

## The Laying of the Cornerstone for the United States Courthouse for the District of Columbia

By David McCarthy

The date was June 27, 1950. That morning, after hurrying back to Washington from his home in Independence, Missouri, President Harry Truman met with his advisors and made the decision to counter the North Korean invasion of South Korea. The Korean War had started. Despite the war clouds, the real weather was typical for a summer day in the capital with a temperature of 93.4° and a heat index of 97° at 3:00 p.m. when the ceremony to lay cornerstone for the new United States Courthouse began. Chief Judge Harold Stephens had the heat rather than the war on his mind for his opening remarks:

"There is an ancient Latin proverb which, translated, is to the effect: 'Let justice be done though the heavens fall.' In view of the temperature and the inconstancy of Washington weather, I think the proverb should be altered to read: 'Let justice be done lest the heavens fall.'" Accordingly, I shall be very brief in justice to you in the audience and my fellow speakers."

Remarkably, a smiling Harry S. Truman took time out this momentous day to attend the ceremony along with Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson, judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals and U.S. District Court, members of the bar, and government officials. Truman spoke later as did Bolitha J. Laws, Chief Judge of the District Court and Colonel Walter C. Clephane of the District of Columbia Bar.



**President Truman helping to guide the laying of the cornerstone**



From left to right are: Chief Justice Vins on, President Truman, Chief Judge Laws, and Chief Judge Stephens.

A sizable cornerstone was needed to accommodate the amazing assortment and number of items that would be placed within it. Among them were photographs: President Truman, Vice President Barkley, Chief Justice Vinson, Speaker of the House Rayburn, and the judges of the Court of Appeals and the District Court. The Washington newspapers' special courthouse editions were enclosed: *The Washington Daily News*, *The Washington Evening Star*, *The Washington Law Reporter*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Times-Herald*. There are copies of the eleven legislative documents referring to the new Courthouse. One of the most interesting artifacts entombed in the cornerstone is the trowel used by President Truman in the laying it. The trowel is made of silver with a "handle of aged yellow pine" from what was then the U.S. District Court building, dating from about 1872.

The Historical Society recently came into the possession of a program from the Cornerstone ceremony. It contains the complete text of the speeches given on that day. As you might expect at such an event, there was much giving of thanks to the various people involved in the planning and construction of the building. There was even some humor when President Truman said that Chief Judge Stephens "almost" convinced him to come for jury duty.

Colonel Clephane must have gotten the day's most laughs with this comment:

".....It is noteworthy also, because of all the lawyers present, that they are in entire accord and that they completely agree with the courts. What is still more remarkable, there is no dissenting opinion by any of the Judges."

Given what was happening in Korea, not all of the speech-making was humorous. President Truman's address covered a wide range of topics from the construction of the courthouse to human rights, totalitarian movements, and the United Nations, but not Korea, surprisingly. Speaking of our Court of Appeals and District Court, President Truman stated,

"These courts hear cases which are not only important to the private parties concerned, but which involve issues vital to the welfare and growth of the Nation. Nowhere else, outside the Supreme Court of the United States, will so many legal questions of national magnitude be decided as in this building before us."

To view the day's program, which contains a complete listing of the contents of the cornerstone, as well as the text of the speeches, click on this [link](#). For a brief YouTube video of the event, click on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msevMLdlc0g>.