

BERKELEY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

A Historic Building Nestled In West Virginia's Second Oldest County

The courthouse is the center of activity for many towns across the country. It is a place where people obtain documents important to their lives, such as birth and death certificates, marriage licenses and deeds. The Berkeley County Courthouse was no different during its peak. The building was the site of many everyday activities, but also some extraordinary events. It is the main reason that Martinsburg became the county seat, and it is one of the many historic buildings that attract people to the area today.

"People who live in an area often take their historically significant buildings for granted," said Don Wood, president of the Berkeley County Historical Society. "Sometimes it takes people coming in from other places to point out how outstanding they are."

Berkeley County is the second oldest county in West Virginia, second only to Hampshire County. It was created in 1772 by an act of the House of Burgesses from the northern part of Frederick County, Va. When the county was created, present-day Morgan and Jefferson counties were also a part of the area. Its rich history is evident through the more than 3,000 properties that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

It is believed by most historians that the county was named for Norborne Berkeley, Baron de Botetourt, a British noble and colonial governor of Virginia from 1768 to 1770. Others claim that it was named in honor of Sir William Berkeley, who acted as the governor of Virginia from 1642 to 1652 and was later re-appointed in 1660 and served until 1677.

When the county was formed, the lack of a courthouse forced official matters to take place in various buildings and people's homes around the area. In 1773, it was decided that a jail and a courthouse would be built in the county. While the jail was finished, the country's struggle for independence from England halted the construction of the planned courthouse. But in March of 1778 a committee was formed to make sure the courthouse was finished. It was opened in 1779.

BY CHRISTINA MARNIK





Left: The Martinsburg Downtown area has that historical charming feel. Top Right: The Martinsburg Roundhouse. Bottom Right: Apollo Theatre.

In 1839, justices of the court found an area at the corner of South Queen and East King streets that was suitable for a county clerk's office. It was built in 1840 and served as a clerk's office until 1856. Although parts of the original county had separated to form Jefferson and Morgan counties, the area was still becoming more and more populated. But the original courthouse and the clerk's office could not fulfill the needs of the area's residents any longer, and a brand new courthouse was planned.

Justices wanted enough space to house the clerk's office, the circuit court, a court hall with an entrance room, a gallery at one end along with a circular recess for the judges' seats at the other end. They also wanted at least three rooms for the juries, one for grand juries and two for petit juries.

On May 14, 1855, plans for the courthouse, drawn up by German engineer and architect Albert Fink, were approved, with the cost of construction limited to \$18,000. The building was completed on August 11, 1856.

The courthouse was occupied twice by Union soldiers during the Civil War. "One of the most interesting things to me is the part it played in the Civil War," Wood said. "The Union took it over a couple of times, and one time they used it for almost five months for their headquarters. They slept in it and everything." The longest occupation occurred

on March 1, 1862 when forces took control of Martinsburg and used the courthouse as their headquarters until July 3, 1862. Confederate spy Belle Boyd was also believed to be held at the courthouse overnight on July 4, 1861 after she had shot a Union soldier who had broken into her Martinsburg home with the intent of flying the United States flag over the house. She was later exonerated of the crime, but sentries were posted around her house to keep track of her activities. She later gained the trust of her officers and became friendly enough with one of them that he told her Union secrets, which she passed on to Confederate soldiers.

Today one of the main attractions for tourists to the area is the Belle Boyd House, which houses Civil War artifacts, historic clothing, Martinsburg historical relics and even a letter the infamous spy wrote to her cousin describing how beautiful she was when she was 17 years old. Both an herb and a rose garden are also present on the property.

Martinsburg changed hands more than 50 times during the Civil War because the main line of the valuable Baltimore and Ohio Railroad ran through the town. To prevent the North from gaining access to the railroad, Confederate troops began destroying it. In October 1862 they destroyed the roundhouse and all other buildings

owned by the B&O Railroad in Martinsburg. It was rebuilt in 1866, and the completely enclosed cast iron roundhouse now serves as one of the area's most popular tourist stops.

Other sites of interest to visitors include cemeteries that date back to the Revolutionary War, historic churches and the Adam Stephen House, where the Revolutionary War general who plotted out the city of Martinsburg lived. Boydville, a mansion built by Elisha Boyd, a general in the War of 1812, and the Ramer Memorial School, which served as a schoolhouse for blacks from 1917 to 1964, are also points of interest to tourists. People also come from all over for events dedicated to BBQ and bluegrass and the area's agricultural heritage. "We're known for our events year-round," said Andrea Ball, executive director of the Martinsburg-Berkeley County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Two of the major events we have are Pickin' in the Panhandle and the Mountain State Apple Harvest Festival. They're just great activities."

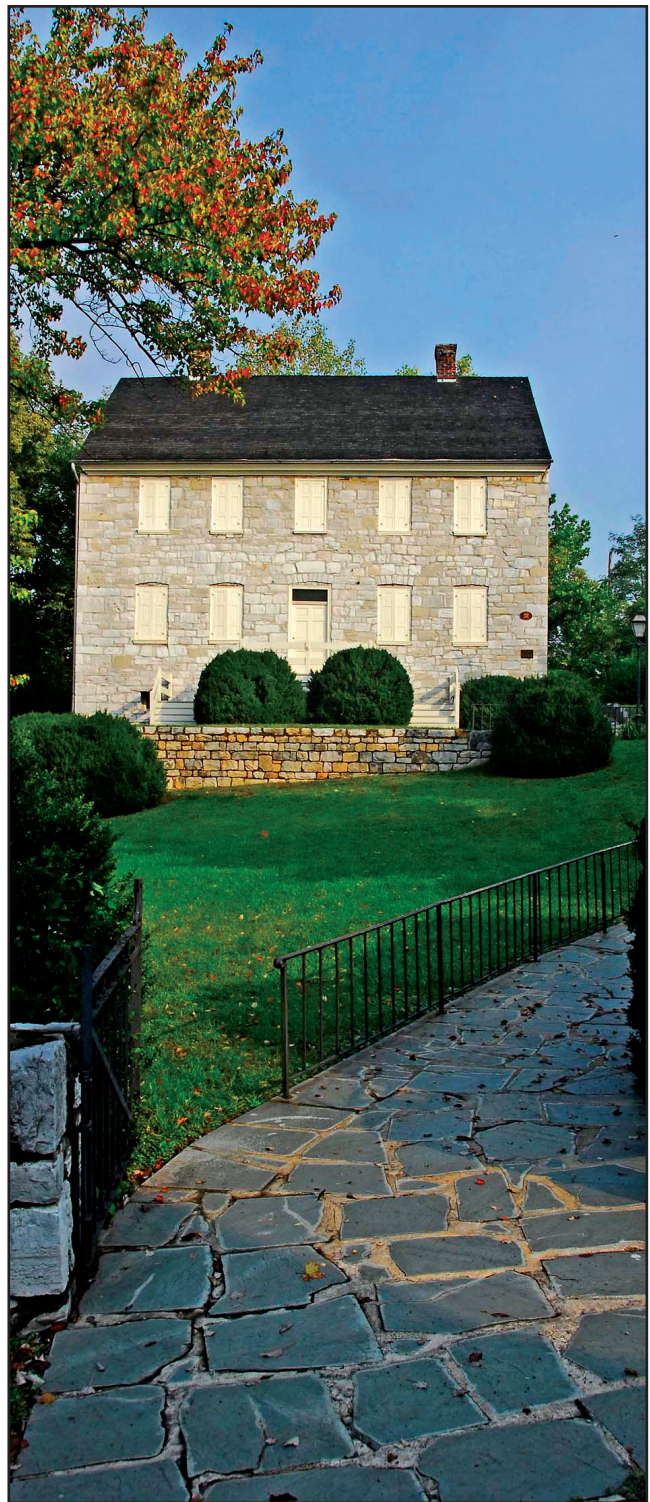
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The courthouse is also a local tourist attraction. The 1856 building, with additions, still stands at 100 W. King Street in downtown Martinsburg. Original pressed tin ceilings, some original lighting fixtures, iron vaults and hardware still adorn its interior. The recognizable gold dome on the roof of the building was built in 1908 and new pinkish brick was laid about 50 years ago. The purpose of the building has changed a bit since its construction all those years ago. While it was once the place where trials were held and birth records, marriage licenses, and all other legal documents were obtained, today just deeds, wills and the county clerk are still located at the original courthouse.

"I think it's very important that the courthouse and other outstanding buildings in Martinsburg be kept in good condition," Wood said. "It is the history of the area and you do have nationally recognized, architecturally significant buildings that people come from all over the world to see."

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The Adams Stevens House has a colorful past.