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PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.



PRESTON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The 200-year-old history of the Preston County Courthouse

Preston County was formed from Monongalia County by an Act of Assembly passed Jan. 19, 1818. The first court convened in storekeeper John Robert's building, known as the Old Red Courthouse. The first term of the Circuit or Superior Court (as it was known then) was held on the first Monday after the fourth Monday in April 1818. Judge Daniel Smith from Rockingham County, Virginia, presided.

In 1821, the two-story "Stone Courthouse" was built on the site of the present courthouse. It was constructed by Major William B. Zinn. A stone jail with a whipping post in front of it was also built. In 1845, a movement to move the county seat to Tunnelton failed and it remained in Kingwood. In 1856, it was decided the Stone Courthouse was too small. There was also discussion about moving the county seat to Albright.

The county court appropriated \$8,000 for the new building. However, the lowest bid was \$16,000. The county court declined raising its appropriation to that amount. A member of the supervisory committee, James C. McGrew, was given permission by his associates to go forward on his own initiative. McGrew assembled a workforce of men and began work on the courthouse in the fall of 1856.

By Jeniffer Graham



PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

After James C. McGrew and Persis Hagans married in 1841, they set up housekeeping in this painted brick home known within the family as “The Pines.” James was charged with building the Preston County Courthouse in 1856. The Society for Preservation of McGrew House restored the home in the early 1990s, continues to maintain it and hosts educational and cultural programs on site. The property was accorded status on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993.

McGrew was not deterred when a storm blew in the unfinished walls. He immediately began rebuilding the courthouse. The cost, when completed, was \$8,000 plus and additional \$1,500 to cover the storm damage. The courthouse built by McGrew served the county from 1857 to 1869.

On March 7, 1869, the courthouse burned to the ground from what appeared to be an incendiary act. Elihu Gregg, a local landowner was suspected of the act and was indicted. On June 21, 1869, Governor William E. Stevenson issued a proclamation ordering the Circuit Court to be held in the Preston Academy in Kingwood.

Gregg was tried in the Preston Academy on July 12, 1869, and was convicted. At that time, incendiarism in West Virginia was punishable by death. He was sentenced

to be hanged Sept. 2, 1869. Before the sentence could be carried out his attorney obtained an order from the Supreme Court for a new trial. That trial also ended in a conviction and Gregg was resentenced to be hanged on Jan. 2, 1870. A few days after the conviction, he was told he could have a choice between life in prison and being hanged. Gregg escaped from jail on Nov. 1, 1869. He was tracked down, arrested again and was eventually pardoned by the governor.

In 1870, a new brick courthouse was built to replace the one that was destroyed. McCafferty, Smalley & Menear constructed the building at a cost to the county of \$11,000. The building was two stories high. An attempt to move the county seat to Terra Alta was made in 1910. The proposal promised a “new, modern,



Coopers Rock State Forest is a 12,747-acre state forest in Monongalia and Preston counties. It is named for Coopers Rock, a series of sandstone cliffs above the Cheat River Gorge. Legend has it that a fugitive hid near what is now the overlook. A cooper by trade, he continued to make and sell barrels from his mountain hideout. Many of the forest's structures, including the main overlook, picnic shelters and superintendent's house, were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. Eleven of these structures have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. (Information courtesy of wvstateparks.com.)



PRESTON COUNTY RAISED BUCKWHEAT CAKES

In a large bowl, mix 1 ENVELOPE DRY YEAST and 1 TEASPOON SALT into one quart lukewarm water. Let stand a few minutes. Add approximately 3 CUPS BUCKWHEAT FLOUR, enough to make a stiff batter. Cover and let stand overnight.

Dissolve 1/2 TEASPOON BAKING SODA, 1/2 TEASPOON BAKING POWDER, and 2 TEASPOONS SUGAR in 1 CUP HOT WATER. Stir into batter, then add about 1 CUP WARM WATER to make a thin batter. Cook on a hot griddle.

(Makes 8-12 cakes)

Save at least 1 cup of the batter for the next cooking. (It will keep in the refrigerator for about a week.) To renew, add 1 pint lukewarm water, 1/2 teaspoon salt and enough buckwheat flour to make a stiff batter. Repeat second paragraph.

The Preston County Buckwheat Festival is held annually during the last week of September. It is the namesake of the raised buckwheat cakes that are cooked on a hot griddle and served as part of a buckwheat cake and sausage dinner at the festival. The official recipe, above, is shared on The Preston County Buckwheat Festival website, buckwheatfest.com.

up-to-date county courthouse fireproof from basement to top of the dome donated by Terra Alta.” Information at the time promised an \$80,000 courthouse and a free site for it to be built on. Once again, it was decided to keep the county seat in Kingwood.

The brick courthouse was torn down in 1933 and the current courthouse took its place. The sandstone for its facades was quarried locally. The final cost of the courthouse was \$113,500.90. It was dedicated on Aug. 25, 1934.

The soldier monument located on the courthouse lawn was placed there to honor Preston County’s Civil War soldiers. In 1903, the Preston County Commission appropriated \$1,000 to aid in the construction of the monument. The statue rests on top of a 36-foot high granite monument inscribed with the words, “To the soldiers and sailors of Preston County.” The 40 foot by 40 foot plot the monument stands on was leased from the county court for \$5 in 1895. The lease was for 99 years. The monument was scheduled to be dedicated Oct. 17, 1903, but a severe snowstorm delayed the dedication ceremony until Oct. 31, 1903. Five thousand people

attended the dedication, including 100 civil war soldiers.

The cannon, a Columbian Siege Gun, located on the courthouse lawn was last fired in April 1861 during the battle of Fort Sumter. The cannon is 12 feet long and has an 8 inch bore. William G. Brown helped the Kelly Post of the Grand Army of the Republic arrange for the cannon to be brought to Kingwood. It was sent by rail to the Kingwood Rail Station. It took three teams of horses to carry the 8,500-pound cannon to its final destination in Kingwood. The cost of delivery was \$100. Although battles fought during the Civil War demanded more portable weapons, the Columbian and other guns developed by Thomas Rodman, Robert Parrott and John Dahlgren accounted for most of the heavy artillery used during the war.

The first floor of the current courthouse is occupied by the Probation Office and Family Court. Magistrate Court is held on the second floor. The Circuit Clerk’s Office and the judges’ chambers are on the top floor as is the courtroom.

The courthouse annex is located across the road from the main courthouse. This is where the Sheriff’s Tax

Office, the County Clerk's Office and the Assessor's office are located. The Prosecuting Attorney's Office, County Commission Office and the Preston County Health Department are located on the second floor of the annex.

Points of Interest & Tourism

The historical McGrew house was home to James C. and Persis Hagans McGrew. The original 1840s structure consists of the northern section of the present house. The large southern section was added after the Civil War. The house accorded status on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993. The grounds surrounding the house are home to many rare and unusual trees and shrubs.

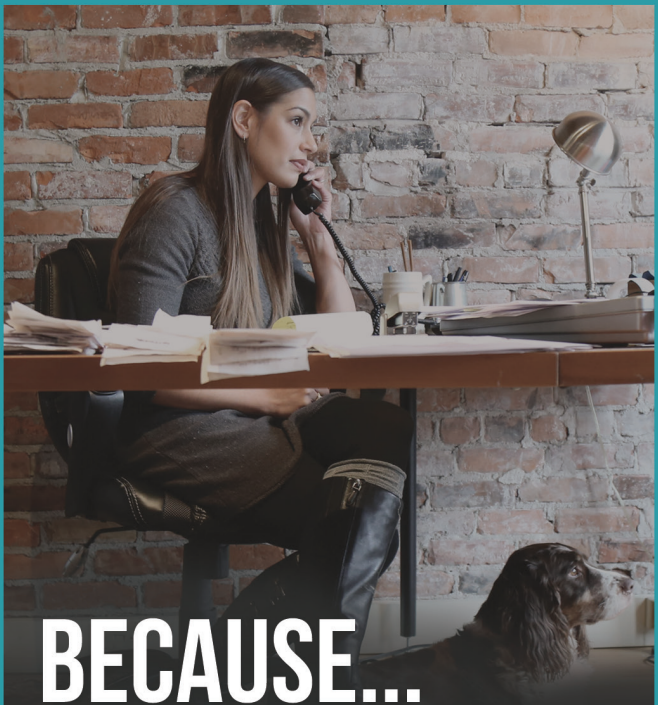
The Lantz family bought the property in 1910 following McGrew's death. In 1917, it was sold to the Gibson family. The Gibsons resided in the house until the 1950s when they converted it into apartments. In the 1970s it was sold to the Schwab family and served as the senior citizen's center.

In the late 1980s, the Preston County Commission purchased the property and by 1989 the city of Kingwood Tourism Committee discovered the historical significance of the property and local volunteers formed the McGrew Society (later dubbed the Society for Preservation of McGrew House.) In the early 1990s, the society entered into an agreement with the county commission to restore and maintain the property, and to offer educational and culture programs there.

The Preston County Buckwheat Festival is a must see. Held the last week of September, it has three parades, more than 50 arts and craft vendors, livestock shows, carnival rides and the coronation of Queen Ceres and King Buckwheat. It also offers Preston County's famous buckwheat cake and sausage dinners.

For more places of interest, activities around the county and information about Coopers Rock State Forest, go to www.tourpreston.com. **WVL**

Jeniffer Graham is a freelance writer and researcher. She is the winner of eight state and national newspaper awards, six of which were first place. She is currently a stringer for *The Dominion Post* and is working on a novel with her grandson, Dakota Garlitz.



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