

MARSHALL COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Courthouse has deep ties to county's history.

At first glance, a courthouse appears to be just a building made of brick and mortar – but it holds much more inside its walls.

It is a record often containing intimate details of our lives. It knows when we were born, when we died and everything between. It knows when we got married or divorced, when we had our first child or bought our first house. It is all there on paper and, in some cases, is also digitized.

The Marshall County Courthouse in Moundsville is no exception.

The first courthouse was constructed in 1836 and was used until a new structure was built in 1875. This 1875 courthouse is the same building that stands today, but it looks much different. Circuit Court Judge David Hummel said the courthouse received its red brick exterior and tall white pillars when it was renovated in 1974 to add more space for storage of records. This renovation included the updated look from the former Romanesque style to the present colonial revival.

Though the outside may have been changed, the courthouse's original charm still remains inside.

"There is a lot of light inside and there is oak woodwork throughout it. It helps it feel light and airy. In

the main hallway downstairs to the left there is a wall that has the names of men from Marshall County who served in military. It's impressive," Hummel said. "When you are here a lot you pass it, but every once in a while it catches your eye."

There is one courtroom where circuit court matters take place and is a pleasure to work in, Hummel said.

"The ceilings are 25 feet tall. It's a magnificent courtroom," he said.

Hummel said the circuit court is large and can house 150 people. The reason it is so large is because public meetings were once held there and people would come to the trials.

"The first time I was in the courtroom, I was in elementary school," he said. "I was a student at Limestone. We came down for a tour as fourth graders and fifth graders. I can still remember sitting in the gallery when they brought in the prisoners."

"We still had the penitentiary then. They brought guys in and they had shackles on their legs. The judge came in and sat on the bench. He was wearing a black robe and he had a booming voice."

Hummel also recalls the first time he wore that same black robe when he took the bench as a judge himself many years later.

By Shelley Hanson

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





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Moundsville is named after the 2,000-year-old historic Grave Creek Mound, where the Adena Indians were once buried. The mound is across the street from the West Virginia Penitentiary, and is also a popular tourist attraction. Related exhibits can be seen at the adjacent Delf Norona Museum.

the ‘All rise,’ and I was neatly taking my time. I forgot tell them to sit down,” he added.

Marshall County: Born of Ohio County

Jane Klug, president of the Marshall County Historical Society and a former history teacher, said Marshall County was created from a portion of Ohio County in 1835. The county predates the state, as West Virginia was born of Virginia, becoming its own state in 1863.

“It was an act of the Virginia Legislature,” she said. “Folks moved in and increased the population. We needed our own county. Many of the early deeds from Moundsville can be found at the Ohio County Courthouse.”

The city of Moundsville was formed in 1866 from two towns – Moundsville and Elizabethtown.

“Elizabethtown was named after the wife of Joseph Tomlinson. In 1867, they decided to incorporate together because they were growing into each other. They were trying to find a name and decided on Moundsville because of the mound,” Klug said, referring to the 2,000-year-old historic Grave Creek Mound, where the Adena Indians were once buried.

PHOTO BY TRICIA GOODE



Marshall County is home to the The West Virginia Penitentiary, which operated from 1876 to 1995, and was constructed by the prisoners themselves. It is a top tourist attraction for the county, and offers tours during the warmer months, as well as its Dungeon or Horrors tours during Halloween.

“I was nervous as all can be. I had a little training. ... I was taking a plea. The lady was sent to prison for domestic battery third offense. The defense attorney forgot to show up. His dad lost to me during the election so I thought he didn’t show up in protest. I called him because I didn’t know what to do. He answered his phone at his office and raced down,” Hummel said.

“As I approached the bench I was nervous. I was laying out documents and books – I was afraid to look up. I realized everyone was still standing, because of

Marshall County was named after John Marshall, chief justice of the Supreme Court for 34 years. Klug believes community leaders decided to name the county after the chief justice because of all he accomplished while on the bench.

“He helped to define states’ rights and rights of the federal government,” she said.

Situated on the first floor of the courthouse are the sheriff’s, county clerk, assessor and circuit clerk offices. The circuit courtroom also is on the first floor. In the basement are the emergency management, the county commission and emergency 911 communications offices.

Klug noted when the current courthouse was built in 1875 it cost \$31,054.85 to erect.

Marshall County Tourism

One of the county’s most popular tourist attractions is the former West Virginia Penitentiary built in 1866. Tours are offered during warm weather months. The facility, which stopped operating as a prison in 1995, is known for its Dungeon of Horrors tours during Halloween, in addition to allowing paranormal investigators to host overnight experiences there.

It is likely many of the judgments handed down at the county’s courthouse were for prisoners who ended up at the penitentiary. According to the penitentiary’s website, construction of the facility was conducted mostly by the prisoners themselves.

The facility’s first capital punishment via hanging took place in 1899 when the task was taken from the counties and given to the state. Eighty-five prisoners were hanged to death until 1949 when the method was changed to electrocution. Between 1951 and 1959, nine prisoners were put to death in the prison’s electric chair, nicknamed Old Sparky.

In 1965, capital punishment was outlawed, but visitors can still see the chair today. When the prison closed in 1995 because of the too-small cells, there were 675 prisoners living there.

Tom Stiles, who has worked at the former prison for 15 years as a tour guide and manager, said Sparky still is on display inside the prison’s gift shop.

While the chair was delivered to the prison by the state it was assembled by an inmate at the prison. When other prisoners learned this they wanted to kill the man. For the inmate’s own safety, he was transferred to another prison to serve out the remainder of his sentence.

Stiles noted the first death by electrocution occurred in 1951.

When people tour the facility, they are often amazed the cells housed two to three inmates at one time.

“People are surprised about the size of the cells. They are 5 feet wide and 7 feet deep – 35 square feet – that’s not very large,” Stiles said. “During the late 1950s and ’60s there were 2,000 people at the prison, and as many as three inmates to a cell.”

The prison was the site of two riots – one in 1973 and a second in 1986. During the 1986 riot, inmates raged for 52 hours, taking 16 hostages and killing three fellow inmates. The inmates who were killed were considered “rats and snitches,” he said.

“They used that time to deal with that situation because they knew any one individual couldn’t be blamed for the murders,” Stiles said.

One inmate murdered was Danny Lehman, head of the Avengers motorcycle gang.

Another large part of the prison’s business involves paranormal investigations.

“Paranormal is a large part of the business. It all started with MTV’s Fear – that put us on the map with paranormal investigators,” Stiles said.

Stiles said he had a ghost-like experience himself once while preparing for the Halloween tours. He was in a section of the prison known as the Sugar Shack.

“I can’t explain it. It did feel like someone touched me once on the shoulder, vividly. I have no explanation for that. It scared and startled me. I was all by myself. ... There were others in the building, but not where I was at,” he said. “It was like it was trying to stop me from going forward. I thought maybe I bumped into something. When I got the lights on, I saw where there was nothing for me to bump into.”

Across the street from the prison is the Grave Creek Mound, 801 Jefferson Ave., Moundsville, owned by the state of West Virginia. It is a 2,000-year-old Adena Indian burial mound. Remains were excavated in 1838. Related exhibits can be seen at the adjacent Delf Norona Museum.

Marshall County also is home to Grand Vue Park, which boasts new Zipline Canopy Tours, cabins for rent, a pool with splash pad, disc golf course, miniature golf and more. **WVLT**

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