

PHOTO COURTESY OF
THE SUPREME COURT OF
APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA
PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER



LEWIS COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Weston: A charming blend
of past and present

Visitors travelling through Weston, W.Va., have no difficulty locating the courthouse. A soaring tower with a weather vane-topped cupola raises skyward, keeping watch over historical downtown streets.

The interior has borne significant renovations to accommodate modern technology and décor. Under a coffered lay-in ceiling, the courtroom boasts arched recessed paneled walls amid native wood sections. The judge's bench and dividing wall are constructed of open wood cells creating a beehive-like appearance.

The exterior reflects the building's 1887 roots. The central bay is recessed; metal spire finials rise from the pyramidal roofs of two octagonal towers. On the front lawn stands a monument honoring war veterans. Nearby, a large, decorative iron clock marks the passage of time in a county proud of its heritage.

Lewis County's founding commissioners chose the elevated site on Henry Flesher's farm to lend prominence and stature to the building that would house its courts. Over time, their new county would evolve through three different courthouses.

In 1816, the Virginia General Assembly could no longer ignore the cries from Harrison County

residents who lived in outlying areas along the upper West Fork, the Buckhannon and Little Kanawha rivers. Demands for their own county court resulted in the creation of Lewis County. Named for Colonel Charles Lewis who was killed in the battle with Indians at Pt. Pleasant, its expansive territory would later form all or parts of six other counties.

Some say construction of the early courthouse was delayed because Flesher's cow had not depleted the straw stack located on the site. But the cow didn't keep Colonel Edward Jackson from marking off the lots and streets surrounding the future court.

"When you walk along the streets of Weston, it's easy to recognize the service, shopping and government districts," said current County Administrator Cindy Whetsell. "The town was well planned. He (Jackson) was very progressive for his time."

The county seat endured three name changes before the courthouse opened its doors in 1821. Preston became Fleshersville after Monongalia County gave birth to Preston County. Strong opposition forced yet another change to what remains Weston today.

The first courthouse was a two-story brick structure with an overlarge, out of proportion cupola.

By Genny McCutcheon



Jackson's Mill, a National Historic Landmark, is a rustic-style event and conference center located just outside historic Weston, W.Va.

Townpeople said the building swayed with the wind. Never finished, the courthouse was used as much for community events as it was for government dealings. Societies held meetings, preachers gave sermons, children attended school — even community plays were staged — when court was not in session.

Centered in the heart of the county, Weston prospered. Another town, Jane Lew, was established in the mid-1830s. Agriculture was the early primary source of economy in Lewis County. Later, better roads helped bring more business and commerce in the form of timber and glass manufacturing.

In 1856, a second courthouse replaced the first. This time, all interior walls were finished and decorated. The new courthouse was a massive structure, built strong enough to sustain a county divided by Civil War.

Factions took sides, supporting either Confederate General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson or Union General Joseph (JA) Lightburn. Jackson spent his boyhood years at Jackson's Mill, now a National Historic Landmark. Lightburn grew up near Weston.

In its 31-year tenure, the second courthouse sheltered soldiers from opposing sides of a war that ended in the abolishment of slavery and the birth of a new state. It witnessed the completion of a railroad system and the opening of The West Virginia Hospital for the Insane (Weston State Hospital), the county's greatest economic achievement.

“The state hospital was once a focal point,” said Whetsell. “They had their own crops, dairy and ran their own store, which actually helped supply the community.”

Fire destroyed the second courthouse, but remnants from its time extend just beyond the present structure. From the flat-roofed portico between paired Doric Columns, one can see the footbridge (1897) that crosses the West Fork to the sprawling expanse of the former Weston State Hospital.

Look through any one of the tall, narrow front courthouse windows to see The Bennett House, once Weston's First Bank. There, gold set aside for erecting the state hospital was seized and later became West Virginia's first treasury.

The hospital finally opened in 1864, swelled to 2,400 patients in the mid-1950s and closed its doors in 1994. Now privately owned and a National Historic Landmark, Weston State Hospital opens March through October for historic, paranormal and ghost tours as well as Easter egg hunts and hayrides.

Today, Weston is a charming blend of past and present. The Lewis County Judicial Annex, on the Court Street side of the courthouse square, opened in September. Down and across the street is the historic Louis Bennett Library, the one time private home of Weston's first mayor, Jonathan Bennett.

Adjacent to the courthouse is the historic Arnold-Edwards House where George Jackson Arnold drafted

the bill to create West Virginia. Visitors who venture a few blocks down Center Avenue will happen upon The Mountaineer Military Museum.

"It's one of our best kept secrets," said Whetsell.

The museum, once Weston Colored School (1882), recently added 2,100 square feet to make room for new Korean, Vietnam and Civil War exhibits. Weston is also home to the West Virginia Museum of American Glass.

Industries both old and new make up the county's diverse economy. Oil and gas boomed in the 1900s and is again a major force. Though Weston State Hospital is no longer in operation, two hospitals, Stonewall Jackson Memorial and William R. Sharpe, Jr., a psychiatric facility, are chief sources for income and employment. There remains one glass-producing manufacturer — Appalachian Glass.

Lewis County is a hub for tourism and recreation. Conferences are held year-round at Jackson's Mill and Stonewall Resort. The two, along with Lambert's Winery, are also popular wedding and event destinations.

Jackson's Mill is home to 4-H campers and the West Virginia Fire Academy. The annual Labor Day weekend Jubilee features arts & crafts, heritage music and a quilt show.

Inside Stonewall Jackson Lake State Park, Stonewall Resort offers water sports, along with golf, mountain biking, hiking and camping. Guests enjoy dinner at Stillwater's or Lightburn's, pamper themselves at Mtn. Laurel Spa and spend cool evenings around a fire pit near the indoor/outdoor pool.

Eclectic restaurants can be found among historic buildings and churches and near landmark sites. Hickory House, only minutes from Jackson's Mill, is known statewide for its barbeque.

Sisters and Lewis County natives Barbie Gorby and Becky Moore agree that "Hickory House has the best homemade pickles and killer coconut cream pie."

Gorby and Moore also enjoy the diverse menu offerings at Pink Moon, Thyme Bistro and Second & Center Café. All are located on streets mapped out nearly 200 years ago by Colonel Jackson. All are within walking distance of the current courthouse, preserved by a county that allows past and present to coexist as it ushers in the future. **WV!**

Genny McCutcheon is a freelance writer and columnist for *Clarksburg Exponent-Telegram*. She blogs her columns at pointspondered.blogspot.com.



West Virginia State Parks are Mountain State destinations for getaway weekends, reunions, associate meetings or perhaps just a day away.

GEAR UP!

CASS SCENIC RAILROAD appeals to kids and the kid in all of us. All aboard in 2014. Train season begins May 20 with daily runs, excluding non-holiday Mondays, through November 2.

SPECIAL TRIPS & EVENTS

Dinner Trains with bands

June 21, July 12, Aug. 9, Sept. 6

Murder Mystery Trains

July 26

Full Moon Runs

June 13, Aug. 10

The Great Train Race

July 19

Special Old Spruce Runs

May 24, June 28, Aug. 30

Special Heisler to Whittaker runs, double headers to Bald Knob and more, as well as the daily train schedule posted online at cassrailroad.com. Charter a train. Rent a caboose. **NEW!** Make your two-story company house reservations online.



wvstateparks.com