



## Destination: Fort Valley, a Hidden-Gem Community

With the re-emergence of its country store, this “valley within a valley” is waiting for your arrival.



If you want to go way, way back, Fort Valley was originally an inland sea before mountains began to push up.

The question comes with the territory. The answer comes with a T-shirt. Let's first establish the territory. It's Fort Valley Country Store, smack dab in the middle of the middle of nowhere. Fort Valley, or “The Fort,” is a Shenandoah County community of roughly 1,200 people that stretches 20 miles long and is surrounded by the George Washington National Forest. Its people will brighten your day with their accepting nature, outdone only by nature itself — the rolling landscape is flat-out gorgeous. There's a postcard-worthy scene at about every twist and turn along the aptly named Fort Valley Road through the area, but the trick is actually finding your way there to take it all in.

Fort Valley, or at least the heart of it, isn't really that place you happen upon after a wrong turn. It's basically found only after you wind your way over the mountain from various points — a valley within the Shenandoah Valley, the locals

affectionately say.

That sparks the aforementioned question of country store co-manager Ann Heap: Who, exactly, do you rely on as customers, because there's no way people are seeking this place out, right?

In response to the inquiry on a November afternoon, she gets up from a table inside the business and heads toward the front door, promising a garment will provide the answer. Heap returns and plops down a light brown T-shirt, having it speak on her behalf.

It reads: “Fort Valley Country Store. A destination. More than just a friendly store with (just about) EVERYTHING you need!”

All preconceived notions that a country store cannot play the role of an attraction are thrown out the window in the Fort, thanks to Heap and her daughter-in-law and co-manager, Melody Heap. It speaks to the area as a whole: Fort Valley has something for everyone, which indeed makes it a destination.



Top: After being closed 16 months, the Fort Valley Country Store, under new ownership, opened last spring. An artisan’s area provides additional income for the store, while also showcasing the works of local residents. Center: On Woodstock Tower Road, the Fort Valley Community Center and Library is a popular resource for area residents. Bottom: A glimpse at the main thoroughfare for Fort Valley, Fort Valley Road. The Fort Valley Country Store offers a little bit of everything, sparing locals from a 30-minute drive to the nearest grocery.

### STORE FINDS NEW LIFE UNDER NEW OWNERS

The store’s backstory will tell you about the pride inherent of the people in Fort Valley. The business, under previous ownership, closed in January 2014. A group of more than 60 people then banded together to invest in and raise money for its reopening, which the Heaps, who lease the store from the group, accomplished 16 months later on May 22.

Meg Trott, a local historian and archivist for the Fort Valley Museum, describes Ann Heap with three words: enthusiasm, creativity and flexibility. Melody Heap sums up her role by saying, “I don’t want anybody to leave hungry.”

Everything the Heaps have done since opening the store has fit those descriptions. A full made-to-order breakfast and lunch carry-out menu include specialty sandwiches and other items passed down from family recipes.

Ann Heap, who hasn’t yet figured out the meaning of a day off work, laments that she cannot keep her chicken salad in stock to take any home for herself. “Apparently,” she says, “it’s a big deal.”

The store boasts gas pumps, old-fashioned ice cream and a local artisan’s showcase, in addition to all of the general conveniences to fill a community’s needs, sparing its residents

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from half-hour trips for the simplest of groceries. It also serves as a check station for hunters and participates in Hunters for the Hungry, which supplies meals to Virginians in need.

Compared to how the store looked previously, it is also brighter, more open, climate controlled and has new front doors. The store was originally a three-bay service station in the late 1950s. There’s still a dip inside the main entrance because the first business had a natural draining system.

Perhaps most important, though, is that the store has once again given Fort Valley a daily social hub. It’s a place to gather and discuss the world’s events — or World Series, as men did in November — or simply see a familiar face and catch up.

“Whether we do or not,” Ann Heap says, “we’re expected to know everything that’s going on in the community.”





'You can probably tell we have a lot of pride in our Valley,' Funk says.

### 'WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE ABOUT FORT VALLEY?'

Fort Valley is its own melting pot of two primary groups. There are the residents whose families have lived in the area for generations, descended from the German and Scottish families who first set foot here in the 1730s. Then, there's a collection of "newcomers," made up of families with children as well as retirees. This segment, especially the retirees, could supply the conversation topics for a thousand dinners given its eclectic backgrounds: Wall Street, Capitol Hill, the military and even a composer.

No matter their background, residents are enamored with their surroundings in the Fort, and for good reason. If you're in the area, you're likely doing any number of the following: hiking, fishing, horseback riding, camping, ATV riding, hang-gliding and just general exploring, such as climbing the national forest's Woodstock Tower for a spectacular view of the Seven Bends of the Shenandoah River.

"This area is so rich in history, so rich in tradition and of course, it's so rich in beauty," says Ann Heap, who moved here in 1986. "The community has been good to me. What's not to like about Fort Valley? It's a beautiful place with beautiful people."

After the first permanent settlers arrived, Fort Valley saw an influx of people in the 1750s who found the area appealing for two reasons: It was safer because it wasn't settled by Native Americans and it had plenty of water in a time of severe drought.

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Many people still visit to scour the shale ground for fossils, says Grayson Funk, a lifelong resident who is president of Fort Valley Properties, which bought the store.

A turning point in the Fort's history came around the Great Depression, when President Franklin Roosevelt started the Civilian Conservation Corps program to conserve America's natural resources and put young men to work. The first camp, Camp Roosevelt, opened in Fort Valley in 1933, greatly improving the local economy. The camp continues to draw visitors today.

Information on that bit of local history is fairly well known. If you want the full blast-from-the-past experience, the Fort Valley Museum offers it.

The museum, which is about a mile north of the country store on Fort Valley Road, packs hundreds of years of history into its small brick quarters, a former church and school built in 1841. The museum opened in 1974 and is in the process of expanding with displays in another former church nearby. A pavilion for events has also been added.

Trott, the historian, proudly shows off all of the above, including the 2015 featured exhibit that presented the history of iron furnaces. The furnaces, best described as pyramids of stone, were built as high as 40 feet near spots that had a large water and limestone supply, rich deposits of iron ore and lots of trees for cutting and making into charcoal, she says.

The museum features many displays retelling the Fort's history since the first permanent settlers arrived in the 1700s. The Fort Valley Museum opened in 1974 and sits about a mile north of the country store, along the main road in an old brick church.

Other exhibits detail the history of a former school, a former resort, local pottery and typical household items from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The museum hosts an ice cream social every July, attracting about 400 people, Trott says. It's sort of like how the country store is seeking to make the area a destination: If you feed them, they will come.

The Fort Valley Volunteer Fire Department has practically written the book on that method (Trott, by the way, has literally written a book on the history of Fort Valley, co-authored with her husband, James, and Jeanette Ritenour). The department and its 75 members rely on four ham-and-oyster dinners a year as major fundraising sources. Funk, who is in leadership positions with the fire department and museum, says the events attract as many as 1,000 people each time.

Formed in 1964, the fire company sits across from the country store. It has a small fleet of vehicles, including ATVs in case someone gets lost in the mountains. The pride of the department, though, is Bumblebee, its yellow ambulance. After having a substation from the town of Woodstock's volunteer rescue squad next door for about 20 years, Fort Valley became an emergency transport agency and purchased its own vehicle about six years ago.

Ann Heap has helped volunteers get their EMT certification, going back to the late 1980s. That's how it works in Fort Valley: If you're involved in one thing, you're pretty much involved in them all. In addition to the store, museum and fire department, there's a community center, library and Ruritan club, all of which are active.

"You can probably tell we have a lot of pride in our Valley," Funk says. You don't need a T-shirt to figure that out. ■