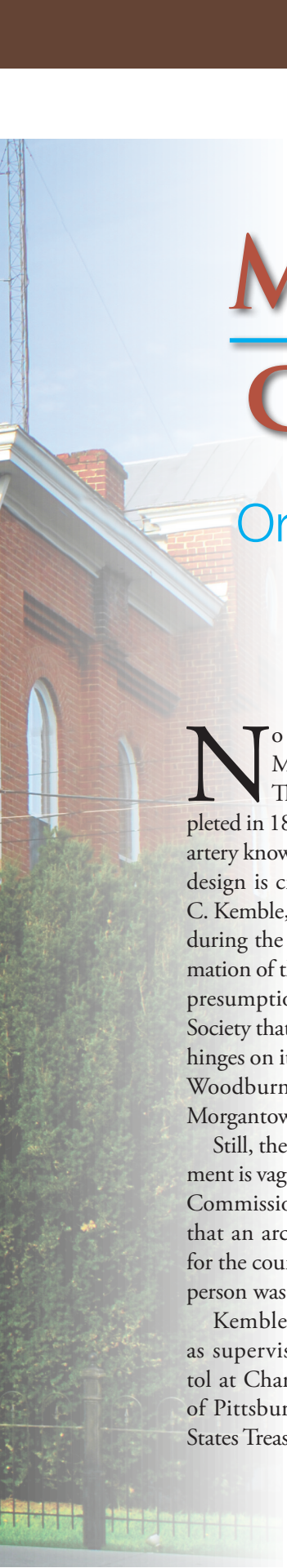




Photo courtesy of the
Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia.
Photo by Jeff Gentner.



MONROE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Origins of Monroe County Courthouse a historical mystery.

No one knows who actually designed the Monroe County Courthouse in Union. The 134-year-old, brick building, completed in 1882, fronts Highway 219, a north-south artery known as The Seneca Trail. The architectural design is credited by local historians to Charles C. Kemble, a prominent architect in West Virginia during the mid- to late-19th century. But confirmation of that fact has been hard to pin down. The presumption by the Monroe County Historical Society that he was the architect for the courthouse hinges on its resemblance to the Kemble-designed Woodburn Hall at West Virginia University in Morgantown.

Still, the evidence pointing to Kemble's involvement is vague. The minutes of the Monroe County Commission, on file at the courthouse, confirm that an architect was hired to prepare the plans for the courthouse, but it did not state whom that person was.

Kemble was in the state at the time, acting as supervising architect of the new state capitol at Charleston in 1879, with Andrew Peebles of Pittsburgh as primary architect. The United States Treasury Register also confirms Kemble was

appointed supervising architect for the new U.S. Post Office in Charleston by 1883. It is based on these records that the Monroe County historians assert he could have been available for the Monroe County Commission to secure him as the designer of the courthouse.

Confirmation might have been drawn more conclusively, had the building plans for the courthouse not been lost by the contractor when they "blew out of his wagon." Local tradesman, A.C. Houston, the commission records show, was appointed to supervise the Monroe County Courthouse construction. The builder lived on a farm north of Union, historian Dr. Ron Ripley reports, and, he said, notices were posted advertising for the return of the lost plans, but they were never found.

Kemble was known to design in a variety of styles, from sedate to elaborately fanciful. Woodburn Hall is the centerpiece of West Virginia University's downtown campus, and is probably Kemble's most memorable structure. According to Ripley, the Monroe County Courthouse's resemblance to Woodburn Hall can be appreciated, if the grandeur was removed and only its central core were to remain, then the style similarities are obvious.

By Peggy Mackenzie



The breathtaking view from the Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory is one of Monroe County's main attractions.

While the courthouse style is generally termed Second Empire, Ripley points out the structure has Romanesque Revival features as well, indicated by the rounded arches of the windows, the heavy masonry piers and the decorated cornices.

Situated at 216 Main St. and facing west, it is an imposing two-story structure. The courthouse is listed with the National Register of Historical Places and is the third courthouse structure to be erected on the one-acre site. The first was a log structure, 22-by-26 feet, two-stories high, and completed in 1802, just three years after the county was carved from parts of Greenbrier County by the Virginia General Assembly. That structure endured until sometime before 1820, when a second courthouse was erected on the same site, this time, made from local brick, in the colonial style, topped with a bell tower cupola. The design is credited to William Haynes.

Over the years, despite an ongoing search for more space, the Monroe County Courthouse has maintained its usefulness. According to County Clerk Donnie Evans,

the first addition to the courthouse encompassed the entire east (rear) face and, he said, it was likely built in the mid-1940s. It now houses the jury room and the judge's meeting room on the top floor, with office space below. A brick addition on the north side, that dates to the mid-1970s, was intended for a new jail, but the project ran out of funds. Later, a grant allowed deputy offices to be installed in the ground floor, while the main floor was used to store the records room. Evans was able to make use of the old brick jail, which dates to 1882, by retrofitting it as a storage area for the county's election voting machines. The exterior remains historically intact, including the bars on the windows.

The courtroom is filled with natural light and occupies the entire second floor of the building. It is unadorned, save for the ornate ceiling tiles and the sky blue wall behind the judge's bench. Evans said the room has had a new coat of paint, and the repairs to the arched windows included the installation of security blinds.

Through regular and prudent grant funding, the courthouse now has a state-of-the-art sprinkler system



PHOTO COURTESY HANGING ROCK RAPTOR OBSERVATORY.



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The Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory sits 3,800 feet above sea level and is the best spot for eye-level views of hawks, eagles, falcons and osprey.

on three floors, a roof replacement, a chair-lift to the second floor courtroom, a metal detector and an audio/visual projection system in the courtroom. In 2012, the building underwent exterior restoration work, overseen by the Mills Group of Clarksburg. Evans commends the West Virginia Facilities Improvement Authority as one of the grant sources he has found most applicable to the maintenance and improvement needs of public buildings.

For the past 24 years, the upstairs courtroom has been the domain of Judge Robert A. Irons, who was first elected circuit judge for the 31st District, serving Monroe and Summers counties, in 1992. He recently won a reelection bid for his fourth term as circuit judge. He said he intends to persevere, “as long as I’m providing a useful service.”

Irons has worked to establish a community corrections program as an alternative to incarceration in both Summers and Monroe counties. He said he is excited about this program, which he hopes will both reduce jail costs and be a productive way to help individuals recover from substance addictions. His dedication is reaping results. Drug court has demonstrated a proven track record, reducing the cases of re-offenders from 80 percent to 20 percent. “We are seeing the difference,” he said. “People are getting jobs and turning their lives around.”

Turning to the facilities at the courthouse, Irons affirmed there isn’t enough room in the building for modern day courthouse needs. The magistrate and family court offices had to be moved off site, he said, and the 911 center and the prosecutor’s office are off premises as well. The problem goes back to pastoral character of the county. “There’s just not much tax base or revenue in the county” to support the cost of housing all the government offices in one building, he said.

Though Monroe County retains its status as a farming

community, tourism is a growing revenue resource. Travelers can step back in time and visit restored covered bridges, old grain mills, historic churches and cemeteries, and antebellum mineral springs hotels. Recreation areas and resorts are also plentiful.

One of the most exhilarating sights in the county is the breathtaking view from the Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory in Jefferson National Forest on Peters Mountain. Perched on the rocks at an elevation of 3,800 feet above sea level, visitors have a 360-degree view of the surrounding mountain ridges. It is the best spot in the state to get an eye-level view of migrating hawks, eagles, falcons and osprey. Most of the birding activity takes place during the fall migration, which runs from August through November. September sees the heaviest frequency of species migration, especially on days after a rainstorm.

The hike to access the tower is close to a mile and can take up to 40 minutes, depending on your fitness level. The Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory is just about as rustic today as it was 60 years ago. There is no electricity or running water at the site. The only bathroom is an outhouse. Visitors are advised to bring water and a lunch, which one can purchase nearby in Gap Mills, and binoculars.

Tourism may or may not be the saving grace for the local economy. But, as long as local government is small enough to be close, large enough to be powerful, and accessible enough to be understood, the Monroe County Courthouse will continue to serve the populace of this quiet, rural place. **WVL**

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