



CLAY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

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The Clay County Courthouse opened on Sept. 23, 1978. It is defined by its clean, modern look and sits directly across the street from the county's former courthouse. The courthouse was built not only to modernize Clay County's governing house, but also to provide the extra room needed to house the extension offices, district attorney's office and county clerk's office. The interior of the new courthouse is simple and constructed with red brick. The exterior is also brick and features a glass front entrance. People visiting the courthouse enjoy its easy access and view of the beautiful Elk River. However, it is Clay County's old courthouse that has been the focal point of political, social and cultural ways of life in the town of Clay for well over 100 years.

The old courthouse was designed by renowned architect Frank L. Packard in 1902. It is a true expression of Packard's ingenuity and refined yet subtle abilities and is a bona fide example of turn-of-the century architecture. The senior courthouse is a local landmark registered on the National Register of Historical Places. It stands with undeniable integrity that has not been compromised with significant exterior or interior changes in the past three quarters of a century.

By Tammy Marie Rose
Photos by J.A. Waddell

Andy Waddell, owner and operator of the Clay newspaper, *The Communicator*, and its only radio station, WYAP 101.7, explained that the old courthouse will soon begin renovations “to bring back the early 20th-century charm and house a historical museum in the near future.”

“This will become a big draw for our county,” he said.

The county’s historic courthouse displays a classical theme most defined by the broken pediment and coupled Roman Doric columns that form a modest portico-front-piece about the building’s arched entrance. It is topped with a domed cupola. The Beaux Arts classicism is typical of the time period during which it was constructed.

The most captivating of the interior aspects are the three fireplaces located in the back courtroom whose separate flues rise in a dramatic chimney in the rear of the building.

The county represented by this historic courthouse, as well as the new one, was formed in March 1858 from land seized from Braxton and Nicholas counties. It was named in honor of Kentucky statesman Henry Clay and is the only county the Elk River runs all the way through.

The first county court was held in the residence of Justice William Fitzwater on July 12, 1858, and held in various places until 1865, when a courthouse and log building for the county clerk were constructed.

An old anecdote is attached to the building of the new courthouse and the withdrawal from the old. Story has it that the stones for the new courthouse were quarried close to the old building. Early one morning several large boulders broke free and rolled through the old courthouse, demolishing it. Old timers still say, “It was the old making way for the new.”

“In the beginning the courthouse was the hub of all activity for the county,” said Jerry Stover, Clay County’s historian. “It was called the Clay Courthouse; at the time it was Clay’s only reason for existing. Everyone migrated to the courthouse for all the activities that took place across the entire county. A lot of activity has gone on inside the old courthouse.”

Stover added that the county commission has approved an annex, and the sheriff’s office and magistrates will eventually move into the new court-



Top: Clay County is the only county the Elk River runs all the way through and is a popular destination for kayakers and fishers. **Middle:** The old Clay County Courthouse, built in the early 1900s, remains one of the county’s most treasured landmarks. Clay County designated that the old courthouse be maintained even after the new one was constructed in 1978. **Bottom:** The annual Golden Delicious Apple Festival has been bringing thousands to Clay County every September since 1972. It is an activity-packed weekend of contests, food, games, crafts and a parade.

house. That will leave the old courthouse vacant for renovations and the opening of a Clay County Historical Museum.

"We have a lot of wonderful plans for this old building," he said. Along with establishing the museum inside the former courthouse, the Clay County Historical Society also plans to hold reenactments of famous trials that took place in Clay County. Some of the most memorable trials were the Sara Legg, Booger Hole and Rosco Bail trials. The Sarah Legg trial of 1905 was the first in the county's history of a woman being charged with murder. Legg was charged with the murder of her husband Jay. She was acquitted.

The year 1917 brought the notorious Booger Hole trial. The trial itself is not what makes this event so notable; the notoriety emerged from what took place as the charged were brought to the courthouse. An incensed mob of citizens surrounded the courthouse and attempted to hang the father and son who faced murder charges. They made it to trial and were found guilty.

In 1953 Rosco Bail, a striking miner, was accused of killing a mine guard. Bail was found guilty but filed an appeal. He was mysteriously killed before the appeal could be heard.

By virtue of its significance to the still rural community, Clay County designated that the old courthouse be maintained even after the new courthouse was constructed.

However, there is more to Clay County than the mysterious, historic allure of the old courthouse. Clay County has much to offer travelers, including the yearly Golden Delicious Apple Festival that has brought thousands to Clay's gateway every September since 1972.

Clay County is also home to the scenic Lake Sampson, the J.G. Bradley campground along the mouth of Buffalo Creek and the Elk River, the historic Buffalo Creek & Gauley Railroad and the meandering beauty of the Elk River.

Whether you are looking to step back in history or simply want a weekend of down-home country fun, Clay County has it all. Clay's greatest offering is the genuine, welcoming Appalachians who call it home. **WV**

Tammy Marie Rose is a Clay County native. She is a freelance writer, columnist, author, radio show host and outspoken environmentalist. Tammy is proud to raise her family in the County of Clay.

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