investigation committee. Six days later former New Jersey Attorney General Robert H. McCarter was appointed counsel for the investigation committee. Their hearings, which began in February, were recounted in the four volume *The*

²² *Jersey Journal*, October 22, 1910.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Jersey Journal*, December 3, 1910.

²⁵ *Jersey Journal*, December 5, 1910.

Hudson County Court House Investigation. This article presents only highlights in order to keep focus on the accusations against Roberts.

At the December 3 hearing, Roberts explained the origins of the \$990,000 figure and noted that he contemplated a brick exterior with inferior finishings and was predicated to keep the number within the fifty cents per cubic foot estimate. He added, "This approximate estimate was not intended to include any furnishings, or decorations, no separate power house was contemplated, no cost of lands, no architect's, engineers', administrative or inspectors' fees were to be included in the above mentioned sum." Roberts continued with other changes in the original concept and the rise in construction costs from the time of the estimate to the awarding of contracts which he suggested were between fifteen and twenty-five per cent. A \$50,000 expense for lighting fixtures, he asserted, was justified in a building of this nature.

The probers, as members of the investigation committee were then called, spent a considerable sum for auditors who analyzed in detail each expenditure. The *Report of Executive Committee to Hudson County Court House Investigation Committee*, published May 10, 1910, opened with a numerical Analysis of Contracts and Savings, prior to its narrative citing the preliminary \$990,000 figure as if it represented a realistic number for the project. A skeptical reader might infer their bias. The executive committee claimed overcharges on virtually every contract including general contractor Wells, interior contractor Gill, as well as the suppliers of lighting fixtures and furniture. They contended that the cost of heating the building during interior construction should have been the responsibility of Gill rather than the county, an expenditure approved by Roberts. Among accusations against the architect were additional fees paid to outside practitioners for work that should have been his responsibility. A case of blatant fraud was discovered: the \$8,000 overpayment for acquisition of the power house site. Although Davis was

deceased by then, the County sued his estate. In conclusion, the report indicated that, “The most beneficial publication of the results of the investigation would be in a charge to the Grand Jury” and that “Our work will not be ended until punishment shall have been meted out to those who have been guilt of crime.” Arguably the committee’s report was itself an indictment.

Justice Swayze issued his thirty-eight page report in August, which took a temperate view in analysis of each of the petitioners’ assertions. His findings, which varied, acknowledged the blatant fraud in the power house land case, instances of ineffective communication of evolving construction plans, and poor practices likely costly to the County. In fairness to Roberts, Swayze acknowledged that the \$990,000 figure should have been forgotten in view of changes. In at least one instance, the payment of “\$1,675 for a book of bonds, the actual price of which, paid to the maker, was \$350” reflected at least poor judgement by a committee that may have been ignorant of its value. Swayze deemed multiple supply contracts to the Binderwald firm for sums under \$500 as a subterfuge to evade public bidding laws. Swayze faulted Roberts, however, for a number of his practices notably for sums the County paid for specialty architectural advice that he claimed should have come out of Roberts’ fee. He questioned the aptness of Roberts billing for five extra sets of blueprint sets as Roberts first furnished five fewer than the customary twenty-five. Swayze also claimed that Roberts may have anticipated for purchase furniture needs too far into the future as purchase at the time of his contract enhanced Roberts’ fee. With respect to the claim of the petitioners objecting to the choice of Roberts, Swayze opined, “With that question, I have nothing to do,” noting that “Mr. Roberts was an architect of considerable experience.”²⁶

An unhappy Roberts sued the County for \$100,000, which the *Jersey Journal* reported on August 9, 1911. He claimed about \$25,000 for unpaid fees and “the remainder as damages for the

²⁶ *Jersey Journal*, August 7, 1911.

failure of the County to allow him to complete the Hall of Records and the Court House.” The same paper reported on November 18 a settlement of \$11,300 for the fees. Roberts also sued the investigation committee for libel with a claim of \$100,000. After a two day trial, the judge dismissed the suit.²⁷

Indictment and Trial

Although Swayze did not suggest criminal culpability, criminal indictments that accused fourteen men of fraud were secured in November. The accusations charged nearly everyone of significance in the project, notably the contractors as well as architects Roberts and Theodore Fraenkel. After a lengthy and contentious trial in July 1912, the defendants were found not guilty. The court’s findings were not dissimilar to Swayze’s insofar as the County found that expenses may have been extravagant and unwise, but they did not constitute a crime. The judges’ opined, “However extravagant its cost may have been, the Court House is conceded to have been an extremely well-built and arranged building. Everything, excepting in the particulars we have mentioned, is shown to have been of the best and to have been acquired regardless of expense and at what seems to us a lavish expenditure which we cannot approve. Had there been a corrupt agreement from the very inception of the enterprise to cheat the county, many opportunities must have presented themselves where the work could have been slighted and detection would have been difficult if not impossible. No such slighting has been shown except in the particulars named.”²⁸

An Afterword on the Court House

Cost notwithstanding, the County possessed “a magnificent structure, whose architectural beauty and completeness of design and furnishing compels universal admiration,” in the words of

²⁷ *Jersey Journal*, August 9 and October 21, 1911.

²⁸ *Jersey Journal*, July 24, 1912.

historian Daniel Van Winkle in 1924 (although he conceded that “it was deemed at the time by some that much money had been unnecessarily expended, and that the matter had become the subject of court investigation and it was found that the furnishings and decorations were somewhat expensive, but their condition, as well as that of the building at this late date, proves the wisdom of the expenditure”).²⁹ This infrequent mention of this building in a historic source appears dismissive of a major controversy of little more than a decade earlier. Perhaps the author was shrugging off the matter as exemplary of how official business in the County is conducted. Still, the court house building was then esteemed as one of the finest in the State. The esteem was short-lived as a mere four decades after VanWinkle wrote, the condition of the court house had declined to a state which brought it close to destruction. The court house was closed in 1966 after the County expanded its combined court and administration building, which was opened in 1957 and located next door at 595 Newark Avenue. In a review in the *New York Times* on July 22, 1966 titled “Functionalism Triumphs,” Pulitzer Prize winning critic Ada Louis Huxtable offered a comparison between art and modern function with the claim, “Today, its classical splendor looms as some surrealist vision in the peculiarly formless mélange of shabby, semi-suburban bungalows, ordinary commercial construction, chaotic signs and esthetic squalor that is the Jersey City environment.” Alluding to New York’s Pennsylvania Station, also completed in 1910 and lost three years earlier, she concluded with, “The landmark invites the wreckers and its replacement reduces the public image to the lowest possible common denominator. Architecture has ceased to be a noble art.” The wreckers were staved off, but for some while the building’s fate was in question. Most of the literature on the court house centers on an ardent rescue campaign led by local preservationists

²⁹ Daniel VanWinkle, *History of the Municipalities of Hudson County New Jersey 1630-1923* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1924).

who reinforced attention to the building's stature by successful application for its entry on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. The application was submitted by Theodore Conrad, president of the Citizens' Committee to Save the Court House, as well as an architect and model maker who was perhaps the county's most ardent preservationist of his time. Their efforts culminated in a fine, extensive restoration and reopening in September 1985. The preservation story and history of the mural decorations are beyond the ambit of this article. In 1984, the court house was named for United State Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan who had earlier served as Hudson County Assignment Judge.

Later Life and Work of Hugh Roberts

In 1909 costs for the court house soared but the investigation was still in the future. Roberts still maintained his ability to secure significant public work exemplified by an appointment from the Hudson County freeholders as architect to design "a new and more commodious and modern lunatic asylum," a project with an authorized cost of \$450,000.³⁰ Roberts promptly began design work for a building with a cost later estimated at \$1,500,000. The freeholders dawdled over the project until 1913 when they opted instead for an addition to the existing building and appointed another architect. Roberts proceeded to sue the county based on the claim that his appointment as asylum architect had not been rescinded and that he had already performed work with an estimated value in the 20,000 - \$25,000 range. Roberts prevailed. After he secured a judgment for \$8,333.33, an editorial titled "Freeholders' Costly Sleep" acknowledged that Roberts was entitled to compensation, but criticized the lack of attentiveness by two freeholder boards.³¹ While the court victory would hardly endear him to the freeholders, Roberts secured at least one other public commission as architect for a replication of the Trenton Old Barracks for installation at the 1915

³⁰ *American Architect*, July 14, 1909.

³¹ *Jersey Journal*, June 4, 1915.

San Francisco Panama - Pacific Exposition. No other building commission by Roberts has been located. While it is believed that Roberts never designed another building after the courthouse trial, there is another explanation to what actually derailed his career. Only age 48 at the time of the judgement in the asylum case, Roberts had about another twelve years of work remaining. Two of his political sponsors, Edward F.C. Young and Robert Davis, were by then deceased. The third, William D. Edwards, for whom Roberts designed a house as recently as 1909, was still alive. However, understandably neither he nor the rest of the Hudson County establishment were pleased with Roberts, who had won two law suits for fees. Roberts' standard architect's contract entitled him to a five percent fee on the cost of the project. Thus, he appears to have benefited personally from excessive costs for non-essential items, or would have if his entire billed fee were paid. Although exonerated from graft, Roberts may have been guilty in the court of public opinion. As a professional, he would have been held to a higher standard of responsibility, particularly greater than the functionaries of the Hudson County political machine. Roberts, who remained active in business organizations including the Board of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce, moved his office to Newark around 1918, perhaps because much of his time was spent there with the architects' organizations that he co-founded and long-supported. Perhaps his efforts on behalf of the New Jersey Society of Architects embraced employment.

Roberts died on March 23, 1928 after a short illness at age 61, then a resident in the city at 135 Claremont Avenue. He was survived by his widow, Lily B., three sons, Paul, Elliot and Reuel; and a daughter, Ruth Roberts. Over half of his local obituary recounted the court house affair and admitted in print what had been generally known a quarter of a century earlier: "It was largely through the influence of William D. Edwards that Roberts was picked for the position of architect

for the new Court House...”³² The New Jersey Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the New Jersey Society of Architects lauded his three decades-long dedication to the groups, acknowledging “an almost inconceivable amount of self-denying service to the profession.” Signatories George S. Drew, Chairman, and Arnold H. Moses, President, added, “As a monument to his professional skill and artistic ability, Mr. Roberts leaves to his State and to posterity, the Hudson County Court House in Jersey City, one of the finest examples of architecture in the East.”³³

Roberts left no known collection of his work or papers. Much of his known oeuvre has been revealed by digitized sources accessible only in the recent past as is demonstrated herein. Though one hopes and expects that other commissions will be discovered, even the newly uncovered works portray a practitioner with significant designs in addition to the one building that established his reputation. Indeed, had Roberts spent more time developing a domestic practice, he might have become a specialist in large residences. Even omitting such speculation, Roberts’ body of work merits a greater appreciation for his career and design skills.

The author offers a special word of thanks to Cynthia Harris, manager of the New Jersey Room of the Jersey City Public Library. Although her quarters were closed for renovations, Cynthia graciously brought helpful materials from that location to her temporary branch.

All illustrations are available online/in the public domain unless otherwise noted.

Randall Gabrielan turned his avocation of local history into a second career after long service as an insurance broker. He has written dozens of historical books, numerous articles, and research reports on individual properties. Gabrielan, a resident of Middletown, served over 13

³² *Jersey Journal*, March 24, 1928.

³³ *American Architect and Architecture*, April 20, 1928.

years as executive director of the Monmouth County Historical Commission in Freehold and is now Commission vice-chair. He also serves as the County's appointed historian. Gabrielan, a library advocate, served 25 years on the Middletown Township Public Library Board of Trustees.