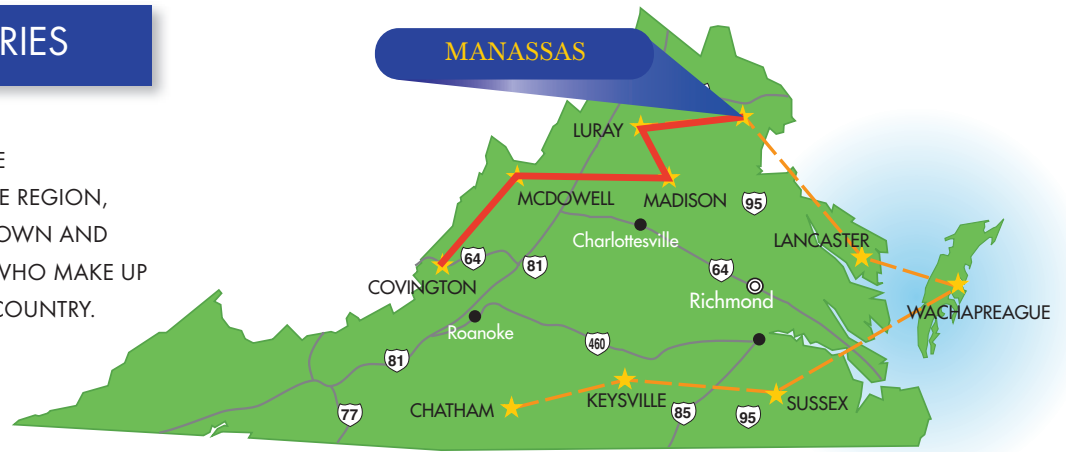


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2008, 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

MANASSAS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BENNIE SCARTON, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

AN OLD TOWN WITH A NEW ATTITUDE.



Old Town Manassas, winner of a Great American Main Street Award, is home to an enticing array of shops, museums, galleries and restaurants.

Manassas is a unique city that recalls its history fondly, while keeping an eye on the future. Located 30 miles southwest of Washington, D.C., and only a short drive from the countryside, the city balances a mixture of urban amenities and historic interest.

The 10-square-mile city provides residents and visitors with the best of these two worlds. The center of activities is located in the historic downtown area, commonly called Old Town.

Honored as a Virginia Main Street Community, Manassas is indeed a classic American community, steeped in history and tradition, welcoming visitors year-round from around the world.

The city's superb variety of shops, museums, galleries and restaurants — and its robust calendar of festivals and events — provide an endless source of interest and fun.

"Old Town Manassas, winner of the Great American Main Street Award, is always an unforgettable destination. For weekend romantics or families on holiday, for a fascinating tour through history or a leisure day trip, Old Town is one place in time. We residents and businessmen all work together, giving the community a lot of charm and ambiance," says **Joanne Wunderly**, president of the Old Town Business Association.

Visitors can begin their visit at the Manassas Train Depot, the signature icon of Old Town. Built in 1914, the renovated depot is now home to the Historic Manassas Visitor Center and the James and Marion Payne Railroad Heritage Gallery. The site is

also a busy stop for daily Amtrak and Virginia Railway Express commuter trains connecting Manassas with Washington, D.C., and beyond.

Nearby, the Manassas Museum offers an intimate glimpse at the rich history and culture of the Northern Virginia Piedmont region through a living-history program and permanent, as well as changing, exhibits.

"We are very rich in history with the Manassas Museum System overseeing eight diverse historic sites. Whether you want to explore 300 years of American history or purchase a remembrance of your visit, Manassas has it all with a wonderful historic district," says **John H. Verrill**, director of historic resources.

"Manassas is unique in that we have what so many areas lack, and that's a sense of community. The trend today is for builders to spend millions of dollars to create a Town Center, but Manassas is the 'real deal.' We actually are a working town with a first-class quality of life. Our city offers arts and entertainment such as the Loy E. Harris Pavilion, Cramer Center, and on the lawn of the Manassas Museum, and thousands of people seeking that sense of belonging come here to enjoy who we are. When people come here and see our historic district, the great restaurants and beautiful shops, they walk around and fall in love with our Old Town," says **Linda Robertson**, executive director of the award-winning Historic Manassas, Inc.

Prior to the 1850s, the Manassas area was no more than a collection of small

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 36,638

INCORPORATED: 1873. In 1892, Manassas became the county seat of Prince William County, replacing Brentsville. In 1975, Manassas became an independent city.

ELEVATION: 305 feet

LAND AREA: 10 square miles

FACTOID: In 1861, the First Battle of Manassas — also widely known as the First Battle of Bull Run — the first major land battle of the American Civil War, was fought near the city.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Lawrence D. Hughes, Manassas city manager, in front of City Hall. • Debbie Jones is president of the Prince William County/Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce. • The restored 1914 Manassas Railroad Depot, which houses the Historic Manassas Visitor Center and the James and Marion Payne Railroad Heritage Gallery. • Manassas Museum Inc. hosts a Civil War encampment each year on the lawn. • One of the stately mansions that adorn Grant Avenue in Manassas.

farms known as “Tudor Hall.” Through the efforts of a group of enterprising Culpeper businessmen, who saw the railroad as the best way to transport their produce to Alexandria and Washington, D.C., the Orange & Alexandria Rail Line was completed in 1851. A few years later, with the joining of this line with the Manassas Gap Railway, the hamlet began to grow, becoming known as Manassas Junction, then Manassas.

These very rail lines that brought new promise to the area would put Manassas at history’s crossroads during the Civil War. Manassas Junction was a strategic location for both Union and Confederate forces. Twice, armies met at this site to battle over the railroad linking Washington, D.C., with the South. Battles on July 21, 1861, and in August 1862 left the entire area in ruins.

Thousands of men lost their lives at Manassas, but the region’s notoriety as a cross-

roads for battle — and its unique position as a railroad depot just miles from the nation’s capital — brought it fame and prosperity in the late 19th century. Stores, homes, hotels and eateries opened and the economic boom in Manassas continued into the 20th century. The richness was not to last. In the 1970s, Manassas — like so many other historic main streets — encountered another invader, suburban sprawl. Attracted by new strip malls and office parks, businesses abandoned the Victorian downtown.

Forty percent of shops were vacated, and 33 empty buildings stood as quiet ghosts along the once-bustling streets. The sight of dilapidated and decaying buildings in the once-prosperous downtown was alarming to the remaining businessmen, particularly insurance broker Loy E. Harris, who led the charge to begin a revitalization of Old Town. Other business leaders followed his example and Old Town was trans-

formed into what it is today — a historic district providing an old-fashioned setting for restaurants, boutiques, antique shops, barbershops, coffee shop, candy and ice cream shop, museums, art galleries, craft shops, Manassas and Virginia souvenir shops and other businesses.

“Although located in the City of Manassas for more than 20 years, the Prince William County-Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce has been privileged to serve the businesses of not only the city, but Prince William County and the City of Manassas Park as well. When I leave my office and walk down the streets of Old Town, I never fail to run into someone I know. That’s why I think the city offers the best of both worlds: the friendliness and charm of a small, meticulously preserved, old-fashioned community set amidst the hustle and bustle of a prosperous and growing county,” says **Debbie Jones**, president of the chamber.



L-R: Joanne Wunderly, owner of The Things I Love and president of the Old Town Business Association. • John Verrill, director of historic resources for the city, oversees eight diverse historic sites. • Debi Sandlin, economic development manager, in front of a restored caboose in Old Town.

The leadership and vision of Historic Manassas, Inc., and its supporters has yielded enviable success.

“Our business leaders played a key role in shaping the business environment of Manassas as a center of commerce, culture and community life that is essential for business attraction and expansion. The city’s progressive planning approach to creating a unique lifestyle has been instrumental in positioning Manassas to compete on a regional and global level. Bold initiatives such as the restoration of the Old Hopkins Candy [facility] into the home for the Center for the Arts and the construction of the Loy E. Harris Pavilion have resulted in Manassas becoming a magnet in attracting visitors and businesses to our community,” says **Lawrence D. Hughes**, city manager.

Annual events in Old Town draw upwards of 200,000 people. These events include the Manassas Heritage Railway Festival in June, which is a family celebration of the rich railway history that Manassas has to offer; the Manassas Wine and Jazz Festival in June; Celebrate America, with the largest, choreographed fireworks extravaganzas in Northern Virginia on July 4; Manassas Fall Jubilee in October, in which more than 100 vendors offer handmade jewelry, woodcrafts, handmade candles and other unique arts and crafts; and Merry Old Town, the first weekend in December, during which the streets in Old Town become a page out of a classic Dickens novel.

The Merry Old Town weekend starts off with Santa Claus arriving by train at the Victorian railroad station to light the Christmas tree amidst carolers, ice skating and hayrides. Saturday features the Greater Manassas Christmas Parade, the

largest holiday parade in Northern Virginia, with more than 2,000 participants including floats, marching units, and high-flying balloons. The merchants of Old Town host their annual open house with refreshments, free horse-drawn carriage rides and shopping-spree giveaways.

Gallery walks and concerts on the lawn of the Manassas Museum, Cramer Center, Center for the Arts and in the Loy E. Harris Pavilion are part of the vast array of entertainment the city has to offer.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY

According to **Debi Sandlin**, the economic development manager for the city, “The renaissance Old Town has enjoyed over the past 15 years can be directly attributed to the public/private partnerships that have been created between the business community and the city leadership. Fifteen years ago, Manassas faced what other cities across the nation were facing — how to compete with the growth of regional shopping centers. To meet the challenge, the city’s leadership and the business community came together and formed a partnership that has resulted in a vibrant downtown that is attractive to visitors, business owners, investors and residents.”

Homeowners lucky enough to live in one of the Victorian- or Colonial-style houses in the heart of the city can walk to the thriving business sector or take in one of the many cultural opportunities.

“I can walk home at 11 p.m. and not worry about crime,” says **Jan Alten**, who owns the Opera House Gourmet, a gift and wine shop that offers wines from Virginia and 15 different regions of the world. “This is a wonderful place to live and run a business ... we have a real sense of community. Would you believe that Old Town

had more than 80 free concerts last year?” The nearby Nissan Pavilion features big-name pop and country stars in the summer.

For over a century, people have been coming to Manassas to shop. Today, the tradition continues with an outstanding variety of unique establishments. Manassas is a fascinating blend of old and new where antiquing is a serious pursuit. Offering a wealth of vintage furnishings, country crafts and works of art, the area’s charming shops have become a source for hard-to-find collectibles, and visitors will find that Old Town merchants are a wealth of anecdotes and inside information about their wares, as well as Old Town itself and adjacent stores and shopping centers.

“We offer something for everyone,” says **Christine M. Finnie**, owner of Whimsical Galerie in Old Town, which sells gift items, toys and souvenirs. “I find that customers coming into my store are some of the nicest in the world. I really enjoy meeting them.”

More than 50 buildings have been renovated, attracting upscale boutiques along with an eclectic mix of restaurants. The sidewalks, adorned with flowers and turn-of-the-century lampposts, beckon travelers and residents alike to slow down and enjoy their surroundings. Once again, the heart and soul of the community sparkles by day and comes alive at night with sounds of music filling the air.

The southern tradition of hospitality lives on in Manassas, evidenced in the greetings you receive as you walk down the streets or step into a shop. No matter your pleasure: business or history, gourmet dining, art or antiques, in Manassas you will find the perfect memory to take away with you. ■

Experience a Sense of Community



June 7: 14th Heritage Railway Festival
June 15: 4th Annual Wine & Jazz Festival

More events, unique shopping & dining information at
www.visitmanassas.org • 703.361.6599



IF YOU GO ...

No matter the pleasure — art, antiques, unique dining, history — the City of Manassas offers an abundance of shops and restaurants, ranging from full-service American to the best in Thai.

Whether visiting one of the many charming shops in **Old Town** or shopping at the **Manassas Mall** for the latest fashions and accessories, visitors and residents enjoy the southern tradition of hospitality that is alive in the community.

Manassas Museum, 9101 Prince William St., Manassas, offers exhibits that interpret Northern Virginia Piedmont history through artifacts, documents and images. The museum provides self-guided architectural and walking tour brochures, as well as maps to diverse shops, to restaurants in Old Town Manassas and to other attractions. "Echoes," the museum store, has unique gifts, jewelry, books and Civil War collectibles. The museum is open Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.; closed Mondays except on some federal holidays. Phone (703) 368-1873.

Historic Manassas Visitor Center, 9431 West St., Manassas, is open daily and has brochures, maps and a knowledgeable staff to help tourists make the most of their visit. It's housed in the restored 1914 Manassas Railroad Depot, which also holds exhibits about the area's railroad history in the **James and Marion Payne Railroad Heritage Gallery** and a rail-station-passenger waiting room. Phone (703) 361-6599.

Freedom Museum is located in the terminal building at Manassas Regional Airport, 10400 Terminal Road, Manassas. The Museum honors Americans who have served their country and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. The focus of the displays of photographs, artifacts and memorabilia is the country's struggle for freedom in the 20th century. Phone (703) 393-0660.

Prince William County/Greater Manassas Chamber of Commerce, 8963 Center Street, Manassas, is one of the oldest and largest chambers in the area, established in 1935. It has continuously supported the business community through the years and serves as a resource for the general public, providing information about the community. Phone (703) 368-6600.

Center for the Arts at the Hopkins Candy Factory, 9419 Battle St., Manassas, houses the

Caton Merchant Family Art Gallery and the **Arthur Kellar Theatre**. It's also host to concerts, classes and art and theater camps, and is home to **Rooftop Productions** (an adult community theater) and **Pied Piper Children's Theatre**. Built in 1908, the factory once produced more than eight tons of candy daily. Phone (703) 330-ARTS.

Prince William County Fairgrounds, 10624 Dumfries Rd., Manassas, is the home of Virginia's largest county fair, the **Prince William County Fair**, that draws about 90,000 visitors every August. Attractions include livestock, commercial exhibits, a midway, grandstand shows, baby contests and pet shows. The rest of the year the fairground hosts craft shows, dog shows, reptile shows and other events. Call (703) 368-0173.

Old Dominion Speedway, 10611 Dumfries Rd., Manassas, hosts drag racing each Friday night from March through October. Saturday nights are dedicated to NASCAR racing. Special events are conducted on many Sundays. Call (703) 361-7753.

Liberia Mansion, located on the largest plantation in Manassas to survive the Civil War, is open for special tours throughout the year. Built in 1825, this structure played a key role as headquarters for both Confederate and Union Troops. Call (703) 368-1873.

Manassas National Battlefield Park is located about six miles from downtown Manassas. The park interprets the First (1861) and Second (1862) Battles of Manassas, also known as the Battles of Bull Run. Today, the National Park Service offers a visitor center, interpretive film, self-guided walking and driving tours and ranger-guided programs. Call (703) 361-1339.

Historic Prince William County Courthouse (1893). The grounds of this Romanesque revival building were the site of the historic 1911 Peace Jubilee, where survivors of the Confederate and Union armies met and shook hands on the field where they were once locked in mortal combat. They were joined by President William H. Taft. (703) 368-1873.

The Prince William County/Greater Manassas Convention and Visitor Center, 8609 Sudley Road, Manassas, offers information on all the great activities and events that take place in the area, including an incredible variety of recreation-

al and cultural attractions such as championship golf, pristine regional parks, sports activities and world-class entertainment. Call (800) 432-1792.

Mayfield and Cannon Branch Civil War Forts are the only surviving Civil War earthen fortifications left in Manassas. Walking trails, interpretive markets and living history programs provide insight into this critical period of American history. (703) 368-1873.

Driving and walking tours of Old Town Manassas are available year-round. Brochures for self-guided tours are available at the Visitor Center in the train depot and at the Manassas Museum. Call (703) 361-6599.

Bennett House Bed and Breakfast, 9252 Bennett Drive, is the only such facility in Manassas. It has been operating for 13 years. Call (703) 368-6121. A variety of hotels and motels are located in the city and surrounding areas. Olde Towne Inn, (703) 368-9191.

Loy Harris Pavilion is located in the heart of the historic district of Old Town Manassas and provides the residents of Manassas and surrounding area with quality entertainment all year. It is transformed into an outdoor ice-skating rink in the winter and the **Farmers' Market** in the summer. Programs designed to create an atmosphere that encourages a sense of community include Wednesday lunch concerts, Sunday afternoon concerts and ice-cream socials, Saturday-night dances, military band concerts, a chili cook-off, chess tournaments, an Old World Festival and wine festival. Call (703) 361-9800.

The city's **Recreation and Parks Department** coordinates the use of school and city park facilities, which include a swimming pool, tennis courts, skateboard park, softball and baseball leagues in the summer and an open-gym program in the winter. In total, there are 11 public parks throughout the city, not including school parks. Call (703) 257-8237. Manassas is also the home of the **Carteret Mortgage Boys and Girls Club**, which offers many programs for youth.

The Manassas Industrial School and Jennie Dean Memorial is located on the actual site of the 1893 school, founded by former slave Jennie Dean. The exhibit provides a captivating glimpse into the life of young African-American men and women after the Civil War. Call (703) 368-1873. ■



L-R: Linda Robertson is executive director of Historic Manassas, Inc., which oversees the Farmers' Market. • The Center for Arts sponsors the Pied Piper Theatre, which performs plays throughout the year. • Christine Finnie owns Whimsical Galerie, one of the many unique shops in Old Town.