Until West Virginia joined the Union as a new state in June 1863, Confederate forces tried valiantly to keep that from happening. After all, loss of the resources available in what became known as the Mountaineer State—coal and salt in particular—and its identity as an essential trade corridor posed dire consequences for the South.

The month-long Jones-Imboden Raid in 1863 would prove the last gasp in a run of ambitious efforts by Southern forces to keep western Virginia in the fold. Launched on April 24 and ending on May 22, the Confederate raid would cover more than 1,100 miles, as two cavalry columns commanded by Brig. Gens. William E. “Grumble” Jones and John D. Imboden set out to disrupt the state’s Unionist government, recruit for the Southern armies, capture supplies, and break up Union infrastructure—most important, bridges used by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. According to local historian Gerald D. Swick, Imboden captured nearly 700 prisoners, 1,000 head of cattle, and 1,200 horses, and Jones reported burning more than 150,000 barrels of oil. The two forces also torched 16 bridges, a railroad tunnel, two trains of cars, and several boats.

Today, several towns along the raiders’ route are well worth a visit, including Buckhannon, Philippi, Beverly, and Fairmont—all with interesting Civil War histories (Fairmont was the site of the largest pitched battle fought during the Jones-Imboden Raid). One of the most captivating of these towns in central West Virginia is Weston, tucked along the banks of the West Fork River—as picturesque and serene today as it was in the 1860s. The town’s residents and occupants played instrumental roles both before and during the war to help shape its course. That included the immortal Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, who lived in Weston from the age of 6 until leaving to attend the U.S. Military Academy in 1842.

Also spending time in Weston were future Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley of the 23rd Ohio Infantry, which occupied the town in the summer of 1861—Hayes as a major and McKinley a private. “A majority of the people here are friendly and glad to have us here to protect them from the Secessionists,” wrote Hayes. “This part of Virginia naturally belongs to the West; they are now in no way connected with eastern Virginia.” —Chris Howland
Jackson’s Mill
160 Jackson Mill Rd.

At the turn of the 19th century, Colonel Edward Jackson, a Revolutionary War veteran, established a farm and mill just north of town, laying the foundation for three generations of Jacksons to live and prosper there. It was here that 6-year-old Thomas Jonathan Jackson and his sister, Laura Ann, would be left under the care of their uncle, who would later send the boy off to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Thomas of course made history as Confederate General “Stonewall” Jackson. Laura, despite marrying Jonathan Arnold, a man with Southern sympathies, remained an outspoken Unionist throughout the war.

There is still a working mill on-site. Guided tours of the property, which can also be rented for special events, are available. Consider staying the night in one of the mill’s multiple lodging options, which range from private suites and camp cottages to a lodge for larger parties. jacksonsmill.wvu.edu

Exchange Bank of Virginia
133 Center Ave.

The structure here served as a branch of the Exchange Bank of Virginia at the time of the war. At dawn on June 30, 1861, Colonel Erastus Bernard Tyler and the 7th Ohio Infantry swept into town to capture gold being held in a vault for construction of the asylum. Banker Robert J. McCandlish lived on the second floor and reportedly answered the door to the demands of the Union soldiers. All but about $2,000 of the gold—needed to pay the asylum workers—would be sent at first by wagon (reportedly a hearse) to nearby Clarksburg, then by train to Wheeling. Francis Pierpont, governor of the so-called Restored Government of Virginia, used this money (about $30,000) to enact legislation establishing the state of West Virginia. The Wheeling Intelligencer defended acquisition of the funds, concluding in its July 4 edition: “We need money almost as badly as they do down at Richmond, and are in no particular need of a Lunatic Asylum...just now coin is indefinitely preferable to crazy people.”

Weston Colored School/Mountaineer Military Museum
345 Center Ave.

Built in 1882, the school was the fourth school erected with public funds for African-American children in the state. For 72 years, until desegregation in 1954, the school served the community and continued to be used as a classroom, archive, library, and welcome center. The building’s Mission-style design is unique for the area, and it is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, the building houses the Mountaineer Military Museum, which interprets the role of Lewis County from the Civil War through the Spanish-American War all the way to Operation Iraqi Freedom. It is a repository for many Civil War artifacts, such as this local soldier’s discharge medal. The museum also has the rifle carried by William Osborne of the 10th West Virginia Infantry, a local boy killed while fighting in the Shenandoah Valley in 1864. This English-produced weapon was eventually returned to the family and was recently donated to the museum.

The museum is open most Saturdays between April and December, or by appointment. For more information, go to: www.mountaineermilitarymuseum.com
George Jackson Arnold House
104 Center Ave.

Down the street from the Exchange Bank site is the home of George Jackson Arnold. Siding with Unionists pushing to break from the Confederate-leaning Old Dominion, Arnold drafted the legislation to do so. That made him a wanted man when Confederate raiders under Imboden and Jones came to town on May 4, 1863. To evade capture, Arnold crawled into a hiding spot under his house.

STONE SPLENDOR

The spectacular Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, closed as a medical facility in 1994, was constructed between 1858 and 1881. An architectural phenomenon, it is the largest hand-cut stone masonry building in North America. Opening to patients in 1864, the building’s Civil War history is unique, to say the least. In fact, the architect, Richard Snowden Andrews, who also designed the Maryland governor’s mansion in Annapolis and a wing of the U.S. Treasury building in Washington, D.C., would serve as a Confederate artillery commander. Andrews was nearly killed at Cedar Mountain in August 1862 when an exploding shell ripped a hole in his side. After convalescing for eight months and having a metal plate attached to his side, he returned to action, only to get wounded again at Second Winchester in June 1863.

Only one of the asylum’s wings had been completed by the outbreak of the war, but the central structure was under construction. Three separate raids, including the one by Jones and Imboden, reduced the supplies allocated for the patients there and scattered Camp Tyler, a Union garrison located on the grounds. Weston flourished after the war, the asylum a leading factor for that.

Today the asylum operates as a museum. Visitors can enjoy a variety of tours and special programs there. For a fascinating look at the facility’s history, read Lunatic, by Edward S. Gleason. 71 Asylum Dr. trans-alleghenylunaticasylum.com