

COMMUNITY

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



MARION COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Marion County's bright future rooted in technology, education and natural beauty

Marion County's history lies in coal, but its future is more aligned with technology, education and its natural beauty.

Formed in 1842 by an act of the Virginia Assembly, Marion County was created from parts of Monongalia and Harrison Counties. It was named after General Francis Marion, known as "The Swamp Fox," of American Revolutionary War fame.

Coal's role in Marion County has lessened in the last 40 years and will probably continue to lessen, but will remain important to the county's economy, said David Janes, judge of the Circuit Court of Marion County, Division II.

"There are no longer any active coal mines in the county, but there are many retired miners, men and women who continue to work in mines in the region and businesses which support, and are supported by, the mining industry," said Janes, who became judge on Jan. 1, 2001. He was re-elected in 2008.

Though both of his parents are from Fairmont, Janes was actually born in Chicago in 1951. "My father was in medical school at Northwestern University at the time, but we returned to Fairmont in 1953 and I was reared here," he said.

Prior to his seat on the bench, Janes worked at a variety of jobs, he said.

He was lehr attendant at Owens-Illinois Bottle Plant, construction laborer at Mellon-Stuart Construction, greens keeper at Fairmont Field Club, a law clerk for Herschel H. Rose, Esq., and at Goodpasture, Carpenter, Woods and Sasser in Nashville, Tennessee; and was attorney and partner at Tharp, Liotta, Janes and Yokum.

He became a judge, he said, "to help ensure that the citizens of Marion County are treated fairly and receive equal justice under the law when they appear in circuit court."

He does that from the third floor of the Marion County Courthouse, located at the intersection of Adams and Jefferson Streets in downtown Fairmont.

"It features a stained-glass rotunda and a stained-glass dome in the Fred L. Fox II Courtroom, in which I have the privilege to preside," he said.

The courthouse, a Beaux-Arts style building listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was constructed between 1897 and 1900, and was designed by the architectural firm of Yost & Packard of Columbus, Ohio.

By Pam Marra

Located just a few miles from the courthouse is the I-79 Technology Park, which is helping to bring that industry to the forefront of the area. Situated in two separate buildings in the park are NASA's IV & V Programs.

The building, which bears the program name and NASA insignia, was completed in 1994. The second building is owned and operated by the West Virginia High Technology Foundation, and NASA leases two floors in one of the two towers of the building, Jennifer Neptune, program analyst, said.

"This program is a community of people who look at software on various types of NASA missions to make sure the software does what it is supposed to do," Neptune said.

The process for developing software for NASA missions is complex, has many phases and often last many years, Neptune said.

"Our program looks at the many aspects of what the mission is supposed to do and assesses where the software is most critical to mission success. When the critical areas are identified and are being developed, we take a look at those areas as an extra review. It's like having someone proofread your work," she said.

NASA's IV&V Program employs approximately 320 people, 200 of which work in Fairmont, Neptune said.

There is a mix of engineers – computer, electrical, software, mechanical, aerospace – software scientists, IT professionals, accountants, program analysts, project managers, program managers, communications specialists, educational outreach specialists, interns and more.

"Most of the employees who work here in Fairmont live in either Marion County or the surrounding counties, contribute to their communities in various ways, have kids in the local schools, and give back to local charities," Neptune said.

Additionally, NASA's IV&V Program is heavily involved throughout West Virginia in both student and teacher education, she said.

"We strive to enhance student and teacher access to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) materials and activities in our state," Neptune said. "One of the goals is to provide free STEM focused educational content, resources and training to the public, educators, and students across the state of West Virginia. These opportunities increase STEM literacy and STEM career awareness for our state."

NASA's IV&V Program has educational outreach efforts, which enable these activities primarily through grants with state universities, high school and college internship programs, public events for students, and engineering design challenges for students of all ages, she said.

"Annually, our team impacts approximately 5,000 students and teachers per year, maximizing partnerships with West Virginia industries, government institutions at all levels, higher education institutions, community organizations, and extra-curricular STEM focused groups like robotics teams, aviation teams, etc.," Neptune said.

One of those higher education institutions is found right in the middle of Marion County. Fairmont State University has an enrollment of 4,200, with students from 25 states and 19 countries, according to Dr. Maria Rose, president.

FSU offers six associate degrees, more than 80 baccalaureate degrees and graduate programs in architecture, business, criminal justice and education. Unique programs include National Security and Intelligence and Aviation Technology and a minor in Folklore Studies, she said.

With approximately 200 full-time faculty members, the student-to-faculty ratio is 17:1. The institution is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Fairmont State University's roots reach back almost 150 years to the formation of public education in the state of West Virginia. The third largest of the state's universities, FSU has an alumni network of more than 29,000, Rose said.

"Many alumni live and work in Marion County and the state of West Virginia. Current students and employees provide vital economic support to the county and to Fairmont," Rose said. "In addition, the university helps to enhance the quality of life for residents of Marion County by providing cultural events and educational outreach opportunities. Part of the university's mission is to help students discover roles for responsible citizenship, and FSU partners with community organizations for numerous civic engagement projects."

The third component of Marion County's present and future can be found in the natural beauty of its parks and recreational sites.

One of those, Prickett's Fort State Park, was developed in the early 1970s, and actually contains two

parts, according to Greg Bray, executive director of the Prickett's Fort Memorial Foundation.

"The historic park, run by the Memorial Foundation, a 501c3 nonprofit organization, sits on about 30 acres with the 110 x 110 ft. fort, originally built in 1774 on the land of Jacob Prickett.

"There is also the Bray Blacksmith Shop, a fully functioning 18th century shop. The Job Prickett House, built in 1859, is the only original structure on the site," he said.

Activities begin in February with the Arms and Accoutrements Show and end with the 18th century Christmas Market in December – the longest running program at the park. About 10,000 people visit the historic fort each year, while 75,000-90,000 people visit the state park, which offers a boat-launching area, fishing, hiking trails, picnicking and the trailhead for the rail/trail.

"The park is about 180 acres, most of which is inaccessible to the public. But it's a wonderful place to bird-watch," Bray said.

Across the county lies Valley Falls State Park, which is divided between Marion and Taylor counties.

According to Superintendent Ron Fawcett, approximately 187,000 people make use of the park each year. "There are four waterfalls, all handicap-accessible and gorgeous scenery.

"It's a popular spot for weddings because of the beautiful backdrop of the falls," Fawcett said. "We do about 90 each summer, and we've done 754 since I came in 1995."

There are about 18 miles of hiking and biking trails, two rental shelters, a gazebo for special events and playgrounds for children. There is a car show in August and two charity bike races each year, Fawcett said.

"Art students come out and paint, photography groups come out here, and so do hiking groups. There's just a lot of scenic beauty," he said. "A lot of high school kids come out here to take their senior pictures, too."

Fawcett said fast-water training also takes place at Valley Falls. "Most fire departments can do lake res-cues, but fast water is a whole new ballgame," he said.

And because the water is so cold and fast, no swimming, wading or alcohol is allowed at the park. "The water is cold and it's deep, with an undertow and dangerous current," he said.

Approximately 100,000 people visit the parks managed by the Marion County Parks and Recreation



PHOTO COURTESY OF PRICKETT'S FORT STATE PARK

Prickett's Fort State Park is a re-creation of the original Prickett's Fort, which functioned as a refuge from Native American war parties in 1774. Today, it serves as a living history site where interpreters reenact the 18th century way of life. Prickett's Fort State Park also offers many activities for tourists, including hiking trails, fishing spots and a 400-seat amphitheater where shows are performed in the summer.

Commission (MCPARC), according to Director Tony Michalski.

MCPARC offers year-round programs, including, but not limited to; K-3 basketball league, free summer concert series, guided bus tours, senior softball, pickle ball league, day camp and a six-week free playground program in the summer at eight different locations across the county, Michalski said. There's also fishing, local races, swim lessons, water aerobics and more.

"MCPARC provides quality recreational facilities and programs to the citizens of Marion County and aims to improve the quality of life for citizens of all ages." Michalski said. **WVL**

Pam Marra is a freelance writer living and working in the Bridgeport, West Virginia, area.