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# CABELL COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The handsome Huntington structure opened its doors in 1901

**A**ll brides are beautiful, or so it's often said. In the same vein, "handsome" is a word regularly employed to describe county courthouses.

Seldom has the word been used more aptly than in referring to the Cabell County Courthouse. In his authoritative *Buildings of West Virginia*, noted architectural historian S. Allen Chambers Jr. labels it "perhaps West Virginia's most impressive county courthouse."

A three-story structure of classic Beaux Arts design and built of Ohio sandstone, the courthouse stands amid a park-like landscaped setting, with a tall, domed clock tower rising dramatically from the center of its roof. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, it is the fourth courthouse to serve Cabell County but the only one built in Huntington.

Named for Virginia Gov. William H. Cabell (1805-1808), Cabell County was formed in 1809. Thus, the county observed its 200th anniversary last year.

The legislation creating Cabell County named a commission to locate a county seat, and that commission recommended that the courthouse be located in the town of Guyandotte. In 1814, however, the town of Barboursville succeeded in having the county seat moved there, where it remained until the turmoil of the Civil War prompted a temporary move back to Guyandotte. The county seat returned to Barboursville at the war's end and remained there until 1887 when a county referendum approved its move to Huntington.

The move to Huntington was sparked by the city's rapid growth. Founded by rail tycoon Collis P. Huntington in 1871 as the western terminus of his Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, the town sprang into existence in a very short period of time. In 1800, Huntington's population was less than 2,000; by 1890, its population had grown to more than 10,000. During the 1880s, Huntington gained a water company, paved sidewalks, a telephone system, electric lights, an electric streetcar line and natural gas service. It seemed only natural that such a thriving city should become the seat of the county's government.

Initially, the county government was temporarily moved into a building (long-since demolished) in the 400 block of Ninth Street that already housed the municipal government, fire department, police station and jail.

**By James E. Casto**

Photos by Jeff Gentner, Arnout Hyde and Rick Lee



**Just a few blocks from the Cabell County Courthouse is Pullman Square, the centerpiece of Huntington's shopping and entertainment district. Pullman Square offers a variety of dining options and has evolved into a favorite hangout for groups of all ages.**

In 1892, the county purchased for \$24,757 a courthouse site – a tree-lined square block of land bounded by Fourth and Fifth avenues and Seventh and Eighth streets. Plans for construction were delayed by the depression triggered by the Panic of 1893, and it was not until 1895 that the county advertised for plans. The Kansas City, Miss., firm of Gunn and Curtis was selected as architect and a Chicago company, Charles A. Moses, won the construction contract.

James B. Stewart of Huntington was hired as supervising architect for the courthouse project. Stewart went on to design many of the city's finest residences and commercial buildings, including the Carnegie Public Library, another masterpiece of Beaux Arts design.

Although the foundation was laid in 1896, more financial woes delayed construction of the superstructure until 1899. The building's cornerstone was laid Nov. 11, 1899, with – in the words of the late George S. Wallace, local attorney and historian – “a parade and considerable ceremony.” Wallace should know, as he was the grand marshal for the parade.

The original building was finally completed and occupied in December 1901, then dedicated on Feb. 22, 1902. It cost \$95,850 to build, but the county had to sell bonds to finance the project so that tacked on a nearly equal sum – \$83,901 – in interest.

As Wallace later commented, “After the completion of this new courthouse the people of Cabell County and particularly of the city of Huntington were pleased with, and proud of, the new structure and felt they had provided for the needs of the county for a long time to come.”

They did not anticipate Huntington's rapid growth, however. Soon the courthouse wasn't big enough. So, in 1923, a new wing was constructed on the building's west end. Still later, in 1940, a second wing was built on the east end. At the same time, the Depression-era Works Progress Administration funded construction of a new jail on Seventh Street.

The west wing cost \$133,900 to erect, the east wing cost \$208,000 and the new jail cost \$246,000. Over the years, the courthouse often was the victim of slap-dash maintenance and outright neglect. In the

1960s, the building's dome was given a brazen coat of blue and yellow paint, glaringly out of keeping with its Beaux Arts beauty. In recent years, however, county officials and concerned citizens have done much to restore and preserve the old building's grandeur.

The courthouse dome was restored in 1997, with cracks sealed, the masonry refurbished and better lighting installed. Thanks to the generosity of Huntington attorney John Hankins, who dug into his own pocket for \$50,000 it cost, the dome received a coat of genuine gold leaf, rather than the gold paint that had been planned.

Interior work to the courthouse rotunda – adding new gold and green paint and restoring the ornate decorations on the ceiling – was completed in 2000. More recently, work has been completed to repair water damage and loose stonework in the building's exterior walls, with crews working their way around the building, doing one side at a time as the money became available.

Preserving the historic beauty of the courthouse is important, says Hankins.

“Courthouses tend to be the most important buildings in any county,” he says. “We’re lucky to have one of the most beautiful ones in the country.”

Today's Cabell County is a very different place than the county the courthouse originally served when it first opened its doors in 1901. When the courthouse opened, there was no Huntington Mall in Barbourville, no Pullman Square, no ornate Keith-Albee Theatre, no Huntington Museum of Art, no soaring bridges crossing the Ohio River, no floodwall guarding the community against high water, no high-tech medical centers, no sprawling Marshall University campus, no Ritter Park and, of course, no Interstate 64 or Tri-State Airport. The list of changes seems almost endless.

However, in spite of the ways Huntington and Cabell County have grown and changed over the past century, the Cabell County Courthouse has remained an abiding presence. It is where judges and juries dispense justice, where the milestones of life – births and deaths, marriages and divorces, the buying and selling of property – are recorded and where the votes are tallied on election night. In one way or another, the life of every Cabell County resident is touched by what goes on within the courthouse's handsome walls. **WVL**

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**Above:** Old Main, built in 1868, is the oldest structure at Marshall University in downtown Huntington. Its towers have become a symbol of the university to its alumni. **Below:** A short shaded walk down Eighth Street takes visitors from the courthouse to Ritter Park, a public park and garden with walking trails, a tennis center, picnic tables and shelters, a children's playground and a 1,000-seat amphitheater.

