

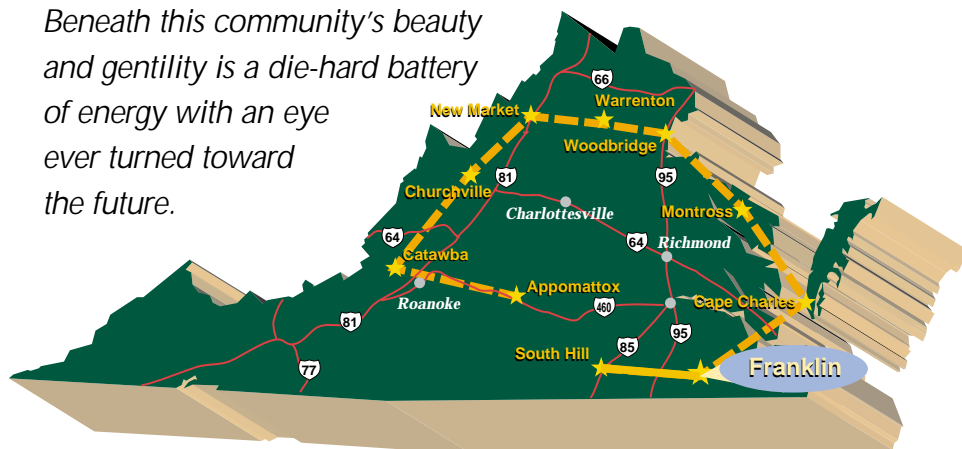
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Virginia Reese,
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During the year 2001, we're making our way around Virginia, 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 second stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Franklin

Beneath this community's beauty and gentility is a die-hard battery of energy with an eye ever turned toward the future.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY AUTHOR



In the fall of 1999, as the waters of Hurricane Floyd ravaged the city, Franklin was the subject of feature stories in newspapers and television broadcasts across Virginia.

Though the flood inundated many communities in the surrounding area, Franklin's downtown business district was especially devastated because the Blackwater River flows along its southern perimeter and Main Street is situated well below the rest of the town, which spreads out to the west. The river crested at 10½ feet and receded very

slowly. Pollution and hazardous chemicals in the water required precautions that made those who were able to enter their buildings nine days later look like astronauts on a moonwalk. All the equipment and inventory on the first floor of the 182 businesses downtown was a total loss estimated at \$30

million. At least 100 homes were destroyed and many more families were displaced. Building repair costs are expected to reach \$50 million.

Communication was a major problem. The phone company, the post office, the local radio station, City Hall, and the fire and police stations were useless. International Paper, the town's largest employer, was severely affected. The power of the ravaging Blackwater seemed overwhelming, but a visitor to Franklin today will find 110 business-



Agriculture was once the mainstay of Franklin's economy. In 1909 J.W. Copeland shows off his peanuts and behind him the remains of the corn crop. Today agriculture accounts for less than 2 percent of the town's economic base. (Inset) Second Avenue and Main Street in 1950 shows a thriving downtown, one without traffic lights or parking meters.





es with new paint and old smiles working to help clients and customers.

The villain Blackwater had been the impetus for the establishment of the town in the late 1800s and was largely responsible for its growth and economic prosperity. The river and the railroad met at Franklin, providing transportation for cotton, peanuts, lumber and people. Steamboats operated on the river until 1928. Early in the 18th century, Richard Barrett opened a hotel near the railroad station and the boat dock, and that area became known as Barrett's Landing.

In March 1999, as part of the Downtown Development and the historic preservation encouraged by Franklin's 1985 designation as a National Main Street Community, the town built a park on the site of Barrett's Landing. The park is the focal point for the Franklin Fall Festival, the Summer Concert Series, and other holiday and promotional events. It was at this site that citizens gathered to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the flood and recognize the recovery that had taken place. Rebuilding the park became a priority for the city and the townspeople, and today Barrett's Landing is the bright star of the restored downtown business district.

Previous floods in 1946 and 1960 had brought destruction to Franklin's downtown. Flames had been the enemy in 1881. A fire started near the railroad station — and driven by the wind — swept up Main Street, destroying 43 buildings in the next four



Franklin Mayor James Council (left) confers with one of many volunteers who helped with logistics during the flood of September 1999.

blocks of the business district. Each time, the citizens of Franklin rallied to help each other — to clean up — to rebuild — to recover. Barrett's Landing has come to symbolize the strength and determination of the community.

Unity Helps Franklin Reach Goals

Franklin's history of succeeding where other small towns have failed reflects the spirited belief that acting together the town's people can reach whatever goals they set. Their recovery from the flood is not the miracle many have proclaimed it to be — it is only the most dramatic of its victories over dire circumstances.

The Mayor of Franklin, James P. Council, said, "The recovery would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment to Franklin of the people here — and their belief in each other. The hundreds of volunteers really made the recovery such a success." He noted that, "We couldn't have done it alone, however. Help came from as far away as Indiana and England." An estimated 8,000 volunteers

This artist's rendering of Barrett's Landing by Dorthy Fagan, a one-time Franklin resident, captures the nostalgia appeal the spot holds for the townspeople.





Students take a break at the landmark cupola in front of Paul D. Camp Community College.

participated in the clean-up and reconstruction work.

Before Floyd, the downtown businesses had prospered despite the arrival of chain stores and strip malls, and the construction of the four-lane Route 58, which bypassed Franklin. Similar events have turned the Main Streets of many small towns in Southside, Virginia (and America) into abandoned ghosts.

In the last decade, Armory Drive — the corridor connecting Franklin to Highway 58 — has developed into a thriving commercial area, providing the city with an increased tax base and its citizens with a wider array of services and shops. Many fast-food franchises, restaurants, a bowling alley, a tri-screen movie complex, a variety of stores including national chains and a Wal-Mart Super Store are located in this area of town, but the restored Main Street of Franklin boasts 110 businesses and continues to attract clients and customers. And, the sign at an exit on Bypass 58 has two arrows — one says “Armory Drive” and the other says “Downtown Franklin!”

Franklin offers an amazing array of amenities that serve the health, education, recreation, and intellectual needs of the community. Serving on committees and volunteering seems to be a requirement for citizenship. The Citizen’s Guide lists 23 boards and commissions whose members are appointed

by City Council, the members of which encourage anyone interested to offer their services. That list doesn’t include the fund drives that have made possible facilities that offer the townspeople advantages and opportunities usually found only in much larger metropolitan areas. Franklin’s population is 8,500.

A new contemporary building is the home of the Ruth Camp Memorial Library, which houses and gives public access to computers. Close by is the Paul D. Camp Community College. The college offers 40 different programs and has an enrollment of 1,660. Under construction is the Workforce Development Center. The center is expected to open in 2002, offering new opportunities for students and an incentive for new enterprises to locate in Franklin.

Central to the “good life” enjoyed by young and old Franklinites is the James L. Camp YMCA. The “Y” program offers sports and recreation activities that run the

gamut from “Twinges in the Hinges” for seniors to pre-school swimming classes and after-school care. With two gymnasiums, indoor and outdoor pools and tennis courts, playing fields for soccer and baseball, it is the center of recreation for the area. Membership exceeds 4,000, so Franklin should have a very healthy population.

It’s impossible not to notice that many of the institutions that provide services to Franklin bear the name of one of the Camp family. The Camp family formed Camp Manufacturing Company in 1888 after it had purchased the Neely Sawmill on the east side of the Blackwater. In 1956 it merged with Union Bag Corporation. The company prospered and is the area’s largest employer. Shortly before the flood in 1999 the mill was sold to International Paper. But a number of Camp family charitable trusts continue generously supporting efforts to provide this community with facilities, services and amenities few small towns enjoy.

Another example is the Texie Camp Marks Children’s Center, which offers a day-care program for typically developing children 6 weeks to 5 years old. The program includes an array of services for children with developmental delays. Occupational and speech therapy are provided to clients up to 20 years old. The center serves 120 Franklin clients.

Southampton Memorial Hospital provides

If You Go...

Good food abounds in the area. Check the *Tidewater News* for church bazaars where you will find home-made pickles, jellies, preserves, and scrumptious desserts. Ask about other fundraisers where you might find Brunswick stew, barbecue or a local “delicacy” — fish muddle.

For another taste of down-home food, and to see where the locals conduct business and spread jokes, visit **Fred’s**, a town treasure, run by Fred Rabil for over 50 years.

Whatever your passion might be, there’s something in the area to delight you. Auto racing? The **Southampton Motor Speedway**, located on Route 58 near Capron, holds NASCAR-sanctioned races every Friday night from March 30 through Oct. 6. Art? Check out the **Rawls Museum of Arts** in Courtland. Their spacious new gallery

showcases changing local and national exhibits and there is a gift shop stocked with ceramics, jewelry and other original art works. On Main Street in Franklin, visit the **A&G Art and Frame Gallery** where local artists’ works may be found. **Franklin Furniture Store** on Second Avenue also showcases works of the local Blackwater Art League.

History buffs will enjoy a visit to the **Rochelle House** in Courtland, the restored home of President John Tyler’s mother. Nearby is the **Agriculture and Forestry Museum**. The main building houses antique cars and farm equipment, but don’t miss the one-room school house, the old filling station, the working saw mill or the narrow-gauge train on the grounds. The third Saturday in September the Agriculture and Forestry Museum holds its **Heritage Day**, featuring old-time crafts and working exhibits of life before television and dot-com.

Fall is a good time to visit. In August the five-day **Franklin-Southampton Fair** features rides and food, crafts and exhibi-

220 beds, and an adjacent medical center complex contains the offices of 90 physicians and surgeons and the New Outlook mental health center. Attached to the hospital is East Pavilion, a 116-bed, long-term facility. The Village at Woods Edge, a senior living community with 55 private apartments, is adjacent to the hospital. The Martin Luther King Community Center also provides activities for seniors as well as young adults and children.

Volunteers Abound

Nearly all of these facilities utilize volunteers to run their programs: Pink Ladies at the hospital, coaches on the playing field, craft instructors at senior citizen's homes. Clubs abound — book clubs, music clubs, garden clubs, the Southampton Assembly, Federated Women's Clubs, Black Achievers, Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, Kiwanis, the Sportsman's Club, and many others. All of them have projects that enrich life in the city.

Even an amiable lunch at Fred's Restaurant on Main Street can turn into an ad hoc committee meeting. If you're looking for the slow pace of a laid-back small town, Franklin may not meet your needs. Its lovely Victorian homes that speak of the past and the golf course at Cypress Cove Country Club that signals leisurely pursuits are deceptive. Beneath the beauty and gentility is a die-hard battery of energy with an eye ever turned to the future. ■



Franklinites flocked to Barrett's Landing during the 2000 Street Painting Festival.

tions, dog shows and beauty contests. In September, Franklin's Downtown sponsors a **Fall Festival** that fills Main Street with vendors, special events and entertainment.