



## NHL Executive Summary



**Name of Property:** Jefferson County Courthouse  
**City, State:** Charles Town, WV  
**Significant Dates:** April 25–September 22, 1922  
**NHL Criteria:** 1  
**Theme:** V. Developing the American Economy  
4. workers and work culture  
5. labor organizations and protests

**Previous Recognition:** 1934 Historic American Building Survey  
1973 National Register of Historic Places

**National Historic Context:** “Extractive Labor in the United States,” *Labor History in the United States NHL Theme Study*

### NHL Significance:

- The Jefferson County Courthouse is nationally significant under NHL Criterion 1 for representing the critical role the legal system played in the labor struggles of the early 20th century as illustrated in the final chapter of the West Virginia mine wars (1912–1921) and the culmination of the Battle of Blair Mountain (1921) involving thousands of union miners in the largest armed uprising in American labor history.
- At this courthouse in 1922, the treason trials of two pro-union coal miners accused by a private coal-mining company spawned a national debate over the charge of treason being used as a tool against labor organizing and exposed how private interests and the state maneuvered legal systems during capital-labor conflicts to defend only the rights of companies.



- The trials caught the attention of the public as well as national union leaders and civil liberties advocates who feared that a guilty verdict would deal a heavy blow to the struggling labor movement, spread anti-union tactics to industries beyond coal mining in West Virginia, and have a chilling effect on the rights of free speech for labor organizers. While ultimately, the United Mine Workers of America's (UMW) worst fears were not realized, the labor unrest, violence, and ensuing costly legal battle took a significant toll on the UMW, contributing to its decline in the 1920s.
- As the first and only treason trials connected to the labor movement in America, this pivotal event in the history of the UMW generated national awareness of the hardships miners endured in their struggles to unionize and ended a decade-long era of violent labor strife.



*Scene in the courtroom at the opening of the first treason trial on April 25, 1922. Photo courtesy of Getty Images, Bettmann Collection.*

### **Integrity:**

- Through the meticulous stewardship of the Jefferson County Commissioners, the courtroom retains the essential features that convey its appearance at the time of the trials. These features include the original floor plan, the gallery, windows, coved ceiling with arched brackets, and the elaborate plaster and wood rose medallion from which hangs an 1879, 60-light, round chandelier. Furthermore, the courthouse building itself is still located in its historic surroundings within a turn-of-the-century town setting.
- Modifications to the courthouse's materials and design—the addition of elevators, a fire escape, the in-kind replacement of the wood courtroom doors in their historic design and bricked-in windows that retain their original location and trim—minimally impact the ability of the courthouse to convey its historical significance. A two-story glass hyphen added in 2007 between the 1910 courthouse addition and the 1918 Jefferson County Jail removed the door and window openings from the addition's south wall but was sensitively done and is unobtrusive.

**Owner of Property:** Jefferson County, West Virginia



**Acreage of Property:** Less than one acre.

**Origins of Nomination:** The Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission initiated the effort through an inquiry to the NPS National Capital Area which then funded a nomination through a cooperative agreement with the Organization of American Historians.

**Potential for Positive Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:** This nomination will bring attention to a unique part of the labor history story that is not well-known and will highlight the historic contribution that coal miners and the UMW made to a distinctive period in American labor history.

**Potential for Negative Public Response or Reflection on NHL Program:** None known.

**Public Comments Favoring Designation (as of August 21, 2023):**

- Martin Burke, Chair, Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission
- Susan Pierce, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History

**Landmarks Committee Comments:**

- Add more architectural description about the courthouse building and its style.
- Add information concerning race and if the courthouse was a segregated building.

**Landmarks Committee Recommendation:**

The Committee recommends that the National Park System Advisory Board recommend to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town, West Virginia, as a National Historic Landmark, with any additions and corrections as noted by the Committee being made prior to the nomination being forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for action.

**Advisory Board Recommendation:** The National Park System Advisory Board recommends to the Secretary of the Interior the designation of the Jefferson County Courthouse in Charles Town, West Virginia, as a National Historic Landmark.

