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MASON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Mason County's courthouses mark significant eras in Point Pleasant's history.

In a small park situated where the Kanawha River flows into the Ohio, an 82-foot obelisk reaches skyward. The granite monument commemorates the Battle of Point Pleasant, said to be the most significant ever fought on the soil of what would become the state of West Virginia.

In 1774, Lord Dunmore, the governor of colonial Virginia, was determined to subdue the Indians who were frequently attacking and murdering frontier settlers. He directed Col. Andrew Lewis to mount a military expedition against the united Shawnee, Delaware, Mingo and Ottawa tribes under the leadership of Shawnee Chief Cornstalk. Lewis assembled a force of 1,000 or so militia members at the Big Levels, the site of today's Lewisburg, and after an arduous march to the Ohio, met and defeated the Indians there.

Local tradition has it that the Battle of Point Pleasant was the first battle of the American Revolution. Historians scoff at that claim. But that doesn't mean the clash wasn't important, as it brought a halt, albeit a temporary one, to the Indian threat and emboldened more frontier families to cross the mountain and settle in the area.

Lewis established "Camp Point Pleasant" at the junction of the Ohio and Kanawha Rivers and the settlement that grew up there also took that name.

In 1794, Point Pleasant became the first town established by the commonwealth of Virginia on its long Ohio River shoreline. When the Virginia General Assembly created Mason County in 1804, it chose Point Pleasant as the county seat. The assembly named the new county, created from part of Kanawha County, for George Mason, the author of the Virginia Constitution and a member of the Philadelphia Convention that framed the U.S. Constitution.

Mason County's first courthouse was a log building typical of that era. It served until 1857, when it was replaced by a handsome brick structure with a belfry that made it look much like a church. The second courthouse is said to have cost \$5,000 to build. It would be the seat of county government for nearly 100 years.

During the Civil War, the courthouse served as headquarters for a detachment of the Union Army and stored a large amount of military supplies. Confederate Gen. Albert Gallatin Jenkins and his

By James E. Casto

men entered the town and attempted to drive the Union troops from the courthouse. But after a gun battle that lasted for hours the Confederates retreated when Union reinforcements arrived from Gallipolis.

As early as the 1920s, there was interest in erecting a new courthouse. Noted Huntington architect Levi Dean was even retained to design a new courthouse but his design went un-built. It wasn't until 1957 that a new modern courthouse – a tri-level limestone structure on the southeast corner of Main and Sixth Streets – was erected.

Entering the courthouse, designed by Wheeling architect Harry Ray Nay and built at a cost of \$750,000, one finds an expansive lobby that's bright and open. A portrait of county namesake George Mason hangs in the stairway to the second floor. The large courtroom features an unusual array of wood parquet panels and accents. In 1963, the former American Legion building was purchased as an annex to the courthouse and remodeled for office use.

Across Main Street from the courthouse, a marker commemorates one of West Virginia's greatest tragedies – the collapse of the Silver Bridge.

In the late afternoon of December 15, 1967, Point Pleasant was crowded with holiday shoppers when the Silver Bridge, a suspension span connecting downtown Point Pleasant with neighboring Ohio, collapsed, plunging cars and trucks into the frigid waters of the Ohio River below. A subsequent investigation determined the span's eyebar-chain design was the key to the collapse. Forty-six people died in the bridge collapse. Forty-four bodies were recovered, but two were never found.



The Battle of Point Pleasant Monument at Tu-Endie-We State Park marks a significant moment in the state's history as the only major action in Dunmore's War.

On the night of March 2, 1976, a massive explosion that claimed five lives rocked the courthouse wing housing the county jail. A young man made his way into the jail armed with a shotgun and carrying a suitcase. He said he had come to spend the night with his wife who was in custody for the murder of their infant daughter. He put the shotgun to the jailer's back and forced him to lead the way to her cell. The jailer let the man in her cell, then slammed and locked the door and ran for help.

Law enforcement officers soon crowded the jail. Sheriff Elvin Wedge was talking to the man when he suddenly fired his shotgun into the suitcase he had carried in. Later investi-

gation determined it contained an estimated 30 sticks of dynamite. Deputy Kenneth Love, the man and his wife were killed instantly in the resulting explosion. Sheriff Wedge died from his injuries the next day and Jailer Ernest Hesson succumbed a week later. Several other law enforcement officers were injured, some seriously.

David Nibert remembers that night well. Nibert is a judge of the Fifth Judicial Circuit, which consists of Mason, Calhoun, Jackson and Roane counties. He's served on the court since 2001. Before he became a judge, he worked as a Point Pleasant attorney for 28 years. On the night of the 1976 explosion, he was called at home with word of what had happened and immediately made his way to the scene he describes as "nightmarish."

"The damage to the courthouse was truly unbelievable," Nibert says. "Our law office was directly across the street. The explosion blew out the big plate glass window in the front of the office and there was

glass everywhere. You could step right into the office through where the glass window used to be. Even the partitions inside the office were moved by the force of the blast, one of them by 12 feet.”

Nibert notes the jail was demolished and rebuilt but the explosion left cracks in the floors of the courthouse. A memorial to the three lawmen killed in the explosion stands at the corner of the courthouse.

There is much to see and do in Point Pleasant and elsewhere in Mason County.

Tu-Endie-We State Park takes its name from a Wyandotte word meaning “point between two waters.” Located in the southern end of Point Pleasant at 1 Main St., the small park is where the soaring Battle of Point Pleasant monument, erected in 1906, stands.

Also located at Tu-Endie-We is the Mansion House museum. Built in 1796 by Walter Newman as a tavern, it’s the oldest log house in the Kanawha Valley. It features displays of antiques and heirlooms of the era, including a large square piano believed to be one of the first brought over the Alleghenies.

The Point Pleasant River Museum is located just a short walk from Tu-Endie-We. Opened in 2004, the museum celebrates the town’s long-standing ties to the river. A favorite with young museum visitors, the Nelson Jones pilot-house training simulator offers participants a chance to experience what it’s like to steer a towboat down the river. The museum also is home to a 2,400-gallon freshwater aquarium that offers visitors an up-close look at the many different varieties of fish found in the Ohio.

The city’s Riverfront Park not only offers a gorgeous river view but also features a colorful series of floodwall murals done by well-known painter Robert Dafford and life-like metal sculptures of Gen. Lewis,

Chief Cornstalk and other historical figures by Mason County artist Bob Roach.

Roach’s best-known creation, however, draws not on history but on pop culture. No visit to Point Pleasant is complete with having your picture taken with the Mothman, as represented in an impressive sculpture by Roach.

With the first sightings reported in Point Pleasant in 1966, the Mothman – described as a giant winged creature with glowing red eyes – has won the town world-wide fame. Whether you’re a true believer or a determined skeptic, you’re likely to enjoy a visit to the Mothman Museum at 411 Main St.

Nestled in Point Pleasant’s Krodell Park, Fort Randolph is a sprawling replica of a typical frontier outpost where early settlers could take refuge from Indian attacks.

At the State Farm Museum, situated just outside Point Pleasant on Fairground Road, you can visit 30 old buildings and displays, including a one-room schoolhouse from 1870, a replica of an early church,

a country store, sawmill, print shop, blacksmith shop, petting zoo and even a barber shop.

The county’s yearly calendar is crowded with festivals and fairs, including the “Sternwheel Regatta” in July, the “Mason County Fair” in August, the “Mothman Festival” in September and “Battle Days” in October. For details of these and other events, contact the Mason County Convention and Visitor Bureau by calling 304.675.6788 or logging on to www.masoncounty-tourism.org. **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, including *Highway to History: A Midland Trail Scrapbook* (Quarried Press, 2011).



PHOTO BY KUYLER MCCOMAS

Whether you’re a skeptic or a true believer, no visit to Mason County is complete without visiting the famous Mothman statue.