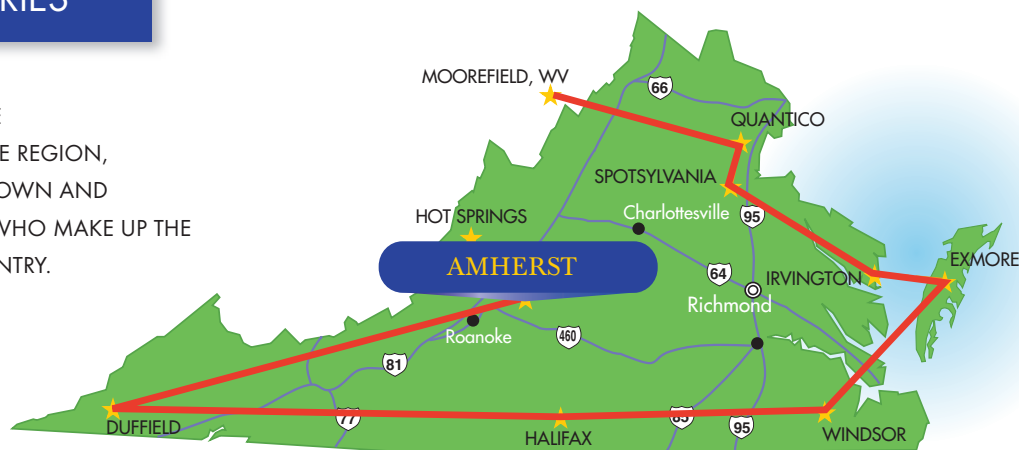


## DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2007, 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 NINTH STOP, WE'LL BE ...



## DOWN HOME IN

# AMHERST

BY JENNIFER MCMANAMAY, CONTRIBUTING WRITER • PHOTOS COURTESY OF JENNIFER MCMANAMAY

HOME TO HIGHLY ESTEEMED  
SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE AND VIRGINIA'S  
OLDEST MAIN STREET ROUNDABOUT

**A**mong the town of Amherst's myriad blessings are its people, its extraordinary natural surroundings and its proximity to other attractive places.

It is the Amherst County seat, but that wasn't the case when the county was established in 1781. Then, the courthouse was about 20 miles north, in what became Nelson County when the two split in 1807. A stage stop between Charlottesville and Lynchburg called The Oaks or Seven Oaks was chosen to be the new government center and was renamed Amherst Courthouse.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, courthouses were commercial hubs, so the town also has enjoyed a steady economy. In time, a mix of manufacturing companies and nearby Sweet Briar College added to its fortunes.

Maybe – in light of the stories **I. Paul Wailes III** heard as a child – providence smiled on the village of Amherst Courthouse when it cleaned up its act in 1910. His mother told him how the town incorporated that year in part so it could establish a police force.

The trouble arose from a glut of drinking establishments, says Wailes, 78. It was especially rough on court days when crowds came in from the country to shop and take care of legal affairs.

"It was so horrible at the turn of the century that the wives of all the attorneys accompanied their husbands to court for fear of what might happen," notes Wailes, whose grandfather was a lawyer. "And they went armed."

It's even possible the state's prohibition movement gained steam in Amherst in 1902, after a local judge, C.F. Campbell, horsewhipped the Rev. C.H. Crawford.



SUE PIEPHO PHOTO

Amherst's historic traffic circle was originally built in 1936 and was redesigned as a roundabout around 1940. VDOT's Walter Pribble says it is Virginia's oldest roundabout and one of only a few on the primary road system. Summer annuals are planted in the circle by the Village Garden Club.

## AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 2,251

LAND AREA: 4.92 square miles

FOUNDED: 1807; incorporated 1910

ELEVATION: 761 feet

FACTOID: In 1902, local circuit judge C.F. Campbell publicly horsewhipped the Rev. C.H. Crawford, superintendent of the Virginia Anti-Saloon League. Crawford had openly criticized Campbell's handling of a trial in which a druggist was acquitted of selling liquor illegally. When the judge failed to convict Crawford of contempt, he settled for beating him and was impeached for the assault.



JENNIFER MCNAMAY PHOTO



AARON MAHLER PHOTO

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: After the original courthouse was torn down in 1872, this section of the present courthouse was built from "homemade brick of Amherst County clay." • The Florence Elston Inn & Conference Center at Sweet Briar College offers lodging and catering, plus access to the 3,250-acre campus. • Visitors are welcome on Sweet Briar's campus to hike the trails, browse the book shop or dine at Le Bistro or Prothro Hall. Three art galleries, the SBC museum, and a full lineup of visual and performing arts, lectures and other events also are open to the public during the academic year. • The Pedlar River is one of several trout fisheries in the Amherst area.



JENNIFER MCNAMAY PHOTO



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWEET BRIAR

According to authors C. C. Pearson and J. Edwin Hendricks in their book, *Liquor and Anti-Liquor in Virginia, 1619-1919*, Crawford was the superintendent of the Virginia Anti-Saloon League. He wrote an article in the League's newspaper castigating the judge's handling of a trial in which a druggist was accused of selling illegal quantities of liquor. Campbell had given jury instructions that would ensure a finding of innocence.

In response to the public criticism, the judge tried to convict Crawford of contempt. Failing, he settled for beating the reverend and was impeached for his trouble. Crawford used the affair to show the corruption of the "wets" in his own pursuit of a dry state.

Today a drink may be had at a few places, including the Briar Patch restaurant, serving the community since 1948, and Travelers Fine Food & Drink on the corner of Second

and Main. By all accounts, though, little disturbs the peace in Amherst.

Downtown doesn't bustle as it did when half a dozen family grocers, Wailes clothing store and the five-and-dime operated a short distance from each other. But you can still enjoy a pleasant lunch and shopping without getting back in your car.

"Within walking distance there are four antique stores," says **Sharon Turner**, man-



FROM TOP (L-R): Gilbert and Patricia Rose opened What a Blessing Bakery in Ambriar Plaza nine years ago. The restaurant serves its homemade breads, pastries and desserts for breakfast and lunch. • Paul Wailes III, 78, is acknowledged as Amherst's unofficial historian. • Gloria Higginbotham, a life-long Amherst resident, used to teach in local public schools. She has worked at Sweet Briar College for more than 30 years. • The Amherst County High School Lancers won the Group AA, Division 4 championship in 2006. It was the second state championship in school history. • W.A. Ogden runs Burch & Ogden appliance and furniture store. His father opened the store with Yale Burch in downtown Amherst not long after his return from World War II. • Bill Wydner, 68, manages Amherst Milling Co. for his father, who purchased the business in 1940. Records of the mill date back to at least 1813. A wheel made by the Fitz Water Wheel Co. still powers some of its operations.



JENNIFER MCNAMAY PHOTOS



JENNIFER MCNAMAY PHOTO



TERRY TODD PHOTO



JENNIFER MCNAMAY PHOTOS



ager of Hill House Interiors. "Downtown is very inviting. It has a down-home feel."

Flowers help make it inviting. The Village Garden Club members put them everywhere, tucking perennials on a busy corner and maintaining mixed gardens and planters around town.

Led by club president **Carol Dziak** and her sister **Pat DeLeon**, they also installed a

fountain in the historic traffic circle where U.S. 60 and U.S. 29 Business intersect. They landscaped around the fountain with seasonally rotated annual plants.

Technically, "the 'circle' today operates like a true modern roundabout," says **Walter Pribble** of the Virginia Department of Transportation. Around 1940, the safer roundabout design replaced the original

1936 circle, he says. It is the oldest roundabout in the state.

The people of Amherst have always been proud of the circle and they're even more so now. Dziak's display of red, white and blue summer annuals drew raves, especially for the tall, showy red *Amaranthus*. When she's watering and weeding, drivers honk and yell, "It's looking beautiful, ladies," she says.



Old family businesses on Main Street – thriving near newer antique and gift shops, restaurants, realtors and insurance agents – account for much of the down-home quality.

The Turner family has operated Hill Hardware, established around 1914, since the 1930s. They opened Hill House, a gift and furniture store, in 1987. **W.A. Ogden** runs Burch and Ogden, the appliance and furniture store his father and business partner Yale Burch started after World War II.

Ogden likes the quiet. He chuckled when thinking of the days before the U.S. 29 bypass was completed in the early 1970s. “I wonder how we made it in town with all that traffic coming through here,” he says, joking that it could be hazardous to step off the curb.

Strip development did not spring up on the bypass near Amherst, which is about 15 miles north of Lynchburg, but it was rampant in Madison Heights to the south. A new bypass from the entrance of Sweet Briar College to U.S. 460 near the Lynchburg airport opened in 2005.

Town leaders believe what the old bypass took away, the new one can give back.

“The current theory is that with the bypass bringing traffic and because it is the [government] center, we ought to roll with that,” says town manager **Jack Hobbs**.

The town has implemented several initiatives, including funding some of the garden club’s beautification efforts. It invested in municipal wireless Internet access and com-



JENNIFER MCNAMAY PHOTO

ABOVE: Jack Hobbs has served Amherst as town manager since 1992. • RIGHT: Amherst LIVE! events feature live music, children’s activities, arts and crafts, and beer and wine sales. Turnout has been good for the evening street festivals, which are held during late spring and summer.

## IF YOU GO...

Several major annual events in October make it Amherst’s unofficial festival month. The **Clifford Ruritan Club Sorghum Festival**, held the second weekend of the month, features sorghum molasses making, arts, crafts, food, and bluegrass and country music. Call (434) 263-5336 for information.

The 35-year-old **Amherst County Apple Harvest Festival** is held the third weekend at Amherst County High School. Call (434) 845-5606 or (434) 847-7435 for information.

The **Virginia Garlic Festival**, held the second Saturday and Sunday at Rebec Vineyards in Amherst, is one of the state’s oldest wine and food festivals. Go to [rebecwinery.com](http://rebecwinery.com) or call (434) 946-5168 for details.

Other events include the **Monacan Indian Nation Powwow** in May, the **Amherst County Museum and Historical Society’s** annual spring **Historic House Tour** in April and **Amherst LIVE!** evening street festivals held during spring and summer. For event information, visit [amherstvachamber.com](http://amherstvachamber.com), or call (434) 946-0990.

### SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE

During the academic year Sweet Briar welcomes visitors to its dining facilities, art exhibitions, lectures, movies, historic tours, and musical, dance and theater performances. Many events are free. Visit [sbc.edu/calendar](http://sbc.edu/calendar) for event information. Contact the Sweet Briar Museum at (434) 381-6246 for information on historical sites. The 3,250-acre campus offers fishing lakes, nature sanctuaries and miles of hiking and biking trails.

### LODGING

**Amherst Inn**  
116 Richmond Hwy., Amherst  
(434) 946-7641

**Dulwich Manor Bed and Breakfast**  
550 Richmond Hwy, Amherst  
(434) 946-7207; [dulwich-manor.com](http://dulwich-manor.com)

**Florence Elston Inn and Conference Center at Sweet Briar College**

(434) 381-6207 or (866) 388-6207

[www.elstoninn.com](http://www.elstoninn.com)

### DINING

**Briar Patch**  
(434) 946-2249

**Le Bistro at Sweet Briar College\***  
(434) 381-6292

**Prothro Dining Hall at Sweet Briar College\***  
(434) 381-6145

**Travelers**  
(434) 946-9792

**What a Blessing Bakery**  
(434) 946-0330

\*May be closed when the College is not in session.

### MUSEUMS

**Amherst County Museum and Historical Society**  
(434) 946-9068; [achmuseum@aol.com](mailto:achmuseum@aol.com)  
[members.aol.com/achmuseum](http://members.aol.com/achmuseum)

**Monacan Indian Museum**  
(434) 946-5391  
[monacannation.com](http://monacannation.com)

### AMHERST COUNTY OUTDOORS

Opportunities for hikers, anglers and anyone who enjoys the outdoors abound. Golfing, biking, hang-gliding and water sports also are available.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Visitors Center**  
154 S. Main St.  
(434) 946-9068

**Town of Amherst**  
186 S. Main St.  
(434) 946-7885, [amherstva.gov](http://amherstva.gov)

For more information on recreation, as well as where to shop, dine and stay in Amherst County, visit [amherstworks.net](http://amherstworks.net) or call (434)-946-9314. ■



PHOTO COURTESY OF BLAIR MARKETING

missioned a study to recommend revitalization options.

For the past two summers, merchants, residents, civic groups and local government sponsored several Amherst LIVE! events featuring live music, children's activities, arts and crafts, and beer and wine sales. Turnout has been good for the evening street festivals.

Wailes, who embraced the first bypass, also believes the new one represents progress. "I don't think progress has a negative impact on anything," he says.

He is part owner of Ambriar Plaza, which is adjacent to U.S. 29 and the first thing drivers see coming from the bypass. He built it in 1973 with partners Thomas Howell and Rex Pixley. He remains partners with his associates' widows, **Robbie Howell** and **Kathryn Pixley**, and together they are remodeling the shopping center.

"We want it to look nice and I want to do it before I go," Wailes says.

The new road also fuels Hobbs' vision of Amherst as a base camp for tourism. "You could day trip to the Appomattox surrender grounds, Poplar Grove [Golf Club], Virginia Military Institute, Charlottesville and Monticello, and the D-Day Memorial in Bedford," he says, naming a few of the attrac-

tions in a 360-degree radius. "Nothing's more than an hour away."

For those who do visit, **Charles Hamble**, a volunteer at the Amherst County Historical Society, also recommends seeing the nearby Monacan Indian Museum and, of course, the Blue Ridge Parkway. "It's always there, no matter what the season. It's always beautiful and always changing," he says.

Traveling west, U.S. 60 climbs the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains for 22 miles, intersecting the parkway at the county line. Along the way is access to the Appalachian Trail, including the Mount Pleasant Scenic Area where hiking trails reach elevations up to 4,000 feet, and the Pedlar River.

The Pedlar, "if you don't want to do anything at all," says **Bill Wydner**, "is a good place to put your feet."

Wydner, 68, is worth visiting, too. He manages the Amherst Milling Co., a grist mill on Rutledge Creek that still uses a water wheel. His father bought the mill and feed store in 1940, when it was already more than 100 years old.

All day long customers crowd into the tiny air-conditioned office, forming a line outside if necessary. Inside, like strata mark-

ing the passage of time, ancient photographs, receipts, advertising placards – even a stock certificate from the defunct Amherst Power and Light Co. – plaster every inch of wall.

On the mill floor, machinery reaches up three stories. Wydner doesn't do tours, but he's an engaging host as he points out the elevators, gears and belts going every which way.

"My grandfather used to take his corn down there for him to grind," says **Gloria Higginbotham**, who was baptized in the creek near the mill in 1948. "That was kind of the hub for the farmers."

These days she stops in occasionally for the produce Wydner buys from local growers.

Despite Wydner's merry-eyed grouching that, "if it wasn't for pop-in and pop-out microwaves, we'd all starve to death," people still buy his rye and whole-wheat flour, corn meal and pancake mix. He also grinds assorted animal feeds, fine forms of which dust his navy blue work pants and shirt.

Wydner, and many of his patrons, embody something else Paul Wailes heard about Amherst when he was young: "Anybody who ever got this red mud of Amherst County on their feet will never shake it." ■