

# Point Pleasant: Land of History and Mystery

*John Wickline, WVU Extension Program Assistant – Harrison County*

---

## Educational Objectives

- Participants will understand the history of Point Pleasant, West Virginia.
- Participants will be able to explain the timeline of the area's historic and mysterious events.
- Participants will become familiar with the ways the town of Point Pleasant celebrates and honors these stories and legends today.

Legend has it that during his surveying days just prior to the Revolutionary War, George Washington referred to the area where the Ohio and Kanawha rivers meet as a “pleasant point.” A few years later, the town officially became known as Point Pleasant.

But despite the town's quaint and idyllic setting, its history has been anything but pleasant. It is clouded with bloodshed and horrifying legends that range from a dying chief's curse to a mysterious creature roaming the landscape.



## The Battle of Point Pleasant

October 10, 1774 was said to be a foggy and cool morning as a force of about 1,000 men led by Colonel Andrew Lewis camped along the banks of the two rivers as they awaited another group coming from Pittsburgh that would unite to squash raids from American Indian tribes. But the great Shawnee Chief Cornstalk had other plans, opting to attack the smaller force around Point Pleasant before the two militias could connect. Cornstalk's warriors were discovered by two soldiers hunting for something to eat, and they rushed to warn their fellow troops about the “acres and acres of Indians” they had just encountered. Lewis initially scoffed, thinking it was just a small raiding party, but he quickly learned it was just the opposite.

– continued –

The battle raged on for hours, and it was said that the rivers ran red that day before Cornstalk eventually retreated his forces back across the Ohio River. Both sides suffered heavy casualties that day, and Cornstalk eventually agreed to a peace treaty that prohibited attacks on the white settlers. The treaty also prevented the native tribes from becoming allies to the British army.

The site of the battle is memorialized by a monument erected in 1909. In creating the funding for the structure, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution calling the Battle of Point Pleasant the first battle of the American Revolution.

## Cornstalk's Curse

With the Revolutionary War in full force, Cornstalk desperately tried to maintain peace on the frontier, as the British were sending supplies and weapons to tribes as an encouragement for them to launch raids on the frontier. Cornstalk traveled to Fort Randolph in 1777 to warn of an impending assault. He was detained at the fort, and when his son, Elinipsico, came to Fort Randolph to check on his father, he was also detained. Two of the fort's militiamen came upon a Mingo war party while hunting, and one militiaman was killed. Dozens of soldiers descended upon the fort seeking revenge, demanding that Cornstalk and his son be turned over to them. Bullets riddled Cornstalk's body, and his son and two other American Indians at the fort were murdered in cold blood. Legend has it that while he lay dying, Cornstalk uttered these words and cursed the land.

*"I was the border man's friend. Many times, I have saved him and his people from harm. I never warred with you, but only to protect our wigwams and lands. I refused to join your paleface enemies with the red coats. I came to the fort as your friend and you murdered me. You have murdered by my side, my young son. For this, may the curse of the Great Spirit rest upon this land. May it be blighted in its hopes. May the strength of its peoples be paralyzed by the stain of our blood."*

Cornstalk's body was dumped in the Kanawha River, but it was later retrieved and buried at Fort Randolph. In 1840, his grave was moved to the Mason County Courthouse, and in 1954,

his grave was moved to its present site at Tu-Endie-Wei State Park. Several tragic events in the town have been blamed on the curse, including devastating floods, an 1880s fire that ravaged the downtown area, the 1967 Silver Bridge disaster, the 1976 explosion at the county jail, and a 1978 train derailment that dumped thousands of gallons of toxic chemicals into the town's water supply. While many historians doubt the authenticity of the curse, its roots may be traced to a 1921 play and its writer's imagination.



Photo: [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mad\\_Ann\\_Bailey\\_statue.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mad_Ann_Bailey_statue.jpg) by NicoleBeckett

## Mad Ann Bailey

The Battle of Point Pleasant also proved to be a defining moment in the life of Anne Hennis Trotter Bailey. Her husband, Richard Trotter, was killed in the battle, which prompted her to join the militia as a scout. The Shawnee called her "Mad Ann" or "The White Squaw of the Kanawha." Ann rode through the frontier, recruiting soldiers and delivering messages to various outposts. Legend has it that on one of her wilderness rides, she hid in a log to prevent being captured by Shawnee Indians, though they did take her horse. That night, she snuck into their camp and took back her horse. When she felt she had traveled far enough away, she



began screaming loudly. The Shawnee believed she was possessed by evil spirits and could not be injured by arrows or bullets. That fear allowed her to travel safely through the woods. In 1788, she married John Bailey, a ranger, and the couple lived at Fort Lee near Charleston. The fort came under attack in 1791, and Ann became a legend for her 100-mile ride to Fort Savannah in Lewisburg to obtain ammunition, which is credited with saving Fort Lee. Her remains are buried at Tu-Endie-Wei State Park.



Photo: [flickr.com/photos/8308527@N02/6157131508/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/8308527@N02/6157131508/) by Sonja

## Mothman

In November 1966, two couples reported being chased by a strange, bird-like creature with glowing red eyes while they were driving through an area north of Point Pleasant that had been home to a munitions factory during World War II. The creature was deemed, “Mothman,” by newspaper accounts. Several more sightings followed over the next year, and many believe Mothman was sent there to warn local residents of impending danger. The creature allegedly has

not been seen in the area since the Silver Bridge disaster. Mothman has been the subject of books, movies, TV shows and documentaries. A 12-foot tall metallic statue of Mothman was unveiled in downtown Point Pleasant in 2003.

## The Silver Bridge Disaster

Built in 1928 and named for the metallic aluminum paint used to coat its steel beams, the Silver Bridge spanned the Ohio River, connecting Point Pleasant to Gallipolis, Ohio. But on a chilly Friday night, December 15, 1967, the structure became the site of the worst bridge disaster in American history. Cars filled with holiday shoppers and over-the-road trucks crammed onto the bridge, and in less than a minute, 64 people trapped in their cars were dumped into the icy waters below as the bridge’s deck began twisting and crumbling like lined-up dominoes, according to witnesses. Forty-six of those people did not make it out of the water alive. A task force on bridge safety determined that a small stress fracture, a crack that was less than an inch deep, inside of a load-bearing steel beam caused the bridge to fail. The task force also concluded that there would have been no way for engineers or the maintenance crew to know of the crack without taking apart the entire joint. The crack had been caused by years of the natural movements of the bridge and its being exposed to weather.



Photo: Coal Barge Near Silver Bridge Collapse. [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coal\\_Barge\\_Near\\_Silver\\_Bridge\\_Collapse\\_\(5069432249\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coal_Barge_Near_Silver_Bridge_Collapse_(5069432249).jpg) by Richie Diesterheft



## Point Pleasant Today

Visitors descend on Point Pleasant today by the thousands each September to celebrate the annual Mothman Festival. Tours are given through the local museum and the areas north of town where the legendary beast was first spotted. The family-friendly event offers guest speakers, games, concerts, hayrides and more. A local pizza shop also offers up a Mothman pizza that has enticed diners from all over the United States.

The town also hosts an annual Battle Days celebration each October, which features a parade, music and authors. Visitors can learn of yesteryear with a stop at the West Virginia State Farm Museum, located near the county fairgrounds north of town. The museum hosts a variety of events throughout the year.

Those looking to learn of the town's history can enjoy a leisurely walk along the Ohio River and take in the large murals depicting the trials and triumphs of the area decorating the floodwalls in the downtown area. A series of statues highlighting those who played a significant role in the town's early history are also included on the picturesque stroll. The walk concludes at Tu-Endie-Wei State Park, where visitors can take in the view of the mingling of the Ohio and Kanawha rivers.

## Resources

Rizer, Chris. "Mason County Memories: How they got their names. Point Pleasant Register," July 12, 2019

[Britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com/place/Point-Pleasant). "Point Pleasant, West Virginia, United States."

[Wowktv.com](http://www.wowktv.com). "The Hidden History of the Battle of Point Pleasant," Parts 1 and 2. May 23, 2018, May 25, 2018.

[Americanhauntingsink.com](http://www.americanhauntingsink.com). "The Cornstalk Curse."

[Womenhistoryblog.com](http://www.womenhistoryblog.com). "American Frontier Women: Ann Bailey."

Reimann, Matt. "The deadliest bridge disaster in US history was caused by a tiny crack just three millimeters deep." July 31, 2017.

[Visitpointpleasantwv.com](http://www.visitpointpleasantwv.com). "Our History."

[WVexplorer.com](http://www.wvexplorer.com). "Point Pleasant, West Virginia."

[Wvfarmmuseum.org](http://www.wvfarmmuseum.org). "West Virginia State Farm Museum."

2022

*In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, WVU is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, and reprisal of retaliation for prior civil rights activity.*

*Reasonable accommodations will be made to provide this content in alternate formats upon request. Contact the WVU Extension Office of Communications at 304-293-4222. For all other ADA requests, contact Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at [diversity@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:diversity@mail.wvu.edu).*

