

Formation and Naming of Mason County, West Virginia

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Petitioning for a new county 1798-1803

Attempts to form a new county from part of Kanawha County began in 1798 with a petition submitted to the Virginia General Assembly by inhabitants of Kanawha County wishing to make access to the seat of county government more convenient. This petition was judged reasonable by the Committee for Propositions and Grievances but was rejected and withdrawn.

In 1799 another petition was presented to the Virginia General Assembly asking for a division of Kanawha County along the same boundaries as the 1798 petition. This petition was rejected and reported to the Assembly.

In 1800, once again, inhabitants of Kanawha County petitioned for division of Kanawha County to form a new county. The boundaries of the proposed county were slightly modified from the boundaries proposed in 1799. The petition was determined to be reasonable by the Committee for Propositions and Grievances but was rejected and withdrawn.

The persistent inhabitants of Kanawha County presented a petition (undated) for division of Kanawha County to a session of the Virginia General Assembly which began December 6, 1802. The area contained within the boundaries of the proposed county was reduced from the three earlier petitions. The date of submission is unclear, but was after Wood County was formed December 21, 1798, from Harrison County because the north boundary description for the proposed new county was the Wood County line rather than the Harrison County line used in the earlier petitions of 1798, 1799, and 1800. The petition asked that Point Pleasant be the seat of government for the new county. This petition was determined to be reasonable by the Committee for Propositions and Grievances and reported to the General Assembly but was rejected by the Senate on third reading January 25, 1803.

Undaunted by four unsuccessful attempts to form a new county, the inhabitants of Kanawha County petitioned the Virginia General Assembly in 1803 for a division of Kanawha County to form a new county with the seat of government to be Point Pleasant. The proposed boundaries were again reduced. The Committee for Propositions and Grievances found the petition to be reasonable on December 12, 1803, and reported it to the full General Assembly, which passed legislation creating the new county on January 2, 1804. The legislation stated "... : *beginning at the mouth of the Little Guyandott river, running from thence to the north-west corner of a survey of one thousand four hundred and thirty-seven and half acres made for Thomas Lewis in Teaze's valley near the house of Joshua Morris, from thence to the mouth of Little Hurricane creek, thence crossing the Kanawha river and taking a dividing ridge between Eighteen mile and Pocatallico creeks to the end thereof, thence pursuing a north-east direction till it intersects the Wood county line to the Ohio, thence down the Ohio to the beginning, **from and after the first day of May next, form one distinct county, and be called and known by the name of Mason county.***" The legislation did not state for whom the county was named.

The legislative journals for the 1803-1804 session (not available online) probably used the same boilerplate wording for the third reading of legislation forming new counties as seen in the 1795 House Journal regarding the formation of Hardy County by dividing Hampshire County:

SATURDAY, December 3, 1785.

An engrossed bill, for dividing the county of Hampshire;" was read the third time, and the blanks therein filled up.

Resolved, That the bill do pass; and that the title be, "an act, for dividing the county of Hampshire."

Ordered, That Mr. Carter Henry Harrison do carry the bill to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

Of the "blanks therein filled up" was the name of the new county, as in the excerpt from the October 10, 1785, Hardy County statute:

...to the dividing line between the counties of Shenandoah and Hampshire; and that all that part of the said county lying south of the said line shall be called and known by the name of Hardy;....

Naming of Counties by the Virginia General Assembly

Hugh Blair Grigsby (1806-1881), noted Virginia historian, describes the Virginia General Assembly's customary naming practice for counties formed during and after the Revolutionary War in his posthumously published article, "The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788", Grigsby, 1890 (24-25). (*The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788: With Some Account of Eminent Virginians of that Era who Were Members of the Body*, Hugh B. Grigsby (2, 24-25), published in Collections of the Virginia Historical Society, New Series Volume IX, 1890.) Relevant passages from the article:

[From page 2 footnote](#): *A discourse delivered before the Virginia Historical Society; in the Hall of the House of Delegates at Richmond, on the evening of February 23, 1858, and subsequently enlarged to the present History*
[From page 24-25](#): ***Since the organization of the State Government In 1776 - a period of twelve years - no less than twenty-eight counties had been formed; and the naming of the new counties offered a graceful opportunity of honoring individual worth.²⁹ Posterity beholds in those names no uninstrutive memorial of the estimation in which the originals were held by their contemporaries. Indeed, from such materials, one skilled in the anatomy of history, might, in the absence of other sources of intelligence, reconstruct no inaccurate record of that age. Not one of those names had hitherto received any such expression of the public regard; for, up to this period, the name of no Virginian had been given to a county; and in the number and character of the new names, it is plainly seen that some remarkable public epoch had occurred. The history of Henry, Washington, Jefferson, Harrison, Campbell, Nelson, Randolph, Hardy, Russell, Woodford, Mercer, Madison, and Pendleton, is the history of their times. The names of Montgomery, Franklin, Lincoln, and Greene, show that in the great event which had transpired, and which had called forth so many of our own citizens, we had received the succor of our sister States; while the name of Fayette evokes the name of that chivalrous youth who, turning his back on the endearments of domestic life and the fascinations of the gayest metropolis in Europe, hastened to share with our fathers the toils and dangers of war, who attained to the rank of Major General in the armies of the United States, and held high command in our midst, and who won on the field of York his greenest laurel; and the name of Bourbon renews the recollection of that beneficent but unfortunate prince, without whose assistance the war of the Revolution might have lasted thirty years, and whose fleets and armies aided in gaining, in our behalf, and within the limits of this Commonwealth, one of the most glorious of those innumerable battles in which the banner of St. Louis had, during many centuries, been borne in triumph.***

²⁹*The names of the counties laid off in the interval between July, 1776. and June, 1788, were: Fluvanna, Rockingham, Rockbridge, Greenbrier, Henry, Kentucky, Washington, Montgomery, Ohio, Yohoganey, Monongalia, Powhatan, Illinois, Jefferson, Fayette, Lincoln, Harrison, Greensville, Campbell, Nelson, Franklin, Randolph, Hardy, Bourbon, Russell, Mercer, Madison, and Pendleton. The reader may wish to know on which of the patriots of the Revolution the honor of having a county called by his name was conferred. Patrick Henry received that honor. He was the first Governor of the State, and the old Colonial rule of naming a county after the existing Governor was applied with peculiar propriety in his case. But, at the same session, the county of Fincastle was divided into Kentucky, Washington, and Montgomery, and the name of Fincastle dropped, as was also, at the same session, the name of Dunmore, and Shenandoah substituted in its stead. At the session of the Assembly immediately after the adjournment of the present Convention, a county was called after George Mason and another after the gallant Woodford. Mason and Woodford counties were in the district of Kentucky, and were lost to us when the district became a State. So that at this time we have no county named after the author of the Declaration of Rights, and the General who gained the first victory of the Revolution. **The present Mason county was laid off in 1804-the year after the death of Stevens Thomson Mason, a distinguished patriot, long a member of both Houses of Assembly and of the Senate of the United States; and, I have understood, was called in honor of his name.***

Which Mason?

Following the tradition of naming newly formed counties described by Grigsby, one should look at the people of note and events occurring in proximity to the formation of a county. A good example is the formation of Mason County, Kentucky in November of 1788 for which the legislative records are all available online.

[Mason Co Ky bill introduced](#) (House 10/25/1788, bottom of page)

[House Journal 3rd reading - blanks filled up 11/3/1788](#) (fourth bill under November 3, 1788)

[Mason County Kentucky- May 5, 1788 Senate Journal](#)

[Mason County KY House Journal](#) (passed House with Senate amendment November 5, 1788)

[Mason County KY statute](#) (November 5, 1788)

When the General Assembly passed legislation dividing Bourbon County to form Mason County (KY) in 1788, George Mason very well-known because of his well-publicized ([Mason's Objections to the Constitution-pamphlet addressed to citizens of Virginia](#)), reprinted from [Ford's Pamphlets on the Constitution](#) efforts related to the Bill of Rights during the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788. The U. S. Constitution was ratified by the Virginia Convention on June 26, 1788, with a resolution attached asking Congress to later amend the Constitution with a Bill of Rights. The resolution was a concession to get some votes for ratification from the "anti-federalists" led by George Mason and Patrick Henry. George Mason died October 7, 1792. Relying on the legislative records alone, gives no clue as to whether Mason County, now Kentucky, was named for a person named Mason, a generic stone mason, or as a reference to the Order of Masons. Therefore, a person must have some historical knowledge of the circumstances of the time when the county was created to ascertain for whom a county was named, as Mr. Grigsby describes in his text above.

The first West Virginia county I have found with its eponym written into the statute for creation of the county was [Mercer County in 1837](#) (Hugh Mercer). There are six West Virginia counties created by the Virginia General Assembly which have their eponym specified in the statute; Mercer, [Marion](#), [Wayne](#), [Barbour](#), [Boone](#) and [Raleigh](#). [Lincoln County](#), created in 1867 by the West Virginia Legislature, also has its eponym written into the statute. The remaining forty-eight West Virginia counties have no definitive legislative record of their eponyms. Analysis of the circumstantial record and events at the time of formation for each of the forty-eight counties is necessary to determine their correct eponyms, as recommended by Grigsby.

Examination of the historical circumstances during the 1803-1804 session of the Virginia General Assembly, when the petition of the inhabitants of Kanawha County was under consideration, yields the eponym for Mason County (now West Virginia).

Stevens Thomson Mason, United States Senator from Virginia, died in office May 10, 1803. On June 4, 1803, John Taylor (John Taylor of Caroline) was appointed by Virginia Governor, John Page, to temporarily fill Senator Mason's Senate seat until the Virginia General Assembly convened December 5, 1803 to elect someone to fill the Senate vacancy, as required by the U. S. Constitution (*...if Vacancies happen by Resignation, or otherwise, during the Recess of the Legislature of any State, the Executive thereof may make temporary Appointments until the next Meeting of the Legislature, which shall then fill such Vacancies*).

On December 7, 1803, Abraham B. Venable was elected by the Assembly to fill the vacancy created by Senator Mason's death. The petition to divide Kanawha County was reported out of the Committee for Propositions and Grievances December 12, 1803, just five days after the election of Sen. Stevens Thomson Mason's successor on December 7, 1803. The legislation forming Mason County passed on January 2, 1804. Holding to the political logic of the time, Senator Stevens Thomson Mason is the eponym for the new county.

There is absolutely no circumstantial evidence to support George Mason, who died in 1792, as the eponym for Mason County, WV.

Tracing the Historical Error

The naming confusion begins in 1845 when a book written by Henry Howe of Connecticut was published. Mr. Howe erroneously cites George Mason as the eponym for Mason County (1804). Mr. Howe's error was compounded when Virgil A. Lewis' *The History of West Virginia in Two Parts* was published in 1889. Mr. Lewis used Mr. Howe's erroneous eponym for Mason County. Henry Howe visited Mason County in 1844 to collect information for his 1845 book, *Historical Collections of Virginia*, as noted by Virgil Lewis in his 1909 book, *History of the Battle of Point Pleasant*. Mr. Howe's reliance on exciting personal accounts of history and his lack of residential connection to Virginia may have induced his eponym error. It is very likely that residents of the western part of Virginia had little news or information about the events related to State and Federal legislative activities in 1803-1804. Western Virginians probably knew of George Mason due to his well-publicized activities related to the U. S. Constitution in the late 1780's, but had little, if any, knowledge of Stevens Thomson Mason as their U. S. Senator, since U. S. Senators were elected by the

General Assembly and not by direct popular vote. A combination of Mr. Howe's commercial rather than academic pursuit of history with the local perceptions of State/Federal Government activities led to his citation of George Mason as the eponym for Mason County. Since Virginia legislative records in the early 1800's did not state for whom new counties were named, a person would have to have some knowledge of Virginia politics, events and legislative process at the time of the formation of a county to discern for whom a new county was named.

In 1890, "The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788", Grigsby, 1890 ([24](#)), was published, citing Stevens Thomson Mason as the Mason County eponym. This was in contradiction to Howe 1845, and Lewis 1889, references to George Mason. [Hugh Blair Grigsby](#) was president of the Virginia Historical Society from 1870 to 1881.

In 1892, Kate Mason Rowland in [The Life of George Mason, 1725-1792](#), 1892 v1:[180-181](#), while discussing the non-importation/non-exportation league, related the eponym of Mason County (Stevens Thomson Mason) to her great, great granduncle, George Mason with, *The battle of Point Pleasant was fought on the 10th of October, 1774, in which General Andrew Lewis contended against the "Northern Confederacy of Indians," led by "Cornstalk," the Shawnese chief. The Indians, it was believed, were instigated to enmity against the colonists by Lord Dunmore, who failed to come to Lewis' assistance, and this battle has been known in Virginia as the first one of the Revolution. It is interesting to trace here an association with George Mason's family, through his brother Thomson's eldest son. On the site of the battle-field has grown up the village of Point Pleasant, the capital of Mason County, now in West Virginia, the county being named after Stevens Thomson Mason, in 1804.*

When Virgil A. Lewis' textbook, [History and Government of West Virginia, was published in 1896](#); paraphrasing Hugh Grigsby's wording, *MASON, formed in 1804, from Kanawha, and named from Stevens Thompson Mason, a distinguished patriot, long a member of the General Assembly of Virginia, and United States Senator from 1794 to 1803*, to state Mason County was named for Stevens 'Thompson' Mason. Lewis corrected his erroneous 1889 [History of West Virginia in Two Parts](#) declaration that Mason County was named for George Mason. Most history texts and West Virginia government publications after 1896 used Lewis' wording from his 1896 book when attributing an eponym for Mason County. Virgil A. Lewis was a Mason County resident and West Virginia's first Historian and Archivist from 1905 to 1912.

In 1904, [Hand-Book of West Virginia: Its History, Natural Resources, Industrial Enterprises, And Institutions](#) [Charleston, W. Va.] was written by Virgil Lewis, prepared and published under the direction of the West Virginia Commission of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in which Mason County's eponym is Stevens Thompson Mason.

Stevens Thomson Mason as Mason County eponym continued with the [1907 Manual of the State of West Virginia for the Years of 1907-1908](#) and [1916 West Virginia Legislative Hand Book and Manual and Official Register](#) (Blue Book). The 1907 Manual and 1916-1920 Blue Book descriptions for Mason County state Mason County was named for Stevens 'Thompson' Mason, using Virgil Lewis' 1896 wording.

In the [1921 Blue Book](#), the Mason County description was shortened, omitting the county eponym. This volume of the Blue Book contained about half the number of pages of the 1920 Blue Book. The shortened description continued until 1927, when the Mason County description was expanded to include Lewis' 1889 wording listing George Mason as the eponym. This change could be related to the fires that destroyed the West Virginia Capitol in 1921 and 1927 (most likely), Clifford Myers being West Virginia State Historian (he was from Mason County), the Mason County Clerk (John Aten) submitting new county information based on Lewis' 1889 book to the WV Senate Clerk for inclusion in the 1927 Blue Book, or a change in editor of the Blue Book. It is possible the convergence of the above circumstances caused the eponym error in the 1927 Blue Book.

The Correct Eponym for Mason County, West Virginia – Stevens Thomson Mason

After reviewing the available historical resources, considering the circumstances of the formation of Mason County and events surrounding the change in Mason County eponym in the West Virginia Legislative Handbook and Manual and Official Register (West Virginia Blue Book) from Stevens Thomson Mason to George Mason in 1927, there is no doubt that Stevens Thomson Mason is the correct eponym for Mason County, West Virginia.