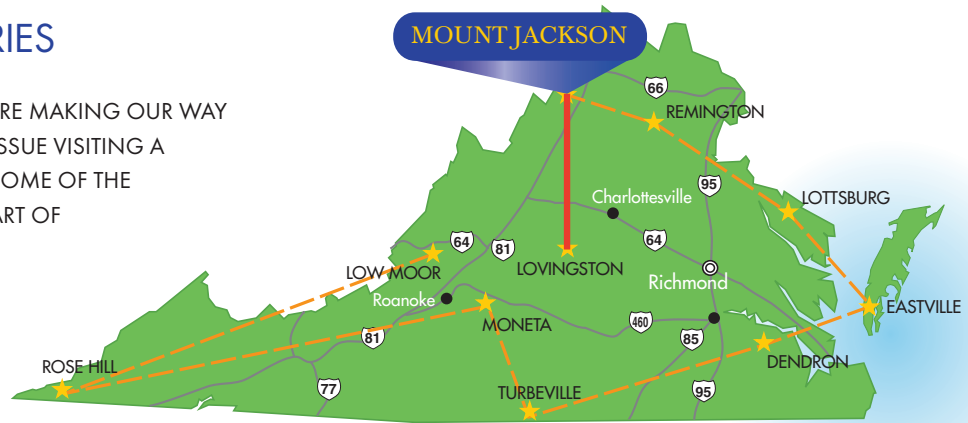


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2009, 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 SECOND STOP, WE'LL BE ...



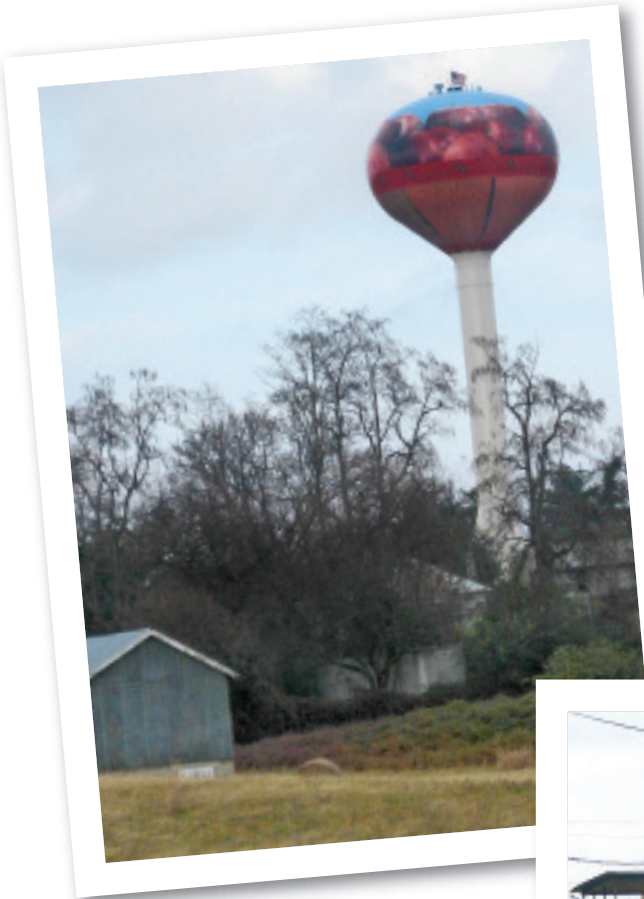
DOWN HOME IN

MOUNT JACKSON

by Rod Shepherd, Contributing Writer / Photos by Cammie Tutwiler

The distinctive “Basket of Apples” water tower alongside Interstate 81 midway between Winchester and Harrisonburg is a now-famous landmark up and down the East Coast. Mount Jackson is the town behind this landmark and is today a thriving town with a rich community history that stretches back to the valley’s pre-industrial age. The basket of apples image that travelers talk about is actually a photograph of real Virginia apples.

Many factors can lead to the formation of a settlement in a particular region, and the abundance of water is the reason a town grew up at the convergence of Mill Creek and the Shenandoah River in today’s Shenandoah County. In pre-industrial America, the main source of energy was muscle power from people and animals, or water power from flowing streams. Water wheels captured the energy from falling water to power mills. At one point, six mills were located along Mill Creek in Mount Jackson. Electric cooperatives were more than a century away.



Mount Jackson’s distinctive water tower is a well-known landmark on Interstate 81.

Main Street, Mount Jackson.





AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: 1,870

LAND AREA: 3.2 square miles

ELEVATION: 917 feet

FACTOID: Founded as Mount Pleasant, but renamed Mount Jackson in 1826. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places and Virginia Landmarks Register in April 1993.

(CLOCKWISE, FROM UPPER LEFT) Renovations to the local landmark Union Church uncovered graffiti left behind by soldiers during the Civil War. • The American Celebration on Parade at Shenandoah Caverns is truly a one-of-a-kind attraction that showcases the history of floats and every presidential inaugural since Truman. • Soldiers Cemetery, where some 450 Confederate soldiers from 11 southern states are buried, is located on Main Street.

In the 1740s, Peter Jefferson surveyed the Fairfax line (today, a part of this line serves as the boundary between Rockingham and Shenandoah counties). In their journals, the survey team mentions the settlements to the north along Mill Creek. Peter's son, Thomas, went on to fame in the latter part of the 18th century.

Mount Jackson was named in honor of Tennessee's Andrew Jackson in 1826. In the controversial presidential election of 1824, no candidate won the required majority of electoral votes and the presidential decision was turned over to the U.S. House of Representatives. Candidate Andrew Jackson had won the majority of the popular vote, but in a surprise decision, the House gave the presidency to John Adams. In 1828, Jackson again ran for president. That time he was the

clear winner in both popular and electoral votes. But the town name was changed before Jackson became president.

The Manassas Gap Railroad arrived in Mount Jackson in 1858. Local agricultural producers now had a faster, more convenient method of supplying food to Washington and Richmond. The railhead here was an important distribution point for manufactured products shipped to the central valley from the eastern cities.

The rail line also nourished the developing tourist industry. West of town the Orkney Springs Hotel welcomed guests with cool summer breezes and water from seven different mineral springs. A horse-drawn coach made several daily round trips to the springs from the train station. Today, the original Orkney Springs Hotel is part of the

Episcopal Diocese of Virginia's Shrine Mont Conference Center. Shrine Mont's outdoor cathedral is the designated home of the Virginia Diocese. Visitors are welcome at the conference center.

Every summer, Orkney Springs Hotel hosts the Shenandoah Valley Music Festival's outdoor concerts on the lawn. Eight concerts are traditionally held the last two weekends in July, one August weekend, and Labor Day weekend.

Another local mountain hideaway began as a summer retreat called Bryce's Mountain Resort in 1909. Today's modern resort offers downhill skiing and snow tubing in winter with golfing, swimming, and an aerial zip line in the warmer months. In 1966 Pete Bryce began the ski operations and added a small airport. OntheSnow.com readers



Meem's Bottom Covered Bridge

IF YOU GO...

If you plan to visit Mount Jackson, there are many places to "stop by," and here are a few to get you started:

Route 11 Potato Chips has a factory, located off the main thoroughfare, in the Mount Jackson Industrial Park area. It is open Monday through Saturday 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Call 1-800-294-7783 for more information, or visit their Web site, www.rt11.com.

If walking down Main Street in Mount Jackson, you should stop in and check out the new **town hall facility**. Construction was finished on the building in 2003. There are informative brochures about area attractions in the lobby area.

A throwback to days gone by can be found at the **six-lane duckpin bowling alley**. Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoons are open play. Call 540-477-2341 for more information.

A definite "drive through" occurs not at a local fast-food restaurant, but at the **Meem's Bottom Covered Bridge**. It was constructed in 1892 and has a 191-foot span. While driving to or from Mount Jackson, the bridge is well-marked by brown signs.

The Art Group, located along Main Street in downtown Mount Jackson, is home to local artists' exhibits. It is, "A Gallery for Valley Artists

and Artisans," and is run by volunteers. There are new exhibits and shows open each month. It is located at 5906 Main Street. The phone number is 540-477-4131. Visit their Web site, www.theartgroup.org.

If you are in the mood to shop, **The Search Thrift Shop**, opened in 1977, will fit the bill. The store is manned by volunteers, and proceeds from the store support the mission of the Search Adult Group Home.

Shenandoah Caverns offers many different attractions for the family, from the cool underground, to the **American Celebration on Parade**, which features floats seen in many major parades, including those seen in presidential inaugural parades. Visit their Web site to learn more at www.shenandoahcaverns.com.

Mount Jackson's Web site:
www.mountjackson.com

Shrine Mont:
www.shrinemont.com

Shenandoah Valley Music Festival:
www.musicfest.org

Bryce Resort:
www.bryceresort.com

Chamber of Commerce:
www.mountjacksonva.org ■



Alex Hofgren with The Art Group, a gallery for local artists and artisans.



ranked Bryce's ski resort as the best family-friendly resort of 2008.

Mount Jackson is rich in history, and historical sites, as the Civil War swirled around the area. Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign in 1862 passed through town twice on the Valley Turnpike. Sheridan's later burning of valley farms in the fall of 1864 devastated the local farm economy.

The Confederate government built a 300-bed hospital in Mount Jackson in 1861. Wounded soldiers from battles in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania found their way by rail or wagon to this hospital. Mid-19th-century standard medical procedures are frightening when viewed from a modern perspective. After what must have been long and painful journeys, many of these men — if they lived long enough to make it to the hospital — later died from fevers, infections, and disease.

The Soldiers Cemetery is located across the Valley Turnpike from the hospital site. Some 450 Confederate soldiers from 11 southern states are buried there. Its memorial statue was dedicated in 1903. The late Coiner Rosen, a well-known local businessman, was instrumental in compiling research on the cemetery and was always willing to volunteer his time and stories.

Joseph Williams moved to Mount Jackson in 1960. "Our community is special because of our volunteers," he says. "We have people from all walks of life giving their time to community projects. If you ask someone to do something, they say yes. That makes you feel good about your town." Williams was elected mayor in 1998 after a successful write-in vote where, as part of his campaign, he gave everyone a pencil.

The Mount Jackson Visitor's Center and Town Hall was dedicated in 2003 and is becoming the heartbeat of the commu-

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The Mount Jackson Visitor's Center and Town Hall, a community hub, serves many purposes under one roof. Says Mayor Joseph Williams (INSET): "Our community is special because of our volunteers."



nity. The one building serves many purposes. The Community Library occupies the northeast corner and holds 9,000 books and seven computers with high-speed Internet. The museum presents many interesting historical Mount Jackson artifacts with a focus on local items. The Town Hall and police department occupy the south side of the building. The central hall is the Visitor's Center, which can seat 100 people.

The Art Group is Mount Jackson's artists' center on Main Street. Established in 1999 and run by artists, the Art Group's gallery features rotating exhibits by local artists, with a student exhibit in late winter. Art classes are available, and the "First Friday" event is a local social highlight. On the first Friday of each month, local musicians perform a free concert in the warm back gallery.

Giving back to the community has been a long tradition in Mount Jackson. The local landmark Union Church was a gift in the 1820s to the community. Most local churches made use of the Union Church as their startup meeting place until they could secure money for their own church buildings.

Renovations to the Union Church in the early 1990s uncovered graffiti left behind by Union soldiers stationed in the area during the Civil War. The Union church is open and staffed by volunteers on spring, summer, and fall weekends. The surrounding cemetery contains Revolutionary War veterans, Confederate veterans, and several Virginians who were born under the realm of King George III.

Just south of town is one of Virginia's remaining covered bridges still open to traffic. Constructed in 1892, the 191-foot span has been a local tourist spot for years. Bridges were covered to protect the wooden deck and beams from weather. The Mount Jackson Garden Club, with the "muscle help" of the local FFA, cleared a small picnic area at the foot of the bridge. "We planned for a place for people to enjoy the river," says club member **Marcia Brownfield**. The club has also undertaken a project to replenish the tree line along the lane leading to the bridge.

The Search Thrift Shop on Main Street has been an institution since opening in 1977. The newly renovated shop in the old rescue squad building draws shoppers five days a week. "A thrift-shop survey ranked this shop as one of the best in the mid-Atlantic region," says **Helen Green**, administrator of the Search Adult Group Home. "The store is our outreach to the community." Proceeds from the thrift store support the mission of the Search Adult Group Home. The thrift store is staffed by volunteers.

The family-owned James E. Zerkel, Inc., was founded in 1946 and has evolved into the essential local hardware store. Second-generation family member **Harriet Zerkel Hiner** started working in the family business shortly after high school. "I can remember climbing over bins in the attic looking for parts or fittings for customers." How can a small business compete today? "Service has always been the thing here. Customer service will be the savior of small business," says Mrs. Hiner.

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The greater Mount Jackson area features an assortment of opportunities for touring, historic discovery and outdoor adventure. For almost two centuries Washingtonians and others have regularly traveled to the community for diversion, rest and a breath of country air. Legend has it that Andrew Jackson frequently hunted and fished in the area.

A major attraction is Shenandoah Caverns, a limestone cave offering year-round 54 degrees of underground cool. The 60-minute guided tour attracts travelers from around the world. Recent additions to the Shenandoah Caverns Family of Attractions include American Celebration on Parade. It's a first-class attraction, housed in a 44,000-square-foot building that showcases the history of floats, and every presidential inaugural since President Truman. It is truly a one-of-a-kind attraction, that has interested tourists not only from all over the country, but internationally as well. The facility hosts an average of 500 motor coaches a year.

Also at Shenandoah Caverns, The Yellow Barn has exhibits highlighting family farm life and features antique farm artifacts collected over the years.

Abraham Neff's boys discovered the caverns in 1884. The railroad started a rock quarry to obtain gravel for the rail bed. "Boys will be boys," says caverns manager **Joe Proctor**. "Seems these boys were playing in the rock quarry and found the opening to the cave." The caverns were developed into a tourist attraction in 1922. For the next 20 years passenger trains brought visitors out to the caverns.

Mount Jackson is also the new home of Route 11 Potato Chips. Their state-of-the-art facility opened this past fall. Tours of the factory are free, and the retail shop is now open Monday-Saturday.

The George Washington National Forest has hiking and equestrian trails to the east and west of Mount Jackson. Short Mountain makes up part of the Massanutten range to the east of Mount Jackson. The southern exposed limestone outcropping at 2,600 feet is clearly visible from Interstate 81 and is locally known as the knob. Mill Creek and the Shenandoah River are stocked with trout for fishing. Hunting is a rich cultural part of Mount Jackson.

Take a break from driving the interstate and relax in Mount Jackson. Life doesn't have to be so rushed all of the time. ■

Rod Shepherd is a native Virginian with a passion for history and has lived in Mount Jackson for 17 years.