

Pt. Pleasant Riverfront Redeveloped as Cultural, Historical Destination

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A small but vital river town for well over a century, Pt. Pleasant, W. Va. by 2000 had slid into an economic slump all too common among communities fronting the nation's waterways.

According to Charles Humphreys, 29 empty buildings listed along the town's six-block Main Street, the former hub of its business district, by 2001.

But Humphreys, who recently had assumed his positions with the local Main Street and economic development organizations, resurrected a local economic revitalization plan that had been created 15 years earlier. Its 2001 incarnation capitalized on both the town's location at the juncture of the Ohio and Great Kanawha rivers and its diverse history.

"Civic leaders had put together a great plan in the mid-'80's," Humphreys said, "but it needed to be updated, and funded, to be realized."



Noting that visitors to West Virginia cite "culture and history" as their foremost rationale for touring the state, Humphreys worked with current civic leaders to tweak the original plan to develop attractions that would draw some of those tourists – and a portion of the estimated \$3-\$4 billion they spend in West Virginia annually – to Mason County. They redirected the town's focus to its scenic, historic, but recently neglected riverfront. They created a \$10 million plan that packaged the riverfront's rehabilitation as a unique outdoor art and history museum – a strategy that positioned them to apply for a successful grant from the West Virginia Division of Culture and History to get the project started.

At the project's core was a two-mile, \$2 million riverfront trail and riverfront park. The development includes a 900-foot dock, an 800-seat amphitheatre, a new pavilion and a small boat marina.



“The trail and park gave us the foundation to work with,” Humphreys said. “Next we needed a program to bring traffic to the adjacent downtown area – and to keep people coming back.”

Humphreys based that program in Mason County history and on the Oct. 10, 1774 Battle of Pt. Pleasant, the culminating confrontation in ongoing hostilities, known as Lord Dunmore’s War, between the area’s Native Americans and settlers.

“Our concept was to bring alive the lessons taught in school about the area’s history,” Humphreys said.

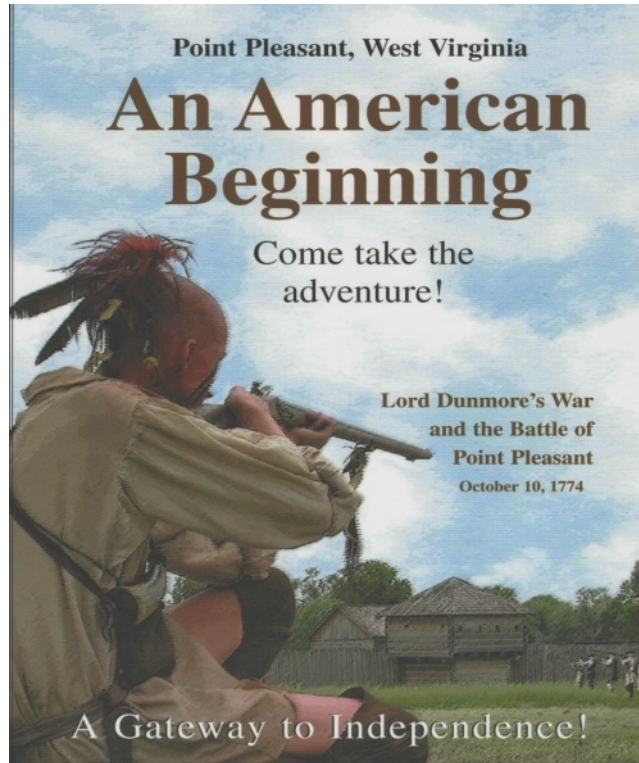
Enlisting the assistance of the history, marketing and integrated science departments at Marshall University, Humphreys developed “An American Beginning – Lord Dunmore’s War and the Battle of Pt. Pleasant.” Presented in a series of artistic renderings on the riverfront’s flood wall, “An American Beginning” features 13 panels depicting Lord Dunmore’s War and a 150-foot rendition of the pivotal Battle of Pt. Pleasant. The murals cost \$600,000 to create and complementary audio helps make the paintings come alive for visitors.

“The presentation features a high-tech sound system,” Humphreys noted, “just like at the movies.”

Future projects planned in conjunction with “An American Beginning” include interactive exhibits with historical re-enactors performing at the riverfront park during its eight-month season.

Humphreys said the “American Beginning” concept was presented to administrators of school districts in 12 surrounding counties, who unanimously supported the program.

“Our goal is to involve students and classes from schools in at least 20 counties,” he added.



As work progressed on the flood wall murals, one of the formerly derelict Main Street buildings adjacent to the riverfront was re-purposed to serve as the Point Pleasant River Museum. Focusing on river life and commercial enterprise on both the Ohio and Great Kanawha, the museum offers displays, video demonstrations and special programs that highlight topics including great floods, boat construction, stern wheel steamers, river disasters and the local river industry's contribution to World War II. The museum also features a 2,400-gallon aquarium, a working pilot house and a research library.



Despite the progress of Pt. Pleasant's riverfront re-development and its apparent success to-date, Humphreys has devised a tongue-in-cheek "Plan B."

"If all this were to fall apart, we could just turn the whole thing over to the Mothman," he joked, referring to the winged, vaguely humanoid creature whose alleged sightings in Mason County in the 1960s continue to spark the world's curiosity.

However the Mothman doesn't figure in the long-range vision for the Pt. Pleasant riverfront redevelopment's future.

"We envision the creation of an 'Ohio River Heritage Trail' that stretches through eight counties along the Ohio River, from Huntington to Wheeling," Humphreys said. "We won't be truly successful until the entire Ohio River valley is successful."