

Winchester

Reflecting the New Face of Rural America

by

William T. Semple



Stonewall Jackson's Headquarters Museum

Seventy-five miles west of Washington, DC in the northern Shenandoah Valley of Virginia is a small city that is not only one of the oldest in Virginia but is of historic importance to the development of our country. Settled in 1732 by a small band of Pennsylvania Quakers, the little village provided shelter to explorers, trappers and traders heading south to the Carolinas; served as an outpost for George Washington; opened up the west to thousands of wagon trains along Route 11, known as the “Great Wagon Road”; and became a strategic prize that inspired three battles during the Civil War, changing hands more than 70 times—or once every three weeks—during the course of that historic conflict.

From the early days of its existence, however, the town has rarely been thought of as a destination—too far away for many to visit for an afternoon or to live permanently and commute into town or even to own a country house. It has been a place on the horizon, a place to pass

through—to load up the wagon train or, more recently, to fill up with gas or stay at a motel—and then push on to somewhere else.

But today all of that is changing. Rapidly. The inexorable westward movement of Washington, DC’s economic and population centers, the aging of America, immigration, the extraordinary growth and diversification of Shenandoah University, the rapid expansion of the Valley Health regional system, and the topography’s natural beauty are combining to turn this town into a destination not too dissimilar from Charlottesville, with the challenges and rewards that accompany unexpected popularity.

Winchester is one of 36 cities recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia as distinct from the counties in which they are located. However, offices for the County of Frederick are also located in Winchester, serving a region of more than 475 square miles noted for its agrarian beauty, rolling country side, and views of

the Blue Ridge. The city is considering merging into the county, but according to those who should know, this may not happen for a long time, if ever.

Its population of 21,000 does not make Winchester a large city. But it seems much bigger. Heavily traveled Interstate 81 runs north/south along the town’s eastern edge, and six other major highways and byways pass through, including Route 50, which George Washington surveyed from the office he established in Winchester. Like many towns including Charlottesville, Winchester is a tale of two cities: a historic section that memorializes the past, and everything else that has built up around it. Old Town is an eclectic mix of antiques, fine furnishings, gift items, local and regional works of art, fine clothing and the boutique restaurants that are common to downtown pedestrian outdoor malls. However, the historic section, a 45-block area listed on the National Historic Register, also features Stonewall Jackson’s Headquarters Museum, George



The Loudoun Street Pedestrian Mall

Washington’s Office Museum, the Old Courthouse Civil War Museum, and the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum. The Loudoun Street Pedestrian Mall recently earned a listing on the National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary for successfully combining history, century-old buildings and museums.

Old Town hosts many annual activities including an all-season farmers’ market, First Fridays Celebration of the Arts (monthly), Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival (May), Bluemont Summer Concert Series (summer), Christmas in Old Town events (December), and the New Year’s Eve First Night Winchester celebration. The author would be remiss not to mention the new Patsy Cline museum. After many years and much struggle, Winchester has found a way to honor its most famous singer and musician.

But while Old Town has worked hard to preserve the past and in so doing

also attract residents and tourists downtown, the rest of the area has changed dramatically, and not always for the good, in

the view of some old-timers.

The primary business of Frederick County used to be apples,

The downtown historic district is filled with interesting architecture.



marked each year by the famous Apple Blossom Festival. But underlying this festive occasion is the sad fact that the orchards have rapidly disappeared. Mike Foreman, the retired clerk for the city of Richmond and one of the area's most highly regarded local historians, says, "About 20 years ago, we may have had 35 to 45 orchards. Today, we may have 15. Twenty years ago, the county accounted for 45 million bushels of apples; today perhaps 10 million bushels are produced."

Second-generation owners of farmland are virtually unheard of. This is a problem that plagues most rural communities, as farming has become a consolidated industry and the next generation moves away. Many of the old farms have been vulnerable to development, inspired by one singular fact: Winchester has become a magnet for retirees. Developments have sprouted all around the region catering to their needs, included a 1,500-home community now under construction. Retirees like the region: services are easily accessible, and entertainment is local. One of the signs of this change has been the rapid increase in local golf courses.

In 1991, Joel Garreau, a feature writer for *The Washington Post*, produced a seminal study of urban activity, "Edge City," in which he wrote:

Edge Cities represent the third wave of our lives pushing into new frontiers in this half century. First, we moved our homes out past the traditional idea of what constituted a city. This was the suburbanization of America, especially after World War II.

Then we wearied of returning downtown for the necessities of life, so we moved our marketplaces out to where we lived. This was the malling of America, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, we have moved our means of creating wealth, the essence of urbanism—our jobs—out to where most of us have lived and shopped for two generations. That has led to the rise of Edge City.



The Marker-Miller Orchards outside Winchester produce 21 varieties of apples and nine varieties of peaches.

Winchester is NOT an "edge city." But it has inspired what legitimately could be called a fourth wave of lives pushing into new frontiers: Instead of farmers growing apples, a new labor force created by immigration is feeding the Edge City, replacing the labor that urban and suburban Washington has lost with skilled and unskilled labor living in rural America where life is cheaper and travel is a given.

"The number of Hispanics in Winchester," Mr. Foreman says, "has probably increased ten-fold. This is not a bad thing: They are very hard working, loyal to their families, and are providing the labor no one else around here wants to do, especially construction and farm work. The problem Winchester faces, however, is how to provide affordable housing to this new labor force. The city itself has lost its middle class, replaced by those who can afford to own and by those who can only afford to rent."

Despite these challenges, Mr. Foreman does not lament change. He believes it is inevitable and in some ways



has provided an improved lifestyle. He is especially fond of Shenandoah University, where he teaches, and which provides world-class education and culture to the local community. In short, Mr. Foreman continues to enjoy living in Winchester despite all of the changes. He expresses his fondness for the city he loves by often giving lectures on the area's history. He isn't especially fond of the traffic or the traffic lights, but he isn't planning to move anywhere else soon. Truth be known, I hardly know anyone who likes traffic or traffic lights.

By contrast, his friend Harold Madagan, who has lived in the county for over 60 years and runs the historic Gaunt Drug Store, laments the rapid increase in the county's population, which has doubled in the past few decades. "I would like to see more control on residential growth



Harold Madagan



Harry Murray at Murray's Fly Shop in Edinburg

in Frederick County,” said Madagan. One measurement of the change that the author suspects many old-timers dislike is the area’s number of Wal-Marts. The area has three. Indeed, they are so large that they influence traffic patterns.

So what is the answer? When one gets tired of traffic lights, go fishing. And that is what is so wonderful about living in or near Winchester, because only 35 miles to the south is Murray’s Fly Shop in Edinburg, owned by one of our country’s most famous fly fishermen. Harry Murray has written seven books and produced two videos and two DVDs on the art of fly fishing. Each Friday his website (www.murraysflyshop.com) publishes a

report on Virginia Blue Ribbon Streams, noting the activity, legal access points, and other fishing requirements for the best trout and bass fishing in the entire state. Around Winchester, the closest trout fishing is the Shenandoah National Park; the best bass fishing is in the upper reaches of the Shenandoah River.

Winchester’s story is the story of America itself. Since Jamestown, waves of new immigrants have enriched every corner of our country—but seldom without a struggle to be accepted. Winchester will struggle to preserve its cherished heritage while assimilating those who come to put down new roots. It will take debate and accommodation between old-timers and

newcomers to find the best way forward for all—and they will. What could be more American than that?

William T. Semple is a freelancer writer, foxhunter, musician and realtor living in Delaplane, Virginia who rides either his bike or his horse through some of the Piedmont’s most beautiful countryside.

Photos by Hay Hardy