

*This year **Cooperative Living** is taking a road trip along the length of U.S. Route 1 as it crosses Virginia from the North Carolina border to Washington, D.C. In each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.*

Trailing Tattered Glory:

Dinwiddie and Petersburg in the Civil War and After



by Deborah Huso,
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Tall, thin, and regal, Ernest Chapman is, in many ways, the portrait of an innkeeper.

Initially formal in his manners, he walks like a man who has spent a lifetime in the military, though he has not. Rather, this caretaker of the Ragland Mansion, an antebellum bed and breakfast on Sycamore Street, just a couple blocks off Route 1 in downtown Petersburg, came to Virginia via a rather long and circuitous route from San Francisco. He claims, as many of Petersburg's "come here's" do, that a series of both unfortunate and fortuitous circumstances brought him to town.

"I was a rescue animal," he jests at breakfast one morning, recounting how his sister, Paula Mims, owner of At the Globe, an antique store on Sycamore Street, urged him to move to the city four years ago. He's been managing the 10,000-sq.-ft. Ragland for its absentee owner Claudia Bezaka ever since. The position more than suits this seemingly stern and serious gentleman who attires himself in black and can always be found wearing a driver's cap, as if he is about to chauffeur



Ernest Chapman has been managing the Ragland Mansion in Petersburg for its absentee owner for four years.

some celebrity about town. Upon meeting him at check-in on an October evening, I make it my goal to get this sober gentleman to crack a smile before I leave.

A CITY STILL UNDER SIEGE

As it turns out, Chapman is only the first of many characters I meet in Petersburg on this next leg of my journey up old Route 1. From the flat and open farmland of Dinwiddie County, Route 1 parallels I-85 all the way into this historic city that is at one and the same time loaded with potential and a little sad.

Here the cityscape ranges from rundown buildings and empty storefronts to happily restored 19th-century warehouses and mansions. It looks like a town getting ready to come back from near death, but as Hiram Haines Coffee and Ale House owner Jeff Abugel notes with a laugh, "Petersburg has been coming back for 20 years. How many years does it take to come back?"

Don't be deterred, however, by the city's rough-around-the-edges appearance. Petersburg is worth exploring, even if you're not a Civil War buff, though I should note that there's a reason so much of Lincoln was filmed here.

Petersburg's architectural heritage is rich, ranging from the stoic Federal style of the 1817 Farmers Bank, now a city museum

and visitors center, to the unique Trapezium House on Market Street, which was built without right angles, purportedly to ward off evil spirits. It's almost hard to believe how devastated this city was following the nearly 10-month siege that ended in April 1865, leaving 800 structures in Petersburg marred by shelling if not completely destroyed.

The Ragland Mansion was among the structures that survived the siege relatively unscathed. Built by Reuben Ragland in the 1850s, the residence was designed to look like an Italian villa. Chapman is fond of relating the history of the entrepreneurial Ragland, who was not only president of the First National Bank of Petersburg (now the Siege Museum), but also ran the commodities exchange, which, Chapman points out, "sold tobacco, cotton, rum, whiskey, and people."

Today the house, with its four-story center hall staircase, twin parlors, and nine guest rooms, offers a sanctuary for visitors to Petersburg, and one will find all manner of such folks at breakfast over which Chapman presides with his almost English stiffness. Interestingly enough, it is a British couple visiting from London that finally inspires Chapman to crack a smile one morning over coffee and bacon.

Commenting on the American presidential debates last fall, Ragland guest Tony Hall, an official tour guide across the Atlantic in London, remarked on how the candidates repeatedly interrupted one another. "Those kinds of interruptions would be considered most discourteous in our country," he said with a sniff. Chapman and I exchanged glances and began to chuckle. Finally, the ice was broken.

And a good thing, too, because it is Chapman who ultimately gives me the directions I need to find the special and secret haunts of this delightfully weathered city, including the names of the often quirky entrepreneurs who have been trying to get this city to come back, as Abugel says, for the last 20 years.

OLDE TOWNE ON THE MEND

Among those entrepreneurs is Russ Johnson, owner and head chef at The Bistro at Market and Grove, a shockingly posh restaurant occupying the former home of a corner gas station at the western edge of Olde Towne. More than the food, it's the decadent dining room that grabs one's attention here. Crisp white tablecloths, mismatched velvet-tufted chairs, painted



Built by a wealthy entrepreneur linked to the Tudor monarchy, the Ragland Mansion was designed to look like an Italian villa. During World War I, Ragland served as the first officers' club for the nearby Camp Lee military base.



The Bistro restaurant occupies what was formerly a gas station at the western edge of Olde Towne. More than the food, it's the dining room's decadent decor that grabs one's attention here.



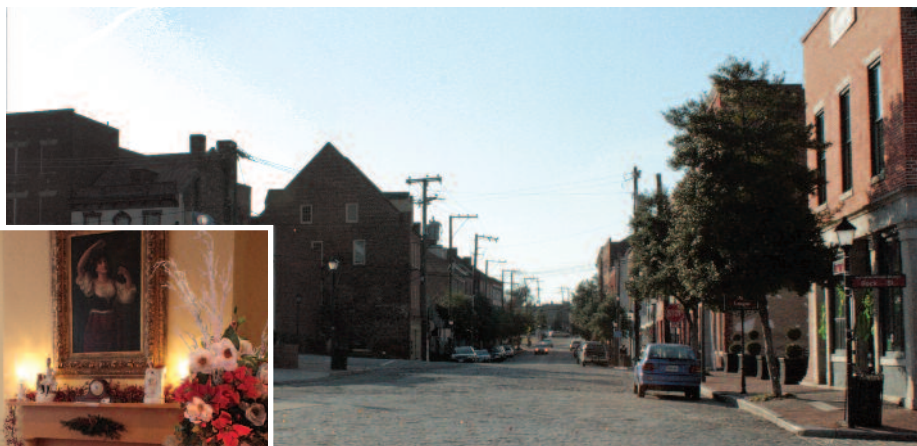
metal chandeliers, crystal candlesticks, and gilded knick-knacks galore define The Bistro. When I enter with my boyfriend, he remarks, “This is Petersburg?”

Well, yes, it is.

And that’s pretty much the reaction Johnson is going for. “It’s sort of like your grandmother and your Great Aunt Bertha died in the same week, and you just threw all their stuff together in a room,” remarks the burly, curly redheaded Johnson.

Johnson is a former youth counselor with no professional training in the culinary arts, though his Sunday brunch and evening fare belie this fact. And something about the place still speaks of Johnson’s former occupation. The Bistro is staffed by smiling young men, most of whom are family — nephews and cousins. But if you ask Johnson what led him to go from social work to culinary delights, he’ll only reply, “Temporary insanity.”

Fortunately, for visitors, the temporary insanity that led entrepreneurs like Johnson and Abugel to take a chance on helping to revitalize Olde Towne, has made Petersburg a rather hip place to visit if you can overlook some of the less-than-well-kept features of much of the surrounding city landscape. Downtown’s Old Street is home to some very nice antique shops, including



Downtown’s Old Street (top) is home to some very nice antique shops, including Penniston’s Alley Antiques (above). Next door, you can enjoy an English tea at the Blue Willow Tea Room (right).



Penniston’s Alley Antiques, which is loaded with fine period furniture as well as handmade and estate jewelry. Next door, you can enjoy an English tea at the Blue Willow Tea Room and then head up Sycamore Street to the Petersburg Regional Art Center, which hosts regional artists and their studios and

holds evening receptions the second Friday of every month until 10 p.m., giving visitors the chance to meet the artists while sipping wine.

Stay tuned for more on Petersburg’s delights, including the real-life “haunts” of Edgar Allan Poe, in the next issue! ■

IF YOU GO

Civil War buffs visiting Petersburg and Dinwiddie County should be sure to check out the Virginia section of the **Civil War Trails website** at www.civilwartraveler.com for details on all the relevant historic sites along Route 1.

If you happen to be in Dinwiddie County on a Tuesday or Thursday, you can get a tour of the old **Dinwiddie County Courthouse and Historical Society** (804-469-5346) between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Just north of Dinwiddie Courthouse on Route 627 is the **Five Forks Battlefield Visitor Center** (16302 White Oak Road), part of the **Petersburg National Battlefield** (www.nps.gov/pete, 804-732-3531). **Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Solider** (6125 Boydton Plank Road,

www.pamplinpark.org, 1-877-PAMPLIN) is right off Route 1 south of Petersburg.

While in Petersburg, be sure to visit the **Siege Museum** (15 West Bank Street, 804-733-2402) for a history of the longest siege on American soil as well as well as **Blandford Church and Cemetery** (111 Rochelle Lane), where 30,000 Confederates who died during the siege are buried.

Get the lay of the land at the **Petersburg Visitors Center** (19 Bollingbrook Street, 804-733-2400, www.petersburg-va.org/tourism), located in the old Farmers Bank. The friendly ladies here can direct you to all of the city’s numerous museums and historic houses and buildings, though wandering around the cobblestone streets of Olde Towne and checking out the likes of **Old Train Depot** and **Union Train Station** is worthy of an hour or so pursuit. **Old Street** and **Sycamore Street** are

loaded with antique shops. My top picks are **Penniston’s Alley Antiques** (102 W. Old Street) and **Kimberly Anne’s** (246 N. Sycamore Street).

For good eats, **Wabi Sabi** (804-862-1365, www.eatwabisabi.com), a sushi and tapas bar on Bollingbrook, can’t be beat for its modern and eclectic atmosphere (or its \$5 martinis on Mondays!), and **The Bistro** at Market and Grove (804-732-4480) is the place to go for elegance and gourmet evening meals as well as champagne Sunday brunch. And if you’re in town overnight, Ernest Chapman will welcome you to the fine digs at **The Ragland Mansion** (205 S. Sycamore St., 800-861-8898, www.ragland-mansion.com). ■

Lincoln Was Here ... and So Was Steven Spielberg

If you do much traveling in Virginia, you've probably had countless experiences with claims from inns and restaurants like "Washington slept here" or "Jefferson stopped by here." One thing you'll notice in Olde Towne Petersburg, however, are a lot of businesses with prominent decals on their windows claiming "Lincoln was here."

Now it's possible the real President Abraham Lincoln may have encountered these streets when he visited Petersburg following the siege in 1865, but these shop and restaurant owners are actually claiming Lincoln as portrayed by Daniel Day Lewis in the Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln*, which premiered in theaters last November. Spielberg's crews filmed the movie entirely in Virginia, with a lot of the footage created in Petersburg and Richmond.

It doesn't take more than a few seconds in Olde Towne Petersburg to understand what made it such a perfect location for period-movie making. With its still intact historic architecture, cobblestone streets, and slight aura of the

decrepit about it, Petersburg readily suited the somber mood of Spielberg's hit film. Be sure to watch it before you visit, and then see if you can catch some of the streets and buildings featured in the movie.

Another connection to the Lincoln White House can be found just south of Petersburg in Dinwiddie County. Here Mary Todd Lincoln's famous dressmaker and intimate friend Elizabeth Keckly was born into slavery around 1818. She later moved with her mother and son to her owner's home at 314 N. Sycamore Street in Petersburg.

It was through her dressmaking skill that Keckly purchased freedom for herself and her son in 1855, ultimately landing herself a position as dressmaker to the President's wife in 1861. Keckly visited her old hometown of Petersburg in 1865 in the company of Mrs. Lincoln following the fall of Richmond.

THE CIVIL WAR IN PETERSBURG AND DINWIDDIE COUNTY

Any Civil War buff knows Virginia is second to none for offering fare for the history lover's palate, and this is especially true in and around Petersburg, which is something of a Mecca for those interested in the "War of Northern Aggression," as staunch southerners like to call it.

A good starting point, particularly if you have the kids in tow, is Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier on the southern end of the city. Occupying a section of the Petersburg battlefield with remnant Confederate trenches to prove it, the park provides both an overview of the siege that ultimately ended the war in Virginia as well as an in-depth look at the lives of ordinary soldiers.

Upon entering the museum, you'll get to choose a soldier whose story you can follow through the museum, which includes a "Trial By Fire" room that simulates an actual battlefield with the floor shaking and the sensation of bullets whizzing by your head.

My identity for the day is that of Lt. William Marcus Woodcock, Company B, 19th Kentucky, U.S. Infantry, who joined up at the war's outset at the tender age of 18. Woodcock remarked after his first battle experience, "I first pointed my rifle at a human being. One year before this time, it would have made me shudder to see a man in the sights of an empty rifle." Woodcock was a fortunate survivor in a war that claimed more than 600,000 lives, two-thirds of those being casualties of disease, not bullets.

In all, 70,000 of those casualties occurred during the near-10-month siege of Petersburg, and many of those who fought here were African-American soldiers, who occupied uniforms on both sides of the conflict.

If you're traveling Route 1, some good places to stop and experience Virginia's Civil War Trails include the historic Dinwiddie Courthouse, where Federal troops conducted a raid in June 1864. Just north of the courthouse and a few miles off Route 1 is the Five Forks Battlefield Visitor Center. It was here that Federals finally made a breakthrough for control of Petersburg in the spring of 1865. Just north of Pamplin Park along Route 1 (known as Boynton Plank Road here) is a monument marking the site of Confederate Gen. A.P. Hill's fatal wounding on April 2, 1865. And while in Olde Towne, be sure to check out the Siege Museum on Bank Street, which details the story of the Petersburg "homefront" during the battle. ■



Pamplin Park is home to the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier (top) and Hart Farm (above), the scene of fighting on two occasions during the Petersburg Campaign. Federal troops conducted a raid on historic Dinwiddie Courthouse (left) in June of 1864.

