

DOUG PERKS | HISTORY MATTERS



JEFFERSON COUNTY MUSEUM ARCHIVES
The mastheads from consecutive issues of the Spirit of Jefferson are shown above. For the issue of June 23, 1891, Charles Town is spelled Charlestown. For the issue of June 30, 1891, the name is spelled with two words, as it is today.

When Charlestown became Charles Town

Within the space of eight years, three towns named “Charlestown” were established by the Virginia General Assembly, each located in the region of Virginia west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The first “Charlestown” was established in October 1786 on “eighty acres of land, the property of Charles Washington, lying in the county of Berkeley.” The second “Charlestown” was established on December 7th, 1791 “at the mouth of Buffaloe creek, on the Ohio river, in the county of Ohio.” The third “Charlestown” was established on December 19th, 1794 on “forty acres of land, the property of George Clendenin, at the mouth of Elk River, in the County of Kanawha.”

As was at the time a commonplace practice, each of Virginia’s three “Charlestown” was given the name of a person somehow connected to the town’s founding. The first “Charlestown” was named for Charles Washington, youngest brother of General George Washington, who owned the land where his town was platted. Although initially in Berkeley County, when Jefferson County was formed in 1801, Charlestown was within the borders of the new county and was named the county seat. “Charlestown” in Ohio County was named for its proprietor Charles Prather, and in 1796 when Brooke County was formed from Ohio County, Charlestown was named its county seat. Brooke County officials recognized that three Virginia towns with the same name was at least one too many, and in 1816 renamed their county seat Wellsburg to honor Alexander Wells, Charles Prather’s son-in-law. Kanawha County was formed in 1788 out of Greenbrier and Montgomery counties, and when incorporated in 1794, Charlestown became its county seat. By 1818 – 1819 Kanawha countians recognized the confusion of having two towns with the same name and changed the name of their county seat by removing the “w” and calling their town Charleston.

For the next six decades, Charlestown and Charleston led a peaceful co-existence. That is not to say that there was no confusion, as was evidenced in 1859 when newspaper reporters in their dateline indicated that they were covering the news of John Brown’s trial from Charleston, Virginia. During the Civil War reporters continued to mistake Charleston for Charlestown, as both armies battled up and down the Shenandoah Valley. Cartographers on occasion made the same error indicating that Jefferson’s county seat was Charleston, but the similarity of the spelling of the two towns came into sharp focus when West Virginia became a state in 1863. Wheeling was initially the capital of the new state, but for five years beginning in 1870 the capital moved from Wheeling to Charleston. In 1875 the capital returned to Wheeling, which prompted a state-wide referendum in 1877 that ended the capital city ping pong game by declaring that Charleston would become the permanent state capital eight years hence in 1885.

As its status as the state’s permanent capital enhanced its prominence, Charleston became problematic for residents of the first Charlestown. Charles Washington’s Town was in the midst of a renaissance and was among the more prominent towns in West Virginia. In 1881, Charlestown’s William Lyne Wilson became the third president of West Virginia University, and from 1883 until 1895 he represented West Virginia’s 2nd Congressional District. Beginning in 1873 and continuing for the next four decades, the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals held alternating sessions in Charlestown and Charleston. Though residing in Kanawha County at the time of election, Emanuel Willis Wilson, West Virginia’s seventh governor, was born in next door neighbor Harpers Ferry. With correspondence and commercial transactions emanating from or headed to Charlestown in Jefferson County, in the words of Colonel William Price Craighill, “We have in our State a Charleston as well as our Charlestown, and this fact produces much annoyance because letters are every day given to one which are intended for the other.”

With military precision, Craighill laid out his case in a March 23rd, 1886, letter to the Spirit of Jefferson’s Editor George Haines. He opened with the rhetorical question, “Why may not the name of one or the other be changed?” and then answered his query with, “It would naturally be supposed that the town which has had its name longest should retain it.” He next recounted the chronology of the founding of both towns reaching the conclusion that “Our town has therefore the prior claim to the name.” He then fired a shot across Charleston’s bow:

It seems to me that this is an excellent time for Charleston to change her name, when she has become the permanent capital of the State and a city. Let her be called Kanawha City, or simply Kanawha. Additional emphasis would then be given to this really beautiful

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