



LEXINGTON

By
Katie Lectcher Lyle

Photography by Hay Hardy

The Maury River outside Lexington

Lexington, Virginia, at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is one of the beautiful small towns in America. With brick, tree-lined sidewalks, horse-drawn carriages, quiet narrow streets, and cheerful hanging baskets of flowers, Lexington has managed to preserve its Revolutionary and Civil War heritage. The town boasts two beautiful colleges, each unique in design: Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University. The entire downtown, with its period lampposts and variety of antique and gift stores, clothing shops, restaurants, and boutiques, is protected by stringent architectural review codes, as are the older residential streets of this town of four thousand.

The town is scattered with charming bed-and-breakfast establishments, such as The Victorian Inn, only a block from downtown. Purchased in 1998 by Donna Welsh, the large house was built by the son-in-law of one of Stonewall Jackson's colonels, and a nineteenth century mayor of Lexington. Donna completely restored the house using genuine Victorian wallpaper and period furniture and fixtures.

The passage of time and the construction of major interstate highways that cross just a mile north of Lexington have unavoidably affected this gem of a town, but until twenty-five years ago, Lexington had as many museums and libraries as it had stoplights. There are many green areas inside the city limits, and the citizenry boasts many lovely private gardens. The whole of the downtown area is on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Lexington has in recent years become something of an art center, spawning several galleries that offer art ranging from traditional to avant-garde. Tourists can refresh themselves at the pleasant cafes and eateries that line the downtown



The Southern Inn on Main Street

streets. Or they can dine elegantly at the excellent Southern Inn, the Sheridan Livery, and the Willson-Walker House. Tourists from New York are known to shop the small boutiques, the sophisticated bookstores and the antique malls of Lexington.

The downtown area is compact and easy to walk, and parking is accessible. In a day, one can visit on foot the VMI Museum, the Robert E. Lee Chapel Museum, as well as Stonewall Jackson's House and Museum, all historical repositories of great interest for Civil War buffs. The George C. Marshall museum adds further appeal for World War II veterans and devotees. Also, the Rockbridge Historical Society Museum is open Tuesday-Saturday, with ever-changing exhibits on various aspects of the history of the area.

Breathtaking Natural Bridge is only eleven miles south on Route 11, with its zoo and the Natural Bridge Caverns. The complex boasts an interesting histori-

cal wax museum and a reconstructed Monacan Indian village. Ghost-seekers can thrill to the creepy ghost tour of Lexington. Horse people flock to the state-of-the-art Virginia Horse Center, with year-round equestrian events.

"I've seen a fair piece of the world, but I've never seen a fairer piece than Lexington," wrote Gary Jennings, the author of *Aztec*, *The Sojourner* and many other books, who lived in Lexington during his later years.

Within three hours of Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia, and two hours from Richmond, Lexington offers endless outdoors sporting opportunities, including fly-fishing, lake fishing, hunting, horseback riding, canoeing and tubing, mountain biking and even spelunking.

The Blue Ridge Parkway and George Washington National Forest, as



Joe Malloy fishing at a mountain stream up near the Appalachian Trail

well as the Appalachian Trail, are only minutes from the center of this Shenandoah Valley town. In fact, roughly twenty percent of Rockbridge County, of which Lexington is the county seat, is public land. This gives sportsmen excellent access to the wooded portions of the Valley and the nearby Alleghenies, and to its streams and rivers. Private local landowners are, as a rule, friendly and generous to sportsmen.

The People

Otis Mead

Otis Mead, one of the Shenandoah Valley's most successful realtors, has sold and resold many of the area's renowned farms and houses, as well as

such distant properties as Berry Hill Plantation in Halifax and Meems Bottom in Mount Airy. Otis discovered Lexington during his college years. To get to Hampden-Sydney during the fifties from his home in Low Moor, he drove right through the middle of Lexington, where Earl N. Levitt men's clothing store on

Nelson Street lured him in. Along the way, Otis became enamored of Lexington. When he got out of the army, Otis managed Levitt's store for two years, after which he joined a local real estate agency owned by William Kinnear. When Bill Kinnear retired, Otis became an independent agent, and the rest is history.

Otis Mead in his office in downtown Lexington.



As the real estate market began to pick up in the late sixties, Mead increasingly arranged sales of larger properties in and around Rockbridge County for buyers looking for “the quintessential small college town.” The appeal has been to people who found Lexington to have preserved the small-town qualities that many other towns this size have lost. “Lexington,” Mead says, “is like good wine: The older it gets, the better it gets.”

Mead notes that the coming of the Virginia Horse Center has brought Lexington into focus and has attracted people to the area – though fewer than half his sales are to people drawn to the equestrian scene. Mead is convinced that the Horse Center has helped make the entire county more conservation-conscious, and finds black and white fences around neat green pastures to be far more appealing than the rusty barbed wire that once prevented Rockbridge cattle from roaming.
Joe Malloy

Meet Joe Malloy, trout fisherman. A librarian at Sweetbriar College, Malloy returned to Rockbridge County because of his love of the mountains, the clear streams and clean rivers. Originally from Lynchburg, Joe lived for a while in Beaufort, South Carolina, but tired of the brackish water, and missed the Blue Ridge. Joe now wades the streams and rivers near Lexington for the trout he loves, casting his flyrod on a year-round basis. In the spring and fall, he catches (and releases) fine rainbow trout and native brookies.

When the water warms, Malloy fishes for native sunfish, also known as bluegills and yellow-bellies, and for red-eyes, or rock bass, and for smallmouth bass. Joe fishes flies exclusively, artfully dropping his artificial patterns on the water’s surface in the manner of mayflies, caddis flies, and stone flies - the favored foods of trout.

Joe tries to fish at least once a

week. In addition, he teaches fly-fishing to his students at Sweetbriar and at nearby Hampden-Sydney College. He purchases most of his specialized fishing equipment from Angler’s Lane in Lynchburg, Murray’s Fly Shop in Edinburg, and from the Albemarle Angler and Mountain River Outfitters in Charlottesville.

Malloy loves Rockbridge County for the “Trophy Trout Streams,” spring-fed streams of cold limestone water, where the trout grow large. In these special regulation waters, fisherman can take only one or two fish a day, which must exceed a minimum length. Some of Joe’s favorite streams include Buffalo Creek near Lexington, the mountain streams in the George Washington National Forest and the Shenandoah National Park, Mossy Creek near Bridgewater, and the streams and rivers in nearby Bath and Highland Counties.

Lucy Turner with the Rockbridge Hunt



Lucy Turner

W.E. “Tex” Tilson started the Rockbridge Hunt over fifty years ago with his pack of foxhounds – which are never called dogs. His sizable farm, Broadview, and the farms of neighboring landowners were incorporated into The Hunt. Lucy Turner, real estate agent, has been a member of the Rockbridge Hunt for over thirty years. Today the Rockbridge Hunt encompasses over sixteen thousand acres in three separate territories.

Though membership to the Hunt is by invitation only, visitors can be accommodated if invited by members. There is a “capping fee” for guests. However, spectators, or *hilltoppers*, may drive to various points along the hunting route to watch the hounds and riders. Any member of the Rockbridge Hunt may be contacted for specifics.

These days, says Turner, hunting is a chase sport. It is evident that the Rockbridge Hunt practices fair sportsmanship. The hunting season is limited to fall and winter, the coldest months. In the spring and summer, hunts are forbidden while the birth and raising of fox kits occur.

There are many hunts when the hounds do not pick up a fox’s scent. But Turner quickly adds that a “blank day” is no less successful than a hunt that does find a fox. Usually, Turner says, the fox “outfoxes” the hounds. The object of a good hunt, in Turner’s view, is to have a good chase – and to have the fox get away.

James J. Crawford, Jr.

James J. Crawford, Jr. lives to hunt turkeys. A 1958 Washington and Lee geology graduate and originally from Strasburg, Virginia, Jay retired to Lexington from a career in the oil business that took him all over the world to 13 different countries, including China twice. A



James Crawford with his turkey

lifelong hunter who’s been cooking venison and squirrel since the age of thirteen, he chose to attend Washington and Lee University because of the proximity to game and fish. Crawford describes himself as having always had “a gun in one hand and a fishing rod in the other.” Throughout his professional years, he continued to hunt, especially wild turkeys, arranging stateside visits to coincide with spring gobbler season in Virginia. Crawford buys equipment locally from Grizzly Archery in Buena Vista, and from Orvis in Roanoke. He orders his camouflage clothing from Realtree and other companies.

“Turkey hunting borders on being a religion – with a lot of side benefits,” James remarked. “There are periods of what I’d call intense activity, as you sit in the woods and call the turkeys to you. I remember I was sitting in the woods one day up in Bratton’s Run, on the second ridge of the mountains - just sitting there, not talking to the turkey at the time - when I looked up, and there was this single rhododendron flower right in front of me, that red blossom at the end of the limb with the dappled greenery, and a white dogwood

tree in blossom behind it . . .” His voice trails off, awed in the memory.

In a recent publication, *Unique Homes* called Lexington, “A pocket of serenity amid the sprawl, clutter and homogenization that have overwhelmed so many American vacation spots.” One local calls the town, “unflappably down to earth.” Otis Mead, grinning slyly, simply describes Lexington as “country cosmopolitan.”

Katie Letcher Lyle is the author of sixteen books. Her short fiction has appeared in many magazines, including *Viva*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. She lives in Lexington, Virginia.

PLACES TO VISIT

The Southern Inn
37 South Main Street
Lexington, Virginia 24450

The Victorian Inn
203 Jackson Avenue
Lexington, Virginia 24450

Queen Victoria Fine English Antiques
603 North Lee Highway
Lexington, Virginia 24450

Cocoa Mill Chocolate Company
115 West Nelson Street
Lexington, VA

The Willson-Walker House
30 North Main Street
Lexington, VA

Stonewall Jackson's House and Museum
Rockbridge Historical Society Museum

SPORTING STORES

Dominion Outdoors
Stuarts Draft, Virginia

Grizzly Archery
Buena Vista, VA

Orvis
Roanoke, VA

Murray's Fly Shop
Edinburgh, VA

Albemarle Angler
Charlottesville, VA

Mountain River Outdoors
Charlottesville, Va

Drake waterfowl systems
www.drakewaterfowl.com