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End of a Wilmington landmark

Bridge removed; historic building repurposed

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WILMINGTON -- For the first time in a long time, the old courthouse on Rodney Square is moving back to the identity it knew for so long.

First came the exterior: This week, work crews began dismantling the pedestrian bridge over 11th Street that has connected the circa-1916 building to Bank of America's headquarters next door, severing the historic structure's last links to the city's financial sector.

Next comes its new purpose: In early 2012, it will again be a part of the city's legal world, becoming home to the prominent law firm of Young Conaway Stargatt & Taylor.

Once again, landmark Rodney Square will be framed by institutions that have been so central to the state's identity and aspirations -- the legal profession; the sciences (DuPont Co.); finance (Wilmington Trust); and learning (the library).

The removal of the walkway also marks the demise of a familiar downtown landmark, one that will take more than a week to completely deconstruct. Workmen from Pettinaro Co., which owns and leases the courthouse, painstakingly detached slabs of concrete through the week with the help of a giant crane.

Inside the former Daniel L. Herrmann Courthouse on King Street, which will retain its historic facade, Pettinaro is moving ahead with infrastructure projects such as elevators, restrooms, elevators and utility equipment.

Over the next year and a half, the company will fit out the 218,000-square-foot interior with office space.

"We're also putting in some parking ... in the back along French Street," company CEO Gregory Pettinaro said. "The building was pretty much gutted when we got it."

The courthouse had been part of the downtown complex of Bank of America's predecessor, MBNA. Young Conaway will occupy the entire building when it arrives, but Pettinaro says plans to add high-rise stories to the courthouse are on hold.

That's not to say they won't be revived.

"We're not going up with tower now, but we have the ability to go up later," by installing foundations designed to support a center section of eight additional stories.

When Pettinaro bought the property, it had been a notably empty presence on Rodney Square for seven years.

"Everything that will be put into it will be brand-new, state-of-the-art," said Richard A. Levine, an administrative partner with Young Conaway.

In this economy, the deal has been a point of pride for the Pettinaro firm, which also built the seven-

story, 150,000-square-foot Star office building that rose in the Riverfront District in recent months.

The firm is still seeking tenants for that property, but Pettinaro says it leased more than 40,000 square feet of office and retail space on the Riverfront in the second half of 2009.

"I'm one of the few developers still building in the city," he said.
