



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

PENDLETON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Built on the ashes of the past.

On the southern end of Franklin, not far from the edge of town limits, the Pendleton County Courthouse stands proudly in the small county seat. Its rich history rivals the Victorian and Greek Revival-style buildings that line the historic district of Main Street.

The Colonial Revival-style architecture of the courthouse's modern iteration faces the McCoy Home, which was used as a telegraph office when the Union occupied Franklin during the Civil War. It was there that Union General Robert H. Milroy planned out the Battle of McDowell, which took place in what is now neighboring Highland County, Virginia, in 1862.

Before the courthouse property was established, Pendleton County was organized in the home of Seraiah Stratton near the community of Ruddle, six miles north of Franklin. According to *A History of Pendleton County*, published in 1910 by Oren F. Morton, it was clear immediately that the property would not suffice once the first county court was held.

"Tradition states that the court used the barn instead of the house. If so, it was doubtless because the dwelling itself was too small to afford a sufficient surplus of room," according to the book. The passage goes on to state that the county was only charged \$4 the entire time the property was used as the county seat to "not look exorbitant."

Soon after, it was decided the courthouse be constructed on the lands of Francis Evick, Franklin's namesake (at the time referred to as Frankford). The first grand jury at the new location was held in Garvin Hamilton's home on Sept. 1, 1788. Hamilton, whose home was on the Evick property, would become the first Pendleton County Clerk.

By Mike Mallow



Seneca Rocks, located in Monongahela National Forest, is one of the best known landmarks in West Virginia, rising nearly 900 feet above the North Fork River. A self-guided 1.3 mile trail begins behind the Seneca Rocks Discovery Center and offers the non-climber a way to reach the rocks and view the scenic valley below.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HEAP/SHUTTERSTOCK.

Though the courthouse has existed on the same grounds since the county's formation in 1788, the current structure is the fourth to be built on that site.

The original courthouse was a log construction, and documents specified that it "was to be 22 by 23 feet in the clear, and constructed of good hewn logs, the chinks between the logs being filled with stone and pointed with lime."

The old two-story log building gave way to a brick structure that was erected in 1817 at a cost of \$3,250.

In 1882 a levy of \$1,000 per year for six years was ordered, which would provide funding for a new courthouse. The contract for construction was awarded in 1889 and the third version of the building was constructed for \$7,900. This building, however, would not stand as long as its predecessor.

On April 17, 1924, a fire that began in *The Pendleton Times* newspaper office destroyed much of historic part



of Franklin, including the courthouse. Fortunately, the records were removed from the building before the fire reached them.

According to current Pendleton County Clerk Elise White, "The men moved quickly to hand the records through open windows as the fire approached."

Because of their efforts, the deed records in the County Clerk Office go back to the county's formation in 1788. Those books are tucked away in the clerk's office. Their tattered and browning pages make no attempt to disguise their age.



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White also noted that when the courthouse was rebuilt, the Clerk's Office, home to the records, was constructed with concrete walls in order to fireproof the room. The entrance was also outfitted with a fireproof vault door, which remains connected to the doorframe to this day.

The current courthouse began construction in 1925 and was finished in 1927. The total cost of construction at the time was between \$60,000 and \$70,000.

The Jailhouse

The jailhouse had always been an integral part of the courthouse and existed alongside the courthouse since the beginning.

Today, the courthouse stands alone.

The final jailhouse building was demolished in May of 2003 after the Pendleton County Historical Society lost a final appeal to save it. By then, holding cells had been relocated to the courthouse basement, with long-term inmates being moved to the Potomac Highlands Regional Jail in Augusta. The increasingly derelict building combined with the courthouse's need for additional parking led to the county commission's decision to raze the structure.

Although the courthouse has had four versions in

the past 229 years, the jailhouse went through five before its final demise.

The first jail to sit at the courthouse property was short-lived. It was described as a "massive little building," and in 1796 a new jail was commissioned. However, just 14 years later another jail was ordered. The building remained long enough to be upgraded twice, once in 1820 to add pillory, stocks and a whipping post, and in 1838 when an addition was built.

This jail burned in 1864 at the close of the Civil War, and was promptly replaced, only to be consumed by fire again 41 years later. The last version was built soon after and was fortunate enough to be one of only a few buildings to escape the massive 1924 fire.

The Current Courthouse

The current courthouse, which was remodeled in 1995, is a large, two-story brick structure with Greek Ionic columns on the front face of the building. An ornate cupola tops the building, which shines among the new roof tiles that were installed in 2016.

Inside, a mishmash of laminate tiles are surrounded by off-white walls, sporting plaques honoring past state supreme court justices and county-raised soldiers who died in foreign combat.



The Sites Homestead is located near Seneca Rocks, West Virginia. The log house was built by Jacob Sites in 1839 below the Seneca Rocks ridge. The house remained in the Sites family until it was acquired by the U.S. Forest Service in 1968 as part of Spruce Knob-Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area in Monongahela National Forest. It was restored by the Forest Service in the 1980s and is now part of the Seneca Rocks Discovery Center facility.

PHOTO BY MARY TERRIBERRY/SHUTTERSTOCK.

The first floor of the building contains the Assessor, Magistrate, County Clerk and County Commission offices. The Sheriff's Department is also located on this floor for tax collecting purposes.

The upstairs is designated solely for court activities, with the Probation, Circuit Clerk and Magistrate Court offices located on this floor. At the eastern end of the second floor is the courtroom, which houses the modern tools of the criminal justice system. Along the walls of the courtroom are hand-drawn illustrations of the three previous courthouses, serving as a reminder of the history that came before.

Tourism

Pendleton County is best known for its scenic beauty and agriculture. Seneca Rocks, one of the most recognizable landmarks in the state, is located on the Western side of the county and brings thousands of visitors to the area each year.

Franklin is also home to one of the largest heritage festivals in the state. The Treasure Mountain Festival, held annually on the third weekend in September, will be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2018. It is during this weekend each year that the tiny town of under 700 swells to as many as 20,000 festivalgoers. The festival is based on the legend of treasure buried in the mountains following an Indian raid on Fort Seybert in 1758.

Descendants of families attacked in that raid still reside in the area. They are a testament to the importance of history and heritage alive in modern day Pendleton County. **WV**

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