

RALEIGH COUNTY COURTHOUSE

An ever-increasing population brought
the need for a new courthouse

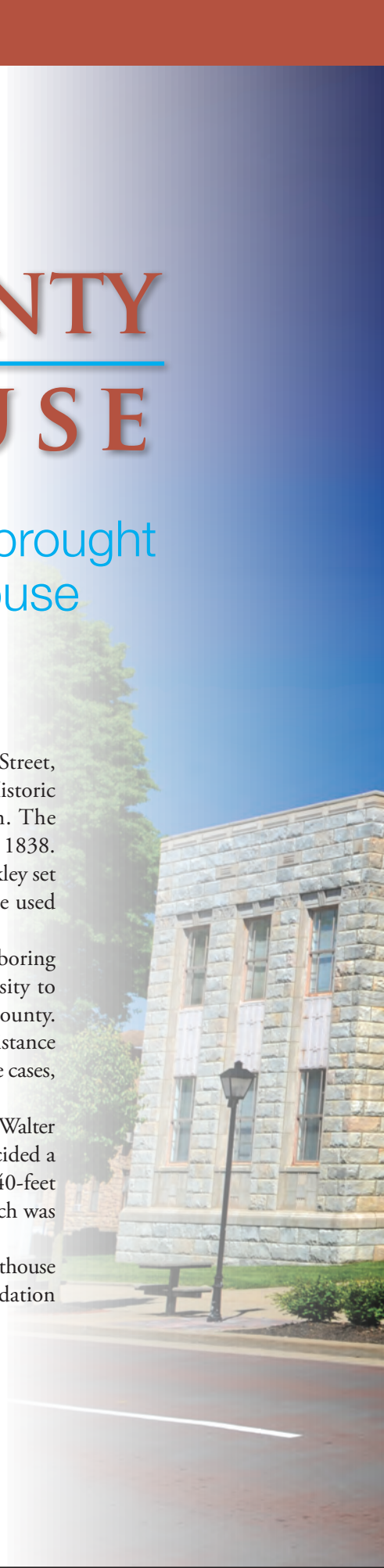
The Raleigh County Courthouse, located at 215 Main Street, is the centerpiece of the Beckley Courthouse Square Historic District, which comprises eight blocks of downtown. The city's founder — Alfred Beckley — drew a map for the town in 1838. According to Raleigh County historian Scott Worley, Alfred Beckley set aside Courthouse Square, now a historic landmark, to always be used as a public space.

Raleigh County was formed in 1850 from a portion of neighboring Fayette County. The population had reached a significant density to warrant petitioning the Virginia General Assembly for a new county. Worley said one of the reasons for a separate county was the distance residents had to travel to conduct county business, which, in some cases, exceeded two days' travel.

With the official formation of Raleigh County, so named for Sir Walter Raleigh, local officials first gathered at a church, but quickly decided a courthouse was needed. Alfred Beckley donated a 240-feet by 240-feet parcel of land in the center of the town for the courthouse, which was constructed in 1852 for \$2,772.

Within two years, however, it was determined that the first courthouse had not been constructed up to standard. Worley said the foundation

By Wendy Holdren







COURTESY OF BECKLEY-RALEIGH COUNTY CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU. PHOTO BY MOLLY WOLFF.

Head to Winterplace in Raleigh County. There are more than 90 skiable acres and it's the farthest south you can ski in West Virginia. The ski resort boasts 27 slopes, one terrain park and the largest snow tubing park in West Virginia.

had cracked and the building itself had settled almost a foot into the earth. The original courthouse was demolished, but rebuilt on the same location within the next three years. That courthouse, a brick, two-story structure, stood until the Civil War.

During the war, the county court closed for the most part, Worley said. Even though Raleigh County saw no major battles during the war, Beckley was an occupied city. Many units of the Union Army, mainly from Ohio, set up camp in and around Beckley. Worley said the main reason for the Union Army occupation was control over the two turnpikes that intersected in the middle of Beckley — the Giles,

Fayette and Kanawha Turnpike, which traveled from near Pearisburg, Virginia, to Kanawha Falls, and the Logan Turnpike, which went from Beckley to Kentucky.

Interestingly enough, two future presidents — Rutherford B. Hayes, then-colonel of the Ohio 23rd Infantry, and William McKinley, a young soldier — spent the Civil War in Raleigh County. Commanders made their headquarters at the courthouse, and their troops camped on the courthouse lawn and other structures in town. Hayes would become the 19th president of the United States and McKinley the 25th.

When the war was over in 1865,

local officials decided both the jail and the courthouse had been too heavily damaged to be occupied, so yet another courthouse was constructed. All new furniture was also purchased for the new building. Similar to the Fayette County Courthouse in structure, the Raleigh Courthouse, opened in roughly 1866, was a two-story brick building with a turret.

The structure remained as it was for roughly 30 years, when officials decided it was too small for their needs. Worley said the county's population had grown, so more courtroom space was needed. Officials also decided to update the jail, creating room for 150 prisoners,



The overlooks at Grandview provide sweeping views of the New River — from 1400 feet above it. The area features a visitors center, hiking trails, outdoor summer dramas from Theatre West Virginia and more.

and moved it onto the courthouse grounds. The jail was previously located adjacent to the grounds, where the Raleigh County Commission is currently located — 116 North Heber Street.

The new courthouse was constructed in 1891-92 and was very similar to the previous structure with the exception of a new bell tower. The architect and builder, Frank Davis, of Baltimore, Maryland, constructed the building for \$34,355. That building met the county's needs until the middle of the 1930s, Worley said, when yet another courthouse was built. The population continued to grow, so even more space was needed.

While there was no money available to build an entirely new courthouse, the county was able to secure grants from the Works Progress Administration to remodel the old one. The art deco-style building, using steel joist construction and concrete floors, was completed in 1936. The exterior is pink and neutral color Indiana limestone. The front façade has three divisions with 12 bays, with the main entrance in the center section. The windows are recessed with aluminum spandrels between the first and second story. The contractor was J.O. Freeman and the architect was J.T. Bengston.

The remodeled structure, what

can be seen today, was simply built around the old courthouse. Visitors who go to the elevator shaft in the basement of the courthouse can see the old brick courthouse inside the current one, Worley said. All the architectural details remain intact.

The Register-Herald reported the Raleigh County Commission made a commitment in 2006 to construct an annex — the Raleigh County Judicial Center. Officials said they recognized the county's need for a centralized judicial system in order to house all the county judicial officers under one roof. Space constraints and the lack of technology in the current courthouse were also considered in the planning and

construction of the annex. The annex, located directly across the street from the courthouse, opened in April 2012.

Today, the annex is used for magistrate court and circuit court, while the Raleigh County Courthouse is used for other legal proceedings. The courthouse grounds are home to number of monuments to Alfred Beckley, the city's history, Beckley area mine disasters, the Civil War and former Mayor Charles F. Shoemaker.

• • •

Raleigh County's historical landmarks include the Beckley Courthouse Square Historic

District, Wildwood Museum, Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine, Little Beaver Dam, Sophia Historic District, Saint Colemans Catholic Church and the Beckley Mill.

The county's main tourist attractions include Grandview, part of the New River Gorge National River; Little Beaver State Park; Winterplace Ski Resort; Exhibition Coal Mine, which allows visitors to ride through the dark passages of a vintage coal mine; Tamarack, a location that showcases handcrafts, fine art and regional cuisine and Theatre West Virginia, an outdoor theater production company specializing in West Virginia historical dramas.

Local hot spots include the Beckley Underground, which

includes Sir Walter's Tavern, Melody's, Cheers, and The Raleigh Playhouse and Theatre, The Chocolate Moose, and Foster's Main Street Tavern. The city's most popular annual events include the Appalachian Festival, hosted in August, the Rocket Boys Festival, hosted in September/October, and Chili Night, hosted in October. **WVL**

Wendy Holdren is a Wyoming County native and a lifelong West Virginian. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Concord University and her Master of Arts in Journalism from the University of Missouri. She has worked for *The Register-Herald* since 2011, first as a reporter and now as managing editor.

Bailey & Wyant P.L.L.C

Welcomes Former West Virginia Supreme Court Justice



Brent D. Benjamin

As Of Counsel at Bailey & Wyant, PLLC, former - Justice Benjamin's work will emphasize appellate practice & consulting, general & commercial litigation, and alternative dispute resolution.

(304)345-4222

bbenjamin@baileywyant.com

www.baileywyant.com