

COMMUNITY

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LINCOLN COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Today's modern structure is third to serve the county and its residents.

Declared a state by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, West Virginia is the only one of the 50 states to be designated by Presidential Proclamation. Thus, it seems only fitting that one of West Virginia's counties be named in Lincoln's honor.

On Feb. 23, 1867, the West Virginia Legislature created a new county from parts of Boone, Cabell, Kanawha and Putnam counties. The legislation creating the new county directed that "it shall be called and known by the name of the County of Lincoln, in honor of our late chief magistrate, which paid his life as a forfeit for his devotion to our glorious Union."

The following year, the new county's boundaries were drastically changed. Putnam's territory was given back. More land was taken from Boone, Cabell and Kanawha. And new land was incorporated from Logan and Wayne counties. In 1869, there was yet another boundary shift, which saw Lincoln take in all of the Harts area and most of the headwaters of the Mud River.

Archeologists say a tribe of prehistoric people once lived in what is now Lincoln County. Later, Native Americans, originally the Shawnee and eventually the

Mingo tribe, used it as a hunting ground and as a buffer from the white settlers in eastern Virginia.

The county's first white settlers were male members of the McComas family who arrived at the Guyandotte River in 1799. That summer they raised 20 acres of corn, thought to be the first ever grown in the area. Initially the men left their families behind as they didn't know if there were hostile Native Americans in the area or if the soil would be fertile. Reassured on both counts, they returned to eastern Virginia and collected their family members. Other settlers quickly followed, building cabins and planting crops in the early 1800s.

The future county's residents were about equally divided during the Civil War, and both Union and Confederate troops made their way through the county, the scene of several skirmishes but no major battles.

When the new county was created, Hamlin was chosen as its county seat. First settled by David Stephenson, who erected a cabin around 1802, the town was officially chartered by the Virginia General Assembly in 1853. It was named for nearby Hamline Chapel, itself named for Methodist Bishop Leonidas

By James E. Casto

Lent Hamline. (At some point, the “e” at the end of the town’s name disappeared.)

Lincoln County’s Board of Supervisors met for the first time on March 11, 1867, at Hamline Chapel and decided that future court sessions would be conducted at White Hall, a Southern Methodist Church, until a proper courthouse could be erected. A two-story red brick courthouse was built about 1875. Legend says the site selected for it had previously been a briar patch.

Timbering was big business in early Lincoln County and continued for decades. Thousands of trees were felled, and the logs then rafted downriver to the village of Guyandotte, where the river flowed into the Ohio. There most were turned into lumber at local sawmills, but larger logs were sometimes floated on down the Ohio to Cincinnati or Louisville.

The arrival of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway in 1904 opened up the coalfields to development. In the early 20th Century, the oil and gas business boomed in the Griffithsville area, prompting Lincoln’s population to surge from 15,434 in 1900 to 20,491 in 1910. (That figure would show little change over the next century. The 2010 Census put it at 21,720.)

Agriculture has always been an important part of the Lincoln County economy. During the 1930s, the county was West Virginia’s largest tobacco producer.

In its entry on Hamlin, *The West Virginia Encyclopedia* says the town’s 20th Century history “was marked by a disastrous courthouse fire in 1909,

the construction of a new courthouse in 1911 and the construction of a modern courthouse in the 1960s.”

The courthouse was destroyed in an arson fire in the early morning hours of Nov. 19, 1909. Three men were arrested and lodged for a time in the Cabell County Jail in Huntington for their own safety, as there were rumors they might be lynched. But, strangely, the men were never brought to trial. It’s speculated the fire was set in order to destroy the county’s records and confuse land titles. Nearly all the county’s property records and tax files, as well as its birth certificates and marriage licenses were reduced to cinders in the blaze.

No time was lost in constructing a new courthouse. Neoclassic in its design, complete with a soaring clock tower, it would serve the county faithfully for more than 50 years. Dedicated in 1911, it was demolished when the current courthouse opened in 1964.

Designed by a Charleston architectural firm, Greife, Daley & Hoblitzell, and built by contractor H. B. Agsten Jr. Inc, also of Charleston, the new courthouse was a sharp departure from the classic design of its predecessor. In his book “Buildings of West Virginia,” architectural historian S. Allen Chambers Jr. labels it “a typical expression of 1960s modernism.”

The building is a two-story buff colored brick and concrete structure that is rectangular in shape, with a recessed central entrance on the south side. A five-bay façade is centered with a broad frontispiece containing a recessed entrance at the first-floor level and decora-

Outdoor enthusiasts can kayak on Upper Mud River Lake. The 306-acre lake also provides fishing opportunities.



PHOTO BY RIC MACDOWELL



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tive metal grillwork above, with the words "Lincoln County" affixed at the top. The windows are vertical, rising to the second story. The roofline is flat.

The interior of the courthouse maintains the modern design throughout. The courtroom is richly adorned with oak in the wall panels, seating, litigation well and the judge's bench.

Lincoln County is rightly proud of its many sons and daughters who have served in uniform, and a bronze plaque at the courthouse reads that the building is "dedicated to all Lincoln County military personnel, past, present, and future, for honorable service to their country." In addition, the courthouse grounds contain memorials to the veterans of World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam.

The county's best-known member of the military, native son Chuck Yeager, the first man to fly faster than the speed of sound, is honored elsewhere. A statue of the legendary airman was erected at his alma mater, Hamlin High School, in 1985.

Like all courthouses, the Lincoln County Courthouse is where the milestones of life – births and deaths, marriages and divorces, the buying and selling of property – are recorded, and where judges and juries dispense justice. Most days at the courthouse are routine, even humdrum. But others can bring drama that equals anything seen on television or the movie screen.

Circuit Judge Jay Hoke vividly remembers one such day.

"It was in 1990," Hoke recalled. He was prosecuting attorney at the time. It would be another two years before he was elected to the bench. A much-anticipated trial was in progress in the courtroom. The defendant was charged with rape and murder.

"The victim's mother had just finished testifying, and Judge Jack Stevens had told her she could step down from the witness stand. She leaned over to get her purse, pulled out a gun – a snub-nosed .38 caliber revolver – and fired at the defendant. The bullet ricocheted off a stack of law books on the table in front of the defendant, and then ended up embedded in a side door. The courtroom went nuts. The judge shouted 'Get that gun away from her!' The defendant's mother fainted. It was chaos for a while."

The book that deflected the bullet was *Evidence Handbook for West Virginia Lawyers*, by former West Virginia University law professor Franklin Cleckley. Hoke says that after the courthouse shooting he talked with Cleckley and told him, "You know, that's the only time that damn book did me a bit of good."

Hoke also notes that because of the shooting, the Hamlin courthouse was one of the first in West Virginia to have a metal detector installed at the entrance. **WVL**

James E. Casto is the retired associate editor of the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* and the author of a number of books on local and regional history.