

COMMUNITY

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TAYLOR COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Histories of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad,
Grafton and Taylor County interwoven.

One of West Virginia's smallest counties, encompassing only 174 square miles, Taylor County was created by an act of the Virginia General Assembly on Jan. 19, 1844. Formed from parts of Barbour, Harrison and Marion counties, it was named in honor of U.S. Sen. John Taylor (1753-1824), a soldier-statesman from Caroline County, Virginia.

It's believed that trapper John Simpson was the earliest white person to enter what's now Taylor County. That was in 1768. Soon afterward, settlements were established in Booths Creek in the county's northwestern corner.

Pruntytown is the oldest settlement in Taylor County, dating back to the early 1770s. Named for pioneer settler John Prunty (1764-1848), it's the site of the former West Virginia Industrial Home for Boys, now renamed the Pruntytown Correctional Center. Pruntytown served as the county seat from the founding of the county in 1844 until a county election in 1878 moved it about three miles away to Grafton.

As the *West Virginia Encyclopedia* notes, "The histories of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, Grafton and Taylor County are interwoven."

The B&O traversed the county on its way to Wheeling in 1852, a year after the Virginia General Assembly chartered a companion line, the Northwestern Railroad of Virginia, to connect with Parkersburg via a spur on the B&O main line. Grafton was established at the specified junction point, near the confluence of Tygart Valley Creek with Three Fork Creek, three miles east of Pruntytown. When the new line was completed in 1857, Grafton, then only a year old, became a major hub for freight and passenger service.

By James E. Casto



Four miles south of Grafton, Tygart Lake State Park is known for its 10-mile long, 1,750-acre lake, which offers water activities like boating, water skiing, scuba diving, swimming, kayaking, canoeing and fishing. The park is surrounded by mountains and provides lakeside lodging.

John Grafton, a civil engineer with the B&O, provided the town's name. But a story persists that rail crews, taking note of the converging sets of track, began calling it the "graftin' on" place.

Due to the importance of the B&O for the movement of troops and supplies, Grafton was a strategic point during the early stages of the Civil War. Although the Union forces held possession of Grafton's B&O depot throughout the war, Union and Confederate troops frequently skirmished along the rail line, and many little towns became hospital sites and way stations for troops.

With the county seat moved to Grafton from Pruntytown, work

started on building a new courthouse. As originally built (1880-82), the courthouse looked much like a fairy-tale castle, with an ornamental turret on the east corner and a tall tower on the west. Both were removed for safety reasons, leaving a building that's strictly utilitarian although still impressive. Two additions, one built in 1924 and one in 1976, stand on either side of the brown brick structure.

The old courthouse "stands at the heart of a block-long array of buildings devoted to county government," said Circuit Judge Alan Moats. A former bank that's adjacent to the courthouse now houses the offices of the county commission and the county clerk. On the

other side of the courthouse is an old jail, now used for storage, and two other buildings that house other county offices.

Moats noted that one significant piece of the county's early history still survives at the court house — "the old bell that once hung in the county's first courthouse in Pruntytown."

Taylor County's early economy depended on agriculture, timbering and, of course, railroading. Today, the county benefits from its rugged beauty.

The first federal flood control project built in West Virginia, Tygart Dam, located on the Tygart River about three miles from Grafton, was completed in 1938 as part of

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program. It created a 1,740-acre lake that's a magnet for summertime fun-seekers. Nearby Valley Falls State Park, once a lumber and gristmill community, is also enjoyed for its scenic beauty.

Many history lovers visit Grafton's International Mother's Day Shrine and its two National Cemeteries.

Built in 1873, Andrews Memorial Church, at 11 East Main St. in Grafton, was the scene of the first official celebration of Mother's Day in 1908. The observance was conceived by Anna Jarvis as a way of honoring her own late mother, Ann Maria Reeves Jarvis. In the years following, Anna Jarvis worked tirelessly to promote Mother's Day as an annual event honoring all mothers everywhere. Her idea quickly gained support. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Mother's Day as a national holiday.

Today, the old Andrews Memorial Church has been rededicated as the International Mother's Day Shrine. It's open from May through October on Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Group tours are welcome with advance arrangements. To schedule a tour or request further information, call 304-265-1589.

The first interments at Grafton National Cemetery took place in 1867 for West Virginia casualties of the Civil War. The cemetery contains the burial site of Thornsby Bailey Brown, said to have been the first Union casualty of the Civil War. Brown was killed May 22, 1861, when he refused to acknowledge a Confederate sentry. In 1904, the Grand Army of the Republic dedicated a 12-foot marble obelisk in his honor.

The Grafton National Cemetery is open daily for visitation from dawn to dusk. It's closed to most new interments due to inadequate space. Interments now are made at the nearby West Virginia National Cemetery, which was dedicated in 1987.

In 1867, Grafton held a "Flower Strewing Day" honoring the Civil War dead. The event has evolved into today's Memorial Day, and Grafton claims the honor of the longest ongoing Memorial Day observance in the nation. **WVL**

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"Mother With Children" sculpted by William Douglas Hopen, sits outside the International Mother's Day Shrine at the Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, West Virginia. The church was the location of the first official celebration of Mother's Day in 1908.

The City of Grafton acquired the Historic B&O Freight Station from CSX Inc. in 2017 to have a permanent home for the Grafton Farmer's Market. Originally built in the mid 1880s by the B&O Railroad, it is the oldest railroad structure remaining in Taylor County.



Once the site of a lumber and grist mill community, Valley Falls State Park is a place of scenic beauty and historical significance. A series of four picturesque falls created the Tygart Valley River and are the distinguishing feature of this 1,145-acre park.