



A Brief History of Highland County, Virginia

Highland County, one of the four Virginia counties named for its natural features, was formed in 1847. Settlement had taken place from about 1745 when the Germans began to push over the mountains to the northern area of the present county and the Scotch-Irish began to find land in the southern part. The county's remote location was noted by the settlers who were petitioning for their land before the Revolution. Asking for 50,000 acres on the "head branches of the James River", they said *"the lands are very remote and lying among great mountains, being about 200 miles from any landing."*

The county is crossed by five major valleys, and ten streams flow out of Highland and form the head waters of the James and the Potomac Rivers. At Hightown, northwest of Monterey, the county seat, a barn was built in such a way that all the rain that runs off the roof on one side drains into the Potomac Basin and off the other side into the James River. The farm is appropriately named "Dividing Waters Farm."

Native Americans (likely Shawnee) called the Cowpasture River the "Wallawhatoola," meaning *"the river that bends."* Legend says that the three "pasture" rivers were named after hunters killed a buffalo calf at the first stream (the Calfpasture River,) a cow at the second (the Cowpasture River), and a bull at the third stream (the Bullpasture River.)

The first road in the area was a 32-mile bridle path to a mill, reported in 1751. When the county was created, the county seat was described as *"a patch of woods and laurel thickets on the saddle between the two straight creeks."* The only building was the John Cook house and tavern. Once the hunting ground of a small band of Shawnee warriors, the county began to open to development when the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike was constructed in 1838 under the supervision of Claudius Crozet, a famous engineer who built canals and railroads. By the time of the Civil War, Highland was able to enlist more than 500 men as soldiers, serving almost exclusively in the Army of the Confederacy.

The Battle of McDowell, the first Confederate victory of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, was fought on May 8, 1862. Today, visitors may climb the rugged hillside where the Confederates met the Union forces. The battlefield is relatively unchanged and is the only Valley Campaign site where the atmosphere of the time of the conflict is retained by the historic character of the lands, structures and sites. The battlefield has been designated "100% pristine" by the Department of the Interior.

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