

COMMUNITY



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HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The rich history and beautiful scenery of West Virginia's oldest county are worth exploring.

Hampshire County is the oldest county in West Virginia. Romney, its county seat, is the state's oldest city. Created by the Virginia General Assembly on Dec. 13, 1753, Hampshire County was formed from parts of Frederick and Augusta counties from Virginia.

Legend has it that Lord Thomas Fairfax came upon some very large hogs in what is now Winchester, Va., and asked where they had been raised. When he learned that they were from the South Branch Potomac River Valley (modern-day Hampshire County), he declared that he would name the area in honor of Hampshire, England, a region famous for its fat hogs. In 1748, Fairfax sent a surveying party, including 16-year-old George Washington, to survey his lands along the South Branch of the Potomac River; and it was Fairfax who formally laid out plans for a new town in Hampshire County, then known as Pearsall's Flats, into 100 half-acre lots. He renamed the town Romney in honor of a port city on the English Channel.

The Hampshire County Courthouse was built in 1922 and is located on Main Street in the center of Romney, on one of the half-acre lots designated by Fairfax. The structure's four 25-foot columns with scrolls as column caps stand tall in front of the building's neo-classical Greek design. The Greek Revival structure contains more than 9,000 square feet of usable space.

The courthouse boasts several other unique characteristics: in front of the building stands a Doughboy statue memorializing the Hampshire County men who died in World War I, and a large golden dome looms on the courthouse roof. The "dome" is actually made of metal and wood. Its four sides identify north, east, south and west, each with large single letters. However, the original ports were fitted with working clocks. Hanging inside the dome is the original bell from the county's first courthouse, which was in use from 1833 to 1921.

Hampshire County suffered a loss of records during the Civil War, when repeated Confederate raids forced the county seat to be temporarily moved from Romney to Piedmont. Although no great Civil War battles were fought in Romney, the county seat was scourged by both armies, and it changed hands 56 times during the war.

By Marla Pisciotta



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Established in 1870, the West Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind continues to provide educational and vocational training to deaf and blind young people today.

Hampshire County has numerous frontier forts, including Fort Edwards, located just outside of Canon Bridge; Fort Mill Ridge, a Civil War encampment along Mill Creek where an engagement with McNeill's Rangers was held in 1863; and Fort Pearsall, constructed to protect against Native Americans in 1754. Fort Pearsall includes part of Indian Mound Cemetery, which stands 7 feet high and about 25 feet in diameter. It is one of the largest remaining mounds in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia and has never been excavated. Similar mounds in the area dug by the Smithsonian Institution suggest this mound might date between A.D. 500 and 1000.

Attorney and local historian Royce Saville has lived his whole life in Hampshire County and said he wouldn't live anywhere else.

"The Sheetz gun factory, owned by Jacob Sheetz, stood on the farm where my grandparents lived outside of Romney," Saville said, adding that during the Civil War, old militia flintlock rifles were converted by the Sheetz gunsmiths into caplock rifles.

"During the Civil War no trials were held, no taxes were collected and the civil authority and government in the county ceased," he said.

In addition to its involvement in the Civil War, Hampshire County was the site of numerous battles during the 18th and 19th centuries. A fierce battle between the Catawba Indians, who lived in the county, and an invading party of Delaware Indians left

hundreds dead at what is called Hanging Rocks. The residents in the area built Fort Pearsall and formed themselves into a regiment under the command of George Washington in order to protect themselves.

Ice Mountain runs along the North River just north of North River Mills. The mountain contains a set of stone chimneys called Raven Rocks, named after the ravens that make their home in the area. Cold air flows out of the gaps between boulders along Ice Mountain's rocky base, producing an accumulation of ice all year long. Because of the unique geology of the cool air in the summer, Ice Mountain creates a cooler habitat for species of plants that normally grow in the colder regions of Canada.

The West Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind was established in 1870. Located in Romney, the school educates both deaf and blind youth and provides academic and vocational training.

History can be obtained from almost any resident or business owner in Hampshire County. Saville is researching the history of Frenchburg, an entire town destroyed during the Civil War. He and another historian named Rob Wolford participate regularly in public "fireside chats" about the area's Civil War history. Additionally, historian Charlie Hall maintains the informational website HistoricHampshire.org.

Eighty-five-year-old resident Louisa Hardy can vividly remember the past several decades.



"The town was a very different place when I was a young girl," she said. "We had a very active agriculture industry, primarily apples. We grew a lot of corn, apples and peaches – and everyone knew everyone."

One of Hardy's dearest memories is of the old New Century Hotel, which once stood where the Bank of Romney Community Building stands today.

"That was an antebellum-style building that looked like it belonged in the old south. It was the first building in the area where air conditioning was installed," she said. "People said they didn't like the air conditioning because it was too cold."

Charles See is the publisher of the *Hampshire Review – South Branch Intelligencer*, the oldest continuing newspaper in West Virginia dating back to 1829. He said the interesting history of the county is enriched by its promising future.

"We have a pretty sizable influx of people from northern Virginia and the Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C., areas," See said, adding that the newcomers have contributed quite a bit to the overall health of the community. "They are bringing in new ideas and new ways of doing things without trying to change the old ways."

See said that as nearby Winchester, Va., has grown, Hampshire County has grown along with it.

"Hampshire County is a great place to live and raise kids. The people here are hard-working, giving and



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAMPSHIRE CVB

Rob Wolford, town historian in Romney, dresses as the "town crier" during historical reenactments. The town crier delivers public announcements from the court throughout the town's streets.

laid back," he said. "As we grow, we will continue to benefit economically with good-paying jobs. I think more young people stay here than they did 20 years ago. There tends to be more entrepreneurship."

He said a major addition to the county is Valley Health's commitment to invest \$35 million in the Hampshire Memorial Hospital in Sunrise Summit.

The year 2012 is a great time to visit Hampshire County. Romney is celebrating its 250th birthday with historical celebrations all year. The Romney 250th Celebration Committee is helping to produce the city's second PBS series entitled *Road Trip*, which will premiere in June during a week-long gala.

Hampshire County is certainly a beautiful land that brings the words "Mountain Mama" to mind. The hunting, the fishing, the eagle-seeking paths of the Potomac Eagle excursion train that winds through its river valley, Civil War fortifications, historical buildings and places all are part of what Hampshire County has to offer. The county is full of farms, down-home communities and vast panoramic views that will leave all who pass through with a full heart and an empty roll of film. **WVL**

Marla Pisciotta is a journalist for the *Hampshire Review* in Romney. She contributes to the *Spirit of Jefferson* in Charles Town, *The State Journal* in Charleston and other local and national publications. Research for this article was completed through the Hampshire County Planning Commission, SHG Resources, HMdb.org and the people of Hampshire County.



PHOTO BY STEVE SHALUTA

The Potomac Eagle excursion train takes passengers along the South Branch of the Potomac River, where the American Bald Eagle is known to soar above the waters.