

BARBOUR COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Philippi: Home to the Historic Barbour County Courthouse
and the Site to the First Land Battle of the Civil War

When the founding fathers of Barbour County, and Philippi, West Virginia, began establishing themselves in western Virginia in the 1800s, the area was known as Anglin's Ford and then Booth's Ferry. It was considered the most important access point where the Tygart, Buckhannon, and Middle Fork rivers converge.

By March of 1843, Barbour County was named with Philippa (Latin feminine spelling which was later changed due to numerous misspellings) designated as the county seat. The town was dedicated to distinguished Virginia jurist Judge Philip Pendleton Barbour (1783-1841).

Landowner of the future courthouse site, William F. Wilson, was governor-appointed along with 23 justices of the peace, a sheriff, a prosecuting attorney, a clerk, several attorneys, and a newly appointed coroner to begin overseeing the government. The group initially held court in Wilson's home.

Also in 1843, the first Barbour County Courthouse was erected. A wooden frame building served as the courthouse. Expenses for the first year of operation totaled \$558.79.

At this time, Barbour County was sparsely populated. Even so, the government continued to organize and litigations were underway. Proceedings were recorded in language that would be recognized and understood in any modern court today.

The first naturalizations of immigrants took place in 1847. According to lifelong resident Gary Price, most of the area was settled by German, Welsh, and Dutch immigrants.

Barbour County is historically significant as the location of the first land battle of the Civil War. The engagement was initiated by Union troops who, led by Col. B.F. Kelley, were attempting to protect the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Locally, the battle was called the "Philippi Races" because of the hasty retreat made by the Confederate forces under Col. George A. Porterfield. The Federal strategy at Philippi included what was probably the first significant use of the railroad to affect the convergence of divergent forces upon an enemy in world history.

BY KAREN M. BROWN

PHOTO BY DAVID E. FATTALEH





Left, Top: Philippi is home to Barbour County's Historical Museum, which was once a train depot. Right: Philippi county residents walk along the state's longest covered bridge. Left, Bottom: Barbour county courthouse has beautifully manicured lawns that join the downtown area of Philippi.

During the Civil War, the courthouse was used as a hospital. Soon, it was necessary to have it boarded up after looting and vandalism abounded in and around the structure. However, even as this took place, across the street two significant Confederate casualties were making history as the first battlefield amputees. These were believed to be the first such operations of the war. They were performed on the site where the Philippi Baptist Church now stands.

One of the soldiers was Virginia Military Institute Cadet Fauntleroy Daingerfield. The other was young Confederate James E. Hanger, who was an 18-year-old college student.

After recovering, Hanger returned home and made an artificial leg for himself from barrel staves with a hinge at the knee. The Virginia State Legislature commissioned Hanger to manufacture the "Hanger Limb" for other wounded Civil War veterans. Hanger patented his prosthetic device and founded what is now the Hanger Orthopedic Group, Inc. As of January 30, 2009, the group, known as HGR on the NYSE, sold for \$13.65 per share and had a market value of \$420,406,350. The company is the market leader in manufacture of artificial limbs.

In addition, celebrated short-story writer and satirist, Ambrose Bierce (An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge), was a raw recruit at the Battle of Philippi. Twenty years afterward, he wrote an autobiographical piece he entitled, *On a Mountain*. An excerpt follows:

"We gave ourselves, this aristocracy of service, no end of

military airs; some of us even going to the extreme of keeping our jackets buttoned and our hair combed. We had been in action, too; had shot off a Confederate leg at Philippi, "the first battle of the war," and had lost as many as a dozen men at Laurel Hill and Carrick's Ford, whither the enemy had fled in trying, Heaven knows why, to get away from us."

For several months throughout the Civil War, the courthouse held no sessions while battles ensued.

In March 1861, a meeting was held at the county courthouse. Secession from the Union was the foremost topic on the agenda. Only one man, Spencer Dayton, a New England native, spoke in favor of remaining in the Union. After attempting to speak, a gun was leveled at his chest. He fled for his life, jumping through a courthouse window.

Later, a group of Union supporters met in secret at Martin Myer's shoe shop. They elected several delegates to the Wheeling Convention. This group was entrusted with deciding if the state government should be reorganized or if a new state should be formed. This historical meeting was later dubbed the "Shoe Shop Convention."

The last court session held under Virginia jurisdiction was on June 1, 1863. Less than a month later, West Virginia became a state.

Philippi was incorporated by act of the Legislature in February 1871. Records vary as to when talk of building a new courthouse began. In November 1902, plans and specifications were on file in the county clerk's office. In June 1903, the

Biglow Lodge No. 52 of the order of Free Masons, most of whom were Italian, German, and Scotch-Irish immigrants, was appointed to take charge of the ceremonies of laying the cornerstone of the new courthouse.

In August, J. Charles Fulton, the architect, recommended an entirely fireproof building – all first and second floor constructions would to be made of steel and metal and the rear porch and main cornice would be stone. The present-day building was dedicated in February 1903. Its exterior is faced entirely in Hummelstown brownstone – a dark brownstone with reddish to purplish hues.

Our forbearers would have had no way to conceive of the Internet; much less imagine that a flattering photograph of their courthouse masterpiece would appear by accessing something called “Wikipedia.”

Type “Hummelstown brownstone” into any search engine and the prime example of this masonry is exemplified by an image of the Barbour County Courthouse in Philippi, West Virginia.

Near the courthouse’s centennial year in 2003, presiding Judge Alan Moats, along with 100-plus volunteers as well as inmates housed at the building’s jail at the time (1997), undertook a renovation of extraordinary measure. Moats directed the renovation of the stained glass ceiling as well as restoring all woodwork to the beauty of its original red oak. Moats was told the project would cost a million dollars, but the Barbour County community volunteers brought the project to fruition for a mere \$50,000.

“This courtroom is a perfect example of what can be accomplished when state and county officials work together for the common good,” Moats said.

The beautiful and historic building serves as tribute to the dedication and pride of Barbour County citizens. In 1999, the Main Street, West Virginia, project of the West Virginia Development Office designated the courtroom as Best Interior Rehabilitation Project.

The Barbour County Courthouse and its predecessor have seen their share of notorious cases. The first murder trial in



Judge Alan Moats directed the restoration process of the stained glass ceiling in the county’s courthouse.

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– JUDGE ALAN MOATS

Turnpike. The bridge now carries US250 traffic, which makes it the only covered bridge in America on the United States primary highway system.

Each year, the first weekend closest to June third is set aside for the Blue and Gray Reunion and its reenactment to commemorate the Civil War Battle of Philippi, the first land battle of the Civil War. Of course, the covered bridge plays an integral part of this event.

Alderson-Broaddus College makes its home in Philippi. It is a four-year, co-educational, liberal arts institution affiliated with American Baptist Churches, USA. In 1945, A-B, as it is nicknamed, developed the first four-year nursing and the first radiologic technology programs in West Virginia. The college’s presence affords the area’s residents the opportunity to enjoy academic study, as well as cultural and athletic events brought to them by its enduring existence.

Philippi and Barbour County and its people are steeped in a proud tradition. This is no ordinary county seat, run-of-the-mill courthouse, nor complacent populace. It should be obvious, this is America at its finest. **WVL**

1853 saw Thomas Board hanged for shooting his nephew. More recently, Moats presided over several criminal cases in Philippi, including that of two sadistic murderers, who drugged a man and woman, then set them afire.

The town of Philippi is nestled in a valley surrounded by what residents fondly refer to as No Business Hill, College Hill, and Suicide Rock, named for the death of a grieving Native American widow. In 1850, it had a population of 9,005. As of 2009, it has less than 3,000 residents. Even so, in 2004, it received the All-America City Award.

In 1852 pioneer bridge builder Lemuel Chenoweth completed the covered bridge in Philippi. It has upheld history and the memory of the men and women who made it. The 308-linear-foot span inclusive of its six graceful 140-foot yellow poplar arches was originally a toll bridge on the Beverly-Fairmont

Author: Kim M. Brown