

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 fifth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

ASHLAND

by Audrey Hingley, Contributing Writer

Ashland native **Sarah Wright**, 85, who "lives in the house I was born in," sums up her hometown simply: "It's a real nice town. It has a train running through the middle of town. It's a town of beautiful old houses. It's a friendly town."

Located in historic Hanover County, Ashland is a 15-minute drive north from

Richmond. Ashland's tree-lined streets and rumbling trains provide a small-town oasis in the midst of Hanover's fast-growing rural-to-suburban landscape. One of the larger towns in land area in Virginia, Ashland has grown to its present 7.02-

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 6,850

LAND AREA: 7.02 Miles

ESTABLISHED: 1855; incorporated in 1858.

FUN FACT: Originally known as "Slash Cottage," Ashland had its beginnings as a rural resort town.

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square-mile dimensions via several annexations. The town's 6,850 residents proudly call their town "The Center of the Universe," a motto coined by former mayor Richard S. Gillis.

Captain John Smith's 1607 map of Virginia gives evidence that he explored the area, then populated by the Chickahominy Indians. In 1836, the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad (RF&P) laid a single track from Richmond north through land that would later become Ashland. By the early 1850s, mineral springs were discovered near the present-day campus of Randolph-Macon

Built in 1992, Ashland's Henry Clay Inn is an exact replica of the original 1906 Georgian Revival-style building that was destroyed by fire in 1946.



Ashland is a regular Amtrak stop and a popular gathering spot for train-watching enthusiasts. (Inset) Ashland Town Manager Charles Hartgrove notes that "tourism is very big here."



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Washington & Franklin Hall, on the Randolph-Macon College campus, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

College, and the area developed into a popular resort. In 1855 the village's name, Slash Cottage, was changed to Ashland, selected to honor Hanover native son Henry Clay, who died at his Kentucky home, "Ashland," in 1852. The town was incorporated in 1858.

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(Above) Cross Brothers Grocery was established in 1912 and displays old photographs and antique grocery memorabilia. (Right) The Ashland/Hanover Visitor Center is located on Center Street, in a 1923 RF&P Railroad train station.

Along with the railroad, the relocation of Randolph-Macon College from Boynton, near the Virginia-North Carolina border, to Ashland in 1868 helped fuel the town's post-Civil War economy. Today the private, co-ed liberal arts college is home to 1,118 students, who occupy a 116-acre campus complete with playing fields, courtyards, and three buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Ashland/Hanover Visitor Center is located in a 1923 RF&P train station. Railroad tracks literally run through the center of town, cutting through the town's main street. Visitor Center manager **Donna Baxter** says the town attracts a variety of visitors.

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— Hail, and Farewell, to the Chief —

It's impossible to write about Ashland without honoring J. Malcolm "Jay" Pace III, long-time editor and publisher of the weekly Hanover *Herald-Progress* newspaper, who died suddenly April 12, 2004, at age 58.

A Randolph-Macon College graduate, Jay had been with the *Herald-Progress* since 1973 and became its publisher in 1981 when he purchased the newspaper and printing company. The 123-year-old newspaper employs 25 people, including Jay's wife, Patricia, business manager; brother Steve, vice-president and general manager; and Steve's wife Naomi, administrative assistant.

Steve Pace, while still mourning his brother, recalls, "Jay gave every ounce of energy he had to what he did. He just got wrapped up in life. As a child, he started his own newspaper that he published on a manual typewriter with carbon-paper copies. He loved this community, and community journalism. He

worked tirelessly and died doing what he loved."

Steve Pace says, "Jay died on a Monday morning and I haven't stopped since. I came back from the hospital and told the staff Jay would want us to get the paper out. I told them, 'Make the chief proud.' He had a passion for this county, for this business. Even if you disagreed with him, he would listen, and was absolutely fair."

Steve, who lives in Ashland and calls it "a wonderful, pleasant place," says growth is the biggest issue facing the town. He says the town must work with

Hanover County so that whatever is developed, town character can continue.

As for the *Herald-Progress*, "We have an editorial board now, instead of an editor. We'll hire another reporter, a few more Indians before a chief ... we will continue to publish the paper."

Editor's Note: The late Jay Pace was preparing to write this issue's "Down Home in Ashland" feature at the time of his death.



Jay Pace 1945-2004



"We get all types of people here ... people connected to the college, travelers from I-95, train and history buffs, business people, and day trippers," she explains. "Ashland is also a [centralized] meeting place for people traveling the north-south corridor."

Baxter notes that Amtrak passenger trains still stop in Ashland, prompting a cadre of people from the town and the surrounding area called "train watchers." These unofficial volunteers, many of them retired, help people get off and on trains and gather in groups to talk.

Eclectic Architecture

Adjacent to the Visitor Center is the magnificent Henry Clay Inn, the town's only bed and breakfast. Built in 1992, the exterior of the inn is an exact replica of the original 1906 Georgian Revival-style building, destroyed by fire in 1946. Inside, the inn houses a restaurant and gift/art shop. Ashland residences date from the 1850s and feature Queen Anne, Greek Revival, Italianate, and classic revival-style architecture.

From May to November, visitors can stop by the Ashland Farmer's Market on Saturday mornings for fresh vegetables, fruits, herbs, honey and flowers. There are town parades on the 4th of July and at Christmas. Eclectic shops, restaurants, and friendly shopkeepers abound. Cross Brothers Grocery Store, established in 1912 and long known for personal service, displays old photographs and antique grocery memorabilia. Ashland's Red Caboose is a literal caboose — the caboose was built in 1926 for the C & O Railroad. Housing Virginia-made gifts and train memorabilia, the restored caboose was moved to its

IF YOU GO ...

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Contact Info:

- Ashland-Hanover Visitor Center
112 N. Railroad Avenue
(800) 897-1479 or (804) 752-6766
www.ashlandhanoverva.com
- Randolph-Macon College (804) 752-7200
www.rmc.edu
- Ashland Coffee & Tea (804) 798-1702
www.ashlandcoffeeandtea.com
- Town of Ashland (804) 798-9219
www.townashland.va.us
- Ashland's Red Caboose (804) 798-2233
www.shopva.com keyword: caboose



Kay Landry is co-owner of Ashland Coffee & Tea, a popular local gathering spot.

present location. Homemades by Suzanne features homemade sandwiches, salads, and desserts, its collection of wooden booths and farm-style tables providing an ideal spot to watch the trains rumbling through town. Train Town Toy & Hobby offers all scales of trains for model train enthusiasts, train memorabilia, and toy trains. Owners **Jim** and **Nancy Donlon** moved from New England in 2002, and opened their store in August 2003.

“Ashland is very receptive to supporting local businesses. The town atmosphere is good, and my location next door to the town library helps me a lot,” Jim Donlon explains.

A Neighborly Community

Ashland Coffee & Tea, a town gathering spot owned by **Mary** and **Jim Leffler** and **Kay Landry**, features comfortable mismatched sofas and chairs, Arabica coffee, rare teas, sandwiches, and desserts. At night the shop provides a stage for a diverse mix of live music by some of the area’s best artists and occasional national acts. Landry, who moved to Ashland from Richmond in 1986 for its small-town atmosphere, loves the trains and the town’s big trees.

“People here are very neighborly. When Hurricane Isabel hit last year, the entire town turned out to help each other,” Landry says. “I’ve seen so much change since I’ve been here, with areas once cornfields now having housing developments on them. But people here just embrace them as new neighbors.”

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Ashland Coffee & Tea served as a focal point for community residents who banded together to protest, unsuccessfully, the construction of a Wal-Mart within town limits, prompting a PBS TV special about resident efforts. The Wal-Mart controversy, stemming from concerns that the retail giant would hurt town businesses, also divided the town. Town Manager **Charles Hartgrove** says it's too early to tell what effect Wal-Mart has had since the store opened in June 2003.

"It's still a fresh wound for a lot of people," Hartgrove admits. He says Ashland's biggest challenge is maintaining the town's sense of place while also looking at the benefits of future growth.

"Most of our revenues come from meals and lodging taxes. Tourism is very big here. The fact that we are just off I-95 and one exit away from Paramount Kings Dominion also helps," Hartgrove says.

Hartgrove says Ashland needs to promote, as well as diversify, town businesses. A tax base is needed, but maintaining the town's sense of place is crucial, too. There are no big town employers, although several industrial parks are within town limits. People work within town limits, but also commute to jobs in Richmond or

Fredericksburg. Long-time resident **John Newell**, who coordinates treatment programs for paroled juveniles for the state's juvenile justice department, notes that Ashland is one of the fastest-growing Amtrak stops in Virginia: "People can come from New York, from Maryland, and get off right in Ashland."

Newell believes maintaining a vibrant downtown and "keeping everyone connected" is Ashland's biggest challenge. Despite encroaching development, Ashland can keep its town character through sticking to its comprehensive plan and zoning, he adds.

Walk-Around Town

"We have people from all walks of life here – carpenters, college professors, many writers and artists. It's a very diverse population. You can walk everywhere, you don't have to get in your car and drive to the grocery store," Newell says. "Diversity is the most positive attribute of the town."

Cathy Bach, manager of the Ashland branch of Pamunkey Regional Library, originally came to Ashland from Charlottesville to attend Randolph-Macon College and found a home in Ashland.

"When my children were little, it was very easy to become involved in the community and know different aspects of town life. The phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child' really does operate here," she says. "The schools are wonderful, and the Hanover Arts and Activities Center is a great asset to the community."

Housed in an 1859

church building, a group of citizens led by the Ashland Junior Woman's Club bought the building in 1967 for the Center. Today the Ashland Stage Company performs professional theatre, and it's also home to the Hanover Concert Band, Ashland Girl Scouts, and other community groups.

"I'll tell you a story," Sarah Wright concludes. "I was late getting to Cross Brothers Grocery one day, and they were so glad to see me! This is a typical small town, and I want to keep it the way it is. I haven't found a place any better to live than Ashland." ■

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Cathy Bach