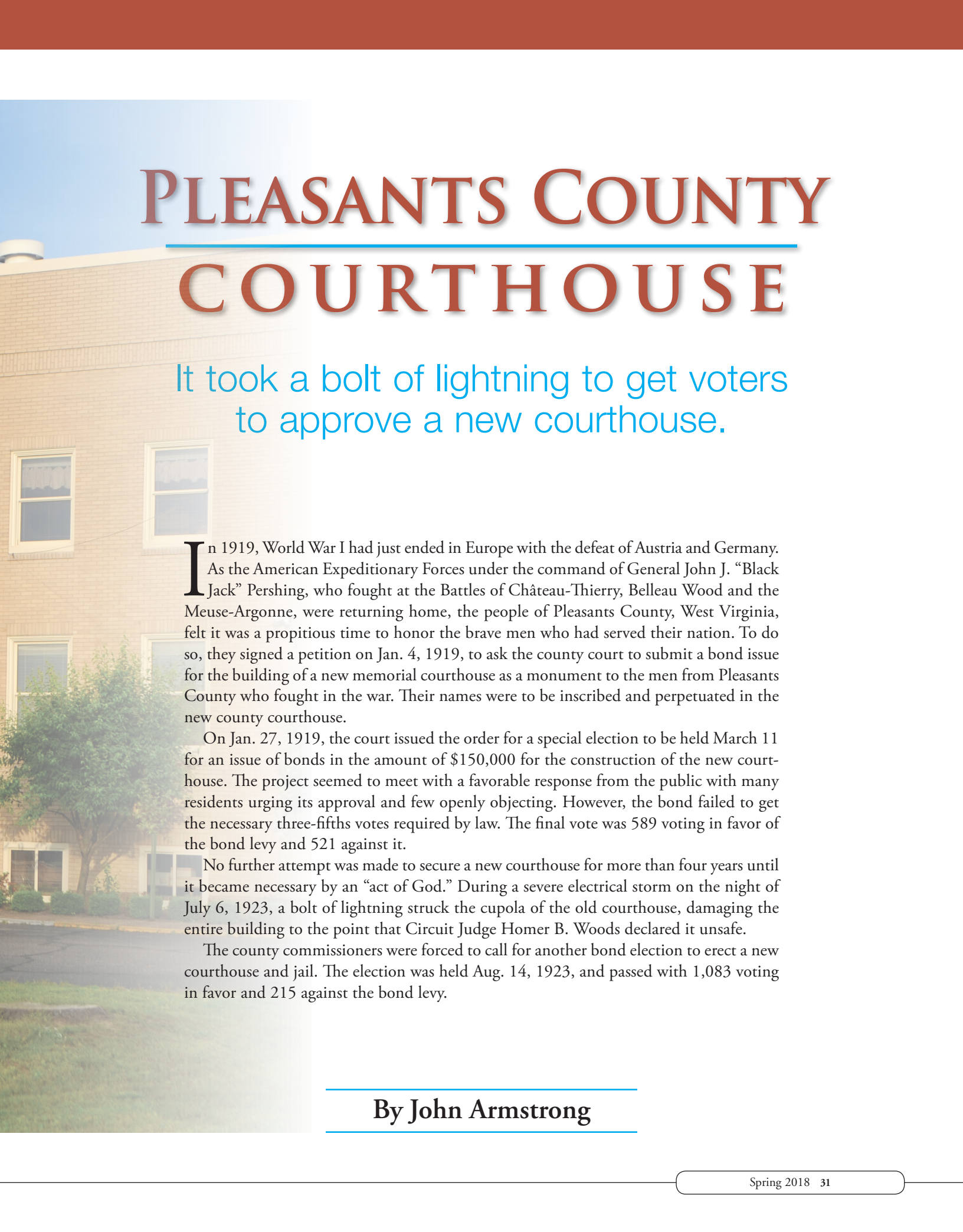




Photo courtesy of the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia.
Photo by Jeff Gentner.



PLEASANTS COUNTY COURTHOUSE

It took a bolt of lightning to get voters
to approve a new courthouse.

In 1919, World War I had just ended in Europe with the defeat of Austria and Germany. As the American Expeditionary Forces under the command of General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing, who fought at the Battles of Château-Thierry, Belleau Wood and the Meuse-Argonne, were returning home, the people of Pleasants County, West Virginia, felt it was a propitious time to honor the brave men who had served their nation. To do so, they signed a petition on Jan. 4, 1919, to ask the county court to submit a bond issue for the building of a new memorial courthouse as a monument to the men from Pleasants County who fought in the war. Their names were to be inscribed and perpetuated in the new county courthouse.

On Jan. 27, 1919, the court issued the order for a special election to be held March 11 for an issue of bonds in the amount of \$150,000 for the construction of the new courthouse. The project seemed to meet with a favorable response from the public with many residents urging its approval and few openly objecting. However, the bond failed to get the necessary three-fifths votes required by law. The final vote was 589 voting in favor of the bond levy and 521 against it.

No further attempt was made to secure a new courthouse for more than four years until it became necessary by an “act of God.” During a severe electrical storm on the night of July 6, 1923, a bolt of lightning struck the cupola of the old courthouse, damaging the entire building to the point that Circuit Judge Homer B. Woods declared it unsafe.

The county commissioners were forced to call for another bond election to erect a new courthouse and jail. The election was held Aug. 14, 1923, and passed with 1,083 voting in favor and 215 against the bond levy.

By John Armstrong



PHOTOS COURTESY PLEASANTS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

The Isaac Reynolds House served as the first courthouse from May 15, 1881, until June 11, 1884.

The new courthouse was to be constructed on the public square in St. Marys where the old courthouse stood since being built in the summer of 1854 on land donated by Alexander H. Creel. The third and current Pleasants County courthouse was completed in the spring of 1925.

St. Marys was founded by Alexander Creel, who visited the Ohio Valley in 1834 from Eastern Virginia on business. While traveling one night by steamer boat to Wheeling, he had a vision in his sleep of the Virgin Mary directing him to look upon the Virginia side of the river. As the legend has it, the Virgin Mary said, "You will behold the site of what some day will be a happy and prosperous city."

Creel awoke and when he opened the door to his stateroom, he saw illuminated by a brilliant moon, the lower end of Middle Island and beyond it a spacious cove surrounded by densely wooded hills. The memory of his vision remained with him — he returned and bought the land where the town of St. Marys now is located.

The more cynical segment of the population say Creel's real motivation may have been the prospect of a new county being formed with a suitable location needed for the county seat with a courthouse, and the possibility of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad coming down and crossing the Ohio River to connect with the proposed railroad to Cincinnati.

What is indisputable is that once Creel had become a landowner here, he became one of the early promoters of forming a new county out of parts of Wood, Tyler and Ritchie Counties. His efforts began as

early as 1848. However, it was not until the winter of 1850-1851 that the establishment of the new county was accomplished in the Virginia legislature. It was named Pleasants County in honor of the Honorable James Pleasants, who was a member of the House of Representatives in Congress for Virginia from 1811 to 1819 and served as governor of the State of Virginia in 1822.

On May 15, 1851, the first county court was held in what was the residence of Isaac O. Reynolds, formerly the old "Central House," at the corner of Main and Lafayette Streets, St. Marys. This house then belonged to Alexander H. Creel.

The following gentlemen served as justices: Moses Williamson, John K. Prince, Abner Martin, Thomas Browse, Samuel Hammett, Abram D. Gorrell, Isaac Williamson, Edmund Riggs, Alexander Creel and John Stewart.

The new justices took an oath of fidelity to the Commonwealth of Virginia and the oath to support



PHOTOS COURTESY PLEASANTS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

The Pleasants County Courthouse that was dedicated June 1854 was struck by lightning July 6, 1923.



PHOTO BY TRAVIS GILES.

Look out! On Second Street in St. Marys in Pleasants County, a train rolls straight through downtown at 10 miles per hour.

the Constitution of the United States, as required by law and entered upon the duties of their office by taking their seats upon the court bench in the manner prescribed by law.

Alexander Creel, John Stewart and John Logan were appointed commissioners on behalf of this court for the purpose of selecting a suitable place for holding the courts hereafter for this county and for keeping its papers and records.

William I. Boreman, John W. Homer, Joseph Spencer, John J. Jackson Jr., Arthur I. Boreman, William L. Jackson, James M. Jackson, Benjamin W. Jackson, Leonard S. Hall, Joseph C. Moore and Jacob B. Blair, who were licensed to practice law in the courts of the Commonwealth of Virginia, were approved to practice law in this court as well.

Several of these young attorneys would go on to play distinguished and key roles in the history of the newly created state. John J. Jackson Jr., became a federal judge appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant and became known as the "Iron Judge." Arthur I. Boreman became the first governor of the new state of West Virginia. James M. Jackson served many years as a circuit judge and Leonard S. Hall was a member of the Virginia Assembly of 1860 and voted to secede from the Union. William L. Jackson became a general in the Confederate army.

The three commissioners appointed to select the building site reported the location they selected was a tract of land pledged by one of those commissioners, Alexander Creel. The land was a small parcel on his farm near the town of St. Marys.

In 1849, the county was organized and Creel had the town of St. Marys surveyed and platted by Thomas Browse, surveyor. In 1851, he had the plat recorded in county deed book No. 1, page 510.

References from the county records indicated Creel donated \$600 of the \$3,000 required to secure St. Marys as the permanent county seat

of justice, as well as the land where courthouse and jail would be built.

The site occupied an elevated position in the rear of the town, extending on each side of George Street, which, after reaching this square, divided and ran entirely around it. From its commanding position, the courthouse was visible for many miles up and down the Ohio River. The jail occupied the basement of the building.

The brick for the courthouse was burned on the Gallaher farm nearby, but the work on the courthouse went slowly and it was not until June 11, 1854, that court was finally held in the new building. During the three years it took to complete the new courthouse, the house of Isaac Reynolds continued to be used for county business and is considered the first courthouse of Pleasants County.

The new courthouse seemed to be substantial, but was cheaply built without much thought about the architectural design. The interior offices were small — allowing only two people to work comfortably. The upper story was divided into two offices for the sheriff and prosecuting attorney, and two larger rooms, one for the grand jury and one for petit juries. The stairs leading to these rooms were exceedingly steep, almost resembling a ladder. As a result, the sheriff and prosecuting attorney never used their offices at the

courthouse, but opened offices in the business part of town, leaving the clerk and jailer as the only occupants of the new building.

Despite being a commanding sight, the courthouse was isolated because of the difficulty of reaching it. The old lane that provided the approach to the building had been neglected and the only direct approach was up the steep bluff on George Street, which had deep gullies caused by the rains.

In the late 1880s, the County Commission contracted with E.B. Park to build a wooden stairway up the hill at the east end of George Street to make it easier to reach the courthouse. The stairway remained in place until 1924 when the steep hill was graded to make a driveway to the new courthouse being built.

The land donated by Alexander Creel for the courthouse built in 1854 had a provision in the deed stating if the land should cease to be used for the county courthouse, the land would revert back to Creel's heirs. The commissioners did not have any justification for abandoning the site since it was far above the reach of floodwaters and had such a prominent location in the landscape, so they purchased additional property surrounding the original site. It allowed the new building to be moved further back from the edge of the bluff and make the grade up to the courthouse less steep. It also allowed space to build a separate jail, jailer's residence and a parking lot.

An architectural firm from Clarksburg, Holmboe

and Pogue, drew up the plans for the new building and the building contract was awarded to Putnam and Foreman of Marietta, Ohio, on May 20, 1924. The \$99,983 contract called for the demolition of the old courthouse, and erecting and equipping of the new one, except for finishing of basement and leaving the façade and cornices plain. The demolition began in August 1924 and the cornerstone was laid Sept. 3, with a lengthy Masonic ceremony led by Grand Master Fred C. Steinbecker of Wheeling, West Virginia.

Work on the new courthouse progressed rapidly through the winter months and the county officials moved into the building in the spring of 1925.

Today, Pleasants County is regarded as one of the best places to live and work in the state of West Virginia. In 2015, a new St. Marys High School was dedicated with a state-of-the-art, one-to-one computer curriculum and athletic facilities surpassing many larger schools and even some small colleges. The nearly \$30 million facility was supported by the generous residents of Pleasants County with a bond levy and help from the state School Building Authority.

For a second time in four years, the Pleasants County Commission was awarded the Thelma J. Stone Award for excellence in county government in August 2016. The award recognizes the most outstanding County Commission in West Virginia based upon several criteria. They include innovation, cooperation, achievement, leadership, and legal and fiscal compliance.

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Pleasants County is home to just over 7,400 citizens and the County Commission continues to work for them. The commission successfully implemented many county improvements including providing free emergency flight coverage for the citizens of Pleasants County with the AirMedCare (Air Evac) network, working with First Energy to utilize their tower in the southern end of the county for better emergency communications service for first responders and the implementation of NIXLE for emergency notifications to residents through phone, text and email alerts.

The commission has continued working with congressional leaders to emphasize the impact the FEMA and floodplain maps from the Biggart Waters Act have on Pleasants County.

Upgrades to the Pleasants County Park have been made including the new aquatic center and renovations in the bathhouse, restrooms and handicapped entrances to the grandstands, dugouts for the baseball field, and sidewalks to the pool and parking areas.

The County Commission also assisted with the creation of the Pleasants County Convention and Visitors Bureau, television commercials to attract visitors and potential new residents to the county, the downtown farmers market, the Evening on Main and attracting new industries to the Industrial Park on State Route 2 in the southern end of the county including Summit Environmental and Sistersville Tank Works. The expansion project will create a \$65-\$70 million dollar investment in Pleasants County while adding approximately 40 new jobs for the area at Solvay's Willow Island facility. **WVL**

John Armstrong was an American history and government teacher for 32 years primarily at St. Marys High School in Pleasants County. He coached basketball and his teams won three state titles and were state runner-up four times. He and his wife Susan recently celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary on Jan. 13, 2018. They have three sons and eight grandchildren.

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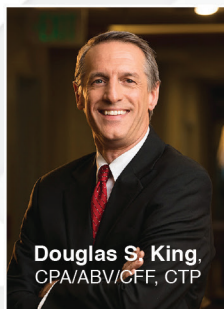
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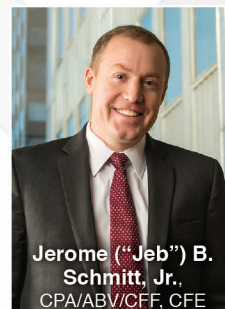
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