

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



MINERAL COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Courthouse's history as rich as
the soil of Mineral County

The Mineral County Courthouse is a portrait in contradictions. On one hand, those charged with the care of the county seat have been successful in securing grants in recent years to replace roofs, upgrade louvers, and re-point bricks in order to maintain the integrity of the 140-year-old building.

On the other hand, those who spend their weekdays researching records in a former vault or preparing for court in the hallways are well acquainted with the need for either an updated facility or additional space to enable them to better serve the population of the county, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year.

The courthouse, located at 150 Armstrong St. in downtown Keyser, is on the National Register of Historical Places and its history is almost as old as Mineral County itself.

According to local historian Dinah W. Courier of Keyser, the courthouse was built because leaders of the newly created Mineral County, formed from a portion of nearby Hampshire County in 1866, were in disagreement as to whether New Creek (as Keyser was known at the time) or Piedmont should be the seat of the new county government. Piedmont had temporarily served as the county seat of Hampshire County during the Civil War.

Henry Gassaway Davis, who came to Hampshire

County as a brakeman with the bustling B&O Railroad and began building his business empire by selling railroad ties to the Union Army, was the driving force behind the legislation to split Hampshire County and create a new county named for the rich minerals found in the soil there.

National Registry documents state Davis “wanted Hampshire County to be divided so there would be a courthouse nearer to his business enterprises in New Creek and Piedmont.” He and his brother, Thomas B. Davis, donated the acre of land where the courthouse now sits, thinking it would entice the new county leadership to locate the seat of government in Keyser.

Their plan worked.

Davis went on to represent Mineral County in the West Virginia State Legislature, and then to become a well-known U.S. Senator. His home still stands in Piedmont, and is currently for sale.

The original design for the courthouse — a modest 2 ½ story brick building with a front gable roof and arched windows — was drawn up by C.G. Sims and the contract for construction was awarded to I.B. Walton. The original building was constructed in 1868.

In 1894, a Romanesque-Revival addition to the courthouse was completed and clearly represented the more sophisticated tastes of the well-to-do Davis brothers, who

By Liz Beavers

at that time controlled nearly every aspect of life in the town that had been renamed Keyser in honor of B&O vice president William Keyser.

Again, an ulterior motive came into play, as residents felt renaming the town after the B&O vice president would ensure that rail operations would remain in town.

Made of brick and rusticated stone, the new façade of the courthouse featured a centered tower with a pyramidal roof. That stately tower, which is currently receiving a makeover in the form of new roofing and louvres, still greets visitors to the county seat today.

According to National Registry documents, architects Edward B. Franzheim and Millard F. Geisey of Wheeling were paid 5 percent of the cost of the improvement — almost \$500. The \$9,836 construction contract was awarded to builder E.J. Fredlock, and work began immediately.

Franzheim and Geisey also designed the courthouses in Fayette and Pocahontas counties that same year, and the similarities in style are distinct.

As the population and business of Mineral Country grew over the years, space in the courthouse became more and more scarce. In 1938, and then in 1941, the county added a two-story brick addition on each side of the original building, as well as one in the rear. The additions, designed by J. Paul Blundon, were kept simple, with flat roofs and simple double-hung sash windows.

Although the historic façade of the courthouse, with its bell tower rising above the front lawn and tree-lined walkway, is what most people think of when they remember the Mineral County Courthouse, the interior of the building is impressive, as well.

Upon entrance through the front door of the courthouse, visitors are greeted by offices to the right and left, and a large staircase which leads up to the second floor. Ascend the staircase and you find additional offices to each side. The main portion of the second floor is occupied, however, by the courtroom, jury room, judge's chambers and law library.

Situated at the center of the large courtroom is the mahogany judge's bench, with a majestic mahogany backdrop and the simple word "Justice" displayed at the top. The low-pitched gable ceiling with exposed rafters adds to the cavernous feel of the room.

A balcony, which at one time overlooked the courtroom from above the spectator seating, was closed off in the 1940s to make room for additional office space.

As one leaves the courtroom, a quick look up above the front staircase reveals an oil painting of one of

Mineral County's most respected statesmen, Harley O. Staggers Sr.

An eight-term U.S. Congressman, Staggers served Mineral County as sheriff for several years in the 1930s and, much like Henry Gassaway Davis, he went on to represent his beloved state of West Virginia on the federal level.

His portrait was chosen to grace the halls of the courthouse based on his reputation as an honest, fair and most loyal advocate for the people of the county.

His sons, Harley O. Staggers Jr. and Daniel Staggers, find themselves in the courthouse quite often as they conduct the business of their law firm.

Harley Jr. said it always gives him "a special sense of pride" to look up and see his father's face shining down on him and on his beloved Mineral County.

"My dad was not the type who wanted any honors," he admitted, adding, however, that the placement of the portrait is well deserved and will always have a special place in his heart.

That portrait also reflects the tradition of pride, commitment and service, which permeates the offices of the courthouse and inspires those who work there to strive to represent their county well.

Jay Courier, who has served as Mineral County's prosecuting attorney for the past seven years and assistant prosecutor for 11 years before that, was appointed in January by Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin to fill the seat vacated by the Dec. 31 retirement of Judge Phil Jordan.

Courier said he taps into that feeling of tradition every day when he walks into the courthouse.

"I love coming to work every day in this historic building ... there is a certain nostalgia in the courthouse that seems to represent the rich history of our local residents, their government and their legal system," he said.

Courier also recognized, however, that there is a dire need for additional space to enable the county seat to grow so that the officials can better serve their constituents.

In 2014, the county was able to renovate and open a judicial annex in a former law building across the street from the courthouse. The county's magistrate court had already rented an end of that building for several years and with the recent renovation, family court now has a place of its own.

Even with the addition of the annex, however, there is still insufficient space, plus there is the added problem of the already-stretched sheriff's department providing security for two buildings instead of one.

In December of last year, Courier and local attorney



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Potomac State College, located in Mineral County, provides a vibrant residential campus experience with personalized advising, small class sizes, more than 25 student clubs and organizations, 11 intercollegiate athletic programs, active honors and intramural programs, and over 400 extra-curricular student experiences per year.

Max White appeared before the county commissioners to urge them once again to consider either constructing a new courthouse or another annex.

While White told the commissioners he “dreamed” of an all-new facility, Courier is leaning toward keeping the historic courthouse as a vital part of county government.

“While it is certainly true that the courthouse cannot adequately and completely meet the needs of our current legal system and that a new facility or judicial annex would be more practical for space, functionality and security ... it would be a tremendous loss to the community to not utilize the (current) building for some aspects of local government,” he said.

“I would hope that if the county commission is able to fund a new facility, that the Mineral County Courthouse would still be utilized, particularly the courtroom. The courtroom would be a perfect location for the commission meetings and other community gatherings.”

In truth, the courtroom is already used often for a variety of meetings and events, and has, as Staggers observed, hosted joyous occasions as well as the serious business of court proceedings.

The courtroom has been the site of such events as Domestic Violence Awareness programs, mock trials presented by local eighth grade social studies students who went on to receive state recognition, and just recently, the retirement reception for Judge Jordan.

It has been the location for weddings and adoptions, and served as the birthplace for community improvement initiatives that started as a mere seed of discussion on the bench seats in the gallery.

What the future holds for the Mineral County Courthouse is anyone’s guess. But the people can be assured that as long as that original historic building is a part of the streetscape of downtown Keyser, the history and tradition of Mineral County will live on in the hearts of everyone who has stepped inside her doors. **WVL**

Liz Beavers is managing editor of the *Mineral Daily News Tribune* in Keyser, and routinely writes about county government and the courts. She has been honored by the West Virginia Press Association and MD/DC Press Association, and also freelances when she can. She loves to share stories about Mineral County and the Potomac Highlands.