



This year *Cooperative Living* is taking a road trip along Route 360 as it crosses Virginia from the Chesapeake Bay to North Carolina. Each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.

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# Trailing Tobacco on Route 360

*Halifax County has a deep heritage in tobacco, and even though the cash crop is not nearly as prevalent along the highway here as it once was, the history lives on in South Boston.*

As I zip past the unusually quiet grounds of the South Boston Speedway on Route 360, I head into the historic district of the town once known simply as the “South Boston Depot.”



Local NASCAR aficionados know South Boston Speedway as the home of the “best short-track racing in the country.”

Halifax County’s tobacco farmers, who were, by the last third of the 19th century, able to sell their product up and down the East Coast through local tobacco

merchants like W.B. Ellison and W.L. Wade. For decades, the region’s tobacco harvests made South Boston a thriving center of commerce, but with the Great Depression, its dominance of the national market began to fade.

Given its start as a stop on the Richmond and Danville Railroad in 1854, it’s hard to imagine that at the turn of the last century, this was the center of the second-largest bright leaf tobacco market in the United States.

Though the architecture in town is telling. Many of the old tobacco warehouses, factories, and prizeries still stand in this historic village on the banks of the Dan River.

South Boston’s history extends all the way back to the Revolutionary War, when Gen. Nathaniel Greene retreated from the army of Gen. Cornwallis in 1781 at a ferry site just below the town. But it was the railroad that brought prosperity to South Boston, opening up market access for

## PRESERVING THE PAST

Tobacco culture remains here, however. As I drive Route 360, I see many old log tobacco barns, some abandoned, some turned into sheds, others into character-laden cottages, where tobacco was once cured. Local farmers still grow this most American of cash crops, though its cultivation has certainly lessened in the last several decades.

Beth Coates, director of The South Boston-Halifax County Museum, remembers growing up on a tobacco farm, training early under the tutelage of her father, who is now 88 years old. “At the time, I thought Dad was trying to kill me,” Coates recalls of hard labor on the farm. “I started driving a tractor when I was 5 years old. Dad taught me how to work.”

She admits that South Boston’s tobacco heritage is not as omnipresent as she would like, noting that her own son once thought when he saw a tobacco field that the farmer was growing cabbage. “You can only farm tobacco now if you’re a big-time farmer,” she remarks.

Coates hopes to be a part of bringing tobacco heritage back to life. The museum is currently working on a tobacco exhibit scheduled to open before the end of the year. The museum already covers some of the region’s tobacco history, including an exhibit on the local Slate Seed Company, which, by 1916, produced 90 percent of the world’s tobacco seed. By 1907, South Boston was selling over 13 million pounds of tobacco annually.

Among the tobacco industry’s historic structures that have been carefully preserved is the Export Leaf Tobacco Building, which today houses the Southern Virginia Higher Education Center, and the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company Prizery, now home to South Boston’s acclaimed local theater.

Despite its modern status as theater and arts center, The Prizery’s history is well-preserved, the main floor of the building showcasing a tobacco press, where leaves were “prized” into 1,000-pound hogshead barrels for shipping. The Prizery’s managing director, Alison Streeter, tells me that between 1907 and the 1960s, all of Halifax County’s tobacco came through this building, which re-opened in 2005 as a community arts center following a \$7 million renovation.

The South Boston-Halifax County Museum (right) and director Beth Coates (below). Coates hopes to be a part of bringing tobacco heritage back to life. The museum is currently working on a tobacco exhibit scheduled to open before the end of this year.



The Prizery (left) is now home to South Boston’s acclaimed local theater. Alison Streeter and Chris Jones (above) are the managing director and artistic director of The Prizery. The Prizery’s main floor includes a tobacco exhibit (above, middle right), including a tobacco press, where leaves were “prized” into 1,000-pound hogshead barrels for shipping.

## GET OUTDOORS ...

Not far from Norfolk Southern’s track and the South Boston depot, one can walk, bike, or horseback ride an abandoned section of the Class I line’s track, formerly part of the Richmond and Danville Railroad, along the **Tobacco Heritage Trail**. The trailhead begins at Cotton Mill Park just below The Prizery and off Railroad Avenue.

Adjacent to the trailhead are two crumbling brick towers, the last remains of the old Halifax Damask cotton mills. (But don’t

expect these historic structures to remain here much longer; the town of South Boston is looking to demolish them given they have no money to restore them.)

As you walk this wooded 2.5-mile trail, you’ll see an old sluice gate, a duck impoundment, and the Diamond Hill Slave Cemetery while also enjoying views of the Dan River. The trail ends at Berry Hill Plantation. For more information, visit [tobaccoheritagetrail.org](http://tobaccoheritagetrail.org).



## FROM WAREHOUSE TO ARTS CENTER

In the summer, The Prizery puts on three theater productions of its own with the help of young actors chosen from theater schools around the country and trained under Artistic Director Chris Jones. During the rest of the year, the theater hosts touring companies providing one-night productions. "We try to maintain a balance between what people want and what they may not know they like," Streeter says with a smile.

Streeter's job has been a dream come true. She studied music and theater in college, but spent the last 13 years in South Boston as a school therapist. While she volunteered at The Prizery for many years, it was only last December that she came on board as a full-time employee.

While Streeter shows me around the building, I can't help but admit that my favorite spot is the costume design studio where Ginny Bogart, with the help of some college students, designs and sews costumes for every single locally produced act on The Prizery's stage. Bogart has been designing costumes since 2001 and has costumed 55 shows.

Today she is putting together attire for the Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*, and I look through the racks of colorful, filmy, whimsical costumes, imagining Bogart must have one of the more delightful jobs in the world. Bogart chuckles at this notion of mine. "Summer theater is very stressful," she says. "We literally put three huge shows together in five weeks' time."

Bogart points out that 95 percent of the costumes for this summer's productions have never been on stage previously. Bogart doesn't make everything, however. Local residents donate old clothes, too, that she often repurposes for the stage. "People get excited when they see something they've donated on the stage," she remarks.

The Prizery is also home to an exhibit on the Crossing of the Dan, which records the history of Gen. Nathaniel Greene's orders to move troops out of North Carolina (while tempting Lord Cornwallis' army to follow and get further and further



The interior of The Prizery Theater (left), where local and touring productions are staged throughout the year. Costume-designer Ginny Bogart (below), with the help of college students, designs and sews costumes for each of the locally produced acts staged at The Prizery.

away from its supply lines). On Feb. 14, 1781, a portion of Greene's army crossed the river at Boyd's Ferry. A short walking trail to a monument commemorating the event stands on the riverbanks below South Boston, as does a replica "ferry" from the 18th century. Greene's strategic retreat ultimately saved the American army while depleting Cornwallis of nearly 50 percent of his troops. ■



## ● IF YOU GO ...

If you visit South Boston, get your bearings at the **South Boston Halifax County Visitor Center** (1180 Bill Tuck Highway, 434-572-2543, [www.gohalifaxva.com](http://www.gohalifaxva.com)). If you're a race fan, be sure to take in some action at the **South Boston Speedway** (1188 James D. Hagood Highway, 434-572-4947, [www.southbostonspeedway.com](http://www.southbostonspeedway.com)), a NASCAR short track on which more than a few racing legends have trained. In fact, Halifax County is home stomping ground for Jeff and Ward Burton. Racing season runs April through September.

Be sure to take in a show at **The Prizery** (700 Bruce St., 434-572-8339, [www.prizery.com](http://www.prizery.com)) while you're in town, too, and tour the first-level exhibits on Halifax County's tobacco heritage and its hosting of the American Tobacco Festival from 1935 to 1941. The event often drew as many as 100,000 people to South Boston. Get even more insight on local history at **The South Boston-Halifax County Museum** (1540

Wilborn Ave., 434-572-9200, [www.sbhcmuseum.org](http://www.sbhcmuseum.org)).

Take a short side trip north on Route 501, and grab lunch at the **Pack House Café** (121 South Main Street, 434-476-6744) in Halifax. They serve up succulent sandwiches, wraps, and salads, including a pretty divine chicken salad with cranberries and almonds. And be sure to sample their homemade tortilla chips with spicy house-made dipping sauce. Or if you're in town for dinner, check out the **Molasses Grill** (63 South Main Street, 434-476-6265, [www.molassesgrill.com](http://www.molassesgrill.com)), which serves upscale southern cuisine like bourbon-and-molasses-grilled pork tenderloin and cornmeal-encrusted chicken.

Spend the night at **The Berry Hill Resort and Conference Center** (3105 River Road, 434-517-7000, [www.berryhillresort.com](http://www.berryhillresort.com)), a former plantation and National Historic Landmark turned into a luxury resort just outside South Boston. Dine in the former mansion house, and spend the night sleeping in a reproduction canopy bed. Guests at the resort can enjoy an on-site spa as well as swimming and tennis. ■