



THIS YEAR COOPERATIVE LIVING IS TAKING A ROAD TRIP ALONG THE LENGTH OF ROUTE 11 AS IT CROSSES VIRGINIA FROM NORTH TO SOUTH. EACH ISSUE, CORRESPONDENT DEBORAH HUSO WILL RELATE HER EXPERIENCES ALONG THE WAY.

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# Generals and Angels

*Explore the lesser-known history of two famous Civil War generals' careers as educators, and grab your buttered popcorn to settle in for a Lexington double feature!*

**D**riving into downtown Lexington on Route 11 from the north, the first thing you'll likely notice is the imposing Gothic architecture of the Virginia Military Institute, which lines the road on both sides before giving way to the campus of Washington & Lee University.

"Route 11 is one of the most historic routes through Virginia and was a major thoroughfare for western migration into Tennessee and Georgia," Col. Keith Gibson, executive director of the VMI Museum, tells me.

"Route 11 was the I-81 of its day," he adds. "That made the route very important to Stonewall Jackson during the Civil War. It was critical for him to maintain control of the Valley Pike." And VMI has occupied a space hugging this important route since 1839. "If you're heading southward on Route 11 through Lexington, it cuts right through VMI's campus."

## 'OLD JACK' IN THE CLASSROOM

VMI was the nation's first state-sponsored military college, and the VMI Museum that traces the school's history is the oldest public museum in the state of Virginia, having opened in 1856. It was during this time that Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson served as a professor at the military college, teaching natural and experimental philosophy (physics) and artillery tac-



Route 11 winds its way through historic downtown Lexington and the VMI and W&L campuses.

tics. Jackson gained the position as a result of distinguishing himself in artillery tactics during the Mexican War; but, as Gibson points out, "his resume did not reflect prior collegiate teaching."

And Jackson indeed struggled with the material he taught, despite his personal philosophy that if he tried hard enough he could succeed at anything. He began teaching at the school in 1851, and Gibson says he probably had a "competent understanding" of the subjects he was teaching by 1855. Cadets at VMI

called him "Old Jack" and, as Gibson describes it, "found him kooky but saw a spark of genius in him." Gibson laughs, "One cadet called him as exciting as an algorithmic table."

Gibson himself is a graduate of VMI, though he freely admits the school was not his first choice. "I wanted to go to UVA and become an architect," he says. Then while he was a senior in high school, he started getting solicitations from the military college and couldn't figure out why until he learned his SAT scores had accidentally been sent there. "I started receiving phone calls from VMI alums while I'm sitting there waiting for the phone to ring from anyone at UVA." It was then that the VMI network began to really appeal to him.

It was also at VMI that Gibson began to nurture his love of history and learned he could make a career out of it. He's been

at the VMI Museum since 1986, and says visitors really appreciate how the museum provides insight into the life of a cadet in both historical and modern contexts. It surprises me to learn that only 60 percent of VMI graduates accept commissions in the Armed Forces, and only 20 percent end up spending their whole careers there. But training officers is not the school's goal, Gibson says. "VMI's mission is to train the citizen soldier," he explains. "Our wars over the last 20 years have been fought by citizen soldiers. When there's a crisis, they rise to the occasion."

And if, like me, you're wondering what would attract a high school senior to attend a school with such rigorous requirements (you have to pass boxing to graduate, for example), Gibson has the answer. "It's like the X-Game of colleges," he says, noting that a lot of students are attracted to the challenge and to testing their limits. "Failure is curiously a part of the VMI experience," he adds. "We teach cadets how to deal with moments in your life that seem insurmountable."

## LEADING WITH CHARACTER

Not surprisingly, there is a similar dedication to preparing the "whole person" for life at neighboring Washington & Lee University, where Robert E. Lee once served as president. "It is one of the great coincidences that both Lee and Jackson were associated with education in Lexington," Gibson says. In fact, Jackson married the daughter of a Washington College president.

Lucy Wilkins, museum director at the Lee Chapel and Museum on the campus of Washington & Lee, jokes when she meets me one crisp morning, "I formerly worked at the Stonewall Jackson House, so I'm getting both my generals in!"

Yet Wilkins doesn't emphasize Lee's performance on the field of battle in the American Civil War. Instead she talks about a part of the famous general's life and influence that is often overlooked — the story of his post-war years as a college administrator.

At the close of the Civil War, Washington College, as the university was then known, had only 40 students and four faculty, and the Union army had ransacked much of the campus. It was a school on the verge of ruin when Lee came on board as president in 1865.



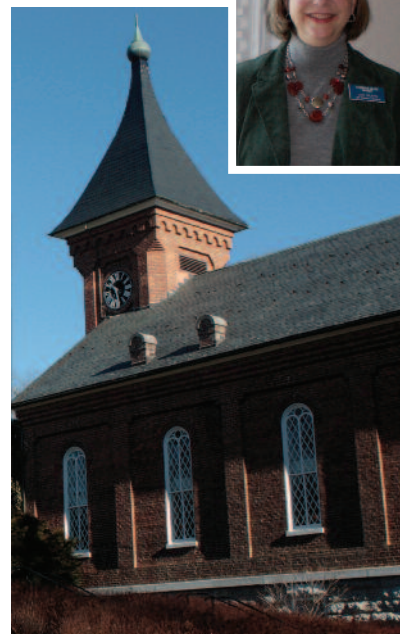
Virginia Military Institute (above) lines the road on both sides of Route 11 before giving way to the campus of Washington & Lee University. Col. Keith Gibson (right) is executive director of the VMI Museum.



Interior views of the VMI Museum (above left) and Jackson Memorial Hall (above right).



The campus of Washington & Lee University (above) and Lee Chapel (right). Lucy Wilkins (inset) is museum director at the Lee Chapel and Museum.





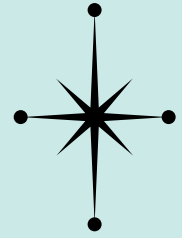
The  
Nation's  
First

Community-Owned  
Drive-In

## Hull's Drive-In Theater



PHOTO COURTESY OF MR. JOHN SCOTT



One Route 11 attraction you can't help but notice is Hull's Drive-In Theater (2367 N. Lee Highway, 540-463-2621, [www.hulldrivein.com](http://www.hulldrivein.com)). Situated just north of town and originally built in 1950, the theater today holds place as the nation's first community-owned, nonprofit drive-in movie theater.

How did that happen? Well, as Jerry Reter, the drive-in's executive director, points out, it almost didn't. From 1957 to 1998, Sebert Hull owned the drive-in, but when he sold it, the next owner could not afford to keep it running. The Lexington community, which had enjoyed the drive-in for nearly 50 years, was not going to let it shut down.

"Locals put together a nonprofit group called 'Hull's Angels,'" Reter explains, "and raised the money to purchase the theater." With \$75,000 in funding, they purchased the theater and reopened it in 2001. Even now, 13 years later, Reter says most theater operations are handled by volunteers, from the ticket booth to the concessions stand.

The theater can accommodate 315 cars, and Reter says it is not uncommon to have movie nights where they have to turn people away. "Wherever you can park a car, we've got people," he says. "I think being in a small town, the drive-in is part of the town. You don't get the same experience at a regular cinema."

Reter regularly brings his own five kids out for the movies and has found something of a dream job as the drive-in's executive director. He moved to Lexington after retiring from the U.S. Navy in 2011. While in the Navy, he had run the base movie theater in Great Lakes, Ill. "I fell in love with it," he says. "It became my dream to run a theater, even though I didn't grow up with drive-ins." ■



Jerry Reter, executive director of Hull's Drive-In Theater.

"At the time, Lee didn't know yet if he would be tried as a traitor," Wilkins remarks. "But he did know he needed to restore the school, but, as he did so, he also reinvented it."

Before Lee's tenure as president, the college had been focused on the typical classical education of the time, but Lee wanted to transform the school into a modern university.

"He felt the development of moral character was central to that," Wilkins explains. Thus, his first order of business was building the chapel, under which he is currently buried. "He called it an auditorium," she adds. "The building was never consecrated as a church." That's because Lee was an advocate of religious tolerance and asked ministers from different denominations to lead chapel services. He also never made chapel attendance mandatory.

When Lee took the helm at the college, many of the students were veter-

ans of the recent war, and in his efforts to provide them a modern education and heal the divisive feelings between North and South, Lee sought reconciliation through the process of funding improvements to the school. Among those who donated money were Cyrus McCormick and even former abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher.

With money in hand, Lee developed nine departments at the college, including Latin, Greek, mathematics, chemistry, modern languages, astronomy, engineering, political economy, and international law and commerce. He also established the first school of journalism in the country. "He wanted to restore education to the south in all fields, including math, engineering, and science," Wilkins says. Lee's efforts at modern education were so innovative that the University of Virginia and even Harvard University later adopted what he was doing, including the concept of majors.

When Lee died in 1870, the college had grown dramatically and had 400 students. In five short years, he had transformed the institution and the town of Lexington. Wilkins says he operated under the very same and single guideline he had followed while superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in the 1850s: "No rules but one — every student must comport himself as a gentleman." ■



The recumbent statue of Robert E. Lee was installed in the Lee Chapel of Washington & Lee University in 1883.

## ● IF YOU GO ...

Make your first stop in Lexington at the **Lexington Visitors Center** (106 E. Washington St., 540-463-3777, [www.lexingtonvirginia.com](http://www.lexingtonvirginia.com)). If you visit on a Friday, you can take advantage of a free city walking tour at 3 p.m., April through November. The tour covers the historic downtown area, the campus of **Washington & Lee University** (204 W. Washington St., 540-458-8400, [www.wlu.edu](http://www.wlu.edu)) and the campus of the **Virginia Military Institute** (540-464-7230, [www.vmi.edu](http://www.vmi.edu)).

The Virginia Military Institute owns two museums in Lexington, both downtown and on its campus. They include the **Stonewall Jackson House** (8 E. Washington St., 540-464-7704, [www.stonewalljackson.org](http://www.stonewalljackson.org)) and the **VMI Museum** (309 Lechter Ave., 540-464-7334, [www.vmi.edu/vmi\\_museum](http://www.vmi.edu/vmi_museum)). Also on the campus of VMI is the **George C. Marshall Museum** (540-463-7103, [www.marshallfoundation.org/museum](http://www.marshallfoundation.org/museum)).

If you get hungry while wandering the historic streets of Lexington,

check out **Bistro on Main** (8 N. Main St., 540-464-4888, [www.bistro-lexington.com](http://www.bistro-lexington.com)). Here crisp young waiters all dressed in black provide the pinnacle of customer service. While I was here, they took my coat and even helped me back into it when my lunch was over. Try the Caesar chicken wrap with beer-battered fries. Or head across the street to the historic **Sheridan Livery Inn** (35 N. Main St., 540-464-1887, [www.sheridanliveryinn.com](http://www.sheridanliveryinn.com)), which originally housed a stable-and-carriage service. Try the savory cheese tart and homemade ravioli! And if you need overnight digs, the Sheridan also has a 12-room inn.

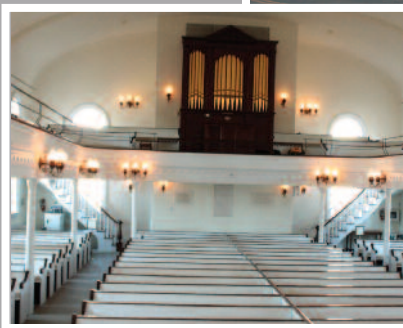
If you keep heading south on Route 11 out of Lexington, be sure to stop by the multiple roadside attractions in the area of Natural Bridge. If you're hungry, stop into the **Pink Cadillac Diner** (4347 S. Lee Hwy., 540-291-2378, [www.pinkcadillacdineronline.com](http://www.pinkcadillacdineronline.com)), a wonderfully nostalgic greasy spoon that does indeed have a pink Cadillac parked outside. Just to the south is the

**Natural Bridge Zoo** (5784 S. Lee Hwy., 540-291-2420, [www.naturalbridgezoo.com](http://www.naturalbridgezoo.com)), a family-owned independent zoo where I had my first experience of having my legs licked by Asiatic black bear cubs!

And then there is, of course, one of Route 11's most famous roadside stops — **Natural Bridge Park** (15 Appledore Ln., 800-533-1410, [www.naturalbridgeva.com](http://www.naturalbridgeva.com)), a National Historic Landmark that has frequently made "Seven Natural Wonders of the World" lists. Route 11, in fact, passes right over this natural stone bridge. While you're here, you can also explore the Caverns at Natural Bridge as well as various hiking trails. Stay the night across the street at the **Natural Bridge Park Historic Hotel** (15 Appledore Ln., 800-533-1410, [www.naturalbridgeva.com/accommodations](http://www.naturalbridgeva.com/accommodations)). ■



Above, a view of bustling downtown Lexington.



Above, the interior of Lee Chapel on the campus of Washington & Lee University. The wonderfully nostalgic Pink Cadillac diner (right), complete with pink Cadillac parked outside.



The Natural Bridge Hotel (left) is right across the street from the entrance to the Natural Bridge complex (below). A wax museum and factory tour are among the attractions for visitors to the facility.

