

Again in the year 2006, 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 FREDERICKSBURG

by Lee Woolf, Contributing Writer

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 21,100 as of 2004

LAND AREA: 10.5 square miles

FOUNDED: 1728

ELEVATION: 1,075 feet

FUN FACT: The Fredericksburg Agricultural Fair is billed as the "Oldest Fair in America." Held in late July, it will have its 268th anniversary in 2006.

History is to Fredericksburg what autumn leaves are to the Blue Ridge Parkway or the ocean is to Virginia Beach.

It's not the only reason to visit, but it defines the region's character and enhances all the other aspects of a visitor's experience.

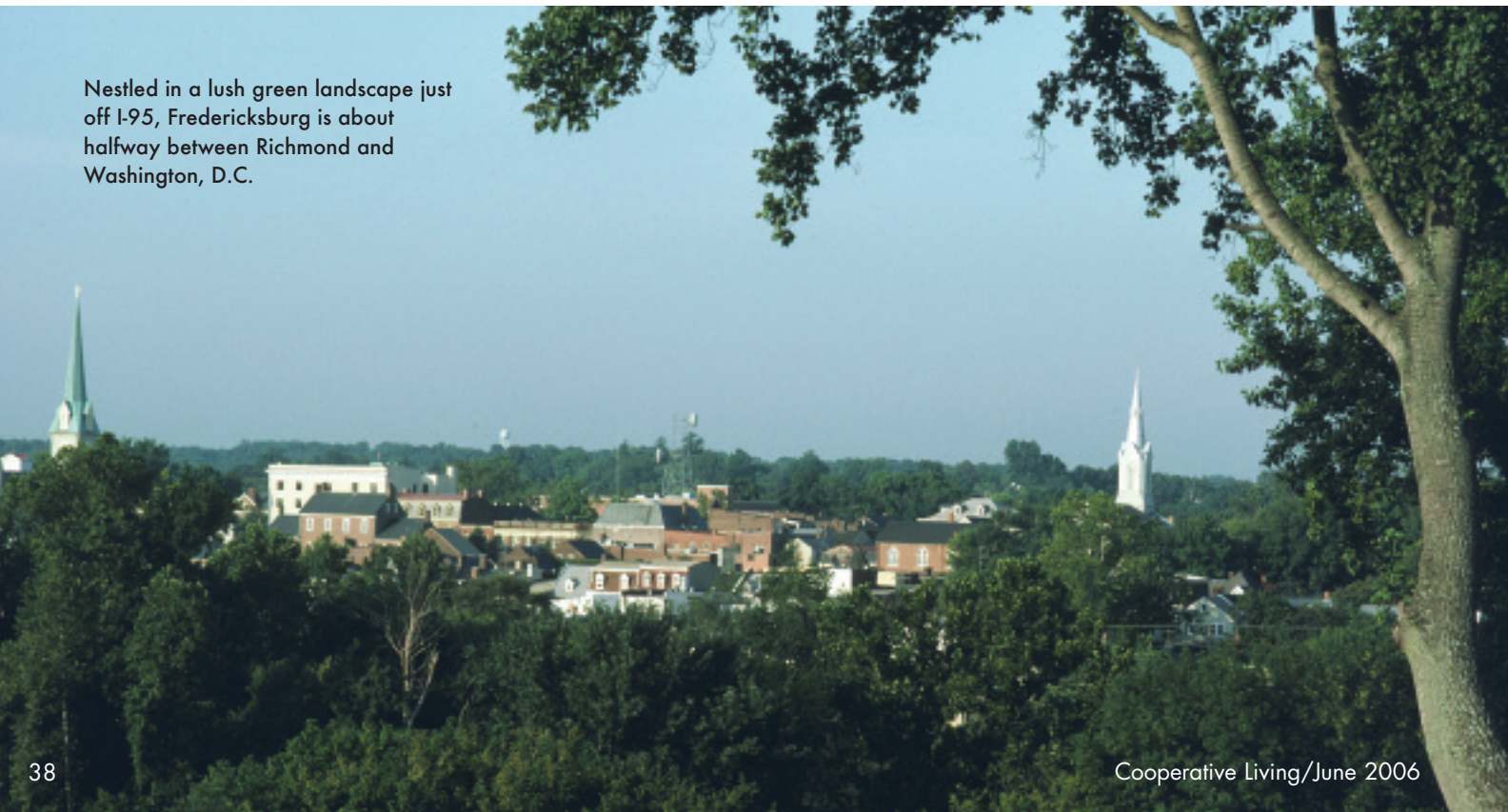
If George Washington or James Monroe

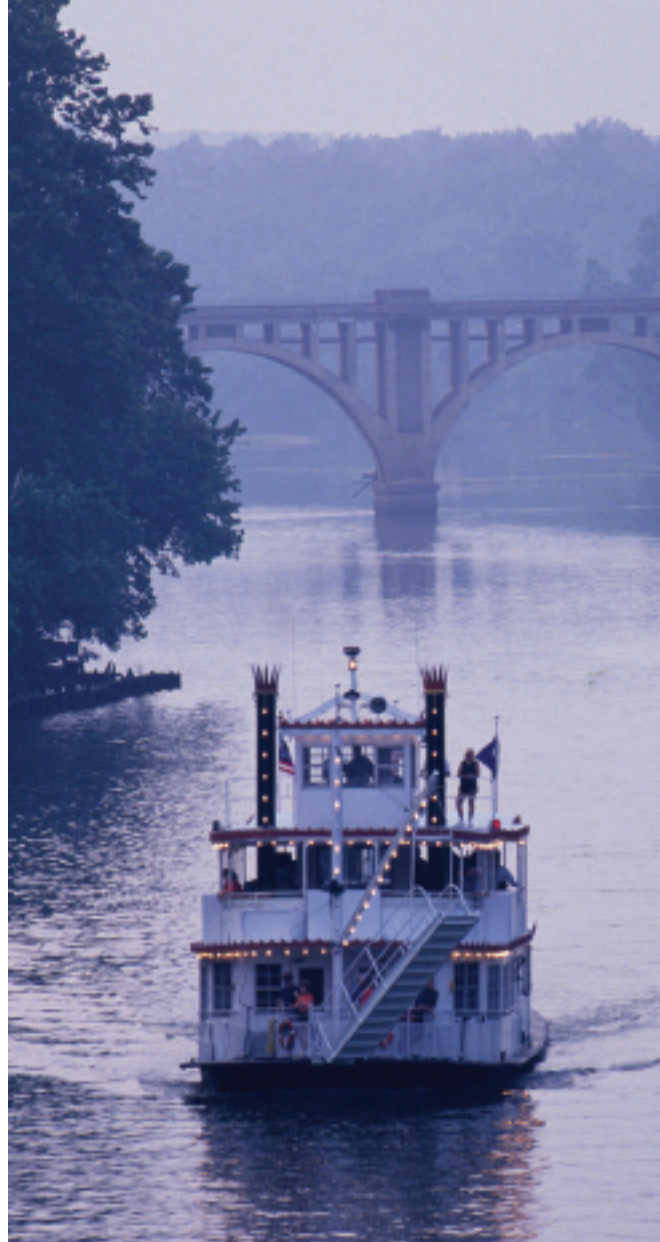
were to return to Fredericksburg today, many of the buildings in a 40-block area of the city that is designated as a National Register Historic District would look familiar. Some of those buildings also have scars from an 1862 Civil War battle that included a devastating artillery barrage and deadly house-to-house fighting. Visitors can stand

where Robert E. Lee watched from the heights south of town as his Confederate troops delivered one of the most lopsided victories of the war.

Some local residents embrace their town as "America's Most Historic City." But other places stake claim to that title, as well. So, when a regional tourism group selected

Nestled in a lush green landscape just off I-95, Fredericksburg is about halfway between Richmond and Washington, D.C.





Clockwise from top: While visiting “timeless” Fredericksburg, you can learn about Colonial medical practices at the Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop, board a 100-foot paddle boat for a cruise on the Rappahannock River, or take a trolley tour highlighting the city’s rich history.

a brand name in 2005, they settled on something simple and to the point: “Fredericksburg Timeless.” The idea was to link the region’s rich history with opportunities for shopping, dining, entertainment and recreation. Think old-town charm sprinkled with modern-day conveniences.

“We were seeking a brand that would identify the unique selling points that the city has to offer and not focus on just one thing,” says **David Holder**, the city’s director of tourism and economic development. “We feel like we have a perfect timeless mix of historic sites and modern amenities.

“This is a place you can visit and be yourself – or be a kid again, if you like – and have fun any way you choose. I think people can come here and escape the stress of life today and lose track of time. And that’s important with so many busy lifestyles.”

So far, the brand name seems to be working. Statistics indicate that about 262,000 tourists visited Fredericksburg’s attractions in 2005, while revenue from meals and lodging taxes rose 8 percent over the previous year.

LOCATION, LOCATION ...

Fredericksburg sits roughly halfway between Washington, D.C., and Richmond – about 50 miles from each via Interstate 95 or U.S. 1. The city’s population is about 21,000 and it is the hub of a fast-growing region that includes neighboring Spotsylvania, Stafford, Caroline and King George counties.

Any discussion of the town probably should begin with the Rappahannock River, which represents the city’s northern border as it meanders from the Blue Ridge mountains toward the Chesapeake Bay. Capt. John Smith explored the Rappa-

hannock to present-day Fredericksburg in 1608, but Native Americans were living in the region as early as 7,000 B.C. Fishing for shad and herring is a popular spring ritual that links past and present.

Fredericksburg was established in 1728 and was named for Crown Prince Frederick, the son of George II of England. Local historian **Paula Felder** writes that initially, the town “was a tiny, raw, dusty river port with the same characteristics that we associate with the later frontier towns of the West.”

George Washington came to live at a family property across the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg in 1738 when he was six years old. The site is called Ferry Farm – where legend says young George was able to throw a coin across the river and could not bring himself to tell a lie about cutting down a cherry tree. Washington’s family has a strong connection to Fredericksburg and he was a frequent visitor as an adult. His mother Mary, sister Betty and brother



Charles all lived in the city, and their former homes are among the city's most popular attractions today.

Another important historic site is the James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library. Monroe came to Fredericksburg at age 28 in 1787 and stayed for three years. He practiced law in Fredericksburg and served on city council before moving to Albemarle County on his way to national prominence.

The city continued to prosper into the 1800s, and in 1837, the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad reached as far north as Fredericksburg. According to historian Felder, this was the beginning of the north-south transportation corridor that would dominate the town's future.

CITY UNDER THE GUNS

"Of all the Southern towns made famous by blood, none would be more famous than

Fredericksburg," wrote **John Hennessy** in an article last year for *Blue & Gray* magazine. Hennessy is the chief historian for the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

"No community in America suffered longer or more variously at the hands of civil war; its wartime ordeal started as inconvenience and affront, but ended amidst horror, poverty and death ... More than a century later, the Civil War remains Fredericksburg's central event — a defining epoch whose imprint remains vivid and visible."

The city became a killing ground in December 1862, when Union Gen. Ambrose Burnside tried to dislodge Lee's Army of Northern Virginia from the heights south of town. First, he had to eliminate Confederate sharpshooters who were preventing his men from constructing pontoon bridges across the Rappahannock. To do that, he directed an artillery barrage that laid waste to the town. Frustrated by tenacious street fighting once they did cross the river, the Federals went on a destructive looting spree as most of the remaining civilians tried to escape through Confederate lines.

On Dec. 13, Burnside struck Lee at two points. But Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's men held firm on the Confederate right flank and the Rebels of Gen. James Longstreet slaughtered the Federals during their repeated attempts to capture Marye's Heights. When silence finally fell over the



Beyond its historical appeal, Fredericksburg offers a choice selection of shopping and dining venues. Old Town is lined with a mix of antique stores, galleries, specialty shops and restaurants, while Central Park, just off I-95, houses over 160 retailers and around 50 restaurants.

Cannon fire still rings in the historical hamlet, where the Civil War's imprint remains vivid.

battlefield, the Federals had suffered more than 12,000 casualties, compared to about 5,000 for the Confederates.

Three more major Civil War battles – Chancellorsville, Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House – were fought within 20 miles of Fredericksburg during 1863 and 1864. Combined, these engagements involved more than 750,000 men and produced 100,000 casualties. The economic impact of the Civil War on the civilian population can't be overstated. It was the 1940s before census figures in the region reached pre-war levels.

In a column marking the anniversary of Lee's birthday last January, local newspaper editor **Ed Jones** wrote, "With historic preservation and Civil War tourism very much in the headlines, this area can claim a wonderfully mixed identity: a growing outpost of Washington where the War Between the States is still a breaking news story."

A FLOURISHING COMMUNITY

Despite its historical legacy, Fredericksburg today is anything but a stale and sleepy town.

The Old Town section offers an inviting mix of antique stores, art galleries, specialty shops and restaurants. A new parking garage nearby is a nice convenience, and plans for a modern downtown hotel are on the drawing board.

The city's chief commercial engine these days is Central Park, which is located just off I-95. It offers more than 160 retailers, including many national chain stores and franchises, about 50 restaurants and a variety of family entertainment options. Central Park is part of the larger Celebrate Virginia project. When complete, it will span 2,400 acres on both sides of the river and will include hotels, restaurants, golf courses, a corporate campus and the National Slavery Museum, scheduled to open in 2007. The spacious new Fredericksburg Expo & Conference Center already is attracting a variety of events.

Also helping the city remain young at heart is the University of Mary Washington, a liberal arts school of about 4,000 students that will celebrate its centennial in 2008.

"Fredericksburg is not a place you would call a 'college town,' but the influence of the University of Mary Washington is significant," says **Ron Singleton**, UMW's senior vice president for advancement and university relations.

From student volunteerism to elder-study programs, UMW has strong ties to the

Any exploration of Old Town should begin at the **Fredericksburg Visitor Center** at 706 Caroline St., where a 14-minute audiovisual program will provide an overview of the area's history. Visitors can stroll the brick sidewalks to nearby antique shops and restaurants, or journey through the historic district by trolley or horse-drawn carriage. Another option is a riverboat trip down the Rappahannock.

Kenmore Plantation and Gardens at 1201 Washington Ave. is one of the finest 18th-century houses in Virginia. Its ceilings display some of the most elaborate plasterwork to survive from the Colonial era. George Washington's only sister, Betty, lived here with her husband, Fielding Lewis.

America's fifth president, James Monroe, began his career practicing law in Fredericksburg. Among the items on display at the **James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library** is the desk he used in writing the speech that outlined the Monroe Doctrine.

The **Fredericksburg Area Museum** at 907 Princess Anne Street is another must-see. In addition to local history from the Colonial and Civil War eras, one exhibit running through Labor Day focuses on Virginia dinosaurs.

Other interesting stops in Old Town include the **Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop**, where visitors get a living-history interpretation of Colonial medical practices; the **Mary Washington House**, where George's mother lived the last 17 years of her life, and the **Rising Sun Tavern**, which was built by George's brother, Charles Washington, as a home in 1760 and later became a popular tavern when Fredericksburg was a bustling port city.

If you are inspired by architecture, Fredericksburg is blessed with several impressive church buildings. A walk along **Princess Anne St.** will take you past **Fredericksburg Baptist Church**, completed in 1855 in the Gothic Revival style;

St. George's Episcopal Church, finished in 1849 in the Romanesque style; and the **Presbyterian Church**, erected in 1833 in the Greek Revival style. All three served as hospitals during the Civil War. In addition, **Aquia Church** in Stafford County, built between 1751 and 1757, is considered one of the finest examples of Colonial architecture in Virginia.

The **Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park** is comprised of about 9,000 acres from four major Civil War battlefields. Visitor centers at both Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville offer films and exhibits. Don't miss the statue of Sgt. Richard Kirkland at Fredericksburg.

The park headquarters is just across the Rappahannock River at **Chatham**, a Georgian-style mansion that served as a Union headquarters and hospital during the Civil War. Other nearby stops in Stafford County include **Ferry Farm**, the site of George Washington's boyhood home, and **Belmont**, the home and studio of artist Gari Melchers.

And finally, don't miss two Fredericksburg landmarks: **Goolrick's Modern Pharmacy** at 901 Caroline St., the oldest continuously operating soda fountain in America, and **Carl's** at 2200 Princess Anne St., which is famous for its soft frozen custard.

Contact info: Fredericksburg Visitor Center (1-800-678-4748); Fredericksburg Area Tourism (1-800-654-4118 or www.visitfred.com); Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park (540-373-6122 or www.nps.gov/frsp). ■

From top: 1) The Rising Sun Tavern is fun for all ages – tavern wenches entertain in lively 18th-century style. 2) Kids get into the act at Ferry Farm. 3) Fredericksburg is home to an extensive arts community, with classes readily available.



Fredericksburg community. The 176-acre campus, complete with a community jogging trail, has been ranked by college guidebooks as one of the nation's most beautiful. Singleton notes that more than 300 lectures, concerts and special events are held on the

UMW campus each year, nearly all of which are open to the community.

The university's art, drama and musical offerings contribute to Fredericksburg's thriving cultural scene.

"One thing that has surprised me during

the two years I've been here is both the quality and quantity of local artists," says Holder, the city tourism director. "Both the visual and performing arts are very good and growing. This is something we need to capitalize on. I think it adds another element to the appeal of the city for both visitors and other artists."

If there is such a thing as the "voice of Fredericksburg," a good case could be made for **Brian Strobel**, who has been the morning DJ on popular radio station WFLS-FM for almost three decades.

"I think one of the reasons I have stayed in Fredericksburg these many years is that I grew up in a small town [Hornell, N.Y.] and I wanted to continue to live in that kind of atmosphere," says Strobel. "Even though the Fredericksburg area has grown so much, the city has retained its small-town charm. I really like the fact that I see so many people I know every day in town and get a chance to chat and feel like a part of a community. I don't feel swallowed up like I would in a big city. And this is a great place to raise a family." ■