1872: COURTHOUSE RESTORED & ENLARGED

In 1872, the county seat was returned to Charles Town and the damaged courthouse was restored. The walls and columns were made higher and a broad cornice, or entablature, was added below the roofline. Above the portico, the bell tower was enlarged to include a town clock. Walls were added to the first floor interior, creating offices and supporting the floor above. A grand new courtroom with a 25-foot ceiling was created on the second floor. It features a balcony referred to as the "ladies listening gallery."

The new courtroom was heated by stoves and, after a few years, was lit by a large "soil kerosene" chandelier. Like the courtroom of 1836, it had windows with wood shutters all around. Also like the 1836 courtroom, railing and balusters defined the bench and the well of the court. A single painting hangs in the courtroom—a portrait of Andrew Hunter, a lawyer of Charles Town who served as special prosecutor in John Brown’s trial.

SUPREME COURT

This new courtroom was home to the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals from 1873 until 1912. During these forty years, the Supreme Court would ride circuit. It sat one term a year in Charles Town, one term in Charleston, and one term in Wheeling.

COURTHOUSE ADDITION

In 1910 an annex was constructed onto the rear of the courthouse for Judge's chambers, jury and witness rooms, and a clerk's office. In 1919 the old jail was sold to the U.S. Postal Service, and a new one was constructed behind the courthouse.

WAR IN THE COALFIELDS

In 1922, 250 miles from Charles Town in the southwestern coalfields of West Virginia, enraged miners inflamed by Mother Jones and union leaders attempted to invade and unseat Logan County. The "Battle of Blair Mountain" resulted. Actual warfare with machine guns and aerial bombardment followed. Two thousand federal troops were needed to stop the fighting.

1922: SECOND TREASON TRIAL

A special Logan County grand jury was convened. Returned were 738 indictments charging treason and murder. The venue was transferred to Jefferson County.

Again, Charles Town was the site for a set of high profile treason trials. The national and world media descended on the town. The newly formed State Police were present in such number that it seemed like martial law. John L. Lewis, Governor Ephraim F. Morgan, and other notables were in attendance.

LEADER ACQUITTED

In the first trial, union leader Bill Blizzard was acquitted of treason. After that, Reverend Wilburn and his son were convicted of 2nd degree murder. The governor later commuted their sentences. Next, Walter Allen was convicted of treason against the state. He was released on bond pending trial and remained at large.

After those trials, venue was moved to Morgan, then Greenbrier, then Fayette County. However, no other trials were ever held, and the remaining indictments were dismissed.

THE LIVING COURTHOUSE

Today the Jefferson County Courthouse remains a working courthouse, not a museum. It stands at the vital center of government in this busy county. Combining architectural and historical significance, it is an eloquent monument to democracy.

WRITTEN BY THE HONORABLE JUDGE DAVID SANDERS

The Honorable David H. Sanders was elected to the bench in 1992 and served until his retirement in 2016. A native of Mercer County, WV, Sanders received his law degree from West Virginia University. He was the presiding judge in Jefferson County from 2008 until 2016.

PRESCRIPTION

The Jefferson County Courthouse was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and is a contributing structure to the Downtown Charles Town Historic District. It is maintained by the Jefferson County Commission, whose decisions are advised by a subcommittee of the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission. This committee brings together various stakeholders dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the county’s central landmark.
1836: NEW COURTHOUSE, A GREEK TEMPLE

The new county was growing so quickly that in 1836 the first courthouse was pulled down to make way for a larger one. The plan had been to sell the courthouse and build in another location. However, it was discovered that, if not used for a courthouse, the property would revert to the Washington family.

The new courthouse was constructed as a Doric Temple in the Greek Revival style. Although there have been some changes, this is the courthouse that still stands. In 1836, the ground floor was one big courtroom. This courtroom had windows in all four walls and was heated by large iron stoves. The judge and court officials sat on an elevated platform behind a railing with turned balusters. This courtroom would be the site of one of the most famous trials in WV history.

1859: JOHN BROWN’S RAID

On October 16, 1859, John Brown led a band of 21 men against the Federal Arsenal and Armory at Harpers Ferry. They killed five and wounded nine in the raid. Ten of the conspirators were killed, five escaped, and six were arrested by troops under Col. Robert E. Lee. They were taken to Charles Town for trial. The charges were murder, inciting slaves to rebel, and treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia.

THE TRIAL

The trial began on Wednesday, October 26, and concluded Monday, October 31, 1859. It took only one day to hear all the witnesses. The jury was only out half an hour before a verdict of guilty on all counts was returned. Part of the John Brown courtroom survives as one of the hearing rooms of the County Commission.

After John Brown’s trial and conviction, he was taken to the jail located diagonally across George Street where the present post office now stands. Brown remained in jail through November while his conviction was appealed. John Wilkes Booth, in Charles Town for these events, gave dramatic readings from Shakespeare at the Episcopal Reading Room.

THE EXECUTION

On the 2nd of December 1859, Brown was taken from the jail. He rode in a wagon seated atop his coffin to a field a short distance away. The site is along present-day Samuel Street, between Hunter and Mason Streets. There, surrounded by troops and V.M.I. cadets, he was hanged. It was 35 minutes before his pulse ceased. Brown was 59.

After the execution, Brown’s body was taken to Harpers Ferry and turned over to his wife. The scaffold was disassembled and made into a porch on a residence at the corner of Liberty and Lawrence Streets.

The remaining five co-conspirators were tried, convicted, and hanged: John Copeland and Shields Green, who were black, and John Edwin Cook, Edwin Coppoc and Aaron D. Stevens, who were white.

WAR DAMAGES COURTHOUSE

Immediately before the Civil War, the court records were moved to Lexington, Virginia for safekeeping. They survived the war intact. The courthouse itself would not be so lucky. The war raged in Jefferson County. Charles Town was frequently occupied, changing hands regularly. On October 18, 1863 troops and artillery under Confederate General John D. Imboden surrounded Union troops in the courthouse. The brief battle that ensued damaged the courthouse. After that, the courthouse was used as a stable. By war’s end, the metal roof had been removed and made into bullets.

THE FORTUNES OF WAR

When West Virginia was formed in 1863, Jefferson County remained a part of the Commonwealth of Virginia. However, Jefferson County was annexed into the new state after a highly questionable “election.” By war’s end the county seat was moved to Shepherdstown. A new courthouse (now McMurrin Hall) was built there. In Charles Town tombstones were sold in the courthouse yard.