

WOOD COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The Wood County Courthouse escaped demolition in the 1980s to continue serving the county.

Today's Wood County Courthouse is the fifth to serve the county. The last three have stood on the same Court Square at Third and Market streets in downtown Parkersburg.

By 1798, settlement in the area surrounding the confluence of the Ohio and Little Kanawha rivers had grown to the point that a new county was deemed necessary. Wood County was formed from Harrison County and named for James Wood, governor of Virginia at the time.

The little town destined to become the seat of Wood County was first known as Springville, then Newport and finally Parkersburg — named for Capt. Alexander Parker, who had purchased most of the property.

As with many other counties, Wood County's first court business was conducted in a private home — the log cabin home of Justice Hugh Philips. The second courthouse, located in 1880 near the mouth of the Little Kanawha, was constructed of logs hewn from nearby walnut trees. The third, constructed of timber, stone and handmade brick, was the first built at the site that became known as Court Square.

By James E. Casto

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APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA. PHOTO BY JEFF GENTNER.





Two miles from downtown Parkersburg, on a site that housed a Union fort during the Civil War, Fort Boreman Park has several overlooks offering beautiful scenery of the Ohio River below.

Constructed in 1860 at a cost of \$25,000, the fourth courthouse had a typically Southern design with Greek Revival columns and a graceful steeple that later was destroyed by lightning. During the Civil War, it was used as a headquarters and hospital for Union troops.

West Virginia's first governor, Arthur I. Boreman, was a circuit judge and held court in the fourth courthouse from 1861 to 1863. Following three terms as governor, Boreman returned to Parkersburg and the private practice of law. In 1888, he was again elected as a circuit judge, a post he held until his death in 1896.

The county's fifth courthouse

is a five-story masonry structure faced with sandstone quarried from nearby Quincy Street Hill. It was built at a cost of \$100,000 in the Richardson Romanesque style by local contractors Caldwell & Drake, according to plans drawn up by architect L.W. Thomas of Canton, Ohio.

In 1899, the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the new courthouse climaxed Wood County's centennial celebration. Readers of the centennial's "Historical Souvenir" were assured that the courthouse would "be of absolute fireproof construction, nothing but iron and steel going into the frame work, while the floors will be of terra cotta."

The building's entrances display fanciful carved ornamentations. Its interior has been considerably remodeled over the years; but several outstanding elements remain, including iron stairwells and the stained-glass sidelights to offices.

In 1901, a fountain was erected at the courthouse's main entrance. It features a bronze memorial to Circuit Judge James M. Jackson, who had died that year. During his 1912 presidential campaign, Theodore Roosevelt visited Parkersburg and spoke from the courthouse entrance. The courthouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

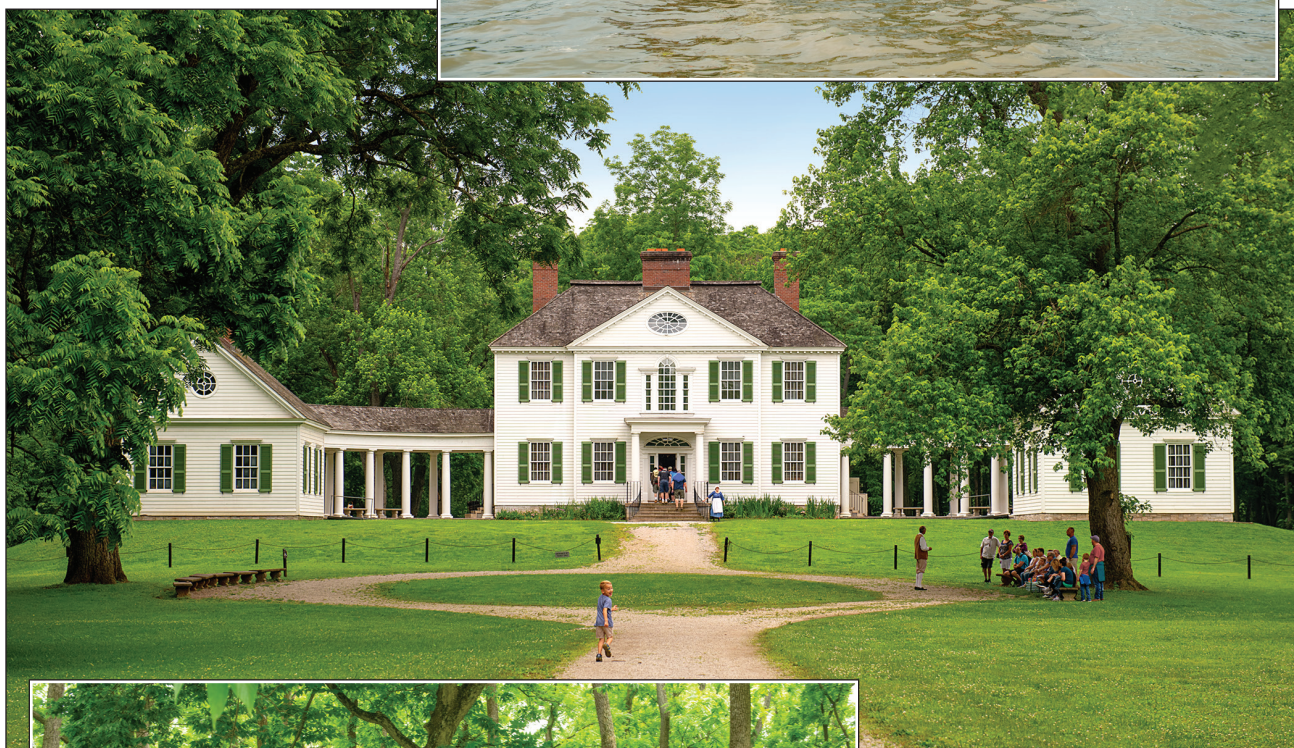
Today, all court functions take place in a judicial annex located

Blennerhassett Island has an interesting and storied past. The fifth largest in the Ohio River, the isle stretches 3.8 miles in length and contains 500 acres. Archeological excavations have revealed that it was the home of native peoples as early as 9000 BC. Two exiled Irish aristocrats, Harman and Margaret Blennerhassett, settled on it in 1798 after fleeing Ireland for political and personal reasons. They laid out a magnificent European-style estate with a mansion containing 7,000 square feet of floor space.

The Blennerhassetts' stay on the island was short-lived. They allowed former vice president Aaron Burr to use their island as the base of operations for his controversial 1805-1807 military expedition to the Southwest, labeled by some historians as



PHOTOS COURTESY VISIT GREATER PARKERSBURG



a “conspiracy.” After the Burr treason trial, presided over by Chief Justice John Marshall, the wealthy couple lost their fortune and died in poverty.

The mansion accidentally burned to the ground in 1811, but has since been authentically reproduced and is open for tours that are hosted by guides in period-accurate costumes.

In order to reach Blennerhassett Island State Park, visitors depart from Parkersburg and take a 30-minute boat ride aboard the *Island Belle* sternwheeler.

Once on the island, self-guided walking tours and horse drawn wagon rides are available. Bicycles may be rented and, with the proper licenses, fishing is permitted from the river banks.



PHOTOS COURTESY VISIT GREATER PARKERSBURG

The Julia-Ann Historic District, located in Parkersburg, is the largest and oldest historic district in the state. Some of the local sights include the Wood County Courthouse, the Blennerhassett Hotel (upper right), the Oil and Gas Museum (bottom left) and Henderson Hall Plantation (bottom right).



adjacent to the courthouse. Other county offices remain in the old courthouse.

Former prosecuting attorney Harry Deitzler has some fond — and some not so fond — memories of working in the courthouse “from 1975 through sometime after 1980 when the new judicial annex was built.”

“I came into my office one morning and the ceiling was on my desk. The roof had leaked and the wet plaster fell down,” Deitzler says.

“The building was constantly either too hot or too cold; we never knew which it would be. When I arrived in the summer of 1975, the telephones in the building were virtual antiques. They were later replaced. Our courthouse offices

when I was prosecutor were small, cramped, uncomfortable and inadequate. We had three assistant prosecutors stuffed in a small room with just enough space for their desks and one chair for the person who would be interviewed.”

In the early 1980s, the courthouse was slated for demolition as part of Parkersburg’s urban renewal plan. It’s still standing today only because opponents of the proposed demolition went to court and averted that fate. (“The local historical group virtually picketed the county commissioners’ offices,” recalls Deitzler.)

In 2020, a new steeple was added to the courthouse’s bell tower, replacing one that had been removed in 1952.

“I climbed up in the steeple once,” says Deitzler. “You had to be half nuts to do that because it had missing and broken stairs and if another one broke it would be a very long fall to the bottom. The reason it was chopped off at the top was because it had been struck by lightning long ago, and they were smart enough not to replace it and risk another strike.”

“I’m not sure what precautions were taken this time around other than the fact that the new federal Bureau of the Public Debt building that was built next door is a lot bigger and much taller. So maybe the steeple will be safe for now.”

Extending from the banks of the Ohio River down the interstate mountainside corridor, Wood

County is a blend of rugged country beauty and urban activities, with plenty for visitors to see and do. For much of the year, boating on the Ohio River is a great way to spend the day. And the river offers great fishing spots. Moving inland, canoers and hunters will enjoy the bountiful streams and game-filled forests.

One delicious stop in Wood County is Holl's Chocolates. Started by Swiss Conditior Fritz Holl as a retirement hobby in April 1986, it is still a family-owned enterprise and remains focused on making traditional, authentic, Swiss chocolates of the finest quality.

If you're history-minded, you're apt to enjoy a visit to the Oil & Gas Museum, which celebrates the early history of that industry. Or you can take a short boat ride to Blennerhassett Island, where Aaron Burr hatched a treasonous plot to steal Texas territory away from the United States. Now a state park, the island boasts a faithful recreation of the grand mansion where in 1806 Harman and

PHOTO COURTESY HOLL'S CHOCOLATES



Holl's Chocolates began in the Holl family kitchen in 1986 and swiftly became a success. In four short years, the company had grown so much it moved to its second professional (and current) location which is in Vienna, West Virginia.



PHOTOS COURTESY VISIT GREATER PARKERSBURG

Parkersburg Paddlefest is a three-day festival dedicated to people-powered watercraft. Kayaks, canoes, and stand-up paddleboards are welcome to participate. Point Park, at the confluence of the Ohio and Little Kanawha rivers, is the setting for the first two day's activities, concluding with a lake excursion on Sunday at North Bend State Park Lake.

Margaret Blennerhassett entertained the visiting Burr and were ensnared in his plot. Nearby is Henderson Hall, home to Henderson brothers Alexander and John who turned in traitors Blennerhassett and Burr to family friends President Jefferson and Secretary of State Madison.

For more information on Wood

County sites and attractions, visit the Greater Parkersburg Convention and Visitors Bureau. **WV**

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