

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





MONONGALIA COUNTY COURTHOUSE

A new era begins in
Monongalia County Courthouse history.

For more than 120 years, the Monongalia County Courthouse has stood as a beacon and symbol of jurisprudence in the Morgantown area.

The Victorian Romanesque-style building was constructed in 1891, and sits at 243 High St. in the heart of downtown Morgantown.

According to documents from the National Register of Historic Places, the current courthouse is the fourth building to have been constructed on the same site. The first structure existed before the city of Morgantown was even established in 1785. The current structure replaced an older building that had been constructed in 1848. That building had a wooden statue of Virginia governor Patrick Henry erected on top of it; that statue now sits in the turret of the current-day courthouse.

In 1884, the old courthouse was deemed to be hazardous. However, Monongalia County residents were hesitant to go forward with the construction of a new courthouse, preferring instead to only do temporary fixes to the building. But the county went ahead and hired a Pittsburgh architect, named James P. Bailey, to design a new courthouse in 1887. Bailey was only paid a measly \$25 for his work.

According to documents from the National Register of Historic Places, there was a conflict between the county residents and the county officials. The residents had twice voted down a proposed bond issue that would fund the construction of the new courthouse. In retaliation, the county officials opted to proceed with the demolition of old courthouse anyway. The residents tried to file an injunction in court to stop the demolition, but, conveniently, court officials had left town.

The George W.L. Mayers building contracting firm, based out of Fairmont, West Virginia, was hired to build the courthouse structure for \$53,478. Ground was broken and the foundation was laid on June 20, 1891, also known as West Virginia Day and the state's birthday.

The first thing visitors will notice as they cross the courtyard to enter the courthouse is the brick walkway, where many of the bricks are engraved with the names of some notable Monongalia County residents who have passed away. The courtyard is also home to a number of memorial stones to honor veterans who served in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm. The basement floor of the courthouse

By Neel Madhavan



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WVU COLLEGE OF LAW

The West Virginia University College of Law's students and faculty provide seminars and training for attorneys throughout the state.

is where the sheriff's tax office is located, while the county clerk's office is located on the first floor. Also, the county commission is on the second floor, and the third floor is the home to the county assessor's office and the main courtroom, which is currently being used for storage.

"At the old courthouse, we only had two jury courtrooms, and as a result, the three circuit court judges had to share those courtrooms which created some scheduling issues," Monongalia County Circuit Court Judge Russell M. Clawges Jr. said. "There, we were not in the same building. The other big difference is the fact that the courts were in two different buildings. Circuit court was in the old courthouse. Family court, magistrate's court, Judge (Phillip) Gaujot, were in what we called the magistrate court building across the street."

"The circuit clerk was always in the old courthouse, he continued. "The circuit clerk not only maintained our records, she also maintained the records for the family court. So records were going back and forth across the street, which was less than ideal."

Clawges has fond memories of the Monongalia County Courthouse, from trying cases as a young attorney to serving on the bench for the past 20 years.

"I'm a bit of a traditionalist," Clawges said. "That courthouse has been around as long as I've been around. I'm from Morgantown. I grew up across the river. I grew up across the river in Westover. That courthouse had always been there. My first contact with the courthouse came when I was in law school here at WVU; I worked one summer in the prosecutor's office. I have really good memories of working with Dave Solomon, who was a prosecutor, and Mike Magro, who was the assistant. We were in his office space; it was made up of two offices and a hallway where his secretary was. The space probably wasn't a whole lot bigger, altogether, than my office now. It was really a small space. We all had a lot of fun working there in the summer. That was my first real exposure to the courts in Monongalia County, and that was good experience for me."

"The law firm I was with was actually a Fairmont firm. We had a Morgantown office. I spent almost 20 years practicing in Morgantown, practicing in this courthouse. Probably 90 percent of what I did was in Monongalia County. There were some other counties, Preston and the Panhandle. Most of what I did was here. Most of my courthouse experience was here."

Morgantown and Monongalia County have grown significantly since the 19th century. As a result of the population growth and the changing times, the resources of the Monongalia County Courthouse were no longer adequate to house the county's court system.

So, after 124 years of serving as the center of judicial proceedings and municipal affairs in Monongalia County, the county's court operations moved down the road in downtown Morgantown, from the courthouse to the new Monongalia County Justice Center in August 2015.

The new, \$18 million state-of-the-art facility is now the focal point of the county's judicial system. Upon entrance to the facility, visitors pass through rigorous security screening before being able to go anywhere in the building. On the first floor are the offices for both the Monongalia County prosecuting attorney and the circuit clerk. The second floor contains the courtrooms and offices for the magistrate courts and the family courts. While the third floor is the home to the three circuit courts and their offices, plus it contains the space for a possible fourth courtroom should the county continue to grow at the rate that it has.

According to Clawges, as the years passed, security became an issue of concern when inmates were brought to and from the courthouse for trials, and for the people coming and going from the courts. Despite the jailhouse attached to the back corner of the structure, the courthouse does not provide much in terms of securing inmates and/or day-to-day visitors, except for a metal detector and X-ray scanner at the entrance.

"I've been on the bench now 20 years, and for probably 15 or 16 of those years the courthouse had basically no security," Clawges said. "The (magistrate) building across the street, actually, was the first building to be secured. It was secured at least 10 years before we moved. We determined we had court security grant money available to secure that building. It has a lot more traffic. Magistrate court, family courts are the high traffic courts. That's also where people are most likely to be unhappy or unruly, basically."

"Now we've got a secure building. We have a building, where everybody who comes in that front door has to go through security. Once you're in, you've also discovered there are different layers or levels of security. We have secured areas or secured spaces."

Monongalia County and the Morgantown area has become synonymous with being the home of West Virginia University, the state's flagship academic institution. With around 30,000 students enrolled, the



PHOTO BY ANTONIO PIZZI

Coopers Rock State Forest is a highly visited tourist attraction of Monongalia County.

university effectively doubles the size of the city of Morgantown when classes are in session. WVU is also a land-grant institution. The WVU College of Law and the Monongalia County Courthouse have a lot of crossover, such as law students clerking for judges. Also, in addition to serving on the bench, Clawges teaches at the College of Law during the fall and spring semesters as an adjunct professor.

You'd be hard pressed to find a resident of Monongalia County that isn't affiliated with the university in some way, but Mylan Pharmaceuticals is also a major employer in the area. Mylan is an international generic pharmaceuticals company that was founded by the late Milan Puskar.

Like the rest of the state, Monongalia County has its fair share of outdoor sights as well. Coopers Rock State Forest, which is located about 10 miles east of Morgantown along the Monongalia/Preston County border, is a great site for hiking, camping, mountain biking, rock climbing and sightseeing. WVU also uses a portion of Coopers Rock for forestry research.

Despite the dawn of a new era with the Monongalia County Justice Center, the Monongalia County Courthouse will continue to stand as a testament to judicial history in Morgantown and Monongalia County.

WVU

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