

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SUPREME COURT OF
APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA. PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.





WIRT COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Wirt County is small, but it's home to larger-than-life historic moments.

The stately Wirt County Courthouse is the home of legal proceedings for a county that may be small in terms of population, but not in historic moments. With about 5,200 residents, Wirt County is West Virginia's smallest county. It is separated from the Ohio River by Wood and Jackson counties, and its 235 square miles are largely rural, with many residents who are employed outside of the county. That was not the case, however, in the mid-1800s, when workers flooded the county to benefit from the oil boom taking place in Burning Springs. The name says it all.

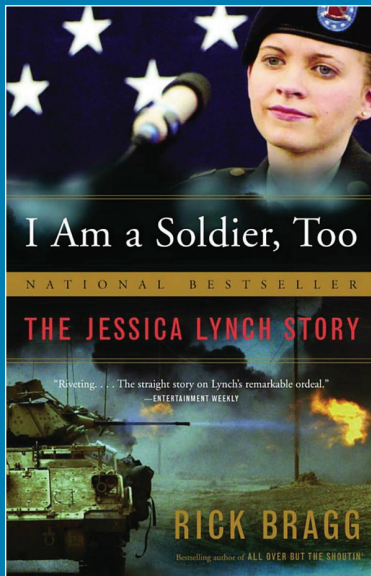
The county's history, however, starts even further back, in what was Virginia at the time. Around 1800, William Beauchamp bought some 1,400 acres on the Little Kanawha River and built a mill. Commerce started to build, and the population of the area began to grow. Over the next two decades, a town was laid out, which in 1822 was recognized by the Assembly of Virginia. It was named Elizabeth, for Beauchamp's wife.

By Jean Hardiman



Wirt County native and Purple Heart recipient Jessica Lynch is a teacher, actress and former U.S. Army soldier who served in the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S. and allied forces. She was seriously injured and taken captive on March 23 that year. Her subsequent recovery on April 1 was the first successful rescue of an American prisoner of war since WW II and the first ever of a woman.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rick Bragg uses Lynch's own words to tell her story in *I Am a Soldier, Too*, the national bestseller published in 2004.



In 1848, a county was formed from portions of Wood and Jackson counties. The new county was named for the late William Wirt of Virginia, who had been U.S. attorney general in President James Madison's cabinet. According to *West Virginia's Living Monuments, the Courthouses*, Wirt County's first courthouse was designed by Peter G. VanWinkle — who practiced law, was president of Northwestern Virginia Railroad and was a leader in the West Virginia statehood conventions, eventually serving as one of West Virginia's U.S. Senators. He was paid \$10 to design the building, which wouldn't survive the Civil War.

By the time of the war, Wirt County was making a new name for itself as a burgeoning economic hotspot. The community of Burning Springs ballooned by more than 6,000 people after drilling experts of the Rathbone family showed how lucrative oil drilling was there and began selling 1-acre plots to others.

This trade, which sent barrels of oil up the Little Kanawha River to the Ohio River and the railways, soon became the target of the Confederate Army as part of its effort to disrupt commerce in the region that was pulling away from the Confederacy. Under the leadership of Gen. William E. Jones, Confederate raiders set the wells in Burning Springs aflame, destroying the drilling equipment and burning over 100,000 barrels of oil that were ready to be shipped. It was reported that the light from the

flames could be seen in the night sky from as far as Parkersburg.

The courthouse was burned by Confederates as well, though records had been salvaged in advance by the county clerk at the time, Daniel Wilkinson, and his father, who transported the records by horse and cart to Parkersburg for safekeeping.

Another courthouse was built and stood for 45 years, before being destroyed by fire. There are stories of the record books being tossed out the windows to safety, said Judge Robert A. Waters of the 4th Judicial Circuit, who oversees trials in both Wood and Wirt counties.

"People say some of the record books still have scorch marks," he said, adding that prisoners were rescued from the fire as well, as the story goes.

The courthouse building that still stands today was constructed in 1911 in Elizabeth. Designed in the Neoclassical Revival style, the building stands 2 1/2 stories, with four towering columns across the front, supporting a full-height portico. The columns' detailed cornice work is visible around the building.

"It is a beautiful building," Waters said, adding that he appreciates that he's had the opportunity to serve as Circuit Judge there since 1993.

The front of the courthouse features a second-floor balcony, as well as a four-sided clock tower that was restored some years back. The clock restoration was a result of an impressive community fundraising effort by local lawyers and others, Waters said.

"It chimes on the hour," Waters said of the clock. "Sometimes you have to pause while it chimes."

An elevator was added about 20 years ago, he said. The large



**Public
Defender
Services**

40 HOURS FREE CLE CREDIT

JUVENILE LAW BOOTCAMP

5 SESSIONS STARTING APRIL 26, 2022

- Registration for this FREE 40-hour virtual training series is open for any West Virginia attorney representing children in status offenses and delinquency cases.
- Topics covered include best practices in handling emergency detention hearings, preliminary hearings, motions practice, dispositions, and other areas of legal practice, as well as juvenile-focused advocacy, and bio-psycho-social features of childhood.
- Approved for a total of 40 hours of CLE credit, 8 CLE hours each day. More information can be found on our website at www.pds.wv.gov
- Please email cara.netzer@wv.gov to register today for this comprehensive training!

This document was prepared under a grant from the West Virginia Division of Administrative Services, Justice & Community Services Section. Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the State of West Virginia Division of Administrative Services, Justice & Community Services Section or any entity of the Department of Justice.

courtroom has been reduced somewhat from its original size; and a balcony that had previously been in the courtroom was closed off, with the space now used for storage. There also were offices added in the back of the courtroom and improvements made to the heating and cooling system. Upgrades were made while maintaining the historic characteristics of the building, Waters said.

The interior of the building features an original wood railing and newel post. The courthouse's center hallway features terrazzo flooring with oak trim. Outside the courthouse are Civil War-era cannons in recognition of the Grand Army of the Republic and a memorial to veterans near the base of the flagpole.

The building is a rarity in West Virginia in that it actually holds all of the county offices there, without any annex buildings, Waters said. Along with the circuit judge and clerk's office, it is home to the county clerk, assessor, magistrates, sheriff's tax office, prosecutor's office and family court judges.

For the centennial celebration of the courthouse's opening, Wirt County hosted a birthday party for the courthouse in May 2011, featuring remarks by state and local officials, music from the 249th Army Band of the West Virginia Army National Guard and a panoramic group photograph that was taken to mark the occasion.

"It was quite the commemoration," said Waters, adding that because Wirt County is small, the community is tightly knit and loves a chance to celebrate its history and patriotism. The Fourth of July is always a fun celebration in Wirt County, he said. It's a full day of activities organized by members of the Elizabeth-Wirt Volunteer Fire Department, who host everything from a 5K to an ice cream social, musical programs, a parade, fireworks and more. Courthouse Square in Elizabeth also comes alive each autumn for the Pioneer Day Fall Festival, which includes craft vendors, music, food and more.

Hunting and other outdoor activities are popular in Wirt County,

and residents love to turn out and support their Wirt County High School teams at athletic events, Waters said. And their patriotism runs deep. Several Wirt County families have stepped up to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Waters remembers the town's celebration and the national media descending on the small community in 2003 when U.S. Army soldier and Wirt County native Jessica Lynch returned home after being a POW and suffering severe injuries in Iraq at the age of 19. She went on to become a local schoolteacher. He also remembers people modernizing her family home to facilitate her care after her return.

"I remember vividly when Jessica Lynch was rescued," he said. "That was dramatic." **WVL**

Jean Hardiman has been writing about the great people of West Virginia for the past 20 years. She works in the communications office at Marshall University and lives in Huntington with her family.