

**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT  
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)**

**1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE** (must comply with a Board of Revision of Taxes address)

Street address: **1801 Vine Street**

Postal code: **19103**

Councilmanic District: **5th**

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: **Municipal Courthouse East and West Conference Room Murals**

Common Name: **Family Court Conference Room Murals**

**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Building

Structure

Site

Object

**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Condition:  excellent  good  fair  poor  ruins

Occupancy:  occupied  vacant  under construction  unknown

Current use: **Court Building**

**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

***SEE ATTACHED***

**6. DESCRIPTION**

***SEE ATTACHED***

**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

Period of Significance (from year to year): **1939-1940**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1939-1940**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer:

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: **Walter Gardner, Benton Spruance**

Original owner: **Board of County Commissioners/City of Philadelphia**

Other significant persons:

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

*SEE ATTACHED*

**9. NOMINATOR**

Name with Title: **Ben Leech, Director of Advocacy**

Email: **ben@preservationalliance.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**

Date: **3/28/2011**

Street Address: **1616 Walnut Street Suite 1620**

Telephone: **215-546-1146 x5**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, PA 19103**

Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: \_\_\_\_\_

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Notice Issuance: \_\_\_\_\_

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

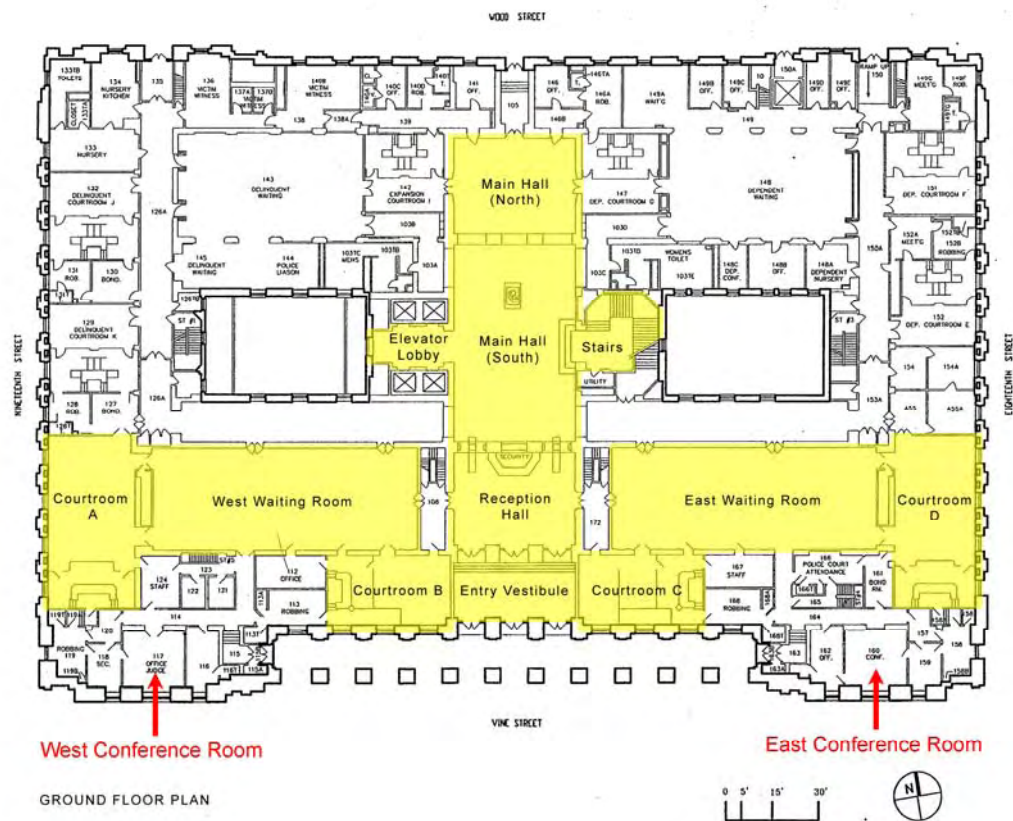
Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Designated  Rejected

3/16/07

## 5. Boundary Description

The West Conference Room Mural is located on the east wall of West Conference Room (now judges' quarters), a ground-floor space measuring 17 feet by 20 feet that faces Vine Street behind the south facade of the Family Court building. The East Conference Room Mural is similarly located on the west wall of the East Conference Room, again measuring 17 feet by 20 feet and facing Vine Street. Each room is located behind the central bay at the temple-fronted east and west ends of the Family Court Building. Each mural measures 11 feet high by 8 feet wide and is set 4 feet 6 inches above floor height at the center of each respective conference room wall.



**Figure 1:** Location of West and East Conference Rooms within the Family Court Building. Separately nominated interior portions of building shown in yellow.

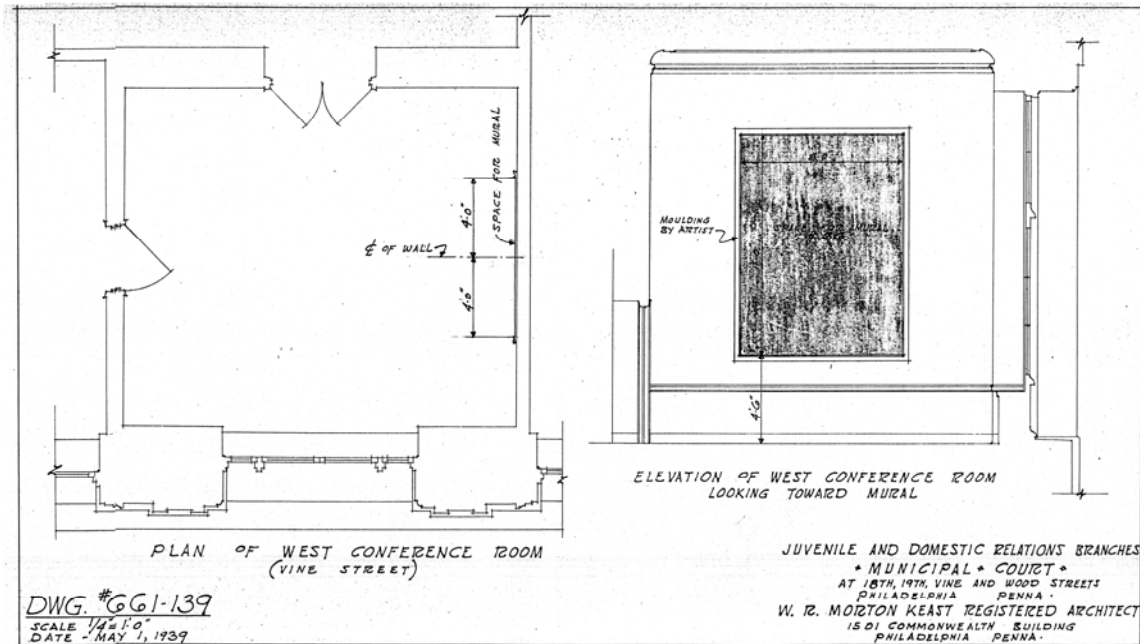


Figure 2: Location of mural in West Conference Room (now judges' quarters).

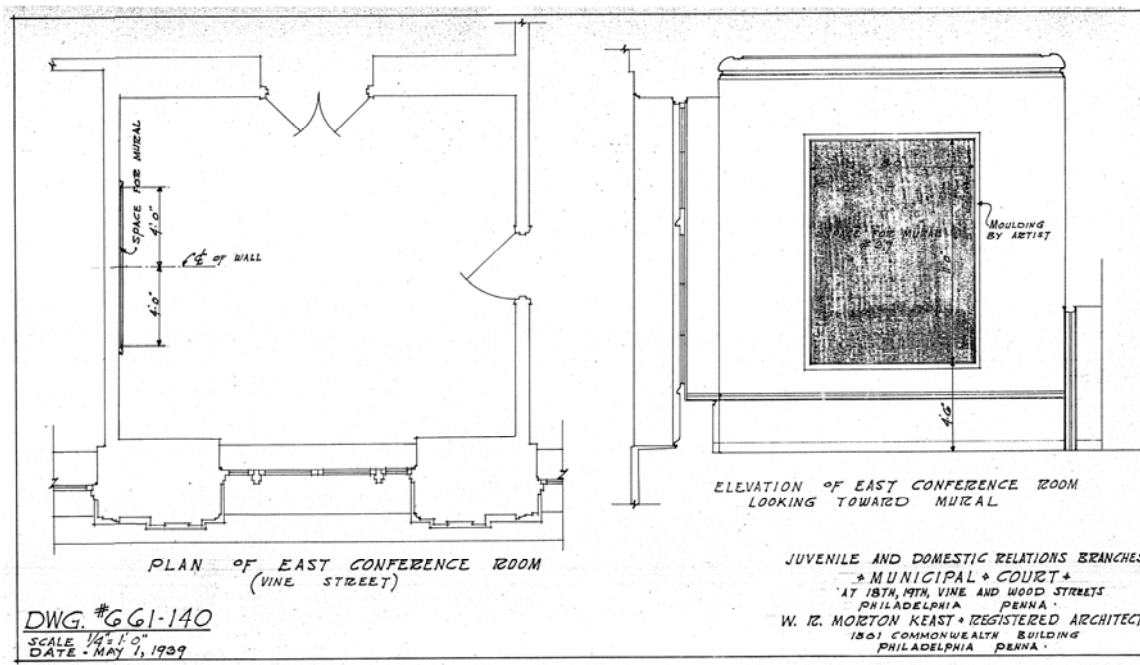


Figure 3: Location of mural in East Conference Room.

## 6. Description

### West Conference Room Mural

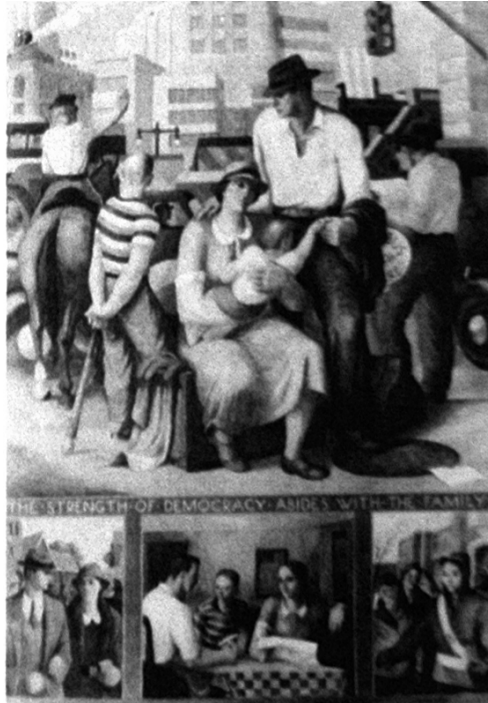
The mural located in the West Conference Room of the Family Court Building is a polychrome oil-on-canvas painting adhered to the wall with an unknown adhesive. A wooden frame with a simple molding profile surrounds the mural, and custom wood dividing bars within the frame separate the image area into four quadrants. Three vertically-oriented upper panels sit atop a horizontally-oriented bottom panel, with the central upper panel approximately twice the width of its flanking side panels. This central panel features a scene of children at play in Fairmount Park. Two girls on roller skates occupy the foreground, flanked by a boy playing with his dog and a mother sitting on a park bench holding a baby. The background recedes into a park pasture, with the tower of City Hall and the surrounding Philadelphia skyline visible in the distance. Capital letters in gold paint spell “RECREATION” at the base of the scene. The left top panel depicts a group of boys in Boy Scout uniforms enjoying camping activities over the caption “SCOUTING.” The right top panel depicts a student crossing guard helping younger children cross a street, with typical two-and-one-half-story Philadelphia rowhouses visible in the background. The base of this panel reads “SAFETY.” The horizontal bottom panel depicts a classroom scene with the inscription “KNOWLEDGE IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS.” A female teacher presides over a group of students. She points to a globe while one student writes on a chalkboard and three others look on. The mural is signed and dated “Walter Gardner, 1940” at its lower left corner. The mural measures 11 feet high by 8 feet wide.

### East Conference Room Mural

The mural located in the East Conference Room of the Family Court Building is a polychrome oil-on-canvas painting adhered to the wall with an unknown adhesive. A wooden frame with a simple molding profile surrounds the mural. This frame has been painted white to match the surrounding wall surfaces. Flat painted bands separate mural into four quadrants, with a large full-width upper panel atop three smaller quadrants set along the mural’s base. The painted band separating the top and bottom portions of the mural is inscribed “THE STRENGTH OF DEMOCRACY ABIDES WITH THE FAMILY.” The top scene features a mother, father and children waiting at a bus stop at the center of a busy urban street scene. A boy in a striped shirt leans against a baseball bat in front of a horse-mounted policeman directing traffic. The mother is seated on a truck and holds a baby, whose arm extends to into the hand of the standing father. The streetscape in the background features a stoplight, modern office buildings, factories, and a grain elevator. The bottom left quadrant depicts a man and woman standing arm-in-arm in front of a residential streetscape. The bottom central quadrant depicts a father, mother, and boy seated around a checkered kitchen or dining room table, with the father holding a small toy airplane. The bottom right quadrant depicts a student crossing guard helping other students cross a street, with a large school building visible in the background. The mural measures 11 feet high by 8 feet wide and was painted by Benton Spruance in 1939.



**Figure 4:** West Conference Room Mural (black and white reproduction of polychrome mural).  
Source: *The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Branches of the Municipal Court*. Philadelphia, 1941.



**Figure 5:** East Conference Room Mural (black and white reproduction of polychrome mural).  
Source: *The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Branches of the Municipal Court*. Philadelphia, 1941.

## 7. Significance

The East and West Conference Room Murals were executed in 1939-1940 as part of a larger 37-mural, nine-artist project for the Family Court Building funded by the New Deal-era Public Works Administration. Thirty-five of these murals are included as contributing fixtures in the nomination of the Family Court Building's major ceremonial public interior spaces to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Because the East and West Conference Room Murals were installed in historically semi-private rooms that fell beyond the boundaries of the proposed interior nomination, this nomination proposes to list the murals separately as objects following the definition set forth in the Philadelphia Historical Commission Rules and Regulations 2.16: "A material thing of functional, aesthetic, cultural, historic, or scientific value that may be, by nature or design, movable yet related to a specific setting or environment." Executed on canvas boards, these murals are movable by nature, and by virtue of their aesthetic, cultural and historic significance as contributing parts of a larger ensemble of highly significant New Deal-era public art works related specifically to the Family Court Building, eligible for listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by virtue of the following criteria as set forth by the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-2007(5), of the Philadelphia Code:

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; and
  
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

The Family Court Building stands as one of the most prominent public buildings in the city of Philadelphia and one of the city's most significant legacies from the Great Depression era of federally-funded public works projects known popularly as the New Deal. Dubbed the "Palace of Justice" at the time of its construction from 1938 to 1941, the building's exterior mirrors that of the adjacent Free Library of Philadelphia (Horace Trumbauer, 1917-1925); the pair is a faithful replica of the Ministerie de la Marine and the Hotel Crillon on the Place de la Concorde in Paris.

The Family Court Building was designed to house the Juvenile and Domestic Relations branches of the Philadelphia Municipal Court system, which since 1914 had operated in a number of makeshift facilities scattered across the city. Though Philadelphia voters approved funds for the construction of a dedicated court building as early as 1916, debates over budgets and site selection delayed progress on the project for two decades. After a series of aborted schemes in the 1910s and 1920s, plans for the court on its current site were begun in 1930 by prominent Philadelphia architect John T. Windrim and approved by the city's Art Jury and City Council the following year. But budget shortfalls further delayed progress on the \$3.5 million project until 1938, when the Federal government granted \$1.5 million in Public Works Administration funding to

the city for its construction (the balance was paid for by previously authorized city loans).<sup>1</sup>

In June 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act as part of his sweeping New Deal reform package. This act, in order to stimulate the stagnant national economy and create jobs for millions of unemployed workers, provided \$3.3 billion for the creation of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, also known as the Public Works Administration (PWA). Between 1933 and 1939, the PWA funded a series of ambitious infrastructure projects nationwide, producing such icons of the era as the Lincoln Tunnel (New York City, 1938-1945), the Grand Coulee Dam (Washington State, begun 1933), and countless neighborhood schools, post offices, and hospitals. The Family Court Building was Philadelphia's largest and most prominent PWA undertaking.

The new court building was designed to be a civic showcase and a model of judicial efficiency. Plans included four ground-floor court rooms, two spacious public waiting areas, a grand entry lobby, and extensive office and auxiliary facilities. Public areas were further enhanced by the inclusion of a Public Works Administration-funded art program depicting the social benefits of the justice system. This program, consisting of 37 murals, one stained glass panel, and two exterior frieze sculptures, represents the largest New Deal-era public art project undertaken for a single site in all of Philadelphia.

Commonly known as WPA artwork, federally-funded art in Roosevelt's New Deal administration was created through at least four independent programs: the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the Federal Art Project of the Works Project Administration (WPA), the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), and the Section of Fine Arts.<sup>2</sup> The Family Court commissions differed from other contemporary mural commissions in that the building's owner, the Board of County Commissioners, selected artists from a list of qualified bidders compiled by the Works Project Administration and endorsed by the Philadelphia Art Jury, chaired at the time by Paul Cret.<sup>3</sup>

Nine painters were selected by the Board of County Commissioners and the PWA: Joseph Capolino, Walter Gardner, George Harding, Joe Hirsch, Vincent Maragliotti, Alice Kent Stoddard, Frank Schwarz, Benton Spruance, and Stuyvesant Van Veen. All were locally or nationally significant artists and proponents of social realism, a style virtually synonymous with Depression-era public art. As noted by the Philadelphia Record art critic upon the building's completion, "[T]he architect... has had the courage to give to American artists an opportunity unequalled in any other municipal building in this city," and the result was "a cross-section of contemporary activity in that particular phase of art."<sup>4</sup>

The didactic quality of the art program (with inscriptions such as "Examination, diagnosis and treatment cure social ills," "Investigation and probation aid humanized justice," and "The strength of democracy abides in the family") reflected an ambitious social agenda behind the court's construction, part of a larger civic pursuit of a "modern"

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<sup>1</sup> "Mayor is 'Amazed' by Court Grant." *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, June 25, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> "Legal Title to Artwork Produced Under the 1930s and 1940s New Deal Administration." General Services Administration Fact Sheet; [http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/pbs/legal\\_fact\\_sheet\\_final\\_I.pdf](http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/pbs/legal_fact_sheet_final_I.pdf) Accessed 3/28/11.

<sup>3</sup> Philadelphia Art Jury/Art Commission Records, Folder 2336. Philadelphia City Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Grafley, Dorothy. "Artists Win Municipal Court Mural Race," *Philadelphia Record*, October 13, 1940.

Philadelphia embodied in the continued development of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Not only did the new court represent a new approach to the justice system (“The building represents a recognition of the new conception of the treatment of crime, in attempting to study the offender rather than the crime,” noted a court official at the time<sup>5</sup>), but also contributed to a heightened civic consciousness. One Bulletin editorial described the new court and its Parkway neighbors as “emblematic of the religious, cultural and humanitarian ideals of western civilization” when commenting favorably on the participation that Federal and municipal officials had in the design and construction of the building.<sup>6</sup> The commodious and elegant interior public spaces were celebrated as civic accomplishments upon the building’s opening. Newspaper reports notes the “cheerful system of bright colors... selected to stimulate an atmosphere of ‘sympathy and understanding.’”<sup>7</sup>

The artists chosen for the East and West Conference Room murals, Benton Spruance (1904-1967) and Walter Gardner (1902-1996), were both prominent Philadelphia artists at the time of the Family Court Commission. Coincidentally, both resided in and had strong ties to the Germantown neighborhood of the city. British-born Gardner immigrated to the United States at the age of 15 and studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In 1936, Gardner won a competition to create Post Office murals in Honesdale, Pennsylvania for the Section of Fine Arts.<sup>8</sup> These were followed by additional Post Office commissions in Philadelphia (“Streets of Philadelphia” at the Spring Garden Branch in 1938) and the Family Court mural in 1940. His West Conference Room panel is of particular interest for its depiction of Fairmount Park and the Philadelphia skyline circa 1940.

Spruance is best remembered today as a master lithographer and professor of art at Beaver College (now Arcadia University) from 1926 to 1967.<sup>9</sup> Philadelphia street scenes and workers were the frequent subjects of his many drawings, paintings and prints, many of which are in the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Recent retrospectives of his work at Arcadia University in 2003 and LaSalle College in 2011 have helped revive his reputation as one of Philadelphia’s most prominent twentieth-century artists. Born in Philadelphia, he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts from 1925 to 1928.<sup>10</sup> Though better known for his lithographs, his East Conference Room Mural is characteristic of the artist’s dynamic portraits and street scenes reflecting concern for the plight of his fellow citizens. According to a description of his mural published at the time of the building’s dedication, the main characters in his panel are a family recently evicted from their home.<sup>11</sup>

In style and content, both conference room murals are integral to their larger Family Court mural program and illustrate the “heroic intensity” of everyday life that

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<sup>5</sup> Cassidy, Morley. “Law and Lawless to Find Dignity in City’s New Municipal Court,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, November 13, 1940.

<sup>6</sup> “Municipal Court Building,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, August 20, 1940.

<sup>7</sup> “Justice Palace Dedicated,” *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, January 22, 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, Andy. “Walter Gardner, Philadelphia Artist,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 26, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, Sarah. “‘Benton Spruance: City Views,’ and a Reminder of His Contributions to Arcadia.” *Arcadia University Bulletin*, Jan. 28, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Abernethy, Lloyd M. *Benton Spruance: The Artist and the Man*. Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Grafley, Dorothy. “Artists Win Municipal Court Mural Race,” *Philadelphia Record*, October 13, 1940.

characterizes much New Deal artwork.<sup>12</sup> By virtue of their character as significant legacies of the New Deal in Philadelphia and as works of aesthetic, historic, and social interest associated with the Family Court Building, these objects are eligible for listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and J.

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<sup>12</sup> O'Malley, Michael J. III. "Built by the New Deal," *Pennsylvania Heritage*, Fall 2008.