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# KANAWHA COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Charleston is one of West Virginia's major commercial and financial hubs

**T**he stately Kanawha County Courthouse surely is the most visible symbol of the county. This is where judges and juries dispense justice, where the milestones of life – births and deaths, marriages and divorces, the buying and selling of property – are recorded, and where, on election night, the votes are tallied. In one way or another, the life of every country resident is touched by what goes on within the courthouse walls.

The history of Kanawha County stretches back to Nov. 14, 1788, when it was created by the Virginia General Assembly. Initially 10 times its present size, the county was steadily reduced in size as other counties were carved out of it. Even so, it remains one of West Virginia's largest counties, at 908.4 square miles.

A few months earlier, in 1787, settler George Clendenin purchased a 1,000-acre tract on the northern side of the Kanawha River at its confluence with the Elk River and erected there a two-story log house, surrounding it with a stockade. His brother William then built a similar log house and stockade nearby. Other settlers soon joined them. Originally the little settlement was known as Fort Lee, but when the Virginia lawmakers issued it an official charter in 1794 they named the new town Charlestown, taking the name of the two brothers' father, Charleston Clendenin. Later the town's name would be shortened to Charleston.

The salt industry stimulated Kanawha County's early economic development. Fifty-two furnaces were producing 3,000 bushels of salt per day by 1815, and three times that number by the late 1840s. Originally, the furnaces were fueled by wood, but as timber grew scarce coal soon became the fuel of choice. The village of Malden was the center of salt production, but by the 1830s the wealthy owners of the salt works began to move west to Charleston to escape Malden's smoke and grim.

**By James E. Casto**

The James River & Kanawha Turnpike, linking the city with Virginia, reached Charleston in the 1820s. The Chesapeake & Ohio Railway arrived in 1873. And between 1875 and 1898, 10 locks and dams were built to provide year-round navigation on the Kanawha.

With the coming of statehood for West Virginia, Charleston won a lengthy tug-of-war with Wheeling to become the new state's capital city, a victory that would play a huge role in Charleston's growth and development over the years.

World War I began a transformation of Kanawha Valley into an industrial powerhouse. Attracted by abundant water, salt brines, coal, gas and petroleum, chemical firms began locating in the county. World War II dramatically accelerated the growth of the valley's chemical industry. Soon some were calling it "Chemical Valley."

Today, Charleston is the state's undisputed hub of commerce and finance. Like many West Virginia communities, it's lost population in recent years.

Nevertheless, it's the state's largest city, having wrested that title from long-time rival Huntington in 1980.

In promoting the city, the Charleston Convention & Visitors Bureau has labeled

it "Hip. Historic. Almost Heaven." Certainly it's all but impossible to escape the sense of history when visiting the majestic Kanawha County Courthouse.

The structure, the county's third courthouse, occupies nearly an entire block, bounded by Virginia, Court and Goshorn streets and Kanawha Boulevard East. It's built on the same site as the county's first courthouse – a one-story log structure constructed in 1796. A second log building next door housed a two-cell jail (one cell reserved for debtors, the second cell for all other prisoners) and an apartment for the jailer's family. At the back of the jail stood a whipping post.

In 1817, the log structure was replaced by a small two-story brick building that was used until the first section of the existing courthouse was built in 1892. When the original courthouse was built, Kanawha Boulevard was known as Front Street and the courthouse entrance faced Front Street and the river. Later, when Virginia Street became a main road and river traffic declined, the entrance was changed to face Virginia.

Designed by Richmond, Va., architects Reuben Shirreffs and Walter R. Higham, the 1892 courthouse was designed in the then-popular Richardsonian Romanesque style and erected at a cost of \$153,000. Constructed of locally quarried granite, it was covered with a distinctive red tile roof. A 1917 addition extended the building south to Kanawha Street (now Boulevard), and a second addition in 1924 extended the structure northward to Virginia Street. Like the original building, the additions were constructed from rock-faced granite. The courthouse was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

The seven-story Kanawha County Judicial Annex building was completed and opened in 1983. Located across Virginia Street from the Courthouse, the Annex is used by seven Circuit Judges, 10 Magistrates and five Family Court Judges. Additionally, the building houses the staffs of the Circuit Clerk, Magistrate Clerk, Mental Hygiene Services and West Virginia Adult and Juvenile Probation offices. All civil and criminal proceedings for Kanawha County take place in the building.

Every summer Charleston turns into a work of art with FestivALL – a celebration of dance, music and visual arts.

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CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU





Famed architect Cass Gilbert designed the Capitol, which was dedicated on West Virginia's 69th birthday June 20, 1932.

When American Electric Power donated its former Charleston headquarters on Virginia Street to the county it was renovated and in 2010 were dedicated as the W. Kent Carper Justice & Public Safety Complex. A prominent Charleston attorney, Carper has been a member of the Kanawha County Commission since 1996.

The Carper Complex consists of two buildings. The office building, or A Building, originally opened in 1930, is now home to the Kanawha County Sheriff's Office and the Kanawha County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. The B Building has a booking area for prisoners, a training center with a 48-seat auditorium, a communications office and a large equipment bay which houses the Sheriff's Office's many specialized vehicles for the SWAT, Bomb and Methamphetamine Lab Teams; as well as a Crime Scene truck and a boat for use of the dive team.

Not far from the courthouse, a visitor will find much to see and do in downtown Charleston.

The Town Center mall, located in the heart of the downtown, is one of the largest indoor shopping centers east of the Mississippi. Haddad Riverfront Park features an amphitheater, boat docking and handy benches along the scenic Kanawha River. The West Virginia Power attracts baseball fans to

Appalachian Power Park each summer. Also every summer, FestivALL turns Charleston into a work of art, with dance and music performances and visual art exhibitions. And the Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences is a year-round delight, with two floors of kid-friendly interactive science exhibits, a planetarium, a fine arts museum and a theater that is home to the West Virginia Symphony.

Some of Charleston's most popular attractions are found at the State Capitol Complex with its stunning gold-leaf dome Capitol building, Governor's Mansion and State Museum.

A masterpiece by famed architect Cass Gilbert, the Capitol was constructed in three stages, between 1924 - 1932, and dedicated on the state's 69th birthday on June 20, 1932. Today, we've grown accustomed to budget-busting government building projects. But West Virginia's magnificent Capitol was actually built for less than the \$10 million the Legislature allocated for its construction. **WVL**

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