



PRESERVATION IDAHO
THE IDAHO HISTORIC PRESERVATION COUNCIL

June 26, 2015

Lee B. Dillion
Associate Dean for Boise Programs
College of Law, University of Idaho
322 E. Front Street, Ste. 590
Boise, ID 83702

Dear Dean Dillion,

I am writing on behalf of Preservation Idaho to ask that you preserve and display all the murals of the historic Ada County Courthouse, in place and intact. We also ask for these important historical elements to be used in the courthouse as a centerpiece of historical interpretation. We believe that these murals will provide visitors a tremendous opportunity to view the development of Western law, culture, and values.

The courthouse was completed in 1939. Built under the New Deal programming of Franklin Roosevelt's administration, the building was constructed with federal and local funding using Works Progress Administration (WPA) labor. This finely crafted Art Deco structure incorporates granite and marble interior fittings into an Indiana limestone exterior. We applaud the significant investment made by the University Of Idaho College Of Law to rehabilitate this National Register-listed building and return it to active use.

Of particular significance to the building's interior are the three-dozen Depression-era murals designed and executed by WPA artists under the direction of Ivan Bartlett. This is one of the largest such collections to exist in its original context and the single largest collection of New Deal art in Idaho. As you are no doubt aware, the intent of the mural sequence is to depict the evolution of justice in Ada County and Idaho, from its lowest form - mob rule - to its pinnacle, the rule of law. One of the murals controversially illustrates the concept of mob rule by depicting the impending lynching of a Native American. No such lynching is recorded in Ada County history, but the image illustrates what may happen in the absence of the rule of law. It seems such a fitting story for a school of law, such an appropriate reminder of the concepts your students are there to learn, and such a great emblem of the values that the practice of law is built on.

Recent media coverage indicates that you are considering covering this particular mural when the building reopens this summer. Preservation Idaho urges you to alter your decision and display the mural along with appropriate interpretation. As you may know, when the building was used to temporarily house the Idaho legislature, the mural was left uncovered and interpreted with language provided by the Idaho State Historical Society and approved by Idaho's tribal governments.

Preserving Idaho's historic places through collaboration, education, and advocacy.



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The murals, whether one endorses the subjects or not, represent an effort by our nation to overcome an economic depression and reflect subjects the artist considered relevant and reflective of public thinking at the time. Idahoans have not destroyed the sites of the Bear River Massacre, the Minidoka Internment Camp, or Massacre Rocks State Park. We deplore what happened at the sites but we acknowledge them so that we may reflect and learn from past mistakes. Similarly, the murals in the historic courthouse should be retained and used to educate. We ask that these murals be preserved and displayed with appropriate interpretive signage. It should be noted that Idaho's Native American tribes have also collectively voiced their opinions that the murals be retained and interpreted (Idaho Statesman, January 18, 2007).

We recognize that an individual appreciation of art is arbitrary, but the art itself allows for a continued discussion of the values and history that strengthen our society. History may not always be packaged as we would like but it enables us to learn valuable lessons. Idaho's history, embodied by these murals, should be honored, interpreted, and left in place.

As in years past, Preservation Idaho joins our colleagues at the local, county, state, and national level in urging this action and stands ready to assist the College of Law in whatever way we are able.

Sincerely,

Paula Benson
President