

WAYNE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Preserving the region's rich history while
also looking toward the future

Situated in the town of Wayne, which is centrally located in West Virginia's westernmost county, the Wayne County Courthouse has stood and served justice for the past century. Like its courthouse, the county itself — with its northernmost section within Huntington city limits and its southernmost portion dotted with rural, historically coal mining communities — has adapted with the times while maintaining longstanding traits of rich western West Virginia history.

Wayne County was named for General “Mad” Anthony Wayne, who served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution and led the Battle of Fallen Timbers against the Shawnee in 1794. The area's first settlers, mostly farmers, came around 1800 and were actually living in what was Kanawha County, Virginia, at the time. Over 60 years later, during the Civil War, the state would break away from Virginia and become West Virginia; the area would eventually transition into Cabell County and finally become an entity of its own, Wayne County.

By Jean Hardiman



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PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.





The centerpiece of the Ceredo-Kenova AutumnFest in Wayne County is the Pumpkin House, which has become one of the favorite tourist attractions in the entire state of West Virginia. In 1978 the Pumpkin House began with only five pumpkins carved for a Halloween display. Since then the number of hand-carved pumpkins has grown to 3,000.

According to *West Virginia's Living Monuments, the Courthouses*, Wayne County has had several different courthouse buildings over the years. One in use during the Civil War was occupied by troops from both sides, and its pine posts had bullet holes filled with putty. After the war, local residents dug out the putty and then the bullets to keep.

The current courthouse was built in 1922-24, costing \$110,000 at the time and designed in the neo-classical revival style. The year before the building was constructed, Kenova, located in northern Wayne County, made an effort to have the county seat moved there from Wayne, formerly named Trout's Hill; but a September 1921 election determined that it would stay in Wayne. Just weeks after the election, while Kenova officials were deciding whether to contest the results of the election, fire broke

out in the wee hours of Oct. 2, 1921, destroying one section of the former courthouse building, including some of the ballots from the election.

Judge James Young, who grew up in Wayne County, has been working in the courthouse for 24 years. After serving as Wayne County prosecutor for 12 years, he became the first judge to serve in Wayne County's second 24th Circuit position, formed 12 years ago.

"This was the busiest single-judge circuit for probably eight or nine years, so that caused them to add a judge," Young said, adding that he joined forces with Judge Darrell Pratt, who recently retired.

Young's office is an old courthouse library, complete with a sizable wooden table that was too large to remove when the space was converted into an office. Young just uses it as a conference table.

"It's one piece, burnt walnut," Young said. "It had to stay, after they partitioned off to make offices. We had to work around it because we couldn't get it out of here. We could cut it, but I didn't want to cut it. It was in kind of bad shape, and one of the custodians worked on it."

With the exception of the bell tower, renovated in 2018, and some upgrades to roofing, windows and the like, the most recent major renovation was 45 years ago.

"In 1976 was the last big renovation," said Young, who worked summers for then-prosecuting attorney Robert Chafin during that time. "They basically added a floor in the large, old courthouse and made a more modernized-looking courtroom."

Today, the Wayne County Courthouse is home to the services of two 24th Circuit judges, Young and Judge Jason Fry; Circuit Clerk Regina Hill; Sheriff Rick Thompson; Assessor Ric Browning; the county commission chambers; and County Clerk Renick Booth. An old jail remains downstairs, with two holding cells still used during hearings and trials, Young said.

Outside stands a memorial to World War I, featuring a sculpture of a "doughboy," and an M5 anti-tank gun developed during World War II.

Inside, the courtroom bears the names and portraits of court officials from centuries past. They include Milton James Ferguson (1833-1881), who served as prosecuting attorney in Wayne County in 1861 and also served as colonel in the 16th Regiment, Virginia Cavalry, for the Confederate Army. With an exciting story of capture and escape, he later served as a circuit judge in the Big Sandy Judicial District in Kentucky.

There also hangs a portrait of the Hon. Goble G. Burgess (1844-1901), who served as prosecuting attorney in Wayne County, as a representative in the West Virginia House of Delegates and as a judge in both the intermediate and criminal courts in Wayne County.

Also featured on the courtroom walls is the Hon. Evermont Ward (1820-1882), who served as judge for the Wayne County Circuit Court from 1873 to 1880. One of the trials over which he presided was that of Laban Walker, who was convicted of murder and hanged on the courthouse grounds on Nov. 28, 1879. It was the county's last execution.

Others outside the field of law who have called Wayne County home and gone on to national fame include two Kenova natives named Smith, but not from the same family — award-winning Christian singer and songwriter Michael W. Smith and business leader Brad D. Smith, who is the former CEO of Intuit, the company behind QuickBooks and TurboTax. He is now the executive chairman of Intuit's board, while continuing to work with West Virginia's universities and business officials toward economic improvements in his home state.

Other well-known names include Major League Baseball player Don Robinson, who was born in Ashland, Kentucky, but became Ceredo-Kenova High School's stand-out pitcher, and burlesque star Blaze Starr, whose reported affair with a Louisiana governor was made into the 1989 film *Blaze*, starring Paul Newman.

Natural resources have always been key to the Wayne County economy. Although coal mining no longer thrives in southern Wayne County, tourism, timber



Located on 8,296 heavily forested acres, Cabwaylingo State Forest is a beautiful destination to relax and unwind. It is Located in Wayne County and gets its unique name from the four surrounding counties: (Cab)ell, (Way)ne, (Lin)coln and Min(go). Cabwaylingo State Forest offers cabins and campsites as well as access to the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System.

and agriculture contribute to the county's economic vitality, as well as manufacturing and the railways that continue to pass through the county to bring coal up toward the Ohio River.

In terms of tourism, the roughly 900-mile Hatfield-McCoy Trail System that has brought thousands of ATV, UTV, ORV and dirt bike riders to West Virginia each year for outdoor adventure has worked on expanding 100 miles through Cabwaylingo State Forest, bringing those outdoor tourism opportunities into the lush forests of Wayne County.

East Lynn Lake, an over 1,000-acre reservoir, is one of West Virginia's larger fishing lakes; and Beech Fork State Park, which is over 3,100 acres and features a 720-acre reservoir, has long been a popular destination, drawing people from local

communities and beyond to its campground for longer stays, as well as for day trips spent fishing, hiking, kayaking, canoeing, biking and swimming. Both places have seen a tremendous increase in foot traffic over the past year as more people have looked to the outdoors and "staycations" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Our two lakes, East Lynn and Beech Fork, bring in a good bit of people in the summer," Young said. "There's boating and fishing, and the campsites at both lakes are used often. There is a lot of activity there." **WVL**

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