



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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Hallowed Ground and the Town Antiques Built

From the well-preserved trenches of the Shenandoah Valley's last major Civil War battle to the "Antiques Capital of Virginia," you'll find plenty worth exploring along Route 11 in Middletown and Strasburg.

One of the things I like most about these road trips is the way serendipity so often intervenes. It suits me — this traveling, often with no particular aim in mind, other than to ride a certain stretch of road and stop whenever something strikes my fancy. Such was the case on a crisp fall morning when I pulled into the Cedar Creek Battlefield Headquarters just outside Middletown on the third leg of my trip south on Route 11.

On the west side of the road stretched a long expanse of field below the outline of the Allegheny Mountains, the mansion of Belle Grove standing stark and white in the distance. On the east side of the road, where I had stopped to check out some battlefield signage, I found myself joined by an easygoing gentleman in a gray plaid sports coat, salt-and-pepper hair brushed back away from his forehead, casually smoking a cigar, legs crossed as he leaned into a picnic table outside the battlefield headquarters museum. "So where are you from?" he asks between puffs.

After I tell him my haphazard agenda as a travel columnist, he is intrigued, holds out his right hand to me and says, "I'm Tom Lomax." It turns out he's the executive director of the Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation, as well as being a former U.S. Secret Service agent (he pulls out his wallet and shows me his badge). More



Middletown's Belle Grove manor house dates to 1797.

intrigued now by his former career than I am by the Civil War, I ask for stories about his service. He shakes his head, telling me he is professionally and ethically bound to tell no secrets. He began his career in service to President Jimmy Carter. Barack Obama was the last president he served before retiring in 2010.

His real love, however, is the Civil War, and he has been a reenactor since 1961. He participated in his first battle reenactment at the age of 11. Today he is a member of the 5th U.S. Artillery, Battery D. "It may be the only Union re-

enactment group in the state of Virginia," he remarks.

It is appropriate that I've landed here on the Cedar Creek battlefield this year. 2014 marks the Oct. 19 battle's 150th anniversary. Last year, Lomax tells me, the reenactment drew over 2,700 participants, and he expects even more this fall.

"We're the only battlefield left in the U.S. where you can actually do a Civil War reenactment on hallowed ground," he says. The Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation owns 19 core trenches from the battle that effectively ended the 1864 Valley Campaign of Confederate Gen. Jubal Early. One can also see original trenches and lunettes overlooking the town of Strasburg 3½ miles south of here on Route 11 at Hupp's Hill Civil War Park.

Lomax's reenactment group does more living history than reenactments, often putting on demonstrations here at Cedar Creek as well as at New Market (another battle marking its 150th anniversary this year) further south. So far, the Cedar Creek battlefield has hosted 20 reenactments.

Speaking of the Civil War, do you ever wonder where movie producers get all the props for historic films like Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*? One of the sources is Vilnis Vitols, owner of Vilnis & Co. Antiques in Strasburg, just south of the battlefield at Hupp's Hill. Vilnis, as he is known ("That is what everyone knows me by," he remarks. "With a name like that, Vilnis is enough."), says he leased about 25 period pieces for use in the *Lincoln* movie.

"Things in the movies are much more exacting now," he says. "They insist on pieces being indistinguishable from the real thing."

Vilnis shows me a circular Federal-style mirror that made an appearance in *Lincoln*. "Do you know why people used to have so many mirrors?" he asks me. "Because people didn't have electric light and needed them to reflect light." And this is a perfect example of why Vilnis does what he does — he loves illuminating the past through objects, finding the story every piece has to tell.

"This is history I'm selling," Vilnis explains. "This is how we lived. I don't consider myself a scholar, but I take a scholarly approach. Why did this object exist?"

Vilnis, whose inventory is mainly what he calls "city" antiques made in America, Great Britain, and France pre-1830, has a long personal history in the antiques business in Strasburg. He admits he first became interested in antiques because of girls — as a young man he found he could acquire quite a dapper fashion inexpensively by purchasing vintage clothing. And then he began selling vintage clothing he purchased to friends, especially the young ladies.

He ultimately ended up going into partnership with Strasburg's local king of antiques, Leo Bernstein, who opened the town's first antiques shop in 1978 and also purchased the historic Hotel Strasburg. Bernstein ultimately bought the now-famous Strasburg Emporium, once a silk mill, and Vilnis ran it for him until deciding to open his own shop. "Bernstein knew antiques would be a draw to the area," Vilnis says.

He was right. Today, this Shenandoah Valley town is loaded with antiques shops, not the least of which is the 50,000-square-foot Emporium, which a serious antiques enthusiast could wander about in for a day or more. Loaded with room after room of dealers, The Strasburg Emporium has been the centerpiece of Strasburg tourism for more than 30 years.

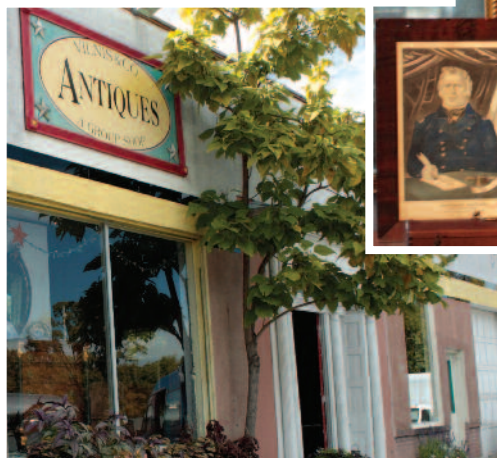


The Cedar Creek Battlefield Headquarters, Hupp's Hill Civil War Park, and trenches at the Hupp's Hill site (clockwise from upper left) provide fascinating glimpses into the rich history of the area, where so

much Civil War action took place. Tom Lomax (above), a former Secret Service agent, is executive director of the Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation.



Vilnis Vitols (above left), owner of Vilnis & Co. Antiques in Strasburg, provided antique props for use in the movie *Lincoln*, including the mirror above. He loves illuminating the past through objects, finding the story every piece has to tell. "I don't consider myself a scholar, but I take a scholarly approach."





The Hotel Strasburg, on South Holiday Street, is a fixture in the northern Shenandoah Valley town. Its amenities include a dining room where visitors can have breakfast, lunch and dinner.



Emporium manager Shelby Collins says she sees some 50,000 shoppers come through the place every year, many of them from Europe, Russia, even Japan.

Collins, who has been working at the Emporium for 15 years, says she came to the job quite accidentally. "I was a potter here in town in a working studio, and I needed a part-time job," she laughs. She worked with

Bernstein until he died in 2008, and three years ago, she took over management of the Emporium, which remains part and parcel of why Strasburg is known as "the antiques capital of Virginia." ■



Shelby Collins (above) is manager of The Strasburg Emporium, which she says attracts as many as 50,000 visitors annually.



● IF YOU GO ...

Be sure to visit the **Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau** online (www.visitwinchester.va.com), as well as the Shenandoah County tourism website (www.shenandoahtravel.org) for an overview of the region and detailed information on attractions.

Begin your exploration of this region's rich Civil War history at the **Cedar Creek Battlefield Foundation Headquarters** (8437 Valley Pike, Middletown, www.cedarcreekbattlefield.org).

Hupp's Hill Civil War Park (33229 Old Valley Pike, Strasburg, 540-465-5884) also has a museum and walking trails interpreting the still-visible lines of defense overlooking Strasburg.

The 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Cedar Creek is scheduled for Oct. 15-20, 2014. Also, be sure to visit **Belle Grove** (336 Belle Grove Road, Middletown, 540-869-2028, www.bellegrove.org), once a 7,500-acre plantation originally owned by Major Isaac Hite, Jr., and his wife, Nelly, sister of President James Madison.

Explore the antiques shops of Strasburg. The must-see is, of course, **The Strasburg Emporium** (160 North Massanutten Street, 540-465-3711, www.thestrasburgemporium.com). If you spend the day here and get the munchies, the Emporium has its own **Café Sandwich Shop** on site. If fine antique furniture and accessories pre-dating the Civil War strike your fancy, then pay a visit to **Vilnis & Co. Antiques** (329 North Massanutten Street, 540-465-4405, www.vilnisantiques.net).

While you're in town, you might also want to get a taste of local history at **The Strasburg Museum** (440 East King Street, 540-465-3175, www.strasburgmuseum.org). Should you choose to stay the night, then make reservations at **The Hotel Strasburg** (213 South Holliday Street, 540-465-9191, www.hotelstrasburg.com), which also has a dining room serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner. ■