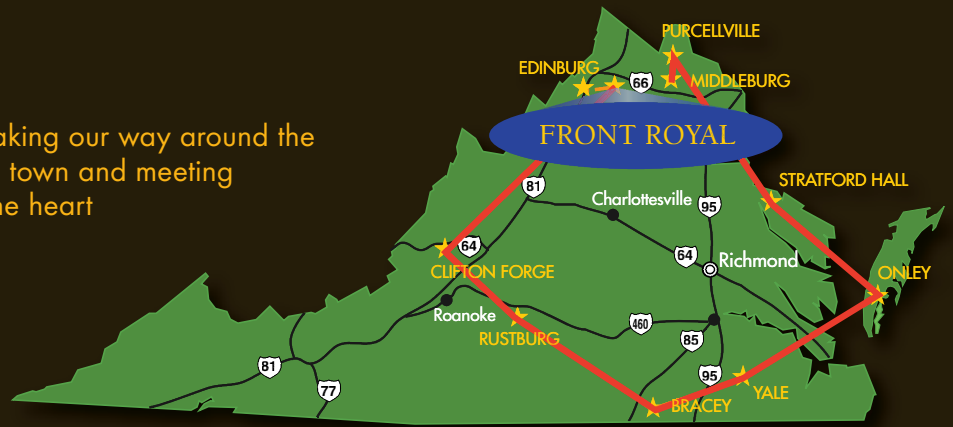


■ DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2011, 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 ninth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

FRONT ROYAL

Story and photos by Robin Couch Cardillo, Contributing Writer

When the clock neared midnight, Rick Novack made his way to the front of the large, dimly lit theater. The rowdy crowd inside grew quiet.

"I just want to welcome everyone," he said softly. "Some of you I've watched grow up over the years as you came to every showing here."

It was the midnight premiere of the last installment in the Harry Potter

In a revitalized building downtown, Royal Cinemas takes movie-going back in time. Owner of both Royal Cinemas and the Royal Family Bowling Center, Rick Novack makes sure Front Royal's residents — and visitors — are entertained.

movie series, and Novack, who owns Royal Cinemas in downtown Front Royal, was playfully asking trivia questions about the popular wizard to an anxious room of Potterphiles.

This is Front Royal — large enough to host the Potter finale and small enough to make it personal. The three-screen Royal Cinemas is in a revitalized Main Street building that once housed a playhouse and a barbershop.

"Front Royal is a great place to live, work, and play," says Novack.

"My family loves it here. It's a little less country than it was when we moved to town 20 years ago, but it's still very rural. I'd be very happy if my 20-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter end up living here."

Front Royal's appeal ranges from the recreational to the historic to the educational.

It's an outdoors enthusiast's nirvana.

"The natural beauty is a big draw," says Tourism Coordinator Jennifer Keck, who makes it a point to track why visitors choose to stop in Front Royal. "We're so lucky. We have everything — Shenandoah National Park, the Skyline Drive, the Shenandoah River, the Appalachian Trail, the Shenandoah River State Park. Our most popular sites for visitors are outdoors-oriented first, followed by history."





AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 14,573

LAND AREA: 9.28 square miles

ELEVATION: 567 feet

INCORPORATED: 1788

FACTOID: Local lore has it that the name Front Royal comes from a command issued by soldiers who were training young locals for battle in the Revolutionary War. When the soldiers shouted, "Front the Royal Oak," the farm boys knew to line up in front of a large oak tree — a symbol of royalty — in the middle of town. The term eventually slurred into "Front Royal" and was adopted as the town's moniker.



1. Front Royal's Main Street is a popular wandering destination. **2.** One of the most striking structures in Front Royal is the Warren County Courthouse. **3.** Canoeing, kayaking, and tubing the Shenandoah River are popular pastimes.

That's what enticed Keck and her family to relocate from Idaho to Front Royal eight years ago. They routinely hike the park trails and spend time canoeing on the river.

They're not alone. A sign at Front Royal's northern entrance, near the bridge that covers the southern fork of the Shenandoah River, reads "Canoe Capital of Virginia." Good-natured self-promotion? Not at all. Virginia's General Assembly did indeed name Front Royal the canoe king several years ago.

Keck quickly produces proof. She pulls a framed certificate from a wall at the Visitors Center. It reads, in part, "The Shenandoah River is the most heavily paddled river in Virginia, and Warren County has more commercial outfitters and access points on the Shenandoah River than any other river in Virginia."

But the river isn't the only lure. Keck points to the progress the downtown is making, as she counts at least 10 restaurants within easy walking distance of the focal point of downtown,

the gazebo. Front Royal's two signature events each year — the Virginia Wine and Craft Fair, held the third Saturday in May, and the Festival of Leaves, on the second Saturday in October — are big draws. In August, the hosts of the annual Shenandoah Riverfest and Rodeo provide (at no cost) canoes to the public, encouraging all ages to paddle the river, fall in love with it, and learn to take care of one of Front Royal's natural resources. And a July music jam downtown — ambitiously called Dancin' in the



1. Front Royal's entrance to the 105-mile Skyline Drive makes the town a convenient stop-off point for travelers. **2.** "Front Royal is the gateway to the valley," Tourism Coordinator Jennifer Keck points out. **3.** In July, the Dancin' in the Streets event attracted nearly 3,000 music lovers to downtown. **4.** Located on Kerfoot Avenue in Front Royal, the Warren County Skate Park opened last year. It was a collaboration of many enthusiastic local residents and organizations. **5.** Dr. Margarita Woc-Colburn, an associate veterinarian at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, examines a cheetah cub. **6.** Mayor Timothy Darr happily guides Front Royal through its many changes. "Front Royal has a great group of people, both employees and citizens," he says. "It's an honor and a privilege to serve this town."

Streets — attracted nearly 3,000 locals and visitors this year.

ITS PLACE IN HISTORY

Front Royal has earned the right to name-drop its historical connections.

In 1862, Civil War Confederate General Stonewall Jackson stood at the top of Prospect Hill on the southern end of town to direct his troops during the Battle of Front Royal. On the hill today is a cemetery that includes a monument built in 1899 to honor seven of John Mosby's Rangers who were executed by the Union in Front Royal in 1864.

The town also played out, on a smaller stage, the struggles of small-town America during the Civil Rights Movement. The Rev. James M. Kilby, a local pastor, was one of 23 African-American students who first integrated Warren County High School in Front Royal in February of 1959. His father, James W. Kilby, filed the lawsuit against the county school board that eventually allowed his children to attend the public school. This June, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources placed a roadside marker at the site of the former school, noting this divisive time for Front Royal.

"[The marker] is a great tribute to my father and the 23 students who integrated Warren County High School and to the history of Warren County," Kilby told one reporter this summer. Today, Kilby ministers at Mount Vernon Baptist Church and is an enthusiastic participant in many Front Royal activities.

On the entertainment side, Bing Crosby also left his mark. He once stopped in Front Royal to ride in a parade while headlining a festival in a nearby city. He liked the townsfolk so much, he made a sizeable donation to help build a baseball field in town. Today, Bing Crosby Stadium hosts the wooden-bat Valley League, a lower rung on the baseball ladder. The beloved Front Royal Cardinals attract a large and loyal crowd to the ballpark.

The Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute has called Front Royal home since 1975. An extension of the Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington, D.C., the facility is known for zoological research that focuses on species conservation. More than 400 ani-

mals now live at the institute, which employs more than 50 Ph.Ds and veterinarians. This year, the institute added two state-of-the-art breeding facilities, one for clouded leopards and another for red pandas. And the arrival of a litter of five cheetah cubs — a “susceptible species,” according to one biologist there — caused quite a stir locally.

The institute typically opens to the public for a weekend in October. However, ongoing construction projects prompted the Smithsonian to cancel the open house for this year.

CREATIVE PLANNING

Front Royal Mayor Timothy Darr’s recent focus is on making the town more visually inviting and accessible “for visitors and residents,” he says. The plan includes expanded walking and bicycling trails and improved landscaping near the town’s northern and southern entrances.

He and his wife, both Front Royal natives, enjoy spending Friday evenings at the downtown gazebo taking in whatever event is on the docket — music from a Beatles tribute band, an art exhibit featuring locals, or a dance party.

Not surprisingly, the shops in Front Royal’s downtown historic district compete with the big-box stores that have sprouted on the outskirts of town over the last few years.

“We have to get creative with downtown,” says Darr. “We’ll always have development. We just need to protect our natural beauty, the aesthetics of the town.”

Front Royal in a decade? “You’ll still see the flowers hanging in the baskets downtown and still feel the quaint rural charm,” Darr assures, “but the outskirts will grow — just not too fast, we hope.”

Tourism Coordinator Keck agrees that Front Royal needs to cultivate its natural gifts. She’s already on a regional committee that’s pondering whether to invest in a geo-tourism mapping project with National Geographic. As with most small towns, funding is an issue.

“But it’s a great opportunity for our region to identify what’s really special to us,” she says thoughtfully. “Who do we want to be? We need to look out 10 years. We need that vision. You know, it builds community pride.” ■

IF YOU GO...

When sketching your itinerary for a visit to Front Royal, reserve more than a weekend — maybe even a week — for your stay. The activities are plentiful, the sightseeing diverse, and the charm magnetic.

By all means, take the walking tour of downtown. Put on your sneakers, grab a guide at the **Visitors Center** on Main Street in downtown, and be off. You’ll get caught up in the history and the architecture, as well as the stories of the colorful characters who shaped Front Royal.

If walking doesn’t intrigue you, perhaps a driving tour will. The Visitors Center offers a CD (\$19.95), audio tape (\$9.95), or paper guide (free) that leads you on a tour of the key points in the Battle of Front Royal on May 23, 1862. It’s part of the Virginia Civil War Trails program.

If Civil War history interests you, don’t miss climbing Prospect Street — by car or by foot — to visit the stirring **Prospect Hill Cemetery**. In 1862, Confederate General Stonewall Jackson scaled this hill to watch the movement of Union troops below so he could maneuver his own troops. At the top of the hill is a circle of simple gravestones — Soldiers’ Circle — marking the remains of 276 soldiers representing the 13 Confederate states. You’ll also see a monument erected in 1899 to honor seven of Mosby’s Rangers who were executed in Front Royal in 1864.

Side-by-side-by-side on Chester Street are the **Warren Rifles Confederate Museum**, **Ivy Lodge Museum** (yes, lush ivy covers the fences in front), and **Belle Boyd Cottage**. For those who appreciate daring



Built in 1819, Ivy Lodge Museum, once the town library, now exhibits county artifacts and includes a gift shop and book store.

darlings in history, take time to get to know Boyd, a female spy for the Confederacy.

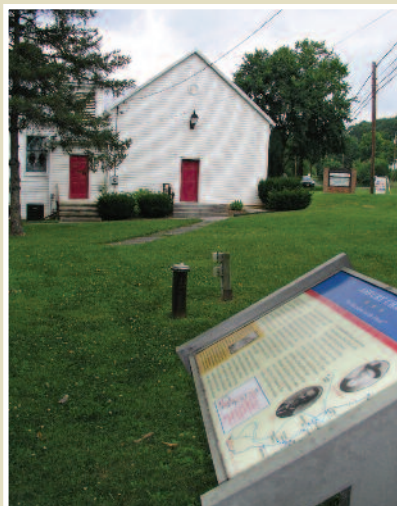
If you’re hungry, try **Element** or **Apartment 2G**, on the moderate to high end of the restaurant scale. Owned by the same chef couple and situated in the same building on Main Street, the two eateries offer offbeat and sophisticated fare. Try a Shenandoah Ranger sandwich of spinach, artichoke hearts, cream cheese, and roasted red peppers at the former or an upscale, five-course prix fixe Saturday evening dinner at the latter. (Element is one of the top spots on her go-to list for lunch, says Tourism Coordinator Jennifer Keck.)

Others will call into question your culinary credibility if you neglect to stop by **Melting Pot Pizza**, a local landmark. Natives and visitors alike fill this pizza place every evening for a taste of the crispy, super-thin pizza crust topped with loads of sausage, pepperoni, mushrooms, whatever you please.

Front Royal has its share of award-winning vineyards — **Glen Manor Vineyards**, **Chester Gap Cellars**, **Fox Meadow Wineries**. Several creative viticulturalists even paired the region’s blossoming wine industry with its Civil War heritage to map out The General’s Wine and History Trail, making an adventure of sightseeing with a glass of wine in hand (no matter that General Jackson was a confirmed teetotaler, according to historians).

On a hill overlooking the town, the co-ed college prep school **Randolph-Macon Academy** sits majestically on a 135-acre campus. Throughout the week, you’ll see clusters of students trekking toward town in their crisply pleated navy blue uniforms. Mayor Darr is a fan: “It’s a beautiful school, and they do a great job. R-MA certainly brings people into the community.”

After a day of touring, schedule a stop at **Tres Bella Spa** for some self-indulgence. A recent drive-by revealed a sign inviting patrons in for an ice-cream pedicure. Who could resist? ■



“1st Maryland to the front!” was Confederate General Stonewall Jackson’s order as his troops moved toward Asbury Chapel on the southern edge of town.