

WEBSTER COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Webster County was the last to be formed before West Virginia counties broke away from Virginia.

Webster County, named for famed Congressman Daniel Webster, was the last county to be formed before West Virginia's counties broke away from Virginia. It was created in 1860 from parts of Braxton, Nicholas and Randolph counties.

The county occupies 556.2 square miles and is drained by a half-dozen rivers — the Elk, Gauley, Williams, Cranberry, Holly and Little Kanawha.

Its remoteness and rugged landscape limited the flow of early settlers to the county. In 1869, the tiny settlement that would grow to become the county seat had only five houses, a post office, a school and a tavern.

The county seat has been known by different names. It was first known as the Fork Lick at Salt Springs, so named because there was Elk River salt lick there. Herds of elk, deer and buffalo made their way to the salt spring that oozed from the riverbank.

In 1892, the county seat was incorporated as Addison, named for Addison McLaughlin, who owned the town site. Later the name of the post office in the little community, but not the name of the town itself, was changed to Webster Springs. Today, the community is generally known as Webster Springs, but its official name remains Addison.

By James. E. Casto



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PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.



Jerry Run Summer Theater, located on Rte 20, offers live music on stage in a rustic theater setting. For concert information, call (304) 493-6574 or email: reneea@mountain.net.

The region's early settlers boiled the spring water to make salt. Many people believed the spring water had medicinal properties. The water, highly impregnated with hydrogen sulfide gas, was thought to be beneficial for ills of the liver, stomach, kidneys and bladder. In the 1890s and early 1900s a steady stream of travelers visited Webster Springs to "take the waters."

In 1897, U.S. Senator Johnson N. Camden built a small hotel on the flat bottomland by the Elk River, now known as Hotel Bottom. As the railroad expanded into Webster Springs and the salt sulphur waters gained a national reputation, the old hotel expanded to 300 rooms with many guest rooms, baths and other amenities. The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1925. It was not rebuilt.

The county's current courthouse is its second. Court was held in a private home prior to a simple-frame courthouse being built. The frame building burned in 1888, and court was held in the Baptist Church until the current stone courthouse was built in 1894.

Located on a tall knoll in the center of town, the courthouse is surrounded by a large grassy lot and tall

mature trees. A small springhouse on the courthouse grounds recalls the days when travelers came to the sulphur springs.

The courthouse was designed by Wheeling architects Edward Bates Franzheim and Millard Fillmore Giesey, who also designed

the Fayette County and Pocahontas County courthouses and designed alterations to the Mineral County Courthouse. According to an article in *Manufacturers Record*, the two architects charged only \$11,900 for their design. As architectural historian S. Allen Chambers observed in his authoritative *Buildings of West Virginia* (Oxford University Press, 2004), that was "an amount that didn't buy much, even in 1894."

Modest in size and simple in style, the two-story building has rugged, quarry-faced sandstone walls. The middle bay of the three-bay facade terminates in a semi-tower covered with a pyramidal roof that barely rises above the hipped roof of the building behind it. A large stone jail and sheriff's office were constructed as a side wing, effectively doubling the building's size.

While the interior of the courthouse has been modified over the

years, the main entrance lobby and the large courtroom still have their original woodwork. The oak judge's bench and witness stand are original as well. The spectator seating is oak benches with curved and scrolled end pieces.

Given the county's vast expanse of forestland, it's hardly surprising that lumbering was its first major industry. Commercial coal mining began in 1917, with an annual output of approximately 100,000 tons by 1929. The county's mines boomed during World War II, producing more than 2 million tons a year by the end of the war.

In 1930, the men of Barton (now Curtin) No. 2 mine placed a large block of coal on the courthouse grounds as a tribute to the county's mining history.

Webster County, nestled in the mountains of central West Virginia, is a peaceful and picturesque oasis where natural beauty and outdoor recreation opportunities abound. More than 65,000 acres of the Monongahela National Forest lie within the county's borders, providing an almost endless list of outdoor fun — breathtaking scenery, camping, hiking, cycling, hunting,



Originally founded in 1922, Camp Caesar is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This 300-acre 4-H camp offers lodging, camping, recreation and exhibit and assembly halls.

fishing, horseback riding, cross country skiing or simply communing with nature. Experienced hikers can enjoy an overnight backpacking trip to the Cranberry Wilderness Area, which offers fly fishing and whitewater paddling.

Scenic hiking and biking trails await visitors to Holly River State Park. With more than 8,000 acres of dense forest, Holly River is West Virginia's second-largest state park. It was first settled around 1870 by a group of immigrants from Switzerland. After years of the land being stripped of useful timber, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began purchasing land and, in 1937, began reforestation and restoring the area to the deep woodlands enjoyed by visitors today.

In 1938, Holly River was designated a wildlife refuge and opened as an official state park; but it wasn't until 1954 that the federal government deeded the land to the state of West Virginia. Since then, many trails have been blazed, cabins have been refurbished and campsites have been constructed. Other improvements have included the construction of game courts, a swimming pool and other outdoor recreational facilities.

In the 1920s, the county established Camp Caesar, a 4-H camp that has become an important summer destination for religious, social and institutional groups. In the 1930s, the federal Works Progress Administration constructed several stone cottages, expanded the dining hall and built a large pool and pool house. The camp was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2009.



Big Ditch Lake is a 55-acre warm water impoundment in Webster County. It is part of the 380-acre Big Ditch Wildlife Management Area and offers fishing for largemouth bass, tiger musky, and more.

PHOTO BY DWAYNE MCCOY

With its ball field, basketball courts, picnic pavilions, grandstand, walking trail, playground, swimming pool and public river access, the Bakers Island recreation area is hugely popular with residents and tourists alike.

Every year Bakers Island is host to a wide variety of events, the largest of which is the annual Woodchopping Festival. After taking a year off due to the COVID pandemic, the event returned this year, drawing a huge crowd on Memorial Day weekend.

The annual festival celebrates the area's timbering heritage. It draws lumbermen from as near as the mountains of Webster County and as far away as Australia and New Zealand to compete in woodchopping and sawing events.

Webster County native Arden Cogar Sr., who began competing in woodchopping events in 1956 and has won championship titles in the United States and Australia, organized the first Webster County Woodchopping Festival in 1960. Held in various places in the county in its early years, the festival was moved to its permanent location at Bakers Island in 1965.

"Everyone comes and camps and

enjoys the beautiful scenery, the beautiful rivers and the beautiful wildlife; and they come to watch some woodchopping — to hear the chainsaws scream, to hear the axes hum and to watch the big burly guys chop the wood," said Cogar, who was the festival's all-around champion six times from 1973 to 1980.

The festival has grown to include a week's worth of events, including arts and crafts, concerts, parades,

car shows, a lumberjack breakfast, a 5K Run and fireworks; but it is the Memorial Day weekend lumberjack contests that remain the highlight. Competition categories include the Jack and Jill crosscut, two-man crosscut, hot saw, solo chainsaw, standing block, handicap chop, springboard chop, championship chop and all-around champion.

If you're a fan of bluegrass music and are planning to visit Webster County, you may want to include the Jerry Run Summer Theater in your plans. Jerry Run is a rustic indoor music venue located near Holly River State Park. From late April through early October the venue features acoustic bluegrass, folk and Americana music on Saturday evenings, and sometimes on Fridays, too.

Tucked deep in the Webster County woods lies Bergoo, which regularly attracts off-road enthusiasts who swear it has some of the greatest mudding tracks anywhere in West Virginia. **WVLT**

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