

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





MINGO COUNTY COURTHOUSE

County's rich heritage now luring
history-minded tourists.

Coal mining and railroading built Mingo County. Today, with the drastic decline in the coal market eliminating thousands of mining and railroad jobs, the county is laying track for a different future — one where tourism is playing an increasingly important role.

"Tourism is the big thing in the county today and it's getting bigger all the time," said Letitia Chafin, the managing partner of The Chafin Law Firm in Williamson. "The Hatfield-McCoy Trail System has been economic shot-in-the-arm for the county. And the recent *Hatfields & McCoy's* television series has generated widespread public interest, bringing visitors bent on seeing where the famous feud unfolded."

Due to the Tug Valley region's rugged topography, its early settlers lived an isolated, landlocked existence. Farming and animals, both domestic and wild, provided them with food. Furs, salt, timber and whiskey were their cash crops. Their isolation caused the settlers to become proud, independent people and spawned stubborn personal and political battles like the Hatfield-McCoy feud.

All that changed when the Norfolk & Western Railway Co. pushed its tracks into the region in the early 1890s, revolutionizing its economy and the lives of its people. Now that the mines could easily ship their coal to market, more and more mines opened, with workers and their families flocking to the mining camps and into towns such as Williamson, the future county seat.

Located on the Tug Fork of the Big Sandy River,

Williamson stands on the state line, across the Tug from South Williamson, Kentucky.

Most historians believe Williamson was named in honor of Wallace J. Williamson. He owned the land where Williamson now stands, earned a fortune in real estate investments in the area, and founded the city's first bank and its first hotel. Others claim the town was named for Wallace's father, Benjamin F. Williamson, who owned most of the land in the region before dividing it among his sons.

The N&W reached Williamson in 1892. Within two years, trains were stopping four times a day at the Williamson depot. The N&W built a massive rail yard with a roundhouse and shops that were second in size only to the railroad's main yard at Roanoke, Virginia. Little wonder that Williamson's population soared, from 688 people in 1900, to 3,516 in 1910 and a peak of 9,410 in 1930.

Mingo County was formed from Logan County in 1895 and is the youngest county in the state. It was named for the Mingo, a Native American tribe who had inhabited the region.

The county's first courthouse was erected in 1905, located on street level at Courthouse Square, in the heart of downtown Williamson.

In 1921, the old courthouse was the scene of a dramatic trial when Sid Hatfield, the sheriff of Matewan, and 17 other men were tried for murder for their part in

By James E. Casto



PHOTO BY WES WILSON

Home to the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Coal House was built in 1933 from 65 tons of bituminous coal. Within a fountain at the front of the building is a statue representing the Mingo, a Native American tribe for whom the county was named.

a shoot-out with coal company gunmen, a bloody event known as the Matewan Massacre. Hatfield and his fellow defendants were acquitted.

The Matewan trial was presided over by Judge Robert Darius “R.D.” Bailey, who was also the judge in another notable Mingo County trial, one that saw Levi Lane and Clyde Beale convicted for the murder of Rissie Purdue. The jury failed to recommend mercy, so a death sentence by hanging was mandatory.

As a *West Virginia Encyclopedia* article on the judge explains: “While Beale’s appeal was pending at the state Supreme Court, Judge Bailey learned that Beale had been convicted on perjured testimony. Convinced a miscarriage of justice had taken place in his court and despite orders from the Supreme Court, Bailey refused in 1927 and 1928 to set a date for Beale’s hanging. The sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment, and in 1949 Beale was pardoned by Gov. Okey L. Patteson.”

A new Mingo County courthouse was erected in 1966 at the same site as the first courthouse, on Second Avenue, between Court and Logan Streets. Designed by Huntington architects William B. Frampton and

Walter S. Donat, it was built by the Neighborgall Construction Co. of Huntington.

The four-story, flat-roofed building is faced with Indiana limestone above a dark-polished granite base. The entrance is also framed with granite. The building’s recessed top floor houses the jail. The courtroom is contemporary in style, with a colorful depiction of the county’s official seal displayed on the wall behind the judge’s bench.

A past president of the West Virginia State Bar Association, Chafin vividly recalled the first case she tried in the courtroom. Fresh out of law school from West Virginia University, she was the court-appointed attorney for a man facing a malicious wounding charge. Standing before the judge, awaiting the jury’s verdict, “I was both excited and scared, all at the same time.” Her client was acquitted.

There’s much to see and do in today’s Williamson and elsewhere in Mingo County. A “must” on the itinerary of any visitor should be a stop at Williamson’s famed Coal House,

located adjacent to the courthouse.

The Coal House was built in 1933 from 65 tons of bituminous coal cut into rectangular blocks and varnished for weather resistance. Its construction was a publicity stunt by the N&W, which wished to create a visible symbol of the “Billion Dollar Coalfield” centered on Williamson.

Standing in front of the Coal House is a colorful statue of Chief Logan, a famous leader of the Mingo tribe. The statue originally stood on the grounds of the previous courthouse.

A 2010 fire caused extensive damage to the interior of the Coal House and some damage to the outside of the structure. Following \$200,000 of restoration work, the building was reopened a year later. Despite its name, the Coal House has never been a residence. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it’s home to the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Want to know more about the Hatfield-McCoy feud? If so, the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce is a good place to start your quest. There you can pick up a free Hatfield & McCoy Driving Tour brochure. You then



PHOTO BY WES WILSON

Williamson, West Virginia, seen in this photo above and to the left of the highway and Tug Fork River, is where the Hatfield-McCoy Marathon takes place each June, and the King Coal Festival is celebrated each September. South Williamson, Kentucky, lies on the opposite side.

can visit the key feud sites and see the burial places of the infamous clan members.

Each year, in June, as many as 500 distance runners from around the United States and several foreign countries descend on Williamson for the Hatfield-McCoy Marathon. Beginning across the Tug Fork in South Williamson, the race ends in the midst of the annual Hatfield-McCoy Reunion Festival in downtown Williamson.

Each September, Williamson celebrates its King Coal Festival, a county tradition since 1972. The annual festival includes a big parade, an outdoor market, beauty pageant, gospel sing and more.

In the 1920s, the growing coal industry spawned a building boom in Williamson. A notable reminder of that era is the Mountaineer Hotel, built in 1923 and still welcoming guests. Over the decades, the hotel's guests have included presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, Eleanor Roosevelt, Henry Ford and country music greats Hank Williams and Loretta Lynn.

In Williamson, visitors can access the Hatfield & McCoy Trail System via the Buffalo Mountain Trail connector at W. Fourth Street. The system covers hundreds of miles of off-road trails in a half-dozen counties. All the system's trails are open 365 days a year to ATVs, dirt bikes and utility vehicles (UTVs).

"On a Friday afternoon," Chafin said, "there's a real traffic jam as the four-wheelers make their way into town to fill up their gas tanks for a weekend of fun."

Leaving Williamson behind, history-minded visitors will want to head for Matewan, where the entire town is on the National Register of Historic Places.

It was in tiny Matewan where Sid Hatfield and a group of striking miners engaged in an historic gun battle with a dozen Baldwin-Felts detectives hired by local mine owners, a bloody clash often cited as the opening of the West Virginia Mine War of 1920-21.

The Matewan Depot Replica Museum is an almost exact reconstruction of the old N&W Depot that was once the social center of town. It contains pictures, stories and artifacts that offer a brief but detailed glimpse into the town's rich history. A gift shop features artwork by local artists and artisans.

Also not to be missed in Matewan is the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, which details the Matewan Massacre and the subsequent Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest labor uprising in U.S. history. Opened in 2015, the museum also provides an instructive glimpse at what daily life was like for yesterday's miners and their families.

Over the decades, coal from southern West Virginia helped transform America into the greatest industrial power in the world. A visit to Mingo County offers a remarkable look back at that now-vanished era. **WVL**

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