

"McDowell County Celebrates Its Centennial," by Kyle McCormick
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MCDOWELL COUNTY CELEBRATES ITS CENTENNIAL

McDowell County in West Virginia is observing its 100th anniversary this year (1958) with a pageant to be held there the week of May 11th to 16th inclusive. Its theme will be the evolution of coal, for the county's economy is entirely dependent upon coal, it being the largest coal producing county in the world.

McDowell County and Buchanan County in Virginia were formed in 1858 from Tazewell County. The bill creating McDowell County was passed on February 20, 1858.

It was named for James McDowell (1795-1851) of Rockbridge County, Virginia, Governor of Virginia from 1843-1846. Governor McDowell attended school at Yale and was a graduate of Princeton College. He was orator upon the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Princeton College.

Following his term as governor, McDowell was elected to the House of Representatives of the United States Congress. He was a highly educated man with a knowledge of foreign affairs.

The area of McDowell County is 588.40 square miles. It had a population of 98,887 in 1950, and in its banner year of 1948, it loaded 29,573,940 tons of coal, or about 20 per cent of the state's total. For years, it was the leading coal mining county in the United States until in 1955, Logan County surpassed it, but McDowell came back to lead in 1956 by a small margin.

When the county was created, it had 1, 533 people with 283 families. There was no town in its limits, and the state of Virginia owned two-thirds of the land, which was valued at about 12 cents an acre. Some coal lands cannot be purchased at any price today, and sales have been made for \$2,000 an acre.

The value of all property at the time the county was created was \$163,585 as against \$102,259,570 today. The Norfolk and Western Railway through its holding company owns about one-third of the county.

At the time the county was created and also at the time West Virginia became a state on June 20, 1863, there were no Negroes,

either free or slave, in the county. There were about four persons of foreign birth, they being Irishmen. In the 1950 census, McDowell County exceeded any other in population both in numbers and percentage of Negroes. Twenty-five per cent of its population is Negro, and approximately 2,000, or two per cent, are foreign born.

McDowell County played no great part in the Civil War by reason of its mountainous terrain and scant population. It was placed in West Virginia along with Pocahontas, Greenbrier, Monroe, and Mercer Counties largely through the efforts of James F. Brown, Kanawha County delegate to the Wheeling Convention. Its geographical position had a great deal to do with its final disposition and because of the protection of the Allegheny Mountains to these five counties in the event of military invasion.

It was estimated that the mountain range was worth 50,000 troops.

The first few years of the existence of McDowell County were spent in contention over the county seat with no solution of the question until 1872, when it located at Perryville, which is now called English.

The act creating the county appointed Henry D. Smith of Russell County; Charles C. Calfee of Mercer County; and John C. Graham of Wythe County as commissioners to select a county seat, and this commission did not act.

The act appointed George W. Payne, Guy T. Harrison, Samuel Lambert, Phillip Lambert, Thomas A. Perry, Elias V. Harmon, and Henry T. Perry as commissioners to lay off the county into four magisterial districts.

An amended act of 1860 saw the appointment of new commissioners: Elijah Bailey of Mercer County; Charles J. Shannon of Smyth County; and Thomas W. Davis of Russell County as commissioners for the purpose of selecting a county seat. They selected a site and the county court rejected it, and the report was lost or destroyed.

This amended act also named new commissioners to lay off districts, and it was composed of George W. Payne, Samuel Lambert, Archibald P. Mitchell, Elias V. Harmon, William Brewster, and Moses Cartwright. An election was held. The results of that election for the county seat are not on record.

The county court let to contract to George W. Payne on June 11, 1861, the building of a courthouse and the laying off nine lots

all for the sum of \$700. This was done upon the recommendation of James R. Doke, J. C. Harman, and John C. Harrison.

But the new "Loyal" government at Wheeling stepped in on February 11, 1862, and passed an act appointing Charles Stuart, Andrew Workman, Robert Hager, George Claypool, and William A. Cook as commissioners to select a site for the courthouse.

They located the courthouse on October 8, 1862, on a farm near Mill Creek, a tributary of Tug River.

It remained there until moved to Perryville in 1872.

The county seat was removed there following a county-wide election. Finally, in 1892, the county seat was removed to Welch after a bitter election followed by court proceedings.

The first county court was held at the residence of George W. Payne, August 9, 1859, and the first circuit court at the same residence on August 23, 1859, Judge S. V. Fulkerson presiding. In the interim courts were held at first one place then another.

When the county seat was removed to Welch, the building used was the Hutson Brothers' saloon, afterwards destroyed by fire. It was occupied as a courthouse until May 1, 1895, when the present stone structure was built. The courthouse annex was completed in 1910.

Welch is now the county seat and is named for Isaiah Welch, noted geologist and mining engineer, who made the first real survey of the coal of McDowell County in 1873, and upon the basis of his report, the Norfolk and Western Railway was extended into the coal fields of West Virginia.

Captain Welch, as he was called, reported that the coal was there in great quantities but that at the rate the country was consuming coal, it would be generations before this coal would be needed by the nation.

Welch, with a population of 6,603, is the trading center of the county and one of the busiest cities for its size in the nation.

McDowell County built the first Memorial Building for the soldiers of World War I erected in the United States and also the first one erected in honor of the Negro soldiers.

The vast development of the resources of McDowell County came about through the extension of the Norfolk and Western Railway into the county in 1888 when the Elkhorn tunnel was completed, and the first coal was shipped from the S. A. Crozer mines in 1888. Crozer and J. J. Tierney were the first coal operators.

The big mine of the United States Coal and Coke Company was established at Gary through the efforts of Judge Gary of the United States Steel Company, and it furnishes coal for the manufacture of steel.

The Norfolk and Western Railway was reluctant to extend its lines into the Atkin District of McDowell County, but Judge Gary through Isaac T. Mann, a Bramwell banker, secured an option on the coal lands of the territory penetrated by the railway.

He sold these lands back to the railway company at a profit of some six million dollars for himself and Mr. Mann, but he contracted to open the mine at Gary. It is one of the larger and more flourishing operations of West Virginia with its club house and country club and golf course, all available to the employees of the company.

The coals are the famous nationally advertised Pocahontas coals which are called "Smokeless Coals" due to the low volatile quality of this bituminous coal. The coal mines are among the most valuable in the world and also among the most modern.

McDowell County has been called the "Free State of McDowell" because of its political situation. It was strongly Democratic with respect to parties when West Virginia was formed. It turned into a Republican county with the coming of the coal operations and through the influence of the mine owners who came mostly from Pennsylvania.

It could be counted upon at times to give as much as ten thousand majority for the Republicans.

This situation changed completely in 1932 and 1936; Democrats got more than 11,000 majority. This majority began to lessen from then to 1956 when the majority was slightly more than 5,000.

There were 20,000 miners in McDowell County a few years ago, but modern mechanization of the mines has reduced this number to 13,000.

Among the men who have held high office from McDowell County are (the following): Dr. H. D. Hatfield, President of the West

Virginia Senate in 1911; elected Governor in 1912, and to the United States Senate in 1928. Edward P. Rucker, Attorney General from 1897 to 1901; E. Leslie Long, State Treasurer from 1909 to 1917; William Cassius Cook, State Superintendent of Schools from 1929 to 1933; and Ira J. Partlow, Attorney General from 1945 to 1949.

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