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Bill Roberts puts finishing touches on new judges benches in old B.C. Supreme courtroom, now reopening as a Maritime Museum gallery.

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▼ MARITIME MUSEUM

Gala opening to revive era of hanging judge

By Patrick Murphy
Times Colonist staff

A gala opening of the newest gallery at the Maritime Museum of B.C. tonight will recreate the original opening more than a century ago.

The courtroom of the B.C. Supreme Court, which has been used as a storehouse for decades, has been restored to its 19th-century finery and will become the centrepiece of the museum, says executive director Guy Mathias.

"This courtroom will be the jewel for the museum program," he said as final touches were put to the 16-month project.

"It will again have cases heard and the public and school groups will be able to see how this court was" when Chief Justice (the Hanging Judge) Matthew Baillie Begbie held sway in the same room.

Replicating the original opening, Lt. Gov. Garde Gardom will be presented with the keys to the courtroom.

The refurbishment of the room cost \$135,000 of the \$1.2 million renovation cost for the museum. There is still about another \$100,000 of restoration to go before the court is finished.

Stuart Stark, who supervised the heritage accuracy of the restoration for the museum, said much of the furniture in the courthouse comes from the original courtrooms built at the Colonial Legislative Buildings in 1860 and transferred to the Bastion Square courthouse in 1889.

Architect Francis Rattenbury did another renovation of the building in 1899.

Stark had to hunt around the province for some of the furniture and railings which had been stripped out of the old building when it was turned over to the museum more than 40 years ago.

He used old photographs and notes to make sure the same arrangements were replicated.

Mathias said there will be mock trials held in the courtroom, with the UVic law faculty participating in some. On occasion, the room will be converted to a vice admiralty court, to reenact inquiries into famous sinkings.

The room is wired for multi-media operations, which will include regular shows about some of these inquiries and allow visitor participation, he said. There are also plans to put the room back to its original use, four days a month, holding Federal Court cases.