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PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER



JACKSON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Mysterious Version of Lady Justice Has Unobstructed View of Proceedings

Lady Justice is typically depicted in courtroom paintings with a blindfold. To the contrary, the Roman goddess of justice and symbol of the legal system has an unobstructed view of the courtroom proceedings as they transpire in Jackson County.

As in countless other paintings and sculptures, Justitia (Justitia) is adorning her conventional flowing robes in the mural behind the judge's bench of the courthouse in Ripley. The stoic beauty balances the scales of truth in one hand (albeit her left hand instead of the traditional right) while grasping her double-edged sword of reason and justice in the other.

Her missing blindfold is a mystery to local court officials and attorneys.

Judge Thomas Evans has been familiar with the courtroom art since beginning his law practice here in 1978. Frankly, he would prefer that she not be peering over his shoulder.

"I think Lady Justice should be blindfolded," said Evans, who presides over the Fifth Judicial Circuit along with Judge David Nibert. "I have no idea why she is not."

Circuit Clerk Bruce DeWees is aware of a theory that a local beauty may have been the model for the eyes of the painting. The tale's timing makes sense. The rendering was the 1965 work of Ravenswood painter Bonnie Tucker. The judge at that time was Oliver Kessel, who was the father of the late Ella Dee Kessel Caperton. She was selected Miss West Virginia of 1964 and the second runner-up at the 1965 Miss America Pageant.

However, looking back, keeping Lady Justice open-eyed may have been fortuitous. Had she been painted with a blindfold, Lady Justice would not have witnessed noteworthy happenings, such as then-President George W. Bush's visit to the Jackson County Courthouse on July 4, 2002 – his Independence Day address following the attacks of 9/11.

By Mike Ruben

President Andrew Jackson is the namesake of the county that was formed on March 1, 1831 from portions of Kanawha, Wood and Mason counties.

The seat of government location was a controversy from its inception. While some wanted the courthouse to be situated along the steamboat-busy Ohio River, others preferred a more central location. Unable to reach a consensus locally, a five-member independent commission was chosen to determine the site.

Landowner Jacob Starcher helped settle the issue by donating eight acres near the middle of the county. Two acres would become the county's public square with six adjacent acres sold to finance construction of the 1833 courthouse.

The county seat debate continued for decades between advocates of Ripley, originally known as Jackson Court House, and the more populous Ohio River community of Ravenswood. The 54-year dispute was finally resolved in the 1886 election when the citizenry voted 2,593 to 459 in favor of the original location.

A second 1856 courthouse at the site hosted a precedent-setting murder trial. John F. Morgan was convicted for the 1897 gruesome hatchet slayings of a mother and two children at their farmhouse near Fairplain. The "carnival atmosphere" hanging attracted a crowd estimated at 5,000. West Virginia's Legislature soon mandated that future executions take place within the privacy of the penitentiary.

Jackson's existing neo-classical revival style courthouse is dated 1918, but was actually completed in 1920 at a cost of \$67,000.

Attorney Tom Goodwin is has historic family connections to Jackson County. His triple great-grandfather, Abraham Staats (1750-1826), is buried within a mile of his Evans home. His wife Kathryn operates family-owned Vail Furniture. The store is one of the oldest of its kind in America and has been a mainstay of Ripley's commerce since 1844.

"I never wanted to live anywhere else," said Goodwin, who began practicing law here in 1970. "Jackson County is where we raised and educated our children. It has a strong community base with a feeling of community spirit. I don't think there's any nicer place in the country to live. We love it here. It's where I'm always going to be."

Goodwin & Goodwin, LLP has offices in Charleston and Parkersburg in addition to Ripley. The practice once included his brothers, current U.S. District Court for Southern District of West Virginia Judge Joe Bob Goodwin and the late Steve Goodwin.

"I feel like I'm coming home when I go to the courtroom in Jackson County," he said. "It has always been professionally, academically and intellectually fun. The practice of law in Jackson County has been a delight to me and very rewarding."

The courthouse literally has been home to Kevin Harris, a partner in the firm of Harris & Holmes, LLC. His mother was a long-time cook for the local jail and his father was once employed as its correctional officer. On call around the clock, the family resided in a courthouse apartment.

"The courthouse is a special place for me," said Harris, noting its stately architecture and paintings of George



PHOTO BY MIKE RUBEN

The depiction of Lady Justice in the Jackson County Courthouse is unusual in that she is pictured without a blindfold.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CEDAR LAKES CONFERENCE CENTER

Cedar Lakes Conference Center is located in Ripley and is home of the Mountain State Art & Craft Fair held in July.

Washington and Abraham Lincoln that flank Lady Justice. “I basically grew up there.”

He also appreciates the outdoors amenities of the county situated between Charleston and Parkersburg.

“It has world-class bass fishing, turkey and deer hunting,” said Harris, whose office features several wildlife examples from taxidermists. “There’s a lot to be offered right here in Jackson County.”

“It’s a great place to get kids involved in the outdoors with hunting and fishing,” said the father of two.

In addition to the Ohio River, fishing is accessible at Turkey Run near Ravenswood, Rollins Lake near Evans, Elk Fork near Gay, Woodrum Lake near Kenna, O’Brien Lake near Statts Mill, Wiblin and Frozen Camp lakes in the eastern part of the county.

Recreational opportunities are abundant at the Cedar Lakes Conference Center, which will host its 50th Mountain State Art & Craft Fair on July 4-6.

The fair was organized to celebrate the state’s centennial celebration in 1963. It complements Ripley’s 4th of July, one of the state’s oldest and largest patriotic celebrations.

The fairgrounds at Cottageville will serve as the site of the youth-oriented Jackson County Junior Fair on July 22-27. Ravenswood hosts an annual Oktoberfest celebration Oct. 4-6.

Of historic note, Buffington Island was the site of the only Civil War battle along the Ohio River. The Washington Lands Museum is situated in a vintage locks headquarters at Ravenswood’s Riverfront Park. Two of the state’s 17 covered bridges are located at Cedar Lakes and Sarvis Fork, near Sandyville. **WVL**

Mike Ruben is a resident of Ripley, W.Va. He is the special projects editor of The State Journal and editor of *Country*