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RITCHIE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The nearly 100-year-old building is the third courthouse to serve the county.

The current Ritchie County Courthouse, with its neoclassical architecture, was completed in 1923 on a small rise in Harrisville. It became the third courthouse to serve Ritchie County citizens.

The Ritchie County Bar Association pushed for a third courthouse to be built.

The county bar association presented a resolution in August 1922 to the “county court,” stating the courthouse was inadequate to meet the needs of county residents and that action should be taken to correct the situation, according to *The History of Ritchie County, West Virginia to 1980*, published by the Ritchie County Historical Society Inc. The attorneys signing the resolution were R.S. Blair, president; Victor Cooper, secretary; S.O. Prunty; Williams S. Clark and S.A. Powell, states the historical society book.

A contract for \$68,000 was awarded in December 1922 to Forman and Putnam of Marietta, Ohio, to build the third courthouse, according to *The History of Ritchie County, West Virginia to 1980*. The first courthouse was constructed in 1844, one year after Ritchie County was formed. A brick building built in 1874 replaced the first courthouse and was used until the present-day courthouse was constructed.

The contract for the 1923 courthouse mentions \$66,000 for “general work” and \$2,500 for Indiana limestone on the building’s exterior, according to *The History of Ritchie County, West Virginia to 1980*. The book notes subsequent bids of \$11,925 and \$5,817 were submitted to construct a portico and tower (without a clock), respectively. The Harrisville Woman’s Club raised money to purchase a clock for the courthouse tower in 1924, the historical society said.

As the courthouse has been remodeled over the years, efforts have been made to maintain interior features of the county building, according to the history book. For example, the original woodwork in the circuit courtroom and judge’s chambers was preserved.

By Paul LaPann

The Ritchie County Courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2004, said David Scott, president of both the Ritchie County Historical Society and the Ritchie County Historical Museum in Harrisville. The building is situated in the center of the county seat of Harrisville on a knoll above the main commercial road in town called Main Street. The courthouse can be seen from several places in town, Scott noted.

Harrisville's establishment dates back to 1822 when Thomas Harris, an early settler, registered a plat in what was then Wood County in the state of Virginia, Scott said. The settlement became a chartered Virginia town. The courthouse was in Parkersburg, west of Harrisville, about a 35-mile drive today.

It was Harris's intention to make Harrisville, a small settlement with a few houses at the time, the county seat, Scott said. The settlement was in the center of the new Ritchie County, formed in 1843. Harris's nephew, of the same name, was born in what is now Harrisville and was a general in the Union Army



The former Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Tunnel No. 13 near Cornwallis is part of the 72-mile North Bend Rail Trail near Cornwallis. Hikers are welcome to take their pets as they travel across the 36 bridges and through the 10 tunnels that are part of the trail.

PHOTO BY DANIEL BUSCH, EPICAR PRODUCTIONS.

during the Civil War. Gen. Thomas Harris distinguished himself at the Civil War battles at Petersburg and Cedar Creek, according to a historical marker from the state of West Virginia in Harrisville.

The county was named after Thomas Ritchie, a journalist from Richmond, Virginia, who was a champion of causes associated with Western Virginia, Scott said. Western

men and boys) in 1861 near Auburn, Ritchie County, he said.

The B&O Railroad was an important transportation artery across Ritchie County — stretching from Parkersburg to Clarksburg in this region — which Confederate troops and Southern sympathizers tried to destroy in the 1860s. Union guards had 23 tunnels, along with bridges, to protect along the railroad line, Scott said.

In the 1800s, Ritchie County grew from the oil and gas and timber in the region. Glass and garment factories, now gone, also provided jobs.

In the 1850s, an area of Ritchie County known as the Ritchie Mines provided a natural asphalt for the area, Scott said. After the Civil War, this product was transported by rail



Berdine's 5 and Dime has been in business in Harrisville since 1908. With thousands (and thousands!) of items for sale, it is believed to be the oldest continually operated dime store in the United States.



North Bend State Park Superintendent Steve Jones paddles a red kayak as he leads a visitor on the prime fishing backwaters of the North Bend Lake near the Cokeley Recreation Area.

to Washington, D.C., New York City, Chicago and elsewhere to pave streets. An explosion in 1873 stopped the production, Scott said. Ritchie County enjoyed “boom times” in the 1890s with oil and gas drilling and the railroads.

Today, Simonton Windows Inc., with three manufacturing facilities, is the largest employer in Ritchie County, said Steve Parks, executive director of the Ritchie County Economic Development Authority.

Ritchie County is fortunate to have intersections at Harrisville and Ellenboro along U.S. 50 for people traveling from Parkersburg to Clarksburg, Parks said.

Ritchie County is seeing some economic benefits from the Marcellus Shale gas boom in the

nearby areas of Doddridge and Tyler counties, Scott said.

Ritchie County is a popular outdoor recreation area with North Bend State Park being the center of attraction. The 305-acre North Bend Lake offers fishing for bass and catfish, along with opportunities for boating and canoe and kayak rentals. The 72-mile North Bend Rail Trail passes through Ritchie County, providing opportunities for biking and hiking. The county has protected wildlife areas along with locations open to hunting.

Step back in time at Berdine’s 5 & Dime in Harrisville, founded in 1908 and believed to be the oldest continually operated dime store in the United States. Berdine’s sells thousands of items, including “good

quality” candy, books, tin toys, embroidery goods, soaps, souvenirs and much more, said Manager Karen Harper. Many of the items are made in the United States, including in West Virginia, she said. Big sellers at the store’s candy counter are orange slices, sour cherry balls, large raisins and milk chocolate English walnuts. Need a pair of rearview sunglasses? Berdine’s has them.

The largest celebration is the Ritchie County Fair & Expo in Harrisville, which took place July 31-Aug. 1 this year. The fair prides itself in providing something for every member of the family. **WVL**

Paul LaPann is managing editor of *The Parkersburg (W.Va.) News and Sentinel*.