

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 second stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in Lexington

by Pat Gibson, Contributing Writer

People in Lexington are serious about their welcomes, and have been for the last 140 or more years. They say 140 because the “speaking tradition” (as it is called) originated just after the Civil War when Robert E. Lee became president of Washington College — now Washington & Lee University. He formally instituted the tradition of greeting everyone you meet on the street, but most likely that was some-

thing the locals were doing anyway. It is a hospitable town with a centuries-old tradition of hospitality.

The spring of 2004 is the beginning of a renaissance of interpretive American history.

Three of Lexington's major museums, The Stonewall Jackson House Museum, the VMI Cadet Museum, and the George C.

At A Glance ...

Population: 6,867 (2000 census)

Land Area: 2.5 square miles

Established: Town of Lexington, 1778; City of Lexington, 1841

Historical Tidbit: Originally known as Gilbert Campbell's Ford

Marshall Research Library and Museum, are undergoing renovation and revitalization. There's still plenty to see and do. A special exhibit on Stonewall Jackson is on display at the Rockbridge Historical Society, in the Campbell House across from the Visitor Center on Washington Street.

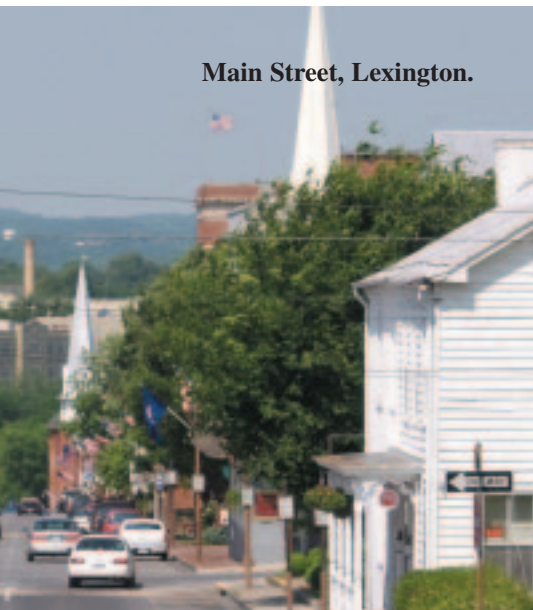
Do the streets look familiar? They just might. What makes the city so attractive to visitors makes it a popular location for television and movies. The most recent film that features Lexington was “Gods and Generals.” When you get to the corner of Washington and Main streets there is a sign for a millenary shop. It's a leftover from the movie “Sommersby.” Nothing really had to be changed other than adding mulch to the streets, because really, not much has changed. That's one of the best things about

The George C. Marshall Museum is just one of several museums in Lexington, a city steeped in American history.

Cooperative Living/February 2004



Main Street, Lexington.



The Classical Revival style of the Washington & Lee Colonnade is spectacular — tall white columns grace the red brick buildings. Across from the Colonnade is Lee Chapel, whose lower level houses a wonderful museum.

mark for those heading south, up the Great Valley Turnpike, as they made their way West. These intrepid travelers often paused here before they tackled the trek across the Allegheny Mountains. Many of those decided they had come far enough west, and they stayed, building the city we now enjoy. Now the mountain stands at the crossroads of two

interstates (81 and 64) and parallel to the original trails, (U.S. highways 11 and 60). Their location is no coincidence. Lexington has grown and prospered, but it hasn't lost any of its charm or visitor appeal. It's a city that is meant to be enjoyed slowly — walk the streets or take a horse-drawn carriage.

Two of America's most distinctive colleges, Washington & Lee University (W&L) and the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), are part of Lexington's downtown. W&L is the nation's ninth-oldest institution



The distinctive profile of House Mountain dominates the western horizon of the city.

Lexington. It looks pretty much the way it did before the Civil War, and for that matter, pretty much like it was afterwards. It is what it is because of what didn't happen here. Which when you think about it is a good thing. When you look up and down the streets you are looking at the same landmarks that have been visible since the earliest days. House Mountain, dominating the western horizon of the city, served as a land-

In the shadow of House Mountain, the VMI Regimental Pipe band performs on the university's parade ground.



if you go ...

Take in a music festival at Glen Maury Park.



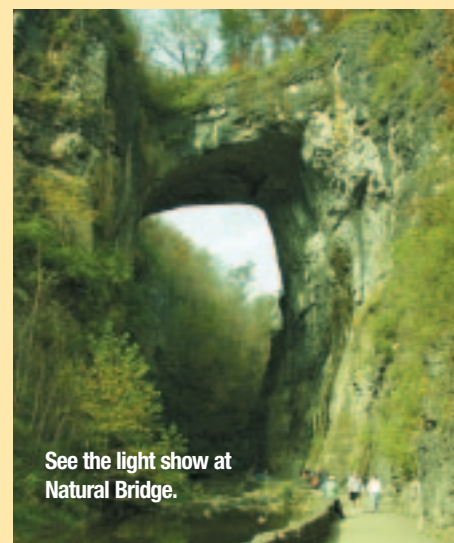
Lexington is located in Rockbridge County — named for one of nature's greatest wonders, **Natural Bridge**. If you visit, you absolutely must see the Bridge! Surveyed by George Washington (he left his initials), owned by Thomas Jefferson, revered by Native Americans and visited by millions of tourists, it is a breathtaking sight. U.S. 11 runs over the top, but you'd never know it whether you are on the road, or down below looking up. The Natural Bridge Hotel is a wonderful place for families to stay — full service with an excellent dining room and lots of attractions to keep everyone's attention. How many other places can boast a **Toy Museum**, a **Wax Museum**, **Caverns**, a **zoo** and a **Safari Park**?

A scenic way to get to Natural Bridge from Lexington is to take U.S. 60 east to the city of Buena

Vista. Take a few minutes to drive through this city that is a time capsule from the 1890s. You'll be amazed at the fabulous examples of Victorian architecture, especially the **Main Hall of Southern Virginia University**. The city's **Glen Maury Park** hosts music festivals throughout the year and is a great place to camp or picnic. A new public golf course will open there this summer. **Magnolia Avenue** is U.S. 501, follow it south to Rt. 130 and the town of Glasgow. You won't have any trouble figuring out when you get there. It's the town where dinosaurs roam freely, or keep an eye on the locals. Stop and take a picture at the local grocery store where Glasgow's version of animal control is taking care of a stray. Follow U.S. 501 on to Natural Bridge. It's an easy few miles more.

Spend the day, the night, or even the weekend at the Bridge. Every evening there is a **wonderful light and music show called the "Drama of Creation"** where you see this natural wonder in a whole different light (pardon the pun). Make reservations for the dining room or grab a snack in the gift shop. Either way you are sure to find something to delight your palate. Speaking of feeding, that's the next thing you need to do. No, not yourself, but how about a buffalo or an ostrich?

At the **Virginia Safari Park**, a 180-acre drive-through zoo, you will go on safari on winding roads through hundreds of well-kept free-roaming animals. With your ticket you will receive a bucket of feed and instructions to enjoy the animals while driving with your windows down. Yes, down. The animals love to help themselves to the food. If you don't want to do this in your own car, there are wagon rides on weekends. You're going to be talking about it for a long time, so make sure you pack the camera for this adventure. This is the most fun you will ever have in your car! Really! ■



See the light show at Natural Bridge.

of higher learning; VMI is the oldest state-supported military college in the nation.

In 1796, George Washington gave \$20,000 in canal stock to endow what became Washington College. To this day students receive a small amount of money each year from the monies generated by this gift. Following the Civil War, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, a former superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, became president of the school. He believed that education was the way to bring the war-torn country into the future.



Be sure not to miss the grave of Traveller, Lee's famous war horse.

His decision to come to Lexington was an easy one — his son was already there as a professor at VMI. George Washington was his wife's grandfather. It was a family thing.

Both schools welcome visitors, both have museums, and the architectural styles of both are truly textbook examples. The Classical Revival style of the W&L Colonnade is spectacular — tall, white columns grace the red brick buildings. Crowning the central hall is a statue of George Washington. Across from the Colonnade is Lee Chapel. Although it is called a chapel it was never conse-

crated; Lee meant for it to be a meeting place for the student body. The simple, plain interior is dominated by a marvelous statue of General Lee. The lower level houses a wonderful museum that traces the connection of the Lee and Washington families and the history of the college. Make sure you step outside the glass doors on the lower level to see the grave of Traveller, Lee's famous war horse. Visitors often leave apples, carrots and loose change.

Collegiate Contrast

Adjoining the campus of W&L is VMI. Stark, spartan and gothic, VMI stands in contrast to the graceful, columned red brick buildings of its neighbor. In spite of its austere appearance, VMI welcomes visitors. Tours are offered daily. The Institute, referred to as "the Post," traces its origin to 1819 when Virginia established an arsenal on the 'frontier.' The soldiers assigned to this duty didn't have a lot to do and found ways to amuse themselves, which did not amuse the townsfolk. A local attorney, John Thomas Lewis Preston, established the concept of educating the soldiers while they weren't guarding the guns. Preston became the first professor. "Cadets" (both men and women) are required to live in the barracks. If you visit on a Friday afternoon during the academic year you might witness a full dress parade. It's quite a sight as the Corps of Cadets accompanied by band and bagpipes stream out of the barracks across the parade ground in the shadow of House Mountain. It's definitely a highlight you shouldn't miss. As you look around the parade ground, note all the statues that surround the parade ground. Two — "Stonewall Jackson" and "Virginia Mourning Her Dead" — were sculpted by Moses Ezekiel, a graduate who became a world-renowned artist.

While you are on post make sure you stop to visit the George C. Marshall Research Library and Museum that honors the most distinguished graduate of VMI. Marshall created the plan for the recovery of Europe following World War II, for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize. For the next five years this building will

also house the VMI Museum, the oldest museum in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Jackson Memorial Hall, the usual location, is under renovation and is not scheduled to reopen until 2007. Even in temporary quarters the collection features spectacular items that you don't want to miss. You will see the raincoat that Stonewall Jackson was wearing when he was shot (look for the bullet hole in the left sleeve) and the mounted hide of his war horse, Little Sorrel.

Lots to Do

If you are interested in outdoor recreation, history, shopping, art or family entertainment you will find it all, no matter what time of year you visit. Good food and lodging are high on any visitor's list. You will find plenty of both. It's a total travel package — it's all right here! So where do you start? That's the easy part. No matter which direction you approach you will find trailblazer signs directing you to the Lexington-Rockbridge Area Visitor Center on Washington Street. That's where you want to begin your visit. Travel counselors will help you organize your visit, providing you with brochures, great maps and helpful information.

Are you hungry yet? Lexington has some great places to eat. You name it, it's served downtown. From down-home barbecue to the finest cuisine, take your pick. All restaurants welcome visitors, just wear shoes and shirts. Don't worry about bringing a tie. Just want something to drink or something sweet? There are two coffee shops, a bakery, a bistro, oh, and two candy stores, a tea room, and a homemade ice cream shop.

Good Fun, Too

Downtown has more than good food. There are six excellent art galleries. You will find everything from Chinese brush painting to fine art photography to sculpture, woodcarving, pottery, jewelry. Is it made by hand? It's here. All are within a two-block radius. Both college campuses have magnificent art collections, too. That's one of the best things about Lexington — for the most part you can park your car and walk just about everywhere.

And don't worry about losing your way, which just doesn't happen in Lexington. Just stop, pause for a moment and someone is sure to ask, "Can I help you?" It's Lexington hospitality at its best. ■