



Photo courtesy of Silling Architects.

MORGAN COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Berkeley Springs iconic landmark
is built on history.

A courthouse has stood on the same spot in Berkeley Springs, Morgan County, for more than 170 years. The current structure, which opened in September 2010, is the third, in a sense, to be located on the corner of Washington and Fairfax Streets. It's one of the dominant buildings in the main square, just catty-corner from "Ye Fam'd Warm Springs," which gives the town its name.

Native Americans were familiar with the region's healing waters for centuries. In 1748, George Washington, a young surveyor at the time, made his first visit to the area. He, along with his family and friends, set their sights on making it the country's first spa town akin to Bath, England.

In 1776, with Lord Fairfax's approval, the Virginia Assembly and the County Court of Berkeley County established the town of "Bath, Virginia at the Warm Springs." However, to avoid confusion with the other Bath, Virginia, the postal name was changed to Berkeley Springs in 1801. Interestingly, the municipal government still operates under the Town of Bath.

As word spread, the place — known as Medicine Springs, Healing Springs, Warm Springs, Frederick Springs and finally, Berkeley Springs — became a favored retreat, especially for the wealthy. Lord Fairfax built

the first bathhouse in Berkeley Springs for his personal use in 1768. Washington reserved his own "bathtub," and three signers of the Declaration of Independence, four signers of the Constitution, seven members of the Continental Congress and five Revolutionary generals also made initial purchases.

Morgan County was formed in 1820 from portions of Hampshire and Berkeley Counties. It was named after Revolutionary War hero General Daniel Morgan. The first court was held at the Ignatius O'Farrell's tavern and later, the Buck Horn Tavern. The first "courthouse" — a residence purchased by county justices — was located at the corner of Wilkes and Fairfax Streets on Lot A. In 1844, a fire destroyed much of the block, including the home and more than a dozen other buildings.

According to National Park Service (NPS) documents, an official courthouse was built at the current location on Washington and Fairfax a year later, in 1845. It featured yellow brick and limestone accents in the Neo-Classical style, and over the next several decades, the building underwent a number of renovations. Yet, rather than rebuilding it in another spot in town, a decision was made to completely remodel the structure. On September 5, 1908, a new and improved, two-story, three bay courthouse — also composed of

By Tricia Lynn Strader



(Above) Berkeley Springs State Park is located in the center of Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. Photo courtesy of Travel Berkeley Springs.

(Left) In 1748, George Washington made his first visit to the area that would become Morgan County. Photo courtesy of Travel Berkeley Springs.

yellow brick with limestone accents — opened to the public.

NPS documents described the new 1908 courthouse as having a double-door entrance that was “arched and recessed and featured a large fanlight,” and “ionic pilasters flanked the entrance and supported an entablature accented with egg-and-dart and dentil molding.” Additionally, the “second and third stories of the tower had one-over-one, double-hung sash windows separated by a seated liberty motif,” fitting for such an iconic piece of architecture in the county seat.

The interior of the 1908 courthouse had a large center hall, with county offices situated on each side. Courtrooms and additional offices were located on the second floor. By the 2000s, magistrate court was in the building next door, previously a post office.

Throughout the 20th century, the 1908 courthouse was revamped to keep with changing times. The clock, which

was originally mechanical and struck the hours on a large bell, was converted to a synchronized electrical drive, and the bell striker was disconnected. An annex building was added, as was a jail behind the main building. The jail was constructed to replace a smaller one that was located on the same site from 1920 to 1939.

Morgan County Prosecuting Attorney Debra M.H. McLaughlin said the sheriff and his wife had lived upstairs once upon a time, and his wife had cooked for the prisoners. McLaughlin had heard one infamous incident that centered on an inmate escaping for a keg of beer.

“He snuck it back into the jail to drink, using a screwdriver to tap it,” she said. “But afterwards, he and a fellow prisoner had to break out again to get rid of the keg.”

When asked why he returned, McLaughlin laughed. “He didn’t want to break out,” she said. “He lived around here. He just wanted a keg of beer.”

Judge Christopher C. Wilkes began his tenure in the 23rd Judicial Circuit in 1993. He spent a number of years early on at the old courthouse, as well as the current structure from 2014 through 2016.

“As a judge in residence, I enjoyed working in Morgan County and working with the people here,” Wilkes said. “We kept in contact, and I came back in 2014. The differences between the old and new courthouse are remarkable. I loved the ambiance and history of the old courthouse with its arched doorways, large courtroom and tall ceilings. It was stately.”

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Unfortunately, in the dark, early morning hours of August 8, 2006, local residents were awakened to find their beloved, historic courthouse going up in flames. The clock faces had melted, but the bell and bell tower were salvaged. Despite the tragedy, the courthouse's vault saved birth, marriage and death records as well as files pertaining to land and voting transactions.

"We didn't lose a single record," Family Court Judge and former Morgan County Commissioner Glen Stotler said. "When they built that courthouse, they had the foresight to build a fireproof vault. The County Clerk's record room had three windows. They were equipped with steel curtains. The employees diligently closed them every night. Otherwise, the fire that destroyed the outside of the windows would have gotten to those records."

Within 24 hours of the 2006 fire, the county clerk was recording new documents. Within 48 hours, all county offices were operating in various buildings around town.

Several yellow bricks, sponsored by citizens and businesses, from the former courthouse were used in the sidewalks around the current. Others were sold as keepsakes or stored.

The current courthouse was built in 2010 by Sillings Architects, Inc. — who received an award for the project from the West Virginia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It was designed to mimic the classical look of the former as much as possible but also incorporate modern amenities. For example, arraignments and pre-trial hearings can be remotely held.

"With video capability, I can conduct a hearing with a defendant at the regional jail," Wilkes said. "Technologically, the new courthouse is highly advanced ... It's very user-friendly and up-to-date."

A touch-screen equipped projector in the courtroom can be used to show a jury any evidence presented.

"The old one was better for formality and grandeur, but as we retrofit older courthouses for new technology, innovative techniques have to go into place," Wilkes said.

Wilkes added that, with advances in technology, the current courthouse is safer for the public and employees. At the current courthouse, there are secure co, unlike in the previous courthouse, where many prisoners might be brought into the courtroom at once. Several would await their case in front of each other and the public.

"The regional jail might bring in 15 at a time while you went through open motions," Wilkes said.



Berkeley Castle was constructed of local sandstone by Samuel Taylor Suit in 1885 as a summer cottage for his young bride Rosa Pelham. Until 2000, it was open for house tours; currently it is a private residence available for photo and movie shoots. The building is dominated by the three-story tower; the roof is trimmed with battlements. There are 13 interior rooms and a basement "dungeon." Photo courtesy of Travel Berkeley Springs.

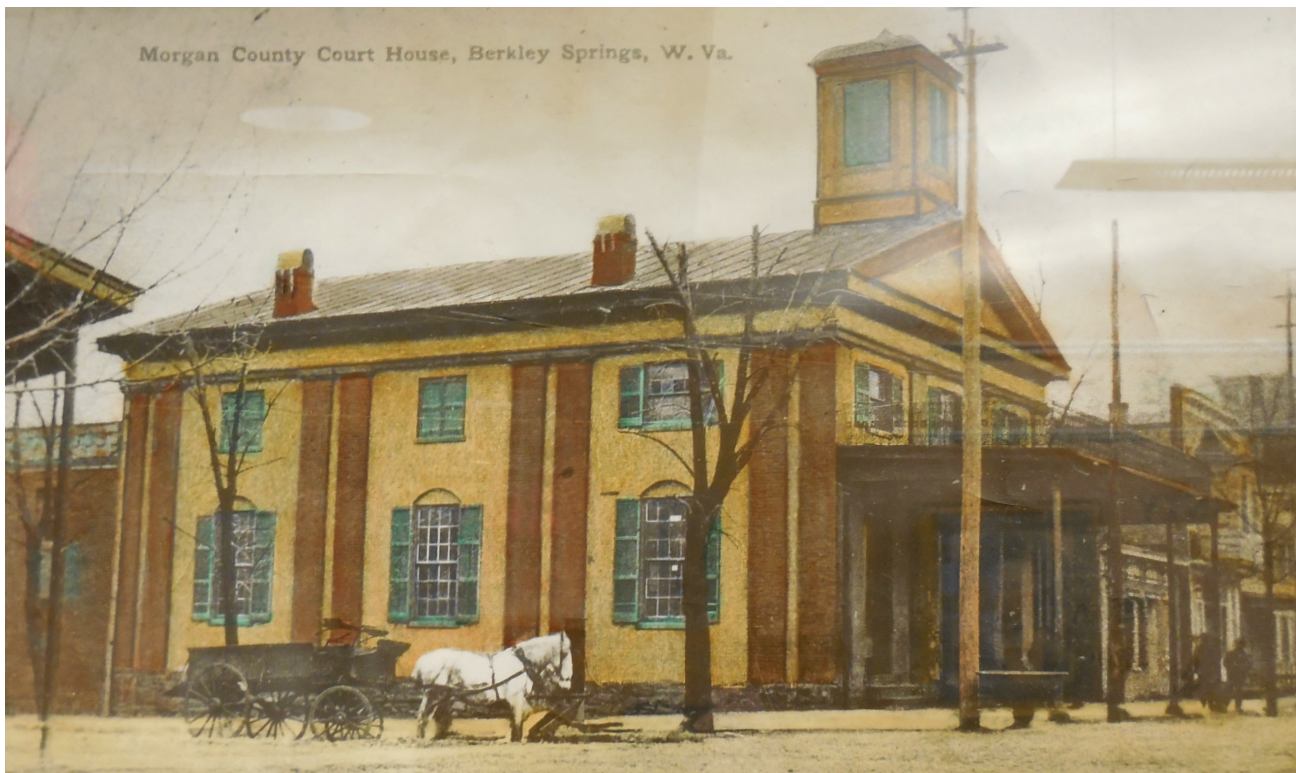
"It was neat to do jury trials at the old courthouse," McLaughlin said. "You would have 20 in a jury pool brought in, and as we called their name, there was the formality of them walking to the jury box. Functionally, this one is laid out much in the same way but more secure. We can also plug our laptops in anywhere, and it is ADA compliant. Sometimes, the chair lift on the stairway at the old one was out of order, so they might have to hold court downstairs in the [annex] commission meeting room."

The 2010 courthouse has a third story and holds the offices of the magistrate, family and circuit courts and county clerk, assessor, tax and county commission offices. The sheriff's office is next door in the former magistrate court.

The bell saved in the 2006 fire as well as other remnants — photos, a wall clock and an antique roll-top desk — were put in the current courthouse. Upstairs is a handmade wooden display case built by Chris Bosley that holds copies of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights. A new cupola was designed to look like the old bell tower. It has a new clock but no bell.

The courthouse also boasts another major improvement: e-filing.

"We were the first multi-county circuit to go to e-filing. That would have been hard to do in the old structure,"



Over time there were upgrades to the courthouse constructed in Morgan County in 1845. Originally, it was built of yellow brick with limestone accents in the Neo-Classical style. Photo courtesy of Tricia Lynn Strader.

Wilkes said. “I can sit in Berkeley County and review case files from Morgan on a web-based subscriber system. There are some counties that have already gone to it, but Chief Justice [Menis] Ketchum chose our circuit to be the first to go that way. It’s a testament to the personnel.”

The Morgan County Courthouse is also the first in the state to use solar and geothermal technology to save on utility costs. The geothermal system is designed to use naturally occurring heat from Warm Springs Run in Berkeley Springs State Park to help heat and cool the building.

“The best part of this new building,” Wilkes said, “is that it’s the only judge’s office in America that overlooks George Washington’s bathtub.”

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Like in George Washington’s day, the warm waters — kept at a constant 74.3 degrees — of Berkeley Springs State Park is a draw for visitors. While there, you can see the original ladies’ spring, Lord Fairfax and George Washington’s bathtubs, drink from the fountain and enjoy baths and/or spa services. The Old Roman Bathhouse offers traditional Roman baths while the Main Bathhouse offers Roman or Jacuzzi baths as well as massages, a sauna and shower. The park is also

used for outdoor concerts and community events such as George Washington’s Bathtub Celebration (March) Morgan Arts Council’s Concerts in the Park (July and August) and Apple Butter Festival (October). The Bath-Romney Campaign Historical and Preservation Association (BRCHPA) holds periodic Civil War living histories and lectures in the park and next door at The Country Inn of Berkeley Springs.

In the mid-1800s, the Berkeley Springs Hotel was built on the site now occupied by The Country Inn of Berkeley Springs. In early January of 1862, some of General T.J. “Stonewall” Jackson’s men occupied the hotel on what has been called the Bath-Romney Campaign, or Romney Expedition, a prelude to his famous Valley Campaign. Jackson had been ordered to drive out the Union forces in Bath and surrounding areas of Morgan County and Hancock, Maryland. Over the many decades since, the Berkeley Springs Hotel and other resort hotels, were destroyed by fires.

In the flower garden at the front of The Country Inn, there are historic signs for the Washington Heritage Trail National Scenic Byway and Civil War Trails. Scattered throughout town are other attractions such as antique shops, art galleries, second-hand shops, lodging and spas



(Above) In the early morning hours of August 8, 2006, local residents were awakened to find their beloved, historic courthouse engulfed in flames. Photo courtesy of the *Morgan Messenger*.

(Right) Thanks to the fireproof vault installed in the original Morgan County courthouse, not one record was lost in the 2006 fire. Photo courtesy of Tricia Lynn Strader.



that use the healing mineral waters. One can even take a walking tour of the original 100 lots that were laid out to form the town.

The Museum of Berkeley Springs, the oldest building in the historic town, is housed on the second floor of the 1815 Roman Bath House in Berkeley Springs State Park. Through its exhibits, publications and activities, the museum showcases the famous mineral springs and their continuing impact on the lives of people around them. There are geological — including a giant crystal excavated nearby at U.S. Silica — and historical exhibits, some of which feature items related to the town's once prominent tomato canning businesses. There is also artwork by Porte Canyon, and the museum serves as the interpretive center for the western segment of the Washington Heritage Trail National Scenic Byway.

Morgan County is also home to other points of interest including other state, county and local parks; The Ice House, the base for the Morgan Arts Council; Morgan County Observatory, The Ridge Fish Hatchery, Sleepy Creek Hunting and Fishing Area and more.

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Berkeley Springs and Morgan County's roots run deep, and the Morgan County Courthouse continues to bear witness to the county's respect for preserving records and ensuring justice. However, it is not just a building. The landmark represents a government by the people and for the people. **WVL**

Tricia Lynn Strader has written for *The Journal*, www.inthepanhandle.com and various magazines. She is a public relations consultant, actress and historical researcher/member of several historical and civic organizations. Tricia is also a Civil War living historian, most known for her portrayal of Martinsburg's Confederate spy, Belle Boyd.