

COMMUNITY

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PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.





ROANE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Today's courthouse is the third located on the same site in Spencer.

Although today he's largely forgotten, jurist Spencer Roane of Virginia was a man of note in 1856 when Roane County was chartered and named for him. The son-in-law of colonial firebrand Patrick Henry, Roane served on the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

The new West Virginia county named for him was created from parts of Gilmer, Jackson and Kanawha counties. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the county has a total area of 484 square miles. Today, it's traversed by Interstate 79, U.S. Highways 33 and 119 and West Virginia Routes 14 and 36.

Today's Roane County Courthouse stands on a level piece of ground on the north side of Spencer's Main Street. It's the third courthouse located on the same site. Both the first and second courthouses were lost to fire.

Strikingly modern in appearance, the present courthouse was built in 1964-65 at a cost of \$600,000. The two-story, flat-roofed structure was designed by architects R.L. Wilson and J.D. King of St. Albans, who also designed college chapels at Davis & Elkins and Alderson-Broadbush.

The building's architects described it as "traditional with contemporary flair." The façade of the courthouse is grayish-brown brick and has a shallow portico formed by slender, smooth piers faced with white marble. There is no ornamentation other than a gold mesh and filigree screen with a state seal in cast aluminum centered above the main entrance. The piers of the portico form a colonnade that stretches across the entire front of the building.

The courtroom is finished in wood with a large black granite frontispiece behind the judge's bench. It's adorned with a silver eagle and an inscription that reads "Equal Justice Under Law."

By James E. Casto

Outside, a monument located near the left front of the courthouse is dedicated to Col. Ruby G. Bradley. A Spencer native, she initially taught in the county's one-room schools. She became a nurse in 1933 and joined the Army Nurse Corps the following year.

Bradley was captured by the Japanese while serving in the Philippines during World War II. She was in a POW camp for three years, where she and other nurses established a clinic to care for the camp's sick and wounded prisoners. When American troops liberated the camp, she weighed only 86 pounds. She also served in the Korean War as a frontline nurse. Bradley retired from the military in 1963. She died at age 94 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

A historical marker on the courthouse lawn details a Confederate cavalry detachment's capture of Spencer during the Civil War, a feat they pulled off without firing a shot.

On Sept. 2, 1862, Confederate Gen. Albert Gallatin Jenkins led his men on a daring raid through western Virginia to the Ohio River. During the raid, Union Col. Rathbone (11th West Virginia Volunteers) surrendered the town to Jenkins without firing a shot in its defense, much to the disdain of men under his command. As a result of their actions, Rathbone and his subordinate, Maj. George Trimble, were dismissed from the service in January 1863 for "cowardly conduct" in a "burlesque" of military operations.



The Robey Theatre was built in 1911 in Spencer, West Virginia, and extensively remodeled in 1926. It is one of the oldest continuously operating movie theaters in the United States and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Jesse Hughes, the scout, hunter and explorer, is reputed to have been the first man of European descent to enter the area, around 1770. He later settled in the area. Many of today's Roane County residents trace their ancestry to him.

Spencer, the county seat, was known earlier as Tanner's Cross Road, Cassville and New California. Samuel Tanner and his wife, Sudna, arrived in the town in 1812 and are credited with being its first residents. Their daughter, Elizabeth, was born that year, reportedly while the family lived in a cave. In 1849, Raleigh Butcher, who had planned to travel to California in that year's great gold rush, stopped in Cassville and stayed. He opened a popular

tavern and the area became known as New California.

Today, Roane County remains largely rural and its economy principally agricultural. The majority of residents continue to operate small farms. Livestock, fruit and nuts, tobacco and timber are its primary exports. Several vineyards and wineries operate in the county.

Points of interest in the county include the annual Black Walnut Festival, Charles Fork Lake, the Heck Mansion and the Robey Theatre.

Founded in 1954, the Black Walnut Festival began as a gathering centered on farmers bringing walnuts from their farms to Spencer to have them weighed and sold to a nut company. Today, the festival, held each year in the

second week of October, is still going strong with a carnival, crafts, live music, a car show, exhibits, a grand parade and, of course, great food.

Charles Fork Lake is a 70-acre impoundment located just south of Spencer on West Virginia Route 36. The lake is known for world-class walleye and bass fishing. Paddlers flock to it for a peaceful glide across the waters where they might see blue heron or maybe even a bald eagle.

The water is surrounded by 21 miles of trails in pristine Appalachian backcountry. The annual Tour de Lake Mountain Bike Race is one of the most popular and long-running events in the point series conducted by the West Virginia Mountain Biking Association.

In the late 1880s, Bowman's Grove was a popular picnic site located on a hill overlooking the fledgling town of Spencer. During the Roaring '20s, the land was purchased by a local Roane County man, Albert Heck. An oil and gas wildcatter and railroad investor, Heck built a stately 17-room, six-bath mansion he called "Sylvanius."

Heck was forced to sell his elegant home when he went bust during the Great Depression. It was purchased by the McIntosh family in 1936 and recently by the Freshwater family.

Named for its original owner, Hammond Robey, Spencer's Robey Theatre is located in an impressive brick building just west of the courthouse. It's said to be one of the



The Albert S. Heck Mansion, located near Spencer, West Virginia, is on the National Register of Historic Places. It was designed by the firm of Wallace Knight, the same group who constructed the West Virginia Executive Mansion. Built in 1925, the Heck Mansion has 17 rooms, six baths and a full basement.

country's oldest continuously operated movie theaters. Certainly it's the oldest in West Virginia. As

built in 1911, the building housed the theater on the first two floors and the Knights of Pythias lodge hall on the third.

The theater's present façade and a rear extension date from a 1926 remodeling. The neon marquee was restored in 2007 and relit after 40 years of non-use. Amazingly, the Robey has managed to make the transition from silent films to talkies to color films and even 3-D.

Both the Heck Mansion and the Robey Theatre are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. **WVLT**

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PHOTO BY AMY HAND.

At Heritage Park in Spencer, visitors can see a train depot that has been converted to a museum on Roane County History, a fully-furnished one-room schoolhouse, a working oil derrick and this fountain. It was rescued by the mayor from an old park where it had been discarded.