

COMMUNITY

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WETZEL COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Original building and a new annex
will share judicial venues.

Wetzel County's economy was largely agricultural until the discovery of oil and gas deposits sparked a boom that lasted well into the 20th century before it faded away. Today, the introduction of new drilling technology has again made the county one of West Virginia's top producers of shale oil and gas.

The Virginia General Assembly formed the county from the northern part of Tyler County in 1846, naming it in honor of Lewis Wetzel. A famous frontiersman, Wetzel was born in 1764 on the South Branch of the Potomac River in present-day West Virginia. His family relocated to the Ohio River Valley in 1769.

In 1838, one of the county's first settlers, Presley Martin, established a little town on his property where Fishing Creek flows into the Ohio River. He named his town Martinsville, and the Virginia lawmakers designated it the county seat when they formed the county. Over the years Martinsville found itself frequently confused with another Virginia town with the same name. So, in 1871, the name of the West Virginia town was officially changed to New Martinsville.

The first meeting of the Wetzel County Court took place at the home of Samson Thistle in April 1846. Two years later, the ground now occupied by the Wetzel County Courthouse was deeded to the county by Presley Martin and his wife Margaret.

By James E. Casto



TIMOTHY E. HAUGH

A courthouse annex was created in the historic Shibben Building on Main Street in New Martinsville. It houses Magistrate Courts and support facilities.

A courthouse built on the site was completed in 1852 and was in use until 1900. Grand jury records indicate that nearly all indictments in the county's early years were for assault and battery, riding in a horse race on a public road or selling bootleg liquor.

The years 1900 to 1902 saw construction of a new courthouse. Designed by local architect James A. Chaplin of the firm Chaplin and Alexander, it cost \$175,000 to erect, quite a sum at the time.

The courthouse style is considered Richardsonian Romanesque, which conveys elements from the

architecture of Henry Hobson Richardson, who developed his style of design in the 1870s. The structure's warm-hued sandstone walls are laid in regular courses of quarry-faced blocks. Square towers capped with steep, pyramidal, red tile roofs project from the corners, echoing the massive belfry and clock tower that rises between them.

Remodeled in the 1970s, the structure's courtroom is open, spacious and modern in design. A large portion of one wall is reserved for a collection of legal reference books. At the rear of the courtroom is a large painting of Justitia — Lady Justice. She originally looked down on proceedings in the courtroom of the original courthouse.

"Our courthouse is located on the banks of the beautiful Ohio River, and as result the river has sometimes flooded the first floor

of the courthouse," said Timothy E. Haught, the county's prosecuting attorney since 2001. "The badly overcrowded courthouse long has needed more room but the risk of flooding has complicated the search for additional space."

In 2017, the County Commission was told an annex could be built behind the courthouse that would be elevated on columns, with the space under the new construction used for parking. The cost, it was said, could be as much as \$8 million.

"Instead," Haught said, "we've created a new annex in the historic Shibben Building on Main Street, located just a block from the courthouse. It will house our Magistrate Court and Family Court and provide space for additional offices, storage and community offices.

"The new annex was made possible," he said, "by a generous gift



MARK YURINZA/PUBLIC DOMAIN



WETZEL TYLER CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

New Martinsville is the county seat of Wetzel County and is located on the Ohio River. The river has played an important part in the area's development and continues to offer a venue for transportation and recreation. The annual RegattaFest is held in September. The APBA sanctioned powerboat event that features three classes of boats is free to everyone who wants to attend.

of the building by the family of Joseph Shibben, who in 1895 immigrated to America from Lebanon, and his son, Paul Joseph Shibben, who was a prominent New Martinsville lawyer. The gift was the idea of John Joseph Mensore and Tulane Mensore, retired members of the West Virginia State Bar.”

The remodeling work on the old building is budgeted at \$3 million, a far cry from the \$8 million figure offered earlier. The \$3 million will come from new tax dollars “raised from the rapid expansion of the county’s oil and gas industry,” Haught said.

To the south, on the street corner, is the main ornament of the small courthouse lawn, a statue of frontiersman Levi Morgan (1736-1826). His grandfather was a Welshman named Morgan Morgan, said to be the first white settler in what is now West Virginia. His father, Zackquill Morgan, settled present-day Morgantown.

In 1901, the West Virginia Legislature appropriated \$3,500 to erect the statue, created by the West Virginia Monument Co., which was located in New Martinsville. Clad in buckskin, his long rifle in hand and a resolute expression on his face, the frontiersman heroically stands guard atop a tall granite shaft.

“One of Wetzel County’s main attractions is its beautiful outdoor scenery and opportunities to boat and fish on the Ohio River,” said Haught. “It’s also a major hunting destination.”

The Lewis Wetzel Wildlife Management Area, located at Jacksonburg south of New Martinsville, includes more than



Sharon Campbell, executive director of the Wetzel-Tyler Chamber of Commerce, welcomes visitors in front of the Fish Creek Covered Bridge located in Hundred.

WETZEL-TYLER CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

13,000 acres of heavily forested hills and valleys. Prehistoric hunters long roamed the woodlands. They camped in a ridgetop cave where they inscribed images of the animals they saw. Game traditionally hunted in the Wetzel WMA includes deer, grouse, squirrel, raccoon and wild turkey. Trout and bass are the principal fish taken. There are 20 primitive campsites available on a first-come, first-served basis. Managed by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, the WMA also has a 100-yard shooting range.

Outdoor enthusiasts also enjoy the 555-acre Lantz Farm and Nature Preserve Wildlife Management Area at Jacksonburg, which was donated to Wheeling Jesuit University by family members of the late Harry Lantz, a prominent Wetzel County lawyer. It provides self-guided walking trails, fishing ponds and opportunities for birdwatching.

“Wetzel County is home to a

number of fun-filled fairs and festivals,” Haught said.

The Back Home Festival, held during the last weekend in June, is the county’s premier summer festival. The Town and Country Days fair in mid-August is held at the 4-H Campgrounds. It includes livestock judging, quilting demonstrations, carnival rides and games, live music and lots of tasty food. The Paden City Labor Day celebration always features a big parade. And New Martinsville long has been known for its powerboat racing. The history of the New Martinsville Regatta stretches back for decades, and since 2017 the New Martinsville Vintage Regatta has attracted antique powerboats from across the nation. **WVL**

James E. Casto is the retired associate editor of the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* and the author of a number of books on local and regional history.