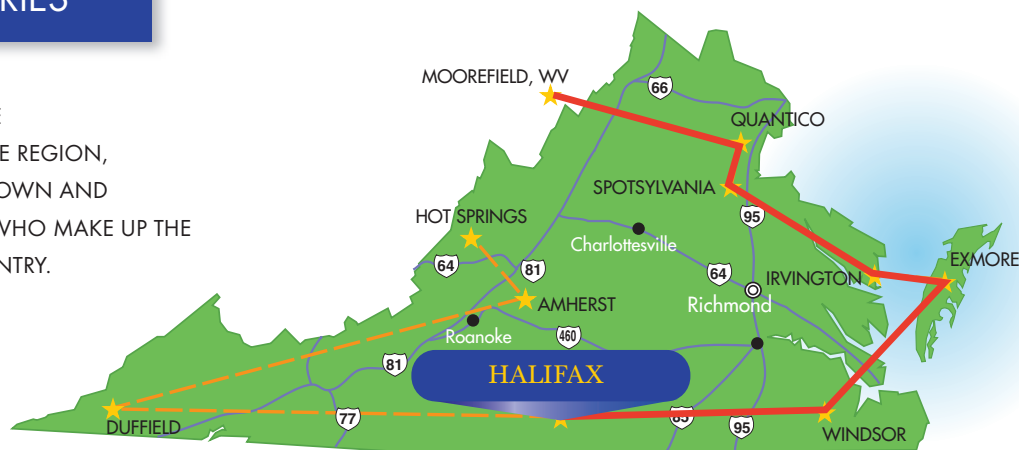


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2007, WE'RE MAKING OUR WAY AROUND THE REGION, EACH ISSUE VISITING A SMALL TOWN AND MEETING SOME OF THE FOLKS WHO MAKE UP THE HEART OF ELECTRIC CO-OP COUNTRY. ON THIS YEAR'S SEVENTH STOP, WE'LL BE ...



DOWN HOME IN

HALIFAX

BY TUCKER MCLAUGHLIN, JR., CONTRIBUTING WRITER • PHOTOS COURTESY OF TUCKER MCLAUGHLIN, JR.

THIS COUNTY SEAT OFFERS
SMALL-TOWN CHARM
WITH BIG-CITY PROXIMITY.

It seems appropriate that a small, stately Southern town that's had four separate names in its lifetime continues to weather change, while preserving respect for its heritage.

Such is the case with Halifax, which emerged from southern Virginia's economic downturn more successfully than some towns and communities in the region.

This is a safe, tranquil place where residents and visitors enjoy daily walks, watching the local Dixie Youth baseball league in the spring, and the magnificent change of seasons in autumn.

Halifax is home to the Halifax County War Memorial, a place of reverence honoring the sacrifices of the county's war dead dating back to the Revolutionary War. Halifax also has a trail marker across from the War Memorial recalling a snapshot of history from the Civil War. This is part of a self-guided driving tour that enhances visitors' appreciation of history in this region.

The marker recalls how John Powell, the headmaster at Halifax Academy, called together his young boys to fight for the Confederacy. Together with the Home Guard, the old men who drilled in Halifax, this Rebel force fought in June 1864 to defend the Staunton River Bridge and Confederate supply lines from Union raiders led by Union generals Wilson and Kautz. Halifax also has a historical marker at the Mary Bethune governmental complex on the state's commemorative Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail. The Bethune complex was once an all-black school, and has made its own distinctive contributions to the region.

History is only part of the appeal of Halifax.

Carl Espy, town manager here since August 2003 and a native of Savannah, Ga., is married to Halifax native **Bee Edmunds**. Espy set out to make his mark in professional acting and lived in New York City, but was captivated by Halifax.

"It seems like a step back in time, and yet you're still an hour's drive from Research Triangle. You're very close to Richmond and Washington, D.C.," says Espy. "The appeal is, this is right next door, but it almost seems a world away."

Naturally, there are small-town issues and problems here, as in most places. But Halifax has demonstrated resilient qualities.





TOWN OF HALIFAX PHOTO



TOWN OF HALIFAX PHOTO



J. DAN SHAW/ HALIFAX COUNTY DEPT. OF TOURISM PHOTO



THE NEWS RECORD PHOTO

AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: 1,389 (approximately)

LAND AREA: 4.35 square miles

ESTABLISHED: In 1818 as Banister; later called Halifax Courthouse, then Houston; became Halifax in 1920.

ELEVATION: 300-600 feet

FUN FACT: The Halifax courthouse was built in 1838 by master designer and builder Dabney Cosby, Sr., and son, Dabney Minor Cosby. The elder Cosby worked with Thomas Jefferson on the construction of UVA and participated in the design and construction of courthouses in several other Virginia counties.

The town, which serves as the seat of local government for Halifax County, is home to three separate police departments, two pool associations, the Chastain Home for Gentlewomen, and a eclectic business community with a personal touch. Halifax also has a historic district and a lake with recreational opportunities on its border.

With assistance from officials in Halifax County, the town is involved in an exciting revitalization project that has transformed the downtown area.

"Through economic downturn with textiles and tobacco, the community had seen

better days," says Espy. "This was an effort to remove economic, visual and physical blight, and bring economic opportunities back to the historic county seat."

Streetscape improvements, efforts to calm the flow of traffic through the main artery of town, and work to make Halifax a more pedestrian-friendly environment are part of the revitalization efforts, says Espy.

Betsy Throckmorton, co-owner of Halifax Floral and Framing Studio and an official in the local business association, says, "Any events we wanted to hold like the parade, we didn't have enough light to have

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The historic Halifax County Courthouse. • Great downtown shopping continues south of the railroad tracks at Toots Creek Antiques Mall. • Local officials commemorate the 50th anniversary of 'Brown v. Board of Education' with the unveiling of the Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail. • Halifax County War Memorial Park. • Town Manager Carl Espy (right) and Assistant County Administrator Jerry Lovelace (left) confer with survey crew before construction.

one at night. It's just beautiful with the new lighting we have.

"The quality of the sidewalks, they're much larger. They're not uneven ... We had big holes. We actually had a few people that were injured from tripping over the sidewalks and now it's just beautiful," adds Throckmorton.

Halifax has new ideas on how to celebrate its rebirth, including a wine festival planned for September 8. Fresh landscaping downtown and other improvements enhance the look of the business area, and broadband Internet access has been



made available in an effort to attract young professionals.

The town's business district has evolved, with a mix of professional offices and longtime locally owned businesses. An expansion across Toot's Creek past the railroad tracks and up Spencer's Hill is home to a unique selection of businesses.

Steve Schopen, an import from the southern part of England and a co-owner of Molasses Grill restaurant, explains the appeal of Halifax.

"Small-town atmosphere," he observes. "No traffic, clean air, but you've got all the attributes of a larger town with South Boston right next door to you."

His wife **Karen** elaborates, "One of the reasons we picked Halifax to open up our restaurant was we had wanted to be part of a community that was reinventing itself. And with the changes going on in Halifax, it's a perfect location for that. It's a community that's dedicated to its history, but is dedicated also to its future."

Another longtime resident, **Margaret Covington**, drove nearly 200 miles to the area to find a job. She has since raised a family with her husband, Bill, an official with the local school system.

She discovered "this beautiful, historic village ... They valued their history, the family sagas and the security of knowing each other," says Covington.

Thirty years later, Covington has found "there is a sense of pride in the community that unites and promotes preservation as well as progress.

"There are a lot of remarkable leaders around here who have done a lot of things to protect the environment and the well-being of a lot of people," says Covington. "People reach out in this community to do things to help other people."

Halifax has its own special niche in Southside Virginia's history.



Espy explains that Halifax, the county seat for more than 200 years, had once been the trade center of the county. The courthouse is a valuable source for local history, according to him.

"It was also known as a river town, because there were navigable bateau sluices along the Banister River, just north of the town," says Espy.

The town was first known as Banister Town, according to local historians, and then Halifax Court House. There's some speculation among historians that there were actually separate locations that grew together as one.

"The third name of the town was Houston, for the treasurer of the construction company that built the Lynchburg and Durham rail line," says Espy. Houston was renamed Halifax in 1920.

There are some surprising historic facts here of which even longtime residents may not be aware.

For instance, "Below the hydroelectric dam (on the Banister) ... there are a number of bateau sluices and Native American wing dams that wind downstream four miles to Terry's Bridge," says Espy. These are some of the best-preserved bateau sluices in the Commonwealth.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Margaret Covington: "There is a sense of pride in the community that unites ..." • Steve Schopen: "No traffic, clean air, but you've got all the attributes of a larger town ..." • Betsy Throckmorton: "It's just beautiful with the new lighting we have ..." • Frances Daniel: "I find the people to be ... quite warm here."

"The Banister River and Banister Lake comprise our northern boundary to a certain extent," says Espy. The lake is home to low-key, relaxing recreational activities, and has a presence on the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail.

"There is a unique sense of place that has not been diminished over the years, in spite of downturns in the economy, and it reflects, I think, the strong heritage and resiliency of the people," says Espy.

Like most small towns, Halifax has a vibrant spiritual life, with historic churches, and, at the same time, a fascinating collection of characters and people who have made an

indelible mark on the place. The town has produced leaders in a variety of pursuits, both on the state and national level.

Frances M. Daniel, who came here 40 years ago, left the urban life when she followed her husband, town councilman **Cabell Daniel**, to Halifax.

"I find the people to be ... quite warm here," says Ms. Daniel, who was a longtime schoolteacher. She speaks in front of her fruit and vegetable stand.

"I've enjoyed the country life, because I never experienced so-called 'country living' until I came here, and I've learned a lot," adds Ms. Daniel, a lay reader in her church.

Halifax has its own special mood.

"If you were to walk through any part of town, you sense a feeling of beauty ... You think about what were the people like who built these houses? What were they like who kept these yards up, these trees? The whole natural scene to me is just something that can be therapeutic on any day," says Covington, who strolls through Halifax frequently.

"And it doesn't matter what part of town you walk in, you will sense that the people take pride in who they are, and ... the life in a small town," she concludes. ■

IF YOU GO...

Halifax features a wonderful, diverse shopping district, including antique shops and several restaurants. Downtown, the highly regarded **Molasses Grill** has already established an excellent reputation (www.molassesgrill.com).

Just across the railroad tracks, the unique shopping experience continues at **Spencer Hill Village**, which includes the **Toot's Creek Antiques Mall** and **Molly's Restaurant**. The town's business community is proud of its hospitality, unique shopping experience, and down-home attention to visitors.

Halifax also has a new attraction coming soon. Plans are underway for the first-ever **Wine Festival**, scheduled for Saturday, September 8. The festival will feature wineries from across the state, and should prove to be a popular draw.

The appeal of Halifax includes leisurely strolls through the sparkling downtown area, around the historic courthouse, and through the **Mountain Road historic district**. Mountain Road is lined with notable nineteenth-century homes and buildings. For more information, go online to www.oldhalifax.com.

Low-key recreational opportunities are available on **Banister Lake**. The boat landing above the dam is on the Virginia Department of Game and Inland

Fisheries' Birding and Wildlife Trail. For more information on the trail, visit www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt.

History buffs will enjoy the **Halifax County War Memorial**. The **Virginia Civil War Trails** marker located across from the **War Memorial Park** describes the Wilson-Kautz Raid, and Halifax's contribution to Civil War history. For details on the raid, visit www.civilwartraveler.com/virginia/va-retreat/wilson-kautz.html.

Halifax also has its own chapter in African-American history with the **Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail**, unveiled at the Mary B. Bethune Complex in May 2004. Learn more about the trail at www.varetreat.com/civilRights.asp. The **L.E. Coleman African-American Museum**, housing art, history and culture, is located two miles west of the courthouse on Scenic Byway VA 360.

Halifax is part of a significant tourism renaissance across the region (www.gohalifaxva.com), with visitors to the area drawn to **The Prizery** in historic downtown South Boston, the **South Boston Historical Museum**, **Berry Hill Plantation**, **South Boston Speedway**, **Virginia International Raceway** and other attractions. If you make plans to visit or would like to learn more about the appeal of the town of Halifax and its surroundings, select "Around Town" and "Area Links" on the town's Web page, online at www.townofhalifax.com (site by Halifax Web Worx; powered by Pure Internet). ■