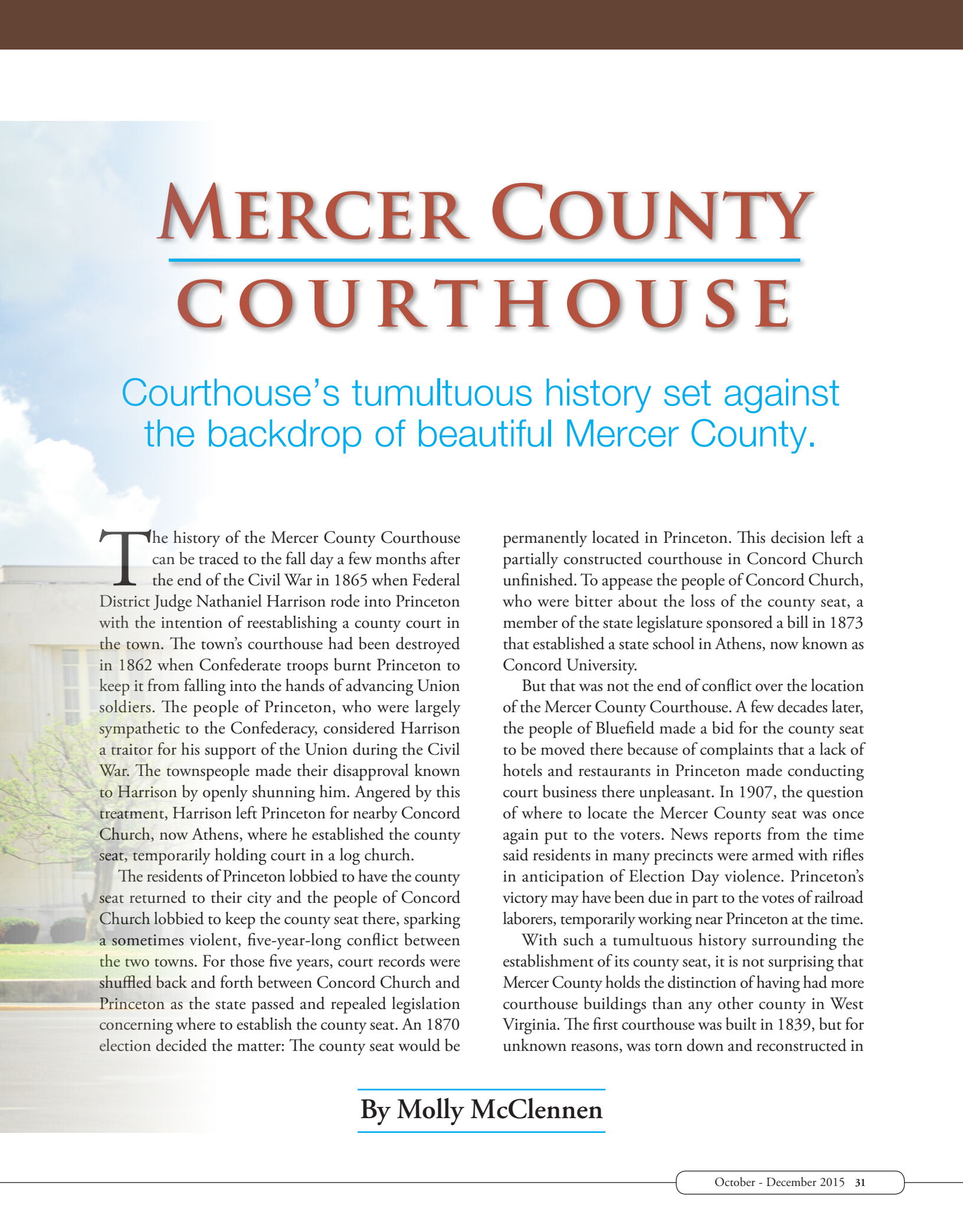




Photo courtesy of the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia. Photo by Jeff Gentner.



MERCER COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Courthouse's tumultuous history set against the backdrop of beautiful Mercer County.

The history of the Mercer County Courthouse can be traced to the fall day a few months after the end of the Civil War in 1865 when Federal District Judge Nathaniel Harrison rode into Princeton with the intention of reestablishing a county court in the town. The town's courthouse had been destroyed in 1862 when Confederate troops burnt Princeton to keep it from falling into the hands of advancing Union soldiers. The people of Princeton, who were largely sympathetic to the Confederacy, considered Harrison a traitor for his support of the Union during the Civil War. The townspeople made their disapproval known to Harrison by openly shunning him. Angered by this treatment, Harrison left Princeton for nearby Concord Church, now Athens, where he established the county seat, temporarily holding court in a log church.

The residents of Princeton lobbied to have the county seat returned to their city and the people of Concord Church lobbied to keep the county seat there, sparking a sometimes violent, five-year-long conflict between the two towns. For those five years, court records were shuffled back and forth between Concord Church and Princeton as the state passed and repealed legislation concerning where to establish the county seat. An 1870 election decided the matter: The county seat would be

permanently located in Princeton. This decision left a partially constructed courthouse in Concord Church unfinished. To appease the people of Concord Church, who were bitter about the loss of the county seat, a member of the state legislature sponsored a bill in 1873 that established a state school in Athens, now known as Concord University.

But that was not the end of conflict over the location of the Mercer County Courthouse. A few decades later, the people of Bluefield made a bid for the county seat to be moved there because of complaints that a lack of hotels and restaurants in Princeton made conducting court business there unpleasant. In 1907, the question of where to locate the Mercer County seat was once again put to the voters. News reports from the time said residents in many precincts were armed with rifles in anticipation of Election Day violence. Princeton's victory may have been due in part to the votes of railroad laborers, temporarily working near Princeton at the time.

With such a tumultuous history surrounding the establishment of its county seat, it is not surprising that Mercer County holds the distinction of having had more courthouse buildings than any other county in West Virginia. The first courthouse was built in 1839, but for unknown reasons, was torn down and reconstructed in

By Molly McClennen



PHOTO COURTESY OF CONCORD UNIVERSITY

Concord University, located in Mercer County, earned the nickname "The Campus Beautiful" for its park-like campus and setting in the mountains.

1840. By 1852, court had to be held in a local church because the courthouse had fallen into disrepair. It was repaired and remained in use until its destruction in 1862. After Concord Church's bid to become the county seat was defeated, a courthouse was built in Princeton, only to also be destroyed by fire a year later. A new courthouse, the county's fifth, was built in 1876 and remained in use for over five decades.

The county's sixth courthouse was constructed in 1931, with an annex added in 2004, and remains in use today. The four-story limestone building is a striking part of the Princeton landscape. The National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form describes the building's imposing presence in downtown Princeton: "The Mercer County Courthouse stands at an ellipse bounded by Princeton Street and Main Street, in the business district of Princeton, West Virginia. The four-story, limestone-faced building commands an impressive position atop a rise where its nearly identical front (north) and rear (south) elevations may be viewed from downtown locations ..."

Built at a cost of \$400,000, the courthouse was designed by Alex Mahood, a prominent Bluefield architect who studied architecture in the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. The courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980 on the basis of its artistic and architectural significance. According to the nomination application, it was one of the more modern courthouses in the state at that time. The application explains its architectural significance: "A series of architectural forms emerging from the minds of tradition-rebellious designers of Europe and America of the late 1920s and 1930s are

found in the Mercer County Courthouse. These ideas were inspired by a desire to jettison historical and traditional forms in hopes of creating a 'modern' consensus. The style represented in the Mercer County Courthouse represents such design purpose. Buildings of such architectural manner are frequently called 'Art Deco' or 'Moderne;' in the example of the Mercer County Courthouse, it is the most spectacular representation of the 1930s era movement in southern West Virginia."

In addition to being a fine example of Art Deco architecture, the building is noteworthy for the friezes located above the front and rear entrances that depict scenes from the history of Mercer County. Mahood designed the friezes based on paintings done by his mother, who had studied art in Europe and the U.S.

The days of heated struggles over which town would be the courthouse's home ended in the early years of the 20th century, but the Mercer County Courthouse continued to be the site of occasionally tense moments. Ninth Judicial Circuit Judge Omar Aboulhosn has held court in the Mercer County Courthouse since January 2009. When asked what memories he has of the courthouse, he recounts an experience he had there more than 20 years ago.

"When I first started practicing law, I was in the courthouse with another attorney I was working for, waiting in the hallway between two courtrooms for a hearing to start and all of the sudden we heard gunshots," Aboulhosn said. "We didn't know where they were coming from, but it was loud. We dove into a nearby courtroom where they were in the middle of a jury trial. The other attorney and I looked like we were deer in the headlights. The judge stopped the trial when we told him shots had been fired. We all got sent back to the jury room and his bailiff stood guard at the door with a pistol, just in case the shooter came in the room. Turns out there was sentencing going on in a murder case, and there were two families very upset with each other. Someone

was standing at the doorway, and at that time all of the doors at the courthouse were unlocked. A man stood there at the door and fired a shotgun at the ceiling and it just rang through the hallways of the courthouse, so it sounded like it was right next to us.”

The courthouse is one of many sites of historic interest in

Mercer County, an area rich in coal, railroad and Civil War history. Mercer County is home to several museums, including an agricultural museum, a railroad museum and an exhibition coalmine. The charming town of Bramwell, 14 miles east of Princeton, is itself a living museum. The town was at the heart of the once thriving Pocahontas Coal Field. Men made rich by coalmines and railroads built grand mansions in Bramwell at the end of the 19th century. The Bank of Bramwell was for a time one of the richest banks in the U.S. The town’s mansions are open for tours several weekends during the year.

The college born of the conflict over the location of the Mercer County seat has evolved and flourished through the years. Concord University is now a public liberal arts college enrolling 2,300 students. Its park-like campus and setting among the mountains earned it the nickname of “The Campus Beautiful.” In addition to Concord



PHOTO COURTESY OF BLUEFIELD STATE COLLEGE

Bluefield State College offers numerous undergraduate degrees in professional and technical fields.

University, Mercer County is home to Bluefield State College. Founded as Bluefield Colored Institute in 1895 to serve the area’s racially segregated coal camps, today the college offers undergraduate degrees in numerous professional and technical fields.

Mercer County is perhaps best-known for the beauty of its mountainous location. At Pinnacle Rock State Park, visitors climb a sandstone rock formation to a height of 3,100 feet above sea level for spectacular views of the mountains. Pipestem Resort, the “crown jewel” of the West Virginia state park system, draws visitors year-round for views of the Bluestone Gorge, outdoor activities, and the park’s aerial tramway, which takes guests on a 3,600-foot ride past spectacular scenery to Mountain Creek Lodge, one of two lodges at the resort.

Judge Aboulhosn appreciates the beauty of Mercer County, so much so that he keeps a reminder of it in his courtroom.

“I don’t think we appreciate sometimes just how pretty it is here. East River Mountain is the southern border of West Virginia with Virginia, and several times a year an atmospheric condition will cause the clouds to roll down the mountain when it is cloudy on the Virginia side and clear here. It looks like they are just pouring over top of the mountain. It is hard to describe, but it is absolutely beautiful when it happens. There is a photo of the clouds rolling over East River Mountain hanging in my courtroom.” **WWL**

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Pinnacle Rock State Park offers a gorgeous view of West Virginia’s mountains any time of year.