

Virginia's Montgomery County

An Overview

With the southwest orientation of the Allegheny Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains and the formidable barrier they represented to travel and migration to the west, there was a natural tendency to follow the ancient paths along the foothills while moving westward. This southwest diagonal path was one taken by thousands of people seeking opportunity, land, adventure, and even a curiosity to explore the unknown. Montgomery County was directly on that path. With an abundance of water from springs and rivers, with major ferry crossing points on the New River and lodging available after the long trek from Fort Lewis near present-day Salem, the county became a major route of travel for the vast migration westward. By the 1790s the routes traveled from eastern Pennsylvania through Montgomery County, Virginia were given in journals by mileage with county lodging places listed for travel to the wilderness area west of the county.

The origin of present-day Montgomery County in Southwest Virginia begins in 1776 when the vast twelve thousand square mile county of Montgomery was formed following the dissolution of Fincastle County. The original boundaries of Montgomery County, with its county seat in Fort Chiswell, included land that was to become the source of new counties in western Virginia, and later West Virginia. In 1789, after much of Montgomery County was subdivided into other counties, the county seat was moved to Hans Meadow. Soon after, Christiansburg was laid out as the new county courthouse town, a mile west, along the Great Road.

The story moves by chapter through the geography and prehistory of the land that was to become Montgomery County and explores the settlement and progress from colonial times to the present day. Included are histories of commerce, industry, education, urban development, transportation, agriculture, arts and entertainment, literary development, religion, local recollections and legends, and county government. The artists who lived and worked here are an important facet of Montgomery County. A separate chapter is devoted to well known folk artist, Lewis Miller, who sketched accurate pictures of life in Montgomery County and southwestern Virginia from the 1830s through the 1870s. Miller annotated the pictures with descriptions that often included the date, building names, scene location and the names of persons in the sketches.

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In addition to many reproductions of Miller's work, a rich collection of photographs from the Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Art Center and several other sources is used to illustrate the county story.

The county is home to Virginia Tech, the largest University in Virginia as well as to Blacksburg, the largest Virginia town, while Christiansburg remains the county seat. Montgomery County also boasts many pleasant smaller towns and rural villages. The climate is generally moderated by the high elevations of 1600 feet in the eastern area of the county and the more than 2000 feet in the western area. The county is rich in forested areas as well as rivers and streams. In terms of population, Montgomery County ranks as the eleventh largest county among the ninety-five counties in the Commonwealth of Virginia, yet, retains the natural beauty that makes it a wonderful place to live.

The Authors

Many individuals contributed to the writing, research, photography, and illustrations within this book. Biographies of each author can be found inside.

On the Cover

The cover illustration features the Great Road, a mural installed in the Christiansburg Post Office in 1939. The painting was done by John W. de Groot, who earned \$600 for his work, as part of a New Deal-sponsored post office art program. The mural is an oil-on-canvas painting, depicting in a stylized manner, a variety of scenes interpreting the county's history. Covered wagons come over the mountains to meet Native Americans and find resistance from the native population as indicated by the burning cabin. The portrayal of the Town of Christiansburg represents the eventual dispersal of native peoples and the influx of European settlers. The painting is used with the permission of the United States Postal Service.