

## CHAPTER IV

## MAKING A NEW COUNTY

Perhaps it will never be known who originated the idea of forming a new county out of Wood, Tyler and Ritchie. It might have sprung from some apparently idle talk, some chance remark made while a group was sitting around the fire in one of the Vacluse stores, but it is reasonably certain that some of the most active promoters were Alexander H. Creel, Thomas Browse, Edmund Riggs and Daniel Reynolds.

The first mention we have of any desire to form a new county was when Thomas Browse rode to the Union school house in January, 1842, to talk the matter over with his neighbors. Then for several years the affair seems to have rested in abeyance, until in September, 1846 Mr. Browse, who was then surveyor of Tyler county, records that he had begun making a map for the new county. On the fifth of the same month he says he finished a new map and then rode with Edmund Riggs to the Union school house "to the meeting of Wood, Tyler and Ritchie citizens, who appointed me to fix boundary lines and to meet again next Friday." And on Friday he says he rode to Vacluse about the county lines, but gives no further information.

In January, 1847, he mentions being in Middlebourne, the county seat of Tyler county, and seeing there posted a notice of the proposed new county. On March 13 he went to the Pickens school house, which was probably the Union school house mentioned before, to attend a meeting about the new county, at which the following subscriptions were laid for the public buildings:

William Bills .....	\$400.00
Samuel Pickens .....	400.00
Alexander Creel, One Acre for Court House and .....	700.00
Edmund Riggs .....	300.00
D. Reynolds .....	300.00
Isaac Riggs .....	200.00
Harris .....	50.00
B. Brandis .....	25.00
Isaac LaRue .....	100.00
Wm. Medley .....	50.00
Brown .....	25.00
Thomas Browse .....	100.00
Jos. Taylor .....	50.00
Wm. Hammond .....	50.00
James Patterson .....	100.00

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\$2850.00

The object was to obtain \$3,500, of which \$3,000 was to be raised on the island and below the creek, including Isaac LaRue, and \$500 above the creek and up McKim. Edmund Riggs, D. Reynolds, Harris, Brown and James Patterson were not present at the meeting.

Under date of April 17 Mr. Browse writes: "Went to the school house at Pickens about the bonds for the new county, and found none there but Bills, Isaac LaRue, Perry LaRue and Samuel Pickens. This clearly shows how much confidence can be put in promises. All will subscribe but no one will bind themselves."

However, the matter seems to have moved forward, for on April 27, 1848, an election was held in which it figured. At the Grape Island precinct the new county proposition received 30 votes with only one against it, the objecting voter being Josiah Riggs. At that time the elections were conducted vive voce, every voter audibly announcing his vote to the commissioners, so that all bystanders could hear. At Allen's precinct, which included the Sugar Creek neighborhood, there were five for the new county and 16 against it. Mr. Browse's journal gives no further news of the election, but it is presumed to have carried, for an act establishing the new county was passed by the Virginia Assembly in the session of

1850-1851. It was named Pleasants in honor of James Pleasants, who was Governor of Virginia from 1822 to 1825, and died in 1836.

From Wood county was taken a section from Bull creek along the river to Middle Island creek and extending back about five miles; from Ritchie county came a narrow strip west of the ridge dividing the waters of Goose and Bond's creeks from the sources of Bull creek, Cow creek and French creek; and from Tyler county came the remainder. The area is given at 132 square miles.

It was a mistake to make the boundary so contracted. More of Wood and Ritchie should have been taken, so as to equalize the area and population of the four counties. The division left Wood with 364 square miles, Ritchie 453 and Tyler 260. One hundred more square miles could easily have been spared by Wood and Ritchie.

The population of the new county could not have been more than 1500, and the total valuation of property was not sufficient to decently operate a county government even in that time of small salaries. It was a purely agricultural and timbering country, with only here and there a grist or saw mill operated by water power, excepting a steam saw mill on Cow creek, which is said to have been operated in 1838.

In the first book of the county records, kept in the remarkably neat handwriting of Rodney Hickman, are related the early events of the organization, which was effected in a house owned by A. H. Creel. These records by Mr. Hickman, who obtained the quills from poultry yards were written with old fashioned goose quills, pointed on the farm of Thomas Browse.

The first meeting of the justices of the new county was held May 15, 1851. They had been appointed by Governor John B. Floyd of Virginia. Present were Moses Williamson, John K. Prince, Abner Martin, Thomas Browse, Samuel Hammett, Abraham S. Gorrell, Isaac Williamson, Edmund Riggs, Alexander H. Creel and John Stewart. They took the oath of office and organized themselves into a court.

Following this initial step came the election of a clerk. There were several candidates—Rodney Hickman, Uriah

V. Gill, Phineas P. Feeney and Jesse C. Beeson. The voting, as at all elections then, was viva voce. Martin, Browse, Gorrell, Riggs, Isaac Williamson and Moses Williamson, all residing in what had been the Tyler county section, voted for Rodney Hickman, who came from Middlebourne. Prince and Hammett, who lived in the Wood county section, voted for Feeney of Cow creek; Creel voted for Gill of St. Marys and Stewart voted for Beeson. Hickman was declared elected for the term of seven years, and his records show that he made a very good clerk.

Greenberry Riggs was appointed crier for the court; Thomas Browse, late surveyor of Tyler county, was recommended for the same position in the new county, and John K. Prince was unanimously chosen commissioner of revneue.

The county was laid off into two constable districts, the dividing line running with Washington street and the Middle Island Creek Turnpike, now known as the Ellenboro Pike, to the Ritchie county line, the northern district being No. 1 and the other No. 2.

Moses Williamson, John K. Prince and Abner Martin were recommended severally to the governor for sheriff, with preference in the order named. The following attorneys were admitted to practice before the bar of the court: William I. Boreman, John W. Horner, Joseph Spencer, John J. Jackson, Jr., Arthur I. Boreman, William L. Jackson, Benjamin W. Jackson, Leonard S. Hall, Joseph C. Moore and Jacob B. Blair.

Several of these young lawyers later took distinguished parts in the history of the State. John J. Jackson was appointed a Federal judge by President Grant and became known as "the Iron Judge." Arthur I. Boreman was the first governor of the State of West Virginia. James M. Jackson served many years as a circuit judge. William L. Jackson became a general of the Confederate army and Leonard S. Hall was a member of the Virginia Assembly of 1860 in which he voted for secession.

William L. Jackson was the unanimous choice for commonwealth attorney, and John W. Widderfield was appointed deputy clerk. A. H. Creel, John Stewart and John Logan were appointed a committee to secure a suit-

able place for holding court. Edward W. Johnson and Ambrose Smith were appointed constables for district No. 2 and Joseph Gorrell, Thomas Rymer and Jesse C. Beeson for No. 1.

The following day the court marked out four districts for overseers of the poor; later the same districts were created school districts. Henry Flesher was overseer and school commissioner of the First district, William Hanes of the Second, Phineas P. Feeney of the Third and Robert T. Parker of the Fourth. Although the bounds of the districts are not given, one may deduce from the residences of the overseers that the First district probably embraced what is now Lafayette district with a portion of McKim, the Second was Union district with a part of Washington, the Third Jefferson with a part of McKim, and the Fourth Grant and a part of Washington.

Greenberry B. Riggs declining the position of court crier, Henry C. Creel was appointed in his stead, and was also made collector, besides becoming deputy to John Widderfield, who was commissioned coroner.

William Dils was licensed to sell spirituous drinks, "so as such liquors be not drank in said store house."

The question of public buildings arising, the justices appointed a committee composed of A. H. Creel, John Widderfield, Edmund Riggs, Thomas Browse, John K. Prince and Abner Martin, to draft suitable plans, and also named A. H. Creel, Thomas Browse, John Stewart, Joseph Taylor and John Widderfield a committee to select a site for the buildings. The sparseness of the population, in which few able men were found, is indicated by the several duties given to certain individuals.

William Rymer was granted license to keep "a house of private entertainment" in St. Marys; Ervin D. Myers was licensed to keep an ordinary at Vaocluse, "the court being of opinion that he is a man of good character and not addicted to drunkenness or gambling." Ambrose Smith was licensed to keep a house of private entertainment at St. Marys, and Logan Brothers and Hopkins & Dils were given permission to sell liquors in St. Marys, the court deeming that their "places are fit and convenient to the neighborhood thereof for the retailing of such liquors."

In 1848 pledges had been given for raising \$4,500 for the purpose of erecting the public buildings, A. H. Creel heading the list with \$700 and the promise of a public square for the court house and jail. Other subscribers were Joseph Taylor, James Patterson, U. V. Gill, Thomas Browse and Daniel Reynolds. The amount needed was raised with considerable difficulty, and at last a contract was awarded to George Sharp and John Stewart to build a combined court house and jail for the sum of \$5,300 and to complete the same on or before December 15, 1852.

For a time it seems that Mr. Creel rued his bargain, as to giving the public square, but at last, on July 11, 1851, Thomas Browse drove the first stake in surveying it, and immediately the contractors went to work. The court house lot was made 160 feet square, with a driveway surrounding it, the plat showing an avenue leading directly from the square to Washington street, but that part of the plan was apparently abandoned. Perhaps it was an attempt to make a thoroughfare to connect with the Ellenboro Pike, which was done years afterward when Barkwill street was opened up.

The brick for the building was burned on the Gallaher farm along the lane, where yet remains a slight depression formed by taking out the clay. The work went on slowly, and it was not until June 11, 1854, that court was held in it for the first time. During this waiting period the house of Isaac Reynolds was used as a court house. This building is yet standing, on the southeast corner of Second and Lafayette streets. Its owner was a son of Daniel Reynolds and was father of Daniel Webster Reynolds, who became sheriff of the county.

Governor Floyd appointed Moses Williamson the first sheriff, accepting the recommendation which had been made by the justices, and at the same time commissioned James Ruckman as a justice. Christian Engle was made deputy sheriff.

At that time all the magistrates of the county joined in holding court, being empowered to try civil cases in which the amount involved did not exceed a certain sum. After the formation of the State of West Virginia, a distinction was made between justices of the peace and members

of the county court, but the latter continued as a judicial body with privilege of deciding cases in which the amount involved did not exceed \$300, until the constitution was amended in 1880, when it became a purely administrative organization, composed of three members only.

The first grand jury, called in July, 1851, was composed of Daniel Reynolds, foreman, John Harness, Moses Ruckman, Robert Triplett, Francis Triplett, George May, Benjamin Prince, Giles Hammett, Edmund Riggs, James Dils, Robert Parker, John Taylor, Joseph Bills, William K. Hanes, Granville Stout, Hiram Curtis, Isaac Cecil, Benjamin Hallett, Isaac Riggs, Greenberry B. Riggs, Thomas Bramel and John Williamson.

It seems that there was a great demand for "ordinaries" and a license for that purpose was granted to Samuel M. Hibbs.

The first person admitted to citizenship in the new county was Samuel Barkwill, late of Boyle Parish, Cornwall, England.

In September, 1851, the new county lines were surveyed by Thomas Browse, surveyor of Pleasants county, A. W. Duty, surveyor of Tyler, Abner Martin, John Bullman, William Cornell and Elza Smith. For his services in doing this work Mr. Browse received \$35.

In December, 1851, W. L. Jackson resigned as commonwealth attorney and Joseph Spencer was appointed to the office.

What we now know as a circuit court was originally called the superior court of law and chancery, the judge having a life tenure, but the constitution was amended in 1850-1, changing the title to circuit court and making the term of the judge eight years. The last judge of this circuit under the old constitution was David McComas, who held the office from 1844 to 1851, and was therefore the first judge to hold "superior" court in Pleasants county.

Joseph Taylor, one of the pioneers who had settled in the river valley at Grape Island, died January 14, 1852, aged 53 years. He had borne a prominent part in establishing the new county and held the office of road overseer at the time of his death.

About the middle of April there were several days of hard rain, causing the river to rise very rapidly. On the 19th it rose at the rate of nine inches an hour and on the 20th a great deal of drift floated down. The crest of the flood was reached April 21, 28 inches lower than the flood of 1832, but the rapid rise and strong current had done great damage. It was said that it carried away six acres from Middle Island.

May 26 an election was held, in which T. Locke, F. Williamson, Samuel Seckman and Abner Martin were elected magistrates, defeating Thomas Browse, Thomas Gorrell and William Virden. William Dils was elected sheriff, Rodney Hickman clerk, P. P. Feeney surveyor and H. Lee Pickens commissioner of revenue.

In some way the citizens of St. Marys had gotten possession of a cannon, which figured in many of their celebrations. On the afternoon of Christmas Day, 1852, a party took it on the steamer Venture up to Grape Island to fire a salute to Mr. Browse, but on trying to get it on shore it fell into the river. In the party were Messrs. S. Logan, Smith, Myers, Kelsall, Strous, Little and John Strafford. The cannon lay in the river until New Years Day, when it was gotten out and taken back to the town. That evening while firing paper cartridges it was discharged prematurely, killing David SeEVERS. His remains were buried on the Kelley farm on Middle Island creek, marked by a stone which briefly tells of the disaster.

It is a pity that we have not more particulars of a horse race which took place on the Browse farm December 15, 1855. It is mentioned here because it shows the diversity of amusements indulged in by that generation, and also because it occurred in a season that is usually inclement. A crowd went up from St. Marys, and three races were held in an open field, a straight course from a small stream to a board fence. The chief race was between a horse owned by a Mr. Cain—perhaps Zachary Cain—and one brought here by a Mr. Malone from Doddridge county, the wager being about \$200 a side. The Malone horse won.

The latter part of that Winter was very severe. On January 9 the Browse record says it was twelve below zero. The snow was deep, logs were dragged over the

roads to break a way for teams, and the snow on the hills made it impossible for people to get out. In the latter part of February Mr. Browse rode a horse on the creek ice, which was two feet thick, from the ferry to Sylvan mills, and on March 10 the mercury was ten below zero. The river of course was frozen over, and the ice did not break up until March 21. The following day about seventeen steamboats went up the river.

In 1856 there was a political upheaval in the United States. The old Whig party melted away; in the North the new Republican party was organized with John C. Fremont at its head as the candidate for President, and everywhere there was a strong sentiment for Know Nothingism. In Pleasants county there were only two parties—the old line Democrats and the Know Nothings, the former being successful throughout, although the voting in most instances was very close. Many of those who were Know Nothings afterward returned to their former Democratic allegiance.

Jacob B. Jackson, Know Nothing, afterwards Democratic governor of West Virginia, was defeated by W. L. Jackson, Democrat, for commonwealth attorney; H. L. Pickens, Democrat, defeated John Kester, Know Nothing, for sheriff; John Watson, Democrat, defeated Mahlon Hanes, Know Nothing, for commissioner of revenue, and Samuel B. Seckman, James Williamson, Thomas Browse and James L. Hanlin, Democrats, defeated Asa P. Allen, Greenberry B. Riggs, Clark Smith and John Fetty, Know Nothings, for magistrates.

The old Virginia law requiring regular muster and drill on the part of all able-bodied male citizens of military age was rather loosely carried out for several years in this county. These musters were held twice a year, sometimes at St. Marys and again at Sylvan Mills. The law was founded on the old English principle that every freeman should be trained to defend the country; but for lack of efficient drill sergeants the training was rather crude. On October 27, 1859, Robert Henry Browse was elected the first major of militia of Pleasants county.