



HARRISON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The Jewel of the Hills: Harrison boasts a rich history as one of West Virginia's oldest counties

A walk along downtown streets reveals how present-day Clarksburg embraces its past. On West Main, you'll pass the 1907 Empire National Bank building. Now BB&T, customers continue to conduct business in this seven-story paradigm of Renaissance Revival Architecture.

Round the corner to West Pike and you'll find The Waldomore (1839), where locals attend meetings and concerts surrounded by century-old furnishings. Once the childhood home of Nathan Goff, Jr., this historic structure also houses Clarksburg Library's West Virginia collection.

City offices and Chase Bank now occupy the Union National Bank building (1914) that rises tall on the corner of W. Main and Third Streets. The Harrison County Courthouse is its next-door neighbor.

Harrison County is the heart of north central West Virginia, having spawned all or parts of 17 other counties from within its original boundaries. The "Jewel of the Hills" called Clarksburg (for Indian fighter and explorer George Rogers Clark) is its hub.

Rumblings for a new county began with settlers who longed to stake claims to their own land. The closest court of law and public offices were miles away over difficult terrain, so they petitioned the Virginia General Assembly for their own local government. The assembly responded in 1784 by establishing Harrison County (named for former governor Benjamin Harrison, a signer of the Declaration of Independence).

Clarksburg's central location and proximity to the West Fork River made for easy commerce with traders and settlers. The town was chosen as county seat and five courthouses followed, each building depicting signs of its times.

Skirmishes with Indians were not uncommon when the first courthouse was built for \$550 in 1787. Pioneers journeyed into town and tied their horses to courthouse posts. No sooner had the courthouse opened its doors than the assembly started sectioning Harrison County territory.

By Jordan Elyse McCutcheon & Genny McCutcheon



In 1985, West Virginia native William D. Hopen created this sculpture, entitled “The Immigrants,” in celebration of Harrison County’s bicentennial.

In 1811, a larger courthouse was erected on the corner of W. Main and 3rd Streets where future courthouses would also stand. The large tree trunk behind the building that was used as a whipping post has long been replaced by a parking lot. Two of Clarksburg’s favorite sons were born during the term of the second courthouse: Confederate Army General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson and Union Civil War veteran, lawyer and one-time U.S. Congressman Nathan Goff, Jr.

The population grew as Irish immigrants arrived by rail from seaside towns. But the county’s boundaries continued to decrease.

“Harrison County was quite large and prominent in 1840,” said Waldomore Special Collections Librarian, David Houchin. “To increase representation, several new counties were formed. It had about five times the representation.”

Peacetime also helped the area flourish. “The county thrived when it was not obliged to take up arms,” said Houchin.

In 1856, on the cusp of civil war, Clarksburg welcomed a new courthouse. The cupola on the rooftop and a wrought iron balcony above the entrance

distinguished this two-story brick building from its predecessor. The tenure of this third courthouse began in Virginia and ended in West Virginia — with no physical change in location. The county acted as a supply depot for the Union Army, and soldiers in Clarksburg marched to the orders of General George B. McClellan.

After the war, a fourth courthouse (1888) foreshadowed the wealth to come in the oil boom of 1902. The three-story Victorian building radiated elegance, but was built more for style than function.

Architects designed the current courthouse (1932) to include what the previous structure lacked: Offices for officials and a safe place for records. Eighty-one years later, the record room is crowded with abstractors mining files for yet another boom — Marcellus Shale.

The building’s “Arte Moderne” design adds a distinct contrast to the antiquity of most of downtown Clarksburg. Marble hallways and floors are enclosed in a unique steel, granite and limestone exterior. On the plaza, the flagstaff of the USS West Virginia, sunk at Pearl Harbor, and a statue of Stonewall Jackson remind visitors of Harrison County’s rich history.

The area continues to benefit from the European immigration of the early 1900s. Italians crossed the ocean for coal mining jobs advertised by American consuls. Tiny towns sprung up quickly as families arrived, speaking little to no English.

“The Italian influence is still strong,” said Bridgeport resident Vera Aman. “My two children are fourth generation Italians. They love the (West Virginia) Italian Heritage Festival and have both participated on the court.”

The festival, ranked a “Top 20 Event” by the Southeast Tourism Society, draws thousands of visitors each Labor Day weekend. Clarksburg’s historic district becomes a Little Italy with meatball-eating contests and judges tasting homemade wines.

The Italian Festival is one of many examples of how the courthouse plaza is used to celebrate Harrison County and its people. At the festival, children wearing bright red dresses tarantella across a stage built over the plaza. Food and free massages await Cecil Jarvis Greater 10K runners below the wide, granite courthouse steps.

Spring through fall, calendars are marked for county festivals and parades. Clansman in plaid kilts can be spotted each May at the Scottish Festival in Bridgeport. In July, concerts and fireworks highlight the Benedum Festival – named for the city’s major contributor Michael Benedum.

Salem’s Apple Butter Festival is an annual event held under the backdrop of colorful fall foliage. Copper kettles over burning embers produce fruits that are canned for immediate purchase.

Outdoor enthusiasts enjoy swimming, fishing and boating on Harrison County lakes, streams and rivers. Bikers venture up and down miles of rails for trails along wooded paths and creek beds. Veteran’s Memorial Park in

Clarksburg features a scenic trail beside the West Fork River — a popular spot for walkers and joggers. In summer, crowds gather at the park’s Amphitheater for concerts and movies, and the new family aquatic center opens in May.

The area’s reputation for family-owned eateries extends beyond state lines. Scents of fresh pepperoni rolls lure customers into local Italian bakeries. Wonder Bar in Clarksburg is known for its steaks, and the minestrone soup at Minard’s is seasoned to perfection. In Bridgeport, Provence Market’s daily specials center on fresh fish or soup cultivated from locally grown vegetables. At Oliverio’s, the angel hair crab balls — sweet crabmeat broiled in crunchy pasta — are a local favorite.

Many local residents share the philosophy of Harrison County’s first settler John Simpson. The trapper and explorer exchanged the clamor of civilization for serenity along the banks of the West Fork River. There, he hunted in peace, but could access populated areas for fur trading when needed.

“Our proximity to cities like Pittsburgh and Charleston enables me to be a part of art communities and expose my students to museums and cultural events,” said Clarksburg resident and Lincoln High School art teacher Carolyn Light. “But I love Harrison County for its solitude, natural beauty and outdoor activities. Living in a smaller town, it is easier to feel a part of your community.” **WVW**

Every year the West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival celebrates the culture of Italian-Americans in West Virginia. It has been named one of the “Top 100 Events in North America.”

PHOTO BY TIM RAY



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