

down home series

Again in the year 2004, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's third stop, we'll be ...



DEBORAH HUSO PHOTOS



Down Home in Staunton

by Deborah Huso, Contributing Writer

At A Glance ...

Population: Approximately 24,000

Square Miles: Approximately 20

Founded: In 1797 as county seat

Fun Facts: Birthplace of President Woodrow Wilson. City-manager form of government originated in Staunton in 1908.

Ask **Sergei Troubetzkoy**, executive director of the Staunton Convention and Visitors Bureau, why this bustling city of 24,000 has drawn so much attention in recent years, and he'll tell you, "You can get a real taste for old-fashioned Americana here."

He's right. With its brick sidewalks, iron lamppost-lined streets, and eclectic architecture, Staunton has certainly rejuvenated its moniker of "Queen City" of the Shenandoah Valley. With a thriving downtown shopping

district, five National Historic Districts, and an ever-growing list of historic and cultural attractions, Staunton earned the 2002 Great American Main Street Award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and was earlier named one of America's Distinctive Dozen Communities.

But it hasn't always been this way.

Thirty years ago Staunton's downtown, like those of so many American cities and

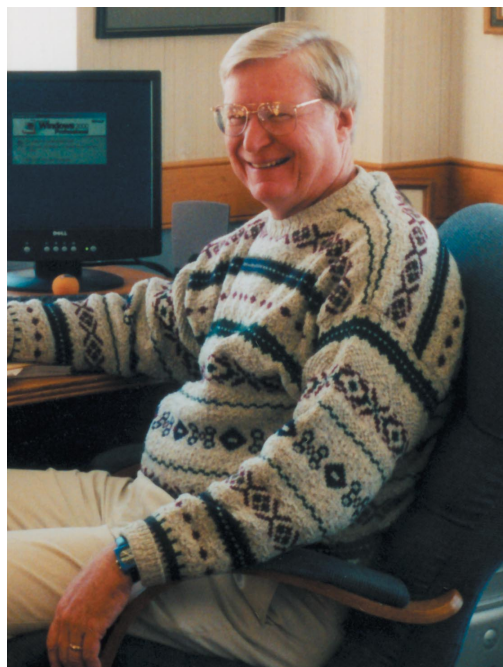
towns, was in serious decline — empty storefronts, residents fleeing to outlying subdivisions, businesses relocating to the busy corridor along I-81. The city's beautiful collection of brick and granite 19th- and 20th-century buildings, ranging in style from Italianate to Victorian, was falling into neglectful disrepair.

"Things really hit the wall," says Staunton city manager **Robert Stripling**, "when VDOT planned to put a major highway through downtown, tearing down the historic buildings in the Wharf District."

Staunton residents rallied, creating the Historic Staunton Foundation (HSF) in 1971, in an effort to stop the planned highway and other urban-renewal projects on the table that were resulting in the destruction of the city's historic structures. "Local

Sergei Troubetzkoy, executive director of the Staunton Convention and Visitors Bureau (far left) and **Robert Stripling**, Staunton city manager.

Cooperative Living/March-April 2004





Among the city's notable structures is the birthplace of President Woodrow Wilson on Coalter Street (left). Mary Baldwin College, established in 1842 as the Augusta Female Seminary, is on the city's walking tour.



In addition to its recreations of European and American farm life, the Frontier Culture museum also hosts special events throughout the year.

developer **Vic Meinert** was an early investor in the preservation effort," says Stripling. "He bought the railroad station downtown." Today the station houses one

Sunspots, a studio and gallery of glass and metal crafts, is located in Staunton's revitalized historic district. The shop receives about 40,000 visitors a year.

of the city's most popular restaurants, The Pullman, and is also home to a smattering of gift shops. Amtrak makes regular stops at the station, dropping off visitors from the metro DC area.

But this kind of transition hasn't been easy. HSF has played a significant role over the last three decades in revitalizing Staunton's historic areas, helping lead the way for the National Register of Historic Places designation of five Staunton districts and helping property owners downtown restore and rehabilitate their build-

ings. The city of Staunton and HSF also partnered to put utilities underground to restore the downtown area's historic appearance and installed fiber-optic cable to help attract more businesses. The city council, Stripling says, invested more than half-a-million dollars to create a more attractive streetscape and to build a parking lot next to the train station. Even City Hall has made use of the old downtown Leggett's store, renovating it to house city offices.

"I really believe preservation is one of our main economic engines," says HSF executive director **Frank Strassler**. "You have to use the resources that you have, and Staunton's



resource is its architecture. There's a definite energy downtown now."

Doug and Caroline Sheridan are among the downtown business owners who have taken advantage of Staunton's revitalization. They opened Sunspots, a studio and gallery of glass and metal crafts, on Lewis Street adjacent to the Wharf District in early 2001. Their business is located in the 1929 Klotz building, once home to a reclamation business. "We'd been living in Staunton for awhile," says Caroline, "and we really liked this building. It also qualified for historic tax credits." Today Caroline estimates that Sunspots, which has glass-blowing demonstrations seven days a week, receives about 40,000 visitors a year.

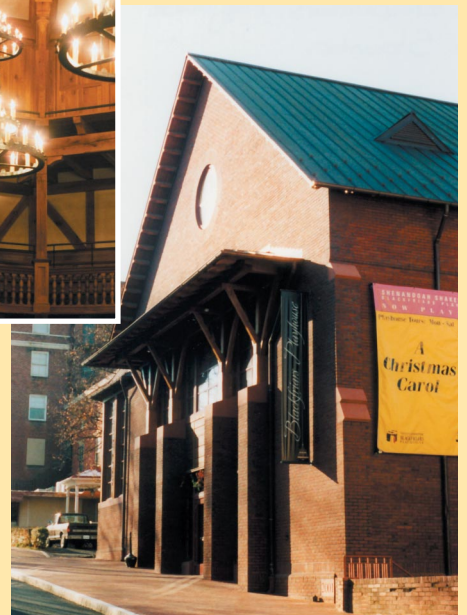
The Historic Staunton Foundation has been particularly instrumental in helping business owners like the Sheridans get started, providing free advice and assistance on historic design and restoration, and helping business owners qualify for federal and state rehabilitation tax credits to help offset the cost of restoring old structures. Strassler says HSF maintains an archive of original architectural designs for hundreds of the city's buildings. More than 250 buildings have been rehabilitated in the last 30 years.

if you go ...

The best way to explore Staunton is on foot. Pick up a self-guided historic walking tour brochure at the city's visitor center at the New Street parking garage. Staunton has five historic districts, all on the register of National Historic Places. **The Wharf** includes the train depot as well as a variety of old warehouse buildings and the 1901 Augusta County Courthouse.

Newtown is Staunton's oldest residential neighborhood and is home to **Stuart Hall**, **Trinity Church**, and the **Stonewall Jackson, Staunton's first public school**. Beverly makes up Staunton's main drag through downtown and is home to one of the city's most identifiable landmarks, the **Marquis Building**, a Romanesque Revival structure with a turreted corner entrance.

Gospel Hill, at the corner of Beverly and Coalter streets, is home to nearly 20 structures spanning the entire 19th century, including the **Woodrow Wilson birthplace** and the stately Greek Revival **Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind**. Adjoining the campus of **Mary Baldwin College** is the **Stuart Addition**, a hilly neighbor-



Blackfriars Playhouse

hood with Victorian row houses and the Italianate former **Staunton Military Academy**.

For more information on Staunton's historic districts or downtown lodging and dining, contact the **Staunton Convention and Visitors Bureau** at 1-800-342-7982.



Gypsy Hill Park

On New Street, one block off Beverly, is the **Blackfriars Playhouse**, where audiences can experience Shakespearean plays as they were originally presented with all the lights on throughout the theater, sparse sets, and actors playing several roles and even switching genders. "We make the theater a

communal experience," says Jane Goodman of Shenandoah Shakespeare. "We even have seats on the stage, so monologues often become dialogues with the audience." For tickets or more information, call (540) 851-1733, or visit online at www.shenandoahshakespeare.com.

Beyond the downtown area is **Gypsy Hill Park**, which was established in 1889. This lovely hilly park is home to a much-beloved duck pond, biking and walking trails, swimming pool, tennis courts, a train for kids to ride, and a bandstand that hosts regular free concerts.

Along the I-81 corridor is the **Frontier Culture Museum**. In addition to its recreations of European and American farm life, this outdoor museum also hosts special events throughout the year, including an annual **Oktoberfest** and **Holiday Lantern Tours**. For more information, call (540) 332-7850, or visit the museum online at www.frontier.state.va.us.

This year Staunton will host its 6th annual **Victorian Festival** April 23-25, which will include historic home tours, ghost walks, horse-drawn carriage rides, a Victorian street faire, a grand ball, and the American Magic Lantern Show. Running simultaneously will be the **Virginia Hot Glass Festival**. For additional information on festivities, call 1-800-332-5219 or go online to www.stauntondowntown.org.

And that's important for a city so steeped in history. Staunton is one of the oldest cities west of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. The area was first settled by Scots-Irish in the 1730s. The first Augusta County courthouse was built here in 1745, and Staunton's city streets were laid out as early as 1747. From its beginning, the city was an important center of commerce, located as it was along the Great Wagon Road and later the Valley Turnpike. In 1854, The Virginia Central Railroad came through Staunton. The railroad made Staunton an important Confederate supply depot during the Civil War.

Unlike many Virginia cities during the Civil War, Staunton escaped mass destruction. When Union General David Hunter assumed control of the city in June 1864, he made an agreement with then-mayor Nicholas Trout to spare the town's buildings with the exception of the railroad station, warehouses, and other structures of importance to the Confederate war effort. As a result, Staunton is a treasure trove of historic architecture from the late 1700s through the early 20th century.

Among the city's notable structures is the birthplace of President Woodrow Wilson on Coalter Street. Wilson was born

in this stately Greek Revival home in 1856 and spent his 54th birthday at the home in 1912 during a much-celebrated presidential homecoming. The house has been a museum since 1941. A museum on Woodrow Wilson's life is located next door to the birthplace and houses Wilson's beloved Pierce Arrow Limousine as well as the Presidential Library.

Staunton has also long been a center of education, and its many schools are on the city's historic walking tour. Among them are Stuart Hall and Mary Baldwin College, both of which were built in the first half of the 19th century. Mary Baldwin was established in 1842 as the Augusta Female Seminary and Stuart Hall in 1844 as the Virginia Female Institute.

Troubetzkoy believes that Staunton's biggest draw is its historic buildings, which number in the hundreds. He says he can walk the streets of town any day of the week and see visitors with the city's self-guided walking tour brochure in hand. "People like anything," he says, "that combines history with exercise."

Tourism and Preservation

"We have more and more people coming to visit here all the time," says Stripling. Troubetzkoy estimates that Staunton draws more than 100,000 visitors a year. He says the city's proximity to the I-81 corridor plays a big role in tourist traffic as do the nearby Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive, but Staunton is also coming into its own as a tourist destination.

Today one of its biggest draws is the newly constructed Blackfriars Playhouse on New Street, which houses the internationally renowned theater group Shenandoah Shakespeare. The Blackfriars is an exact replica of William Shakespeare's indoor Elizabethan playhouse. "It's the only recreation of Shakespeare's indoor theater in the world," says **Jane Goodman**, Shenandoah Shakespeare's director of public relations. "People from all over the country and all over the world come here."

While Shenandoah Shakespeare was started 15 years ago by James Madison University English professor Ralph Cohen, the troupe never had a home until 2001. "Staunton was looking for a destination anchor," explains Goodman. "They recognized an opportunity with us." With the help of funding from the city, private donors, and Mary Baldwin College, the Blackfriars Playhouse was built. Today it seats 300 and hosts six different plays a year.

“Shenandoah Shakespeare has been a big piece of what has made Staunton attractive to visitors,” says Stripling.

Troubetzkoy says that in addition to the city’s architecture and Shenandoah Shakespeare, the downtown area’s many art galleries, Sunspots among them, have become a big draw, as has the Frontier Culture Museum along I-81. The outdoor museum, which recreates life on German, Irish, English, and Virginia farms in the 1700s and 1800s, opened in 1987 and continues to grow. Executive director **John Avoli**, who also happens to be Staunton’s mayor, says, “We have adopted a master site plan that will allow us to grow threefold in the next

three years.” Among the planned additions to the museum will be a West African farm, a Monacan Indian encampment, and a fortified English settlement.

Troubetzkoy says the city’s continued emphasis on history and preservation will be the key to Staunton’s continued growth as a tourist destination. “People from big metropolitan areas want to unwind on vacations,” he says. “That’s why they come to Staunton.” Stripling says he hopes visitor traffic to Staunton will increase even further with the restoration of the 1920s Stonewall Jackson Hotel, which is located adjacent to the Blackfriars Playhouse. The city, along with private partners, plans to rehabilitate

the structure and make it into a 120-room hotel and conference center.

In addition, HSF, the Staunton-Augusta Art Center, and the Augusta Historical Society have recently entered into a partnership to restore one of the city’s historic hotels and turn it into a public history-and-arts center. “That’s our big focus right now,” says Strassler. “What we’re really doing is providing contemporary uses for the city’s historic buildings.”

“Revitalization has increased our revenue base,” says Stripling. “We have more and more people coming to visit.” Stripling hopes more people will also come here to live. “If a family is looking for the ideal small-town environment, Staunton is the place,” he adds. “We have Gypsy Hill Park with regular music concerts, walking trails, a swimming pool, and tennis courts, an authentic downtown with a movie theater. It’s a safe, interesting place with a variety of opportunities for education and entertainment.” ■