

The River That Would Not Leave History of Hinton, West Virginia

The River Before Names

Before there was a town, there was only the New and the Greenbrier Rivers cutting through stone and time. The New River originates in North Carolina and flows North through Hinton. The Greenbrier River begins in Durbin, West Virginia (originally Virginia) and ends in Hinton, flowing into the New River. The Chesapeake and Ohio Railway followed the path of the Greenbrier River for one of its many routes.

Long before maps drew lines, the valley was already a corridor of movement—of animals, Native travelers, and later frontier families who followed the water into the unknown. The area where the New River and Greenbrier River meet was occupied by Native American hunting and travel routes, namely the Shawnee, Iroquois, and Cherokee tribes. European American settlement arrived in the late 1700s, with the Ballengee family among the earliest settlers. The land that would become Hinton was largely farmland and timberland for many decades.

The First Families

In the late 1700s, families such as Gwinn, Ballengee, and Adkins began settling along the river. The first known English settler was Andrew Culbertson, who established a farm in 1753 but later abandoned it after Native attacks. The land became known as Culbertson Bottom, later Reid's Bottom, and today Crumps Bottom near Indian Creek.

The land on which modern Hinton stands passed through several hands. Following treaties that opened western Virginia to settlement, land was granted to Isaac Ballengee. His heirs inherited portions, and Henry Ballengee eventually sold part of the property to John “Jack” Hinton. In 1831, John Hinton laid out a town on land owned by his wife, Avis Gwinn Hinton.

They built cabins on narrow benches of land and carved farms from steep hillsides. These settlers were not yet founders of a town; they were founders of endurance.

Avis Gwinn Hinton and the Land

Avis Gwinn came from one of the region's early river families. Through her marriage to John “Jack” Hinton, her family's land became part of a larger vision. The Gwinn family also had land grants and her property tied everything together. In 1831, a settlement was laid out on property connected to her holdings by her husband, John, who was an attorney and land agent. Though still little more than a village, it marked the beginning of what would become Hinton.

The Railroad Arrives

In 1871, everything changed.

The Chesapeake & Ohio Railway carved its way through the New River Gorge and selected Hinton as a division point. Quiet farmland became industrial ground almost overnight. Tracks replaced trails, engines replaced silence, and the valley filled with workers, commerce, and opportunity.

The C&O Railway gathered coal from the New River coalfields and moved it east to Newport News for domestic and international markets, while western shipments supplied industrial centers throughout the Midwest and Great Lakes region. Hinton became one of the most important transportation hubs in Appalachia.

County Seat and Power

With the railroad came politics. Summers County was formed, and Hinton became the county seat. Courts, law offices, and government buildings rose near the tracks. Families who once farmed increasingly found work in rail operations, commerce, and public service.

The Streets Names

Temple Street was named after Major Temple, one of the chief engineers of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. He played a significant role in the railroad construction along the New River corridor.

Ballangee Street was named after the Ballangee family who settled in the area before the town was formed via a Virginia land grant to Isaac Ballangee.

James Street was named after William James, a lumberman and early settler who was important to Hinton's early development.

Front Street was named simply because it was the closest street facing the C & O tracks.

Summers Street and Summers County were named after George W. Summers. He was a prominent Virginia judge, lawyer, legislator and widely respected U.S. Congressman who was instrumental in the forming of the county. Summers County was formed in 1868 from pieces of Fayette, Greenbrier, Mercer and Monroe counties in Virginia. Interestingly enough, George Summers never lived in Summers County but was honored with his name shortly after his passing.

A City of Iron and Water

For nearly a century, Hinton lived by the rhythm of the railroad. Steam engines echoed through the valley. Hotels welcomed travelers, businesses flourished, and coal trains moved continuously through the city.

Hinton was incorporated in 1880, and in 1927 the neighboring communities of Avis and Bellepoint were merged into the city. During the first half of the twentieth century, Hinton

reached its greatest prosperity. Many of the homes, churches, schools, and commercial buildings that define the city today date from this period.

The railroad also attracted workers from across the South, including many African Americans who helped build railroads, work in mines, and establish churches, schools, businesses, and civic organizations. Their contributions became an essential part of Hinton's identity.

Decline and Reinvention

After World War II, the city's fortunes changed. Coal mining became more mechanized, some coal seams became less productive, and coke-making operations declined. Most significantly, the C&O replaced steam locomotives with diesel engines during the 1950s, sharply reducing railroad employment.

The federal Clean Air Act Amendments in 1977 forced power plants to reduce the sulfur dioxide emissions. Even stricter legislation was enforced in 1990. This forced the power plants to abandon the higher sulfur West Virginia coal and switch to the lower sulfur coal mined out West. As jobs disappeared, population declined and many families moved elsewhere. Yet Hinton endured. The city gradually turned toward historic preservation, tourism, and recreation centered on the rivers that had always defined it.

The Present River Town

Today, Hinton stands between eras. It is both a living community and a historic destination at the gateway to the New River Gorge region.

Visitors come to experience its historic downtown, railroad heritage, nearby parks, Bluestone Dam, Bluestone State Park, Pipestem State Park and many other outdoor recreation opportunities on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone rivers, plus Bluestone Lake.

The trains still pass, though more quietly than before. Amtrak still makes a stop in Hinton. The river remains constant, carrying every version of the town in its current.

Hinton exists because of two enduring forces: its rivers and the railroad.

The Founders

John “Jack” Hinton

No individual had a greater impact on Hinton's existence than John Hinton. A lawyer, landowner, and civic leader, he laid out the original town in 1831 and helped advance the creation of Summers County.

Avis Gwinn Hinton

The town was laid out on her property, and much of the land that became modern Hinton came from the Hinton family's holdings. The neighboring community of Avis was named in her honor.

Evan Hinton

Evan Hinton played an active role in the movement that created Summers County in 1871. Some historians argue that the town may have been named for him rather than John Hinton.

The Railroad Builders

Collis P. Huntington financed and expanded the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, while Williams C. Wickham guided the railroad's development through the New River Gorge. Together, their efforts helped transform Hinton into a major railroad center.

The Ballengee Family

Among the area's earliest permanent settlers, the Ballengees owned much of the land at the confluence of the New and Greenbrier rivers. Their landholdings and civic influence helped make later development possible.

The African American Community Builders

Between 1870 and 1930, thousands of African Americans came through railroad centers such as Hinton to work in rail and coal industries. They established churches, schools, businesses, and civic organizations that became lasting parts of the community.

James H. Miller

Miller documented much of Summers County's early history and preserved information that otherwise might have been lost.

The Business Families

W. B. and Ida Skaggs became known for operating the Star House during the Great Depression, providing meals and assistance to railroad travelers and the unemployed.

The McCreery family helped transform Hinton into a commercial center through their operation of the landmark Hotel McCreery and other business ventures.

The Preservation Generation

As the railroad era faded, preservation advocates, museum volunteers, community leaders, business owners, and ordinary citizens worked to save Hinton's architectural heritage and railroad history. Their efforts helped preserve one of West Virginia's most distinctive historic communities.

Hinton owes its existence to a combination of the Hinton family, the Ballengee family, and the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway. Remove any one of those elements, and the city likely never grows beyond a small river crossing.

Summers County and Hinton, West Virginia

We Salute You!

