



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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Burgers, Buildings, and Bards

Step into the past in the Queen City of the Shenandoah Valley, where a single day will take you across four centuries, from Shakespeare to shakes ... no kidding.

Staunton has long been a familiar place to me. When I was a small child, it was my mother's primary shopping destination, and I can remember wandering among the clothing racks at the Leggett's downtown on Beverly Street. Leggett's is long gone, transformed some time ago into City Hall. But thanks to a few decades worth of effort to revive this "Queen City" of the Shenandoah Valley, Staunton retains much of the character I knew as a child ... and then some.



Beverly Street has long been a shopping destination in Staunton.

CURBSIDE SERVICE

Among the familiar features of this town is Wright's Dairy Rite on Route 11, where you can still get curbside service as if it's 1950 all over again. And just like the good old days, the menu sports cheeseburgers, fries, hot dogs, pork barbecue, shakes, floats, malts, and sundaes.

Forester Wright founded the dairy bar solely as a window walk-up ice cream shop. The family gradually added the drive-in and sit-down restaurant service in years following. James R. "Jim" Cash, his grandson, is today general manager. Jim's father, James E. "Elwood" Cash, is part owner of the shop. Sandy Cash, Elwood's daughter, also works at the business.

When I stop in for a strawberry sundae, Jim is busy working behind the scenes, but his and Sandy's mother, Shirley Wright Cash McKee (Forester Wright's daughter) happily joins me in a red vinyl booth and tells me about growing up in the business. While the curbside service these days features speakers, "We originally had 'curb girls,'" McKee remarks. "You flashed your lights when you needed attention."

In 1978, McKee's father added the dining room, and the telephones for placing orders are still intact at

each table. And while many a roadside drive-in restaurant has come and gone, Wright's has kept on going. According to McKee, it's more than simple nostalgia. "A lot of it is because it's family-owned," she says. "But first it's the good food that brings people back."

McKee started working in the restaurant at 15 and "has been in and out of the business my whole life," she laughs. And what makes Wright's special when compared to franchise fast food? "We cook everything fresh *after* the customer orders it. It doesn't sit there," McKee says. "You can build your own burgers here, and boy, do our customers ever do it!"

BANG FOR YOUR BUILDINGS

Two minutes from Wright's, Route 11 takes travelers right into Staunton's historic downtown. With its brick sidewalks, iron-lamppost-lined streets, and eclectic architecture, the city has a thriving downtown shopping district, six designated national historic-registry districts, and an ever-growing list of historic and cultural attractions. Staunton recently earned designation as "one of the best small towns in America" from *Smithsonian* magazine.

But it hasn't always been this way.

Forty years ago Staunton's downtown, like those of so many American cities and towns, was in serious decline — empty storefronts, residents fleeing to outlying subdivisions, businesses relocating to the busy corridor along I-81. The city's beautiful collection of brick and granite 19th- and 20th-century buildings, ranging in style from Italianate to Victorian, were falling into neglectful disrepair.

But Staunton residents rallied when the Virginia Department of Transportation proposed putting a major highway through downtown and tearing down historic buildings in the Wharf District. Concerned citizens established the Historic Staunton Foundation in 1971 in an effort to save the city's architecture.

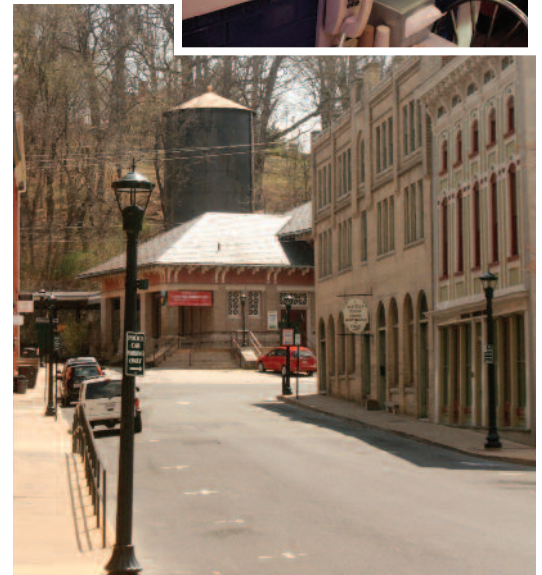
HSF, which is housed in the R.R. Smith Center for History and Art, has played a significant role over the last four decades in revitalizing Staunton's historic areas, helping lead the way for the National Register of Historic Places designation of six Staunton districts and helping property owners downtown restore and rehabilitate their buildings. The city of Staunton and HSF also partnered to put utilities underground to restore the downtown area's historic appearance and installed fiber-optic cable to help attract more businesses.

Today the city is a major tourist attraction, particularly for architecture buffs like myself, and plenty of visitor traffic comes through town courtesy of Amtrak, which makes regular stops at the historic train station downtown.



Shirley Wright Cash McKee (left), daughter of Wright's Dairy Rite founder Forester Wright, is shown with the jukebox in the restaurant. Forester's grandson and granddaughter, Jim Cash and Sandy Cash, are also both involved in the restaurant's operations today.

You can still get curbside service at Wright's Dairy Rite on Route 11. Diners at Wright's Dairy Rite can still place an order via telephone, with order phones in place at each table (right).



Staunton today has become a tourist attraction and offers architecture buffs a rich palette. Concerned citizens established the Historic Staunton Foundation in 1971 to save the city's architecture. HSF, which is housed in the R.R. Smith Center for History and Art (above), has played a significant role over the last four decades in revitalizing Staunton's historic areas, helping lead the way for National Register of Historic Places designation of six Staunton districts and helping property owners downtown restore and rehabilitate their buildings. The historic train station (above, right) and the Marquis Building (right) are two of Staunton's historic structures.



The Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum.

PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON'S STAUNTON

The Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum is among Staunton's architectural treasures. Wilson, interestingly enough, is the only U.S. president to date, to have received a Ph.D. In fact, before being elected governor of New Jersey in 1910, Wilson taught for 12 years as a professor at Princeton University. And from the governorship of New Jersey, he went straight to the White House, leading the nation through the first world war.

One of my favorite parts of the museum is the display of Wilson's Pierce-Arrow limousine, which he used as president, and purchased for his own use in 1921. The automobile has undergone extensive restoration and looks much as it did when Wilson took his daily rides in it up until his death in 1924.

Wilson's father, the Rev. Joseph Wilson, came to Staunton in 1855 as the minister of Staunton's Presbyterian Church, one of the most prestigious congregations in the town. The stately Greek Revival home adjacent to the present museum was built by the church as a manse for the minister and his family, and its size and elegance exemplify the prominence of the Wilsons' congregation.

It was in this home that Wilson was born in 1856, and the bed in which he was born as well as his cradle are on display in the master bedroom. The young Wilson lived in the home with his parents, five siblings, and three hired slaves until his father was called to Georgia. Wilson visited the home again in 1912 and spent his 56th birthday there. The house itself has been a museum since 1941.

STAUNTON'S EVOLUTION AS A TRANSPORTATION HUB

Staunton is one of the oldest cities west of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. The area was first settled by Scots-Irish in the 1730s. The first Augusta County courthouse was built here in 1745, and Staunton's city streets were laid out as early as 1747.

From its beginning, the city was an important center of commerce, located as

it was along the Great Wagon Road and later the Valley Turnpike (now Route 11). In 1854, The Virginia Central Railroad came through Staunton. The railroad made Staunton an important Confederate supply depot during the Civil War.

Unlike many Virginia cities during the Civil War, Staunton escaped mass destruction. When Union General David Hunter

assumed control of the city in June 1864, he made an agreement with then-mayor Nicholas Trout to spare the town's buildings with the exception of the railroad station, warehouses, and other structures of importance to the Confederate war effort. As a result, Staunton is a treasure trove of historic architecture from the late 1700s through the early 20th century.

THE BARD'S AMERICAN HOME

Staunton is also well-known for the American Shakespeare Center on Market Street, which houses the Blackfriars Playhouse. Home to an internationally renowned theater group, it is an exact replica of William Shakespeare's indoor Elizabethan playhouse and the only re-creation of Shakespeare's indoor theater in the world. While Shenandoah Shakespeare was started 25 years ago by Mary Baldwin College professor Ralph Cohen, the troupe never had a home until 2001. With the help of funding from the city, private donors, and Mary Baldwin College, the Blackfriars Playhouse was built. Today it seats 300 and hosts half-a-dozen different plays a year.

Having grown up under the tutelage of a Shakespeare-obsessed English teacher mother who taught me to recite the rhyming couplets of the three witches in *Macbeth* before I was even

school-age, I can't help but find the spirit of the Bard in Staunton a little romantic. And that's probably why I elect to make my evening accommodations at Anne Hathaway's Cottage Bed and Breakfast, a Tudor-style thatched-roof inn just a couple minutes from downtown.

British Innkeeper Juliette Swenson actually built this historic-looking residence in 2008. "I bought a dismantled farmhouse for the old criss-cross windows and beams," says the painter and former publisher of a singles magazine, a pursuit she remarks with a laugh, "I had to give up, of course, when I married." She also bought architectural salvage pieces on eBay and has filled the home with English antiques.



The American Shakespeare Center on Market Street houses the Blackfriars Playhouse.

Her inspiration? The Blackfriars Playhouse, of course.

"I love to go to the theater," she says. Despite her origins in Bath, England, however, Swenson is very much American, having moved to San Francisco at age 18. But her roots are definitely in hospitality. Her parents owned a 21-room hotel in Bath, and Swenson has, over the course of her life, run five bed-and-breakfast inns. ■



British Innkeeper Juliette Swenson (above) built Anne Hathaway's Cottage Bed and Breakfast (upper right), a Tudor-style thatched-roof inn, in 2008. To the right and left are views of the interior room and Juliet's room, respectively.



● IF YOU GO ...

The best way to explore Staunton is on foot. Pick up a self-guided historic walking tour brochure at the **Staunton Visitors Center** (35 South New Street, 800-342-7982, www.visitstaunton.com). Staunton's biggest draw is its historic buildings, which number in the hundreds. The city has six historic districts, all on the register of National Historic Places. **The Wharf** includes the train depot as well as a variety of old warehouse buildings and the 1901 Augusta County Courthouse.

Newtown is Staunton's oldest residential neighborhood and is home to Stuart Hall, Trinity Church, and the Stonewall Jackson, Staunton's first public school. **Beverly** makes up Staunton's main drag through downtown and is home to one of the city's most identifiable landmarks, the Marquis Building, a Romanesque Revival structure with a turreted corner entrance.

Gospel Hill, at the corner of Beverly and Coalter Streets, is home to nearly 20 structures spanning the entire 19th century, including the **Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum** (20 North Coalter Street, 540-885-0897, www.woodrowwilson.org) and the stately Greek Revival Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind. Adjoining the campus of Mary Baldwin College is the **Stuart Addition**, a hilly neighborhood with Victorian row houses and the Italianate former Staunton Military Academy. The **Villages of Staunton** district makes up the grounds of the former Western State Hospital and is being redeveloped into a new residential neighborhood.

One block off Beverly is the **American Shakespeare Center and the Blackfriars Playhouse** (10 S. Market Street, 540-851-1733, www.americanshakespearecenter.com), where audiences can experience Shakespeare plays as they were originally presented with all the lights on throughout the theater, sparse sets, and actors playing several roles and even switching genders.

Beyond the downtown area is **Gypsy Hill Park** (600 Churchville Avenue), which was established in 1889. This lovely hilly park is home to a much-beloved duck pond, biking and walking trails, swimming pool, tennis courts, a train for kids to ride, and a bandstand that hosts regular free concerts.



Along the I-81 corridor is the **Frontier Culture Museum** (129 Richmond Road, 540-332-7850, www.frontiermuseum.org). In addition to its re-creations of European and American farm life, this outdoor museum also hosts special events throughout the year, including an annual Oktoberfest and Holiday Lantern Tours.

Staunton is home to a number of locally owned restaurants, many of them sourcing from area producers. Two favorites, however, are the newly opened **Ava Restaurant and Wine Bar** (103 West Beverly Street, 540-886-2851, avarestaurantwinebar.com), which has the best hummus I've ever tasted, and **Aioli** (29 N. Augusta Street, 540-885-1414, www.aiolistaunton.com) with its Mediterranean-inspired tapas menu. For overnight digs, there are a number of bed and breakfasts in town. If you're going for a Shakespeare-themed getaway, be sure to stay at **Anne**

Hathaway's Cottage Bed and Breakfast (950 West Beverly Street, 540-885-8885, www.anne-hathaways-cottage.com). For a more formal retreat, try **The Stonewall Jackson Hotel** (24 S. Market Street, 540-885-4848, www.stonewalljacksonhotel.com). ■

