

Showcasing the history of Western Maryland Allegany Museum Has a New Home

Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

The Allegany Museum has a new home at the Governor William Donald Schaefer Building on Pershing Street in downtown Cumberland. The 1932 Art



Deco building, originally constructed as a Federal Court House, underwent an extensive restoration that revealed architectural features, materials, and craftsmanship of an earlier era. More importantly, the Schaefer Building provides an ideal setting for showcasing the history of Western Maryland and surrounding region. The grand opening of Allegany Museum in June 2010 culminates years of planning and research by dedicated volunteers.

Allegany Museum's new home was more than a decade in the making and began at the former Western Maryland Railway station in downtown Cumberland. The original museum organization, referred to as the Western Maryland Station Center, Inc., began with small displays of artifacts in the railway building. Development of Canal Place Preservation Authority in 1999 meant the railway station would be donated by the Western Maryland Station Center to the new Canal Place Authority and museum artifacts temporarily moved to a nearby location on South Mechanic Street. At about the same time, Allegany County government decided to divest itself of certain real estate holdings, and the Schaefer Building became available for purchase. Allegany Museum Incorporated, a private, nonprofit organization and successor of the Western Maryland Station Center, purchased the property and subsequently provided leasing agreements to state and county departments, including the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Rental income provided the means for paying off the mortgage over the next six years.

While the Allegany Museum owned the property on Pershing Street, it could not immediately occupy the building because it was home to Maryland District Court facilities. Temporary accommodations were found at the Liberty Trust Building in 2003, and exhibits were moved into

the first floor of the former bank. This location proved to be popular, and visitation increased significantly.

Museum officials moved forward with plans to renovate and occupy the second floor of the Schaefer Building when the Maryland District Court rooms and offices were moved into a new facility in 2009. Restoration work on the former Maryland District Court Room facilities proved to be an interesting and rewarding experience.

Gary Bartik, Allegany Museum President, credits Allegany County employees for being sensitive to the special characteristics and materials of the Schaefer Building when it was renovated in the 1970s to create the Maryland District Court complex. According to Mr. Bartik, "The 1970s were a time when many historically significant buildings were torn down or damaged, but the county workers didn't tear out walnut wood and other fine materials in this building; instead, they covered them over, so now we are able to return the building to its original state."

The original Federal Courtroom was built in the Federal Revival style popular during the 1930s. Crown moldings on top of hand carved walnut pilasters outline the perimeter of the centrally located 3,400 square foot room. The wood paneling is 10 feet in height and proportional to the ceiling, nearly twice its height. One section of the wood paneling posed a mystery to renovators in early 2010 because its original placement was unknown. Additional uncovering of the Maryland District Courtroom walls later revealed the original location of the panel. When workers returned the panel to the vacated section of the east wall, they found it to be a perfect fit, thereby returning the grand federal room to its 1932 appearance. Additional work was necessary on the decorative metal ceiling, due to the earlier placement of heating and air conditioning ducts. Skilled craftsmen remedied the problem by preparing silicone molds and making impressions of original ceiling features; those impressions were used to replace damaged sections.



The new Allegany Museum
3 Pershing Street, 2nd Floor, Cumberland, MD



Facing page photo: Cast panels on the outside of the Federal Revival style building (below 2nd story windows).

Top photo: Home of the new Allegany Museum – The Governor William Donald Schaefer Building on Pershing Street in downtown Cumberland, MD.

Two photos above: intricately carved design above the doors (left) and detail of the crown moldings on top of hand carved walnut pilasters. The wood paneling is 10 feet in height and outlines the perimeter of the centrally located reception room.

New state-of-the-art heating, air conditioning, and filtration systems were later installed without disturbing visible sections of the room. The fully restored grand room enables the museum to display exhibits and to host educational programs, receptions, workshops, and other special events that require an auditorium size room.

Outside the reception room there are a number of smaller rooms highlighting themed displays, including glass making, Western Maryland archeology, the Claude Yoder Sculpture Collection, transportation, the entire Kelly Springfield Museum that was originally displayed at company headquarters, an educational room focusing on activities and displays for students, and professional fire fighting displays. A lounge located near the center of the museum recognizes Governor Schaefer, the Allegheny County Delegation to the General Assembly, the Allegheny County Commissioners, and others who assisted the museum over the years.

Each room reveals many original floors, walls, and fixtures. Prime examples are the restrooms where black and white was cleaned with acid, original chrome fixtures polished, and wood paneled doors restored. An interesting “holding room,” once used to temporarily house unruly prisoners awaiting trial, was converted to a 1930s style restroom. Next to the holding room visitors may view a large 1932 Diebold safe; it features a walk-in room to secure artifacts and other valuables.

According to Bartik, “The Allegheny Museum will help to answer the question, ‘Who and what were here in Allegheny County.’ The museum answers those questions about the past because local people donated many items of interest. We wouldn’t be able to tell our story without citizens’ generosity. We also want oral communication to complete the story. When folks stop by to see the exhibits, they are encouraged to tell us their stories. A key to making the museum a reality was the dedication of professional staff,



Renovation to the reception room (top) will restore it to its original look of the 1930s. Photo below shows extensive metalwork outside above the main entrance.

including Joe Weaver, Dr. Julianne Ferris, Jerry Robinette, Mike Fetchero, and the many docents and volunteers. We do not have paid staff members, and that has really helped us stay on time and on budget with the restoration and exhibits. Through many people’s efforts, the Allegheny Museum has become a reality and major partner with Canal Place. Downtown Cumberland has major exhibits and activities that features a transportation theme—the railroads, C&O Canal and National Highway, and local industries.”

The Allegheny Museum will be open for regular hours Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. Sunday hours are 12:00 am to 4:00 pm.