

Architectural Forms Challenged by History in the Huntingdon County Court House

Simone Bilich

Architecture Since The 1800s

November 8th, 2023

Professor Zohreh Soltani

William Smith of Philadelphia founded Huntingdon in 1767 with the intention of making it a seat of justice and searched for new architectural standards to support the borough as its own political entity. These first public structures are far different from the original two taverns and twelve log cabins that dotted the landscape (Biemiller, 2022).¹ In 1787 William Smith attained his goal and Huntingdon was officially made a seat of justice. Consequently, a more formal and stately structure was needed to conduct county business. Before the construction of the first courthouse, town meetings were held in the Lodwick Sell's tavern. After a fire burnt down the first attempt at constructing the courthouse, one was finally completed in 1792 as the town's first public facility (Shedd, 2023).² (See figure 1). However, as the town grew, more space was needed, and a second building was constructed (the second courthouse) on a new site of John Cadwallader, the first residential attorney's original home (Shedd, 2023).³ The second courthouse took on a Greek Revival style, with a classical façade of a two-story portico with columns. (See figure 2). Unfortunately, construction was not of high quality and the building environment was damp and unhealthy with an unpractical layout for its public function. As a result, M.E. Beebs was commissioned in 1882 to design the third and final courthouse. He chose

¹ Lawrence Biemiller, "Buildings & Grounds," *The Daily News*, April 1, 2022. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/buildings-grounds/article_995a57b3-84f0-54bc-9525-871af4e5e769.html, 1.

² Nancy S. Shedd, "Brief History of Our Three Courthouses," *Huntingdon County*, Accessed October 19, 2023. <https://www.huntingdoncounty.net/about-us/brief-history-of-our-three-courthouses#:~:text=First%20Courthouse%201795%20%2D%201842&text=The%20impressive%20structure%20was%20built,by%20town%20founder%20William%20Smith%22%20HYPERLINK%20%22https://www.huntingdoncounty.net/about-us/brief-history-of-our-three-courthouses#:~:text=First%20Courthouse%201795%20%2D%201842&text=The%20impressive%20structure%20was%20built,by%20town%20founder%20William%20Smith>.

³ Nancy S. Shedd, "Brief History of Huntingdon County's Three Courthouses," *Court of Common Pleas*, Accessed October 18, 2023, <https://huntingdoncountycourt.net/history/>.

the French Renaissance style (Shedd, 44),⁴ with a floor plan to provide maximum separation between convicts and the public as well as the best functionality for public affairs. (See figure 3). The clock tower dominates the skyline and is one of the first public buildings to pass upon the entrance to the town. In the 1880's Huntingdon was growing fast and developed a downtown and expanded its industry. The French Renaissance style of the Huntingdon Courthouse, at the center of the original town, reflected the Victorian's enthusiastic feelings about "Their prospects in the years to come" (Shedd, 45). During the actual French Renaissance (1494-1610) there was a development of exploration of the new world (Google "French Renaissance, 2023), which is symbolized in the courthouse as the town expanded into a new downtown industry with the establishment of the Pennsylvania railroad from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Canal on the Juniata River. Huntingdon appeared to be destined for greatness. With the continued modernization of the Huntingdon courthouse, it is necessary to keep the French Renaissance style intact, to preserve the significance of the building within the town's history, spirit and overall aesthetic.

The courthouse is one of the gems of Huntingdon County Pennsylvania, with its monumental mass playing a key role on the entrance into the town and historical mark of the start and center of the original district. The courthouse is seen from almost anywhere in town because of its symbolic clock tower. The front yard of the building contains statues of a cannon and a replica of the original Standing Stone erected by Native Americans before settlers arrived (Borough of Huntingdon, 2022)⁷ (see figure 4). The front garden takes the form of a small

⁴ Nancy S. Shedd, *An Architectural Study of the Ancient Borough of Huntingdon*. (Huntingdon PA: *Huntingdon County Historical Society*), 44-47.

museum, with winding paths through trees, bushes, and grass patches holding historical symbols. Not only is the building itself sentimental to the public, but its immediate surroundings as well.

After the completion of the third courthouse there began an almost immediate effort to maintain the character of the original building amongst the updates that ignored historical significance. It was believed that after the decorative statue of Lady Justice was mysteriously lost off the building sometime between 1906 and 1912 a “gradual chipping away of the buildings original appointments” began (Shedd, 47).⁵ Other Monumental details that have been lost through updates throughout the years include a cast iron fence surrounding the site, stylized lamp posts aligning the sidewalk, and the original spire clock tower replaced with a colonial style cupola in 1936 due to a lack of materials that M.E. Beebs wanted for the original tower. (See figure 5). The originalities that remain include the windowpanes (which are proposed to be replaced in the next renovation due to inability to keep in heat efficiently) (Thompson, 2023),⁶ the entire front hall of the first floor (amongst other expansions and rearrangement of offices), basement fire-proof vaults and twelve of the original three dozen jury chairs in the courtroom that were manufactured in Huntingdon by Philip Brown (Shedd, 47) (see figures 6 and 7). As the maintenance updates happen there is interest to “retain the 1883 building into a second century”. The Americans with Disabilities Act increased local public safety building codes and budgetary constraints have all combined to make it challenging to retain the style created in 1883. As a result, miss-matches between classical and modern styles are obvious. The biggest mismatch

⁵ Nancy S. Shedd, *An Architectural Study of the Ancient Borough of Huntingdon*. (Huntingdon PA: *Huntingdon County Historical Society*), 47.

⁶ Joe Thompson, “Courthouse Renovation Project Moves Ahead” *The Daily News*. March 29, 2023. Accessed October 18, 2023. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/courthouse-renovation-project-moves-ahead/article_46043d98-a98a-587a-925b-e00f95feace0.html. 1-3.

being the colonial style Cupola on top of the French Renaissance building (Shedd, 47).⁷ (Reference figure 3). Therefore, it is important now more than ever to keep what remains of the history of the building intact and prevent further updates that entirely disregard the French style of the structure.

In 1992 there was a significant fire in the Huntingdon County Court House. Many of the renovations to the courthouse as a result were focused on making the building as fireproof as possible. The renovations included a complete replacement of almost all wooden elements with mostly cast iron that had been painted to look like the original dark wood design, such as the classical columns and staircases of the main entrance hall (Biemiller, 2022).⁸ (See figure 8). In addition, fire stairs were installed in the back of the courthouse encased in cinderblock and iron against the outside of the original brick of the building painted white to blend the materials together and keep up with modern building codes. (See figure 9 and 10). The new fire exit took over the original stone steps and cast-iron railings that formed an alternate entrance through the back door (Shedd, 2023)⁹ (See figure 11). Other fire precautions that were taken included relocation of partitions, stronger flooring on the second floor and later an entirely replaced roof, new electrical wiring, and drywall. The original main courtroom had the windows blocked and covered and brown paneling installed. Nonetheless, the second floor of the courthouse was permanently damaged by the smoke (Shedd, 2023).

⁷ Nancy S. Shedd, *An Architectural Study of the Ancient Borough of Huntingdon*. (Huntingdon PA: *Huntingdon County Historical Society*), 44-47.

⁸ Lawrence Biemiller, "Buildings & Grounds," *The Daily News*, April 1, 2022. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/buildings-grounds/article_995a57b3-84f0-54bc-9525-871af4e5e769.html. 1.

⁹ Nancy S. Shedd, "Brief History of Huntingdon County's Three Courthouses," *Court of Common Pleas*, Accessed October 18, 2023, <https://huntingdoncountycourt.net/history/>. 1.

The original vaults of the building that housed handwritten leather-bound record books of the entire town's history dating back to the 1700's remained intact throughout all the renovations. To protect the leather-bound books as much as possible, they were placed in vaults of concrete and brick walls that were covered in stucco and two feet thick with the same marble flooring of the main hall. The vaults contained metal shelves and drawers, with the original windows that were framed in metal and easily sealed with thick iron shutters. (See figures 12 and 13). With the availability of new technology, retired volunteers have helped with the final fire precaution by digitalizing the records into an online database (Anderson, 2023).¹⁰ The building is comprised of modern fireproof material, that will not require much renovation in the future, which allows for the original design to go undisrupted.

In addition to the fire safety renovations of the 1992 fire, there was a focus on the function of the layout in relation to public safety upon entering the building and special boundaries between the public and convicts in holding. The current front entrance (Penn Street) to the building consists of a concrete staircase leading to an elevated entrance, with three widely spaced metal handrails. (Refer to figure 1). There was no accessibility ramp added to the front entrance, as well as no parking. Instead, handicap accessibility and parking were installed in the back of the building through the fire exit door. (Refer to figure 11). The proposed solution (still in the proposal stage) was to move the metal detectors from the front to the back of the building, requiring everyone to enter through the back of the building to prevent accidents that occur on the front stairs of the facility (Anderson, 2023). The change in the entrance would also save older or more disabled people from stress as well. There is no parking for the main courthouse

¹⁰ Anderson, Jodie. "Tour/Interview of Prothonotary and Court of Clerk Offices,' Opportunity for First-hand Information and Photograph's of public and non-public spaces." Personal Interview by Simone Bilich. October 13, 2023.

entrance on Penn Street. Drivers attempt quick stops in front of the building, halting traffic, causing the passengers to rush to exit their vehicle.

Another important aspect to the transition of the entrance, is how the public and convicts will interact with each other. In the second courthouse, part of the layout that harmed the function was the choice to put the holding cell in the front and center of the courthouse on the second floor. This resulted in convicts waiting in the same space as the public before being escorted to the holding cell, creating a dangerous situation for the citizens. With the redesign of the third courthouse, the cell was placed in the back of the courthouse, with private hallways added on both sides and the back of the courtroom. (see figure 14). The new layout allows for the convicts to enter near the fire exit in the back and private hall behind the courtroom, whilst the public could congregate in the entrance hall and use the front stairs to enter the courtroom separate from the convicts. With the current layout, maximum separation between the public and convicts is provided. This being highly important given as many as 15 prisoners to three guards can be waiting in the facility at any time. Moving the entrance to the back of the courthouse is risky since fighting is very common amongst the criminals and having them so close to the new entrance makes them more audible and closer to the public. For the past 100 years the floor plan has proven functional and safe for the public and staff, and therefore has no need for a redesign, however with the transition of the entrance from the front of the courthouse to the back, some key aspects of safety of public and inmates using the same entrance and approach need to be considered. Such as, will a segregated entrance between the two parties operate smoothly? If so, they will need to hire at least another officer to maintain the separation depending on the number of convicts. Also, the approach for the public will appear as menacing as it does for convicts with un-decorative cast iron rails and modern glass doors. (Refer to figure 11).

To keep the exterior of the building somewhat matching between the modern and classical, the brick and stone were sandblasted, and the woodwork was repainted which “Brightened the building’s façade and helped to blend the materials of the old and blend the materials of the new addition with those of the old building” (Shedd, 45)¹¹. Meaning that the interior holds more honest to the historical nature of the building. However, failure to follow the French Renaissance Style externally for a continuously more modern look would create a disconnect between the courthouse and the surrounding government buildings that also follow the Renaissance look within the same three blocks of the courthouse. The buildings directly adjacent to the courthouse were used for the towns commissioners to hold meetings and work during the construction of the courthouse (Shedd, 2023)¹² and are now utilized for things like the county treasury (Anderson, 2023). (See figure 15). A modern courthouse in between these buildings would look out of place with the rest of the uptown environment.

The impact of the approach is one of the most important aspects of the monumentalism of the building. With the proposed transition of the main entrance being from the front to the back, a lot of this impact is lost. The front would remain an exit, but people would approach the structure from the back, which contains a typical handicap, asymmetrical ramp that leads into a glass, fire exit door, leading into a stair well of concrete and iron (as opposed to a big hall with two story

¹¹ Nancy S. Shedd, *An Architectural Study of the Ancient Borough of Huntingdon*. (Huntingdon PA: *Huntingdon County Historical Society*), 45.

¹² Nancy S. Shedd, “Brief History of Our Three Courthouses,” *Huntingdon County*, Accessed October 19, 2023. <https://www.huntingdoncounty.net/about-us/brief-history-of-our-three-courthouses#:~:text=First%20Courthouse%201795%20%2D%201842&text=The%20impressive%20structure%20was%20built,by%20town%20founder%20William%20Smith%22%20HYPERLINK%20%22https://www.huntingdoncounty.net/about-us/brief-history-of-our-three-courthouses#:~:text=First%20Courthouse%201795%20%2D%201842&text=The%20impressive%20structure%20was%20built,by%20town%20founder%20William%20Smith.>

roofs and marble floors. (Refer to figures 11 and 7). A solution to this could be an officially designed second entrance at the back of the building that imitates the front façade on a smaller scale, to keep the monumental approach in spirit. A fairly inexpensive but reasonable approach could be done with a replacement of a wide, symmetrical, and elevated ramp, rather than one that is narrow and angles down into a shaded platform (See figure 16). The standard iron handrails could be stylized with classical columns to match the cast iron ones of the main front hall, and the door could be made wooden, rather than modern glass. Lastly the door could be framed with a concrete cornice to match the front entrance. Unfortunately, there is not much that could be changed upon entering the emergency exit stairwell within a budget, to give it the same feeling of entering the grand front hall. However, if there was enough money, the second wall between the stairwell and the interior of the building could be removed, and a compression and release system of Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings could be used to create a feeling of tightness within the stairwell and expansion as visitors pass through metal detectors and into the same grand hall of the original entrance. (See figure 17).

With the safety upgrades and modernization of the Huntingdon County Courthouse, it is necessary that care is taken to keep the French Renaissance style intact and to preserve the significance of the building within the town's history and overall aesthetic. Currently there is pressure from public entities in Huntingdon that have kept the renovations supporting the French Reminiscence facade. As recently as Thursday, November 2, 2023 (Thompson, *Daily News*, 2023),¹³ the Commissioners of Huntingdon County opened bids for the current renovation project of the Huntingdon County Court House. The bids were in coordination with the

¹³ Joe Thompson, "Courthouse Renovation Project Moves Ahead" *The Daily News*. March 29, 2023. Accessed October 18, 2023. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/courthouse-renovation-project-moves-ahead/article_46043d98-a98a-587a-925b-e00f95feace0.html. 1.

Huntingdon County Historical Society input. In addition, pressure from other local entities such as Juniata College and Huntingdon County Landmarks Association, LLC have kept the discussion focused on how to make renovations within appropriate aesthetic and historical parameters within a budget. Both the historians and current county employees are working together to arrive at solutions that solve the needs of both entities. Scott Walls, current Huntingdon County Commissioner, stated, “The relocation of the main entrance has not been fully decided.¹⁴ We are working with the Historical Society to retain the style of the courthouse as much as possible. The upstairs main courtroom will have the windows that were covered in the 70’s uncovered for natural light to again be in the courtroom.” Redesigning the entire building would be impractical and insensible to the towns' morale. Making the building entirely modern would require a place for meetings to be conducted during construction, as well as somewhere to store the thousands of records that are protected within the vaults. Also, the most important part of the building is that it allows the public to have the easiest access to their government services. Therefore, if it were to be reconstructed, form would most likely follow this function. However, that would take the structure further from the French Renaissance style, and further away from matching the rest of the town, with buildings that nod to classicalism and keep monumentality in their brick and concrete material. No matter how the building changes to suit the public’s needs, it is key that the materials and façade retain the symbolism and acknowledgement of its significance in the foundation of the original town center and first public building of the year 1787. The leaders and community members of Huntingdon in 2023 appear to be communicating and making decisions to benefit the community for years to come.

¹⁴ Walls, Scott, "County Commissioner phone interview, ' Most Current Information on Court House Renovation." Personal phone interview by Simone Bilich. November 7, 2023.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Jodie. "Tour/Interview of Prothonotary and Court of Clerk Offices,' Opportunity for First-hand Information and Photograph's of public and non-public spaces." Personal Interview by Simone Bilich. October 13, 2023.

Author Unknown, "French Renaissance," Google arts and culture. *Google*. Accessed October 29, 2023. <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/french-renaissance/m04zh5p?hl=en>.

Author Unknown, *Huntingdon County Historical Society*. Last Modified October 2023. Accessed November 2, 2023. <https://huntingdonhistory.org/photo-gallery/>.

Author Unknown, "The Standing Stone," *Huntingdon Borough History, Borough of Huntingdon*. 2022, Accessed October 21, 2023, <https://huntingdonboro.com/history/>.

Joe Thompson, "Courthouse Renovation Project Moves Ahead" *The Daily News*. March 29, 2023. Accessed October 18, 2023. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/courthouse-renovation-project-moves-ahead/article_46043d98-a98a-587a-925b-e00f95feace0.html.

Joe Thompson, "Commissioners Open Bids for Courthouse Work" *The Daily News*. November 2, 2023. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/commissioners-open-bids-for-courthouse-work/article_06f858e6-987c-5e47-89fe-755233cae7da.html

Lawrence Biemiller, "Buildings & Grounds," *The Daily News*, April 1, 2022. https://www.huntingdondailynews.com/news/local/buildings-grounds/article_995a57b3-84f0-54bc-9525-871af4e5e769.html.

Nancy S. Shedd, *An Architectural Study of the Ancient Borough of Huntingdon*. (Huntingdon PA: *Huntingdon County Historical Society*), 44-47.

Nancy S. Shedd, "Brief History of Huntingdon County's Three Courthouses," *Court of Common Pleas*, Accessed October 18, 2023, <https://huntingdoncountycourt.net/history/>.

Nancy S. Shedd, "Brief History of Our Three Courthouses," *Huntingdon County*, Accessed October 19, 2023. <https://www.huntingdoncounty.net/about-us/brief-history-of-our-three-courthouses#:~:text=First%20Courthouse%201795%20%2D%201842&text=The%20impressive%20structure%20was%20built,by%20town%20founder%20William%20Smith%22%20HYPERLINK%20%22https://www.huntingdoncounty.net/about-us/brief-history-of-our-three->

[courthouses#:~:text=First%20Courthouse%201795%20%2D%201842&text=The%20impressive%20structure%20was%20built,by%20town%20founder%20William%20Smith.](#)

Nancy S. Shedd, "Development," in *Two Centuries in Huntingdon*. (Huntingdon PA: *Huntingdon County Historical Society*, 1996), 9-12.

Virine Bahadoosingh, Dean Harder, "County Courthouse," *Huntingdon County*. Last Modified September 20, 2015. Accessed October 23, 2023. <http://www.courthouses.co/us-states/o-u/pennsylvania/huntingdon-county/>.

Walls, Scott, "County Commissioner phone interview,' Most Current Information on Court House Renovation." Personal phone interview by Simone Bilich. November 7, 2023.

Figures

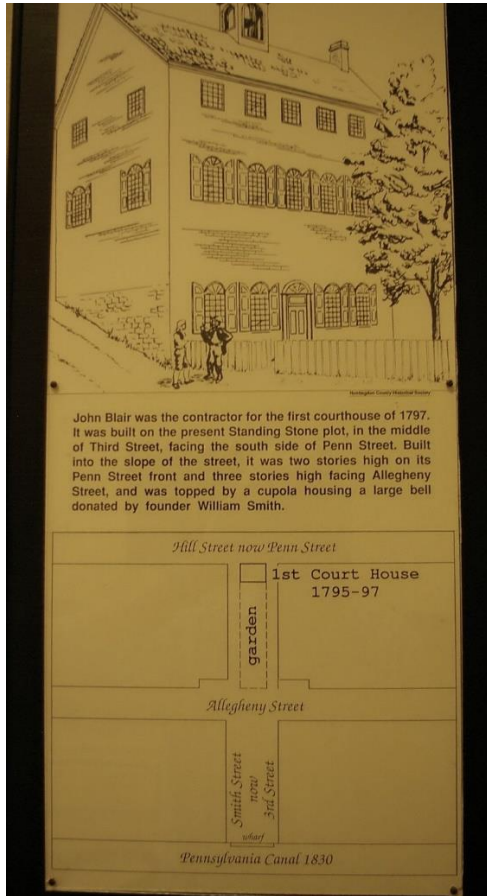


Figure 1: Drawing of the first Huntingdon County Court house with a map of the street underneath, sourced from Huntingdon County Departments.

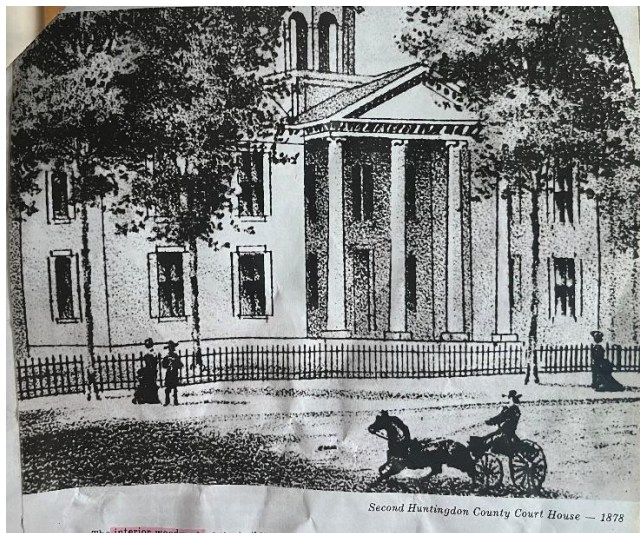


Figure 2: Drawing of the second Huntingdon County Court house, sourced from Huntingdon Historical Society.



Figure 3: Photograph of the third and final Huntingdon County Court house, with a colonial style cupola on the clock tower. Sourced from Borough of Huntingdon.



Figure 4: Photograph of front lawn statue, honoring recipients of the metal of honor. Photographed by author.



Figure 5: A rendition of the original clock tower design of M.E. Beebs in 1882. Sourced from the Court of Common Pleas. Painted & restored photo of the courthouse from around 1900. ©2010 Fred R. Lang, used.



Figure 6: Photograph of the original stained-glass windows of the Huntington County Court house that still remain. Photographed by author.



Figure 7: Photograph of the entrance of the Huntington Court house from the interior main entrance hall. Photographed by author.



Figure 8: Photograph of grand cast iron stairs and columns of the front entrance hall of the Huntington County Court house. Photographed by author.



Figure 9: Photograph of emergency stair well wall of Huntingdon Court house showcasing difference in old and new brick building material. Photographed by author.



Figure 10: Photograph of Huntingdon Court house Emergency Stairs and cast-iron railing. Photographed by author.

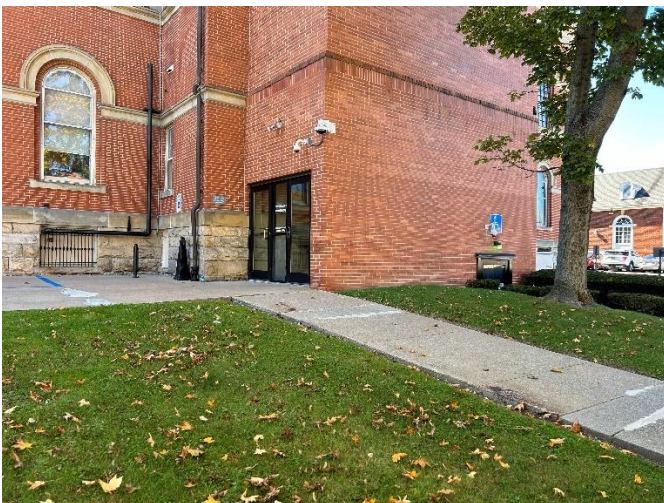


Figure 11: Photograph of rear entrance of the Huntingdon County Court house, both the accessibility entrance and prisoner entrance side by side. Photographed by author.



Figure 12: Photograph of record vault within the Huntingdon County Court house, containing metal shelving and marble floors
Photographed by author.



Figure 13: Photograph of fireproof, iron shuttered windows within the record vaults of the Huntingdon County Court House. Photographed by author.



Figure 14: Photograph of Hallway behind the court room of the Huntingdon County Court House leading to the holding cell. Photograph by author.



Figure 15: Photograph of treasury building adjacent to Huntingdon County Court House, showcasing the same monumental style with a small portico in the middle of a symmetrical building of brick material. Photographed by author

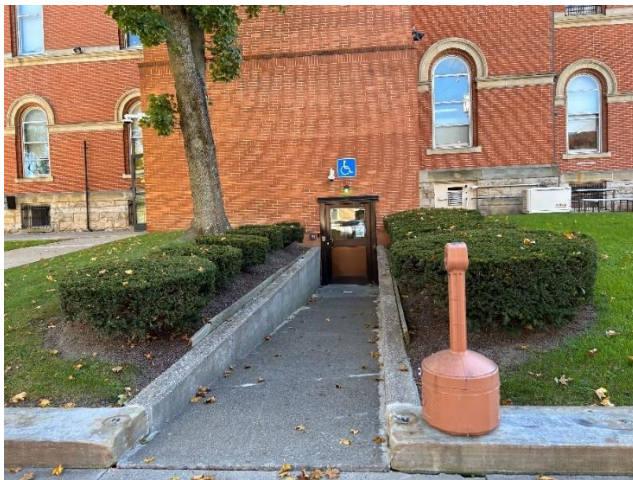


Figure 16: A closer photograph of handicapped entrance in the back of the Huntingdon County Court House, parallel to the prisoner entrance. Photographed by author.



Figure 17: Photograph down the main entrance hall of the Huntingdon County Court House, facing the fire exit in the rear. Photographed by author.