

John Stewart's Tavern

Circa 1790

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**
 Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

John Stewart's Tavern is one of the oldest buildings in Mineral County, West Virginia,

and a popular attraction for visitors who enjoy heritage sites. Thanks to the efforts of community members who saw value in the late eighteenth century structure, the building has also become an example of what civic spirit can accomplish. The story of John Stewart's Tavern is closely connected with European settlement in the nearby area that is today known as Short Gap, West Virginia.

The historic log cabin has not been definitively dated but is estimated to have been built between 1790 and 1797 in an area occupied by pioneers a few years earlier. Records also indicate that a grain mill was located at Turner's Run on the tract of land occupied by Stewart's Tavern. A colonial era road passed through the mill site making the property a typical location for a tavern. John Stewart's association with the tavern does not appear in recorded owners of the property but has been attached through decades of time and oral tradition. According to members of the Frankfort Historical District, Inc., it is speculated that Mr. Stewart may have been a tavern proprietor but not the property owner.

The two story hand-hewn chestnut building revealed evidence of its original appearance during disassembly and reconstruction in recent years. Whitewashing of the floor and joists indicated parts of the rooms exposed to view and markings on the wall showed the outlines of treads and risers winding to the second floor. Beaded edges on floor boards were also typical for the eighteenth century time period. Hinges and other metal hardware probably date from the early nineteenth century.

The tract of land associated with John Stewart's Tavern was purchased by John Daniels in 1853, who maintained

the business operation at the site through the Civil War time period. It was also during Daniel's ownership that a framed addition to the log cabin was constructed. The addition significantly changed the building's exterior and effectively hid its eighteenth century architectural features. Over time the building's appearance changed to resemble an early twentieth century dwelling, rather than an eighteenth century tavern. The building's purpose also changed from commercial ventures to private residences, as a succession of families occupied the building until its eventual abandonment and subsequent sale to the Frankfort Historical District, Inc. in 1988.

The building nearly became an historical footnote in the history of Mineral County when the last private owner decided to relocate the building to Warrenton, Virginia. As the stone chimney was being dismantled, Doris Ours, principal of Short Gap Elementary School, stopped to inquire about the building's fate. Upon learning the owner's plan to remove the old building, a decision was made to hold a public meeting at the school to determine if there was sufficient interest among Mineral County residents to acquire and possibly save the structure. An overwhelmingly positive response to save the building was expressed by more than 100 residents in attendance at the meeting and tentative plans were soon underway.

In 1988, the Frankfort Historical District, Inc. was organized to oversee the project and seek funding necessary to disassemble and restore the original section of the tavern. An early and unexpected twist in the planning process occurred when it became evident the tavern could not remain at its location. Fortunately, an alternative site was available across the road. Stewart's Tavern was subsequently



The two story hand-hewn chestnut building known as Stewart's Tavern, was disassembled, moved across the road and reconstructed through the overseeing efforts of the Frankfort Historical District, Inc.

Right: First floor hall and stairs of Stewart's Tavern.

disassembled and moved to the alternative site by A.J. Wiley of Springs, Pennsylvania. Care was taken to keep the original construction materials, so that placement on the National Register of Historic Places in West Virginia would be facilitated.

Funding for the restoration project included grants from the West Virginia Department of Culture and History and a matching grant from the Claude W. Benedum Foundation. Residents and area businesses also generously provided support.

Since completion of the restoration the tavern has been open on West Virginia Days in June and by special requests. According to members of the Frankfort Historical District,





Above: The first floor of Stewart's Tavern features the warmth and charm of rustic logs and furnishings.
 Right: Upstairs is one large bedroom with another fireplace and spindle bed.
 Left: Porch and front door view.



Inc., interest in the building continues to grow annually as visitors often request to tour the site.

John Stewart's Tavern was placed on the National Register of Historic Places of West Virginia on July 14, 2000.

John Stewart's Tavern is located on Knobley Road near the intersection of Routes 28 and 956 in Short Gap, West Virginia. To request information contact: Doris Ours at 304-726-4321, Darlene Gulino at 304-726-4102, or Eva Kidwell at 304-726-4601.

