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TYLER COUNTY COURTHOUSE

A community known for its unique waterways and oil and gas history

Middlebourne, the county seat of Tyler County, is often described by locals as being older than the state of West Virginia. That quirky fact is based on historical records that show in 1816, nearly half a century prior to West Virginia earning its statehood, the Virginia legislature approved the designation of Middlebourne as the center of Tyler County government.

The Virginia legislature's proclamation about Middlebourne spawned local efforts to erect a "suitable courthouse on the public square acquired by the county court from Robert Gorrell."

Gorrell's land was on the corner of what is now known as Court and Main streets. The initial structure was a log building that was replaced in 1854 by a two-story brick structure, measuring 28' x 30', at a cost of \$1,800.

In 1923, a bond issue approved by county residents allowed the present courthouse to be erected on the outside of the 1854 structure; the bond issue also included a remodeling of the interior of the building. All of the stone and brick for the courthouse was carried into the county seat on a streetcar line from Sistersville. Flat cars full of masonry were parked on Main Street, awaiting placement on the building by skilled masons.

Named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, the courthouse is described in the Registry nomination form as "a modest but locally impressive

By Mary C. Rohrig

piece of architecture befitting the tastes and needs of a small rural county.” Elements of 20th-century classicism and Beaux Arts classicism combine in the entrance façade details of the pavilion and clock tower. A copper-covered dome surmounts the tower, which is divided into three levels, including a brick base with an arcaded rail appointed with stone urns, a louvered belfry and a belvedere with clock faces.

Towering above the quiet community of Middlebourne, which had a population of 815 according to the 2010 census, the courthouse clock chimes each hour and is backlit from dusk until sunrise. Through careful maintenance, guided by a framed list of instructions hanging in the bell tower, the clock has continued to chime for nearly a century.

The name of the sculptor who was responsible for the details and reliefs found on the present structure has been lost to time. However, legend brags that a vagabond, often jailed in a nearby county, cleverly carved the relief of Justitia and the simple urns adorning the courthouse entrance. One account says the first person to escape from the county jail was the stone mason who built it, apparently foreseeing the possibility of his future incarceration. It is said that he designed a loose layer of stone that would later aid in his quest for freedom.

As the county seat, not only was a courthouse necessary, but a jail was also needed to house prisoners. A log jail was established around 1818, followed by the construction of a second one in 1826. It was a brick building that remained as the county’s holding facility until the existing one was completed 57 years later.

Enclosed adjacent to the sheriff’s residence in a two-story stone building, the new jail had five cells and 15 steel bunks. An open area between the two rows of cells had dual tables and bench seating where prisoners in good standing could share meals and conversation.

In early years, prisoners believed to be suffering from mental illnesses were housed in the building’s stone basement, a dark, damp area that likely did little to improve their mental well-being. Female prisoners were kept in a small room secured above the jail at the rear of the sheriff’s residence.

The jail was refurbished in the early 1980s, then closed for good in 2001 by order of the county commission.

The state historical marker on top of the town hill says Middlebourne was so named because it is the halfway point between Pennsylvania and the old salt wells on the Kanawha above Charleston. The marker also mentions another notable feature of Tyler County, calling the “Jug Handle” on Middle Island Creek one of the noted beauty spots of the Ohio Valley.

Located two miles south of Middlebourne, the Jug Handle — known today as simply “the Jug” — is an unusual phenomenon of Middle Island Creek, which is believed to be the longest creek in the world not to be called a river. Approximately 77 miles long, Middle Island Creek makes a 7-mile loop at the Jug then returns to within 50 feet of itself. The slow-moving, low-gradient waterway is considered to be one of the best streams in the state for muskellunge fishing.

According to the late Gladys Gregg, a local historian whose

family owned much of the area surrounding the Jug, “it is a remarkable natural water power and the creek comes in from the northeast and makes a circuit around a body of land containing 568 ½ acres.”

Middle Island and its tributaries have historically provided a stable water supply for nearby residents and are a source for fishing, swimming and boating recreation. The creek, which originates in southeastern Doddridge County, meanders throughout Tyler County before it empties into the Ohio River at St. Marys. Its waters were known as “liquid highways” used to move goods and timber from inland farms, communities and logging areas to other communities and mills located along its water courses, according to the *History of Tyler County, West Virginia to 1984*.

Tyler County is also home to the first county high school in West Virginia. Tyler County High School opened in 1908 to all students in the county except those residing within the Sistersville Independent School District. Prior to its opening, high schools in West Virginia were either part of an independent school district, such as Sistersville, or built by magisterial school districts.

Sistersville High School opened in 1896 for students within the corporation limits. Children living elsewhere in the county attended small community schools until Tyler High began offering classes in Middlebourne. TCHS graduated its last class in 1993, when a new county-wide consolidated middle and high school opened. The old Tyler County High School is now home to the Tyler County Museum.

Tyler County is also home to the state’s first governor, Arthur I. Boreman, and to the youngest

and oldest governor of West Virginia, Cecil H. Underwood. The elementary school currently serving Middlebourne area students is the namesake of Gov. Boreman. The one-room schoolhouse attended by Underwood as a youngster living in Josephs Mills is now located on the front lawn of the Tyler County Museum. Gov. Underwood is one of several distinguished graduates of Tyler County High School.

Early industries in the county included numerous gristmills and sawmills, pottery and glassmaking companies and oil and gas endeavors. The Paden City Pottery Company was a famed manufacturer of tableware for more than 40 years. In 1959 Corning Glass moved into the old pottery plant, which was located along the Ohio River. Another notable glass company in Paden City is Marble King Inc., which has been manufacturing marbles at the Tyler County site since 1959. The plant continues to produce marbles that are distributed worldwide for tournament play, games, industrial use and decorator products.

The oil boom at the turn of the 20th century radically transformed the county and continues to make an impact today. The discovery of oil in the Sistersville field in



The Sistersville Ferry is the oldest ferry on the Ohio River and one of only a few that remain in working order. It has been in operation, carrying passengers, and later, vehicles, from Sistersville, West Virginia, to Fly, Ohio, since 1817. It currently runs Thursday through Sunday, spring through autumn, and accepts reservations for private river cruises in addition to its regular schedule. For \$1 a pedestrian can buy one trip across the river or a ride back and forth all day long.

PHOTO BY TIM KISER

the late 1800s changed a quiet riverside community into a city of more than 10,000 people hoping to get rich quick. Throughout the county, companies produced some of the richest oil and gas wells in the United States. Oil derricks sprung up everywhere as the county flourished economically and socially as never before experienced in this rural area.

The Big Moses well on Indian Creek, located south of Middlebourne, struck pay dirt on Sept. 6, 1894, in the Big Injun sand. It continued to blow in open air until Nov. 29, 1984. According to the *Tyler County History Book*, the well was not completely mastered and its flow confined until Aug. 27, 1895. Its estimated production was 100 million cubic feet of gas every 24 hours, flowing through an 8 1/4" casing at a pressure of 575 pounds per square inch.

When the oil fields were finally

pumped dry in the early 1900s, so was the local economy. But with recent exploration of the Marcellus Shale region and advanced fracking technology, the industry has made an even stronger comeback in the 21st century.

According to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, production of natural gas and liquids in the Mountain

State is at its highest level since 1900, with Tyler County being among the top two, second only to neighboring Doddridge County. DEP records show Tyler County produced 272 billion cubic feet of natural gas in 2018.

The oil and gas industry is honored annually in Sistersville for its current and past contributions to the state. The West Virginia Oil & Gas Festival is held the third weekend of September at the Sistersville municipal park, where visitors can see dozens of old gas engines, an original oil derrick and exhibits about life in the oil fields. **WVLT**

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