

# PASSIONATE ABOUT STAUNTON

by  
Phil Audibert



The gardens on the grounds of Woodrow Wilson's birthplace and Presidential Library offer quiet sanctuary in the middle of town. (Photo by Phil Audibert)



Built in 1924, the Stonewall Jackson Hotel had seen better days by the mid 1960s. Thoroughly renovated, it reopened in 2005 with 124 guest rooms and 8,500 square feet of public meeting space, including the magnificent lobby shown here. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

If you had to come up with just one word to describe the people of Staunton, it would be *passionate*.

It is everywhere—in the earnestness of the Mary Baldwin college student who conducts the backstage tour at the town's remarkable Shakespearean playhouse, Blackfriars. It is evidenced by the \$21 million commitment to rescue the Stonewall Jackson Hotel from the brink.

You can see it on the faces of the archivists in the attic of the Woodrow Wilson Museum as they pop the lid on a trunk bearing never-before-seen documents and photographs.

Go to a public hearing in Staunton and witness this passion for yourself—citizens on both sides of a hot button issue passionately committed to their views. Passion for history, passion for preservation, passion for innovation, passion for education, passion for

caring for the sick of mind and body, passion for the newfangled, passion for the old fashioned—it is everywhere, this passion—on the Wharf on Saturday morning as folks gather for the Farmer's Market, in the kitchen at the Staunton Grocery, in the classroom at Stuart Hall.

Kim Cormier works for the Convention and Visitors Bureau in Staunton. She is also a native of this town.



**Blackfriars Theatre in downtown Staunton is a replica of London's only indoor theater during the 1600s. It supports two repertory companies performing five different works by the Great Bard each season. (Photo by Phil Audibert)**



**Every Saturday from April through November, Stauntonians gather at the Wharf, not just for 30-plus vendors at the Farmer's Market, but also to meet, mingle and discuss hot button issues. (Photo by Susie Audibert)**

She can remember taking ballet lessons in the dingy gray Collonade Room in the then seedy Stonewall Jackson Hotel.

"Passionate and outspoken about what they have here in Staunton and what they want it to be," she explains of this vibrant town's psyche. "Through the years they have fought hard to keep it the way they want it and not have buildings torn down." She pauses and adds, "They were preserving buildings before it was cool to

preserve buildings."

In the 1960s and '70s Staunton went through what most towns did in those days—a downtown downturn in favor of strip malls along the major corridors that led to the city center. In 1961, an "urban renewal" project demolished 32 downtown buildings. Citizens, committed to that never happening again, passionately promoted "preservation over demolition." The result: the first of five historic districts, the Wharf,

was named to the National Register in 1972. Four other districts, Beverley, Gospel Hill, Newtown and Stuart Addition followed in the early to mid 1980's.

Much of this heritage stems from T.J. Collins, an architect who moved here from Washington D.C. in 1891 and designed or remodeled more than 200 buildings before he died in 1925. His sons, Sam and William, continued his legacy, and to this day, the firm T.J. Collins and Sons still exists. Take a self-guided walking tour of Staunton's historic districts and you will see no less than 82 architecturally significant buildings, 23 of them designed by this man.

Currently, downtown Staunton is basking in a renaissance; has been since the "Big Dig" of 1998-1999 when all utility lines were buried, the sidewalks bricked, and the downtown area gussied up. That led to the construction of Blackfriars and the restoration of the Stonewall Jackson Hotel, the two crown jewels of the Queen City of the Shenandoah Valley. Today, 25 restaurants in the downtown area are bustling. This city of 28,000 supports seven art galleries all within walking distance of each other. And as you walk through downtown, every shop front is "open for business."

Recently Staunton was awarded Distinctive Dozen status by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as "one of 12 best communities in America to visit and in which to live and work." Kim Cormier agrees, saying, "It's a great place to raise a family. You have a small city with big city amenities." She talks about a Staunton brand: "a look, a feel—the way people will come to look at Staunton and develop a sense of trust."

Bill Hamilton, Staunton's Director of Economic Development, sums it up this way. "We are determined to maintain the unique 'feel' of Staunton as a small city that has maintained our architectural heritage and values from the past while incorporating 21<sup>st</sup> century 'cool' in our lifestyle."

What's on the horizon for



Ever since the “Big Dig” of the late 1990s, Staunton’s downtown business district along Beverley Street has enjoyed a renaissance. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

Located in the Wharf Historic District, Middlebrook is one of seven art galleries within walking distance of each other in downtown Staunton. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

Staunton? Remember those outlying strip malls that gutted downtown 50 years ago? Now it’s their turn. Hamilton says they plan to, “transform the appearance of our entrance corridors to come up to the level of our award-winning central business district.” A new director of tourism was also hired. Sheryl Wagner joined the team as of November of 2007.

Along the entrance corridor from the east, sits the vast complex of columned buildings that used to be Western State Hospital. Located on 75 rolling acres with a total of 21 structures, most of them dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this abandoned relic is now undergoing what may be Staunton’s most ambitious project yet. Called simply The Villages, old Western State will be transformed into a massive mixed-use office, retail,



residential and meeting space complex.

It seems Stauntonians, as they are sometimes called, are passionate about the future too.

### A history tour of Staunton:

First of all, don't call it *STAWN-tun*; the locals will immediately peg you as an outsider. It is pronounced *STAN-tun*, like Stan the Man.

Museum of American Frontier Culture: This is a good place to start because it tells the beginning of the Staunton story. Despite the dull roar of traffic on Interstates 81 and 64, you will be transported to the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century at this gem of a living history museum. Essentially, it is divided into five authentic: down-to-the-nailhead farms, three of them imported stone-by-stone and timber-by-timber, from England, Germany and Northern Ireland. The other two farms (1773 and 1850) show how these European immigrants evolved as they settled on the American frontier. Everything is authentic—the crops in the fields, the breeds of the farm animals, the thatch on the roofs, the clothing on the docents, the food on the hearths.

Pay particular attention to the 1730s-era farm from Northern Ireland, because in 1732 the first white man to actually settle in Staunton was John Lewis, a Scots-Irishman. Most likely he left a home in Ulster like the one at this museum.

Western State Hospital: Traveling into Staunton from the east, you will see the massive abandoned complex on your left, and you will realize that the developers of The Villages have a tremendous project on their hands. The original hospital building was constructed in 1828 by Baltimore architect William Small, and most of the rest of this complex was built by Jefferson carpenter and scholar, Thomas Blackburn.

Continuing to downtown Staunton, follow Route 250 and at the giant sculpture of a watering can, turn left. By the



The formal parlor at the Woodrow Wilson Presidential home in downtown Staunton

This blacksmith's forge was built in County Fermanagh in Ulster in the 18th century. It has been reassembled stone by stone at the Museum of American Frontier Culture in Staunton. (Photos by Phil Audibert)



way, the watering can, by sculptor Willie Ferguson, spawned passionate debate, both pro and con, proving its own metaphor for growing more than just plants.

Now pull into that building that does not look like a parking garage; in fact it has won awards for its “blending architecture.” Time to set out on foot. Pick up a map at the Convention and Visitor's Bureau and head for Beverley Street up one block.

In 1736, the crown granted William Beverley a patent on 118,000 acres of land that comprises much of Augusta

County today. It is only too fitting that Staunton's main drag is named after this man. By 1745, Augusta County was formed and a log cabin courthouse built on the same spot that the 1901 T. J. Collins-designed courthouse stands now. Staunton was named after Rebecca Staunton, the wife of Colonial Governor William Gooch.

Walking west on Beverley, you will pass numerous examples of Collins' work, including his own corner office, the “wedding cake,” and the National Valley Bank building with its magnificent oval



Built in 1842 and originally named the Augusta Female Seminary, Mary Baldwin College's name was changed to honor a late 19th century head of school. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

stained glass skylight. If you're hungry, there are plenty of places to eat. The sandwich menu and wine list go on for pages at the Pampered Palate. Or perhaps you're more in the mood for good old fashioned home cooking; then the Beverley is your ticket. Order the catfish. Or if you want authentic '50s era drive-in with curbside service, go past the watering can to Wright's Dairy Rite. This classic eatery has been run by the same family since 1952. Or perhaps Cranberry's with its veggie and organic fare is more to your liking.

Refueled, continue your stroll up Beverley Street, to Trinity Church with its 12 Tiffany windows and ancient graveyard. This is where Staunton, in 1781, hosted the Virginia General Assembly, which was on the lam from British raiders at the time. Continuing west on Beverley, go down one of the side streets to the Wharf and visit the shops, restaurants and galleries in the restored brick warehouses that sprouted here when the railroad arrived in 1854. This event transformed Staunton from sleepy valley village to bustling boomtown, linking the Great Valley, *the Breadbasket of the Confederacy*, to the east. Today, Amtrak's

*Cardinal* stops here three times a week on its way from Washington to Chicago

Staunton was spared the ravages of the Civil War, but not the horror. The old American Hotel near the Wharf and the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind both became receiving hospitals. Beneath the gaze of the Confederate Soldier statue at the highest point in Thornrose Cemetery lie the 700 dead whom the hospitals could not save.

Other interesting last resting places here: architect, T.J. Collins, who also designed several mausoleums; Eva Clark, a circus performer accidentally killed by her husband in a lover's triangle, her grave something of a shrine for carnies; and then there's Jedediah Hotchkiss, Stonewall Jackson's mapmaker. He insisted that his feet should face south, not east.

Speaking of Stonewall Jackson, his regimental band still plays. It is the oldest municipally-supported band in the nation, and you can hear them every Monday night during summer months at Gypsy Hill Park, a 214 acre recreational and open space area at the western end of town.

Back to the tour. It's time to turn right off Beverley Street and head back east

on Frederick. Now we see proof of Staunton's commitment to education. In 1844 the Virginia Female Institute was founded. Now known as Stuart Hall, it is the oldest preparatory school for girls in the state. Graduates include Robert E. Lee's daughters as well as Girl Scouts founder, Juliette Gordon Low. Further east on Frederick, we come to what was the Augusta Female Seminary (1842). It was renamed Mary Baldwin College to honor a late 19<sup>th</sup> century school head.

If you go over Gospel Hill on Beverley Street, you'll see another example of Staunton's early commitment to the less fortunate, the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind, founded in 1839. Its main building, with its magnificent Green Revival portico, was designed by Baltimore architect, Richard Cary Long in 1846.

In 1856, the wife of a Presbyterian minister gave birth to a son. Although the family soon moved to Georgia, Stauntonians claim Woodrow Wilson as their own. Eric Vettel is the Executive Director the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library, which he affectionately calls, "the little presidential library that does." He



Staunton is also home to Stuart Hall, the oldest girl's preparatory school in the state. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

produces a typewritten letter by Wilson to his daughter, Jesse, sent just days after her mother died. All hell was breaking loose in Europe. Wilson “Pince-Nez glasses, creator of the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Reserve, in history books a kind of ho-hum guy” writes with heart-wrenching tenderness to his bereaved daughter. This is the same man who courted and married Edith Bolling Galt during his second term and signed his notes to her “Tiger.” All of a sudden this Staunton native is positively passionate!

Vettel bounds up the stairs to the attic. Sitting on a table is a wooden trunk. It belonged to Dr. Cary Grayson, Wilson’s personal physician—the man who cared for Wilson as he suffered numerous mini strokes while trying to resolve World War I and create the precursor to the United Nations. The trunk is full of photos and memoirs from this *the closest advisor* to the President of the United States during an historic global turning point. Like kids on Christmas morning, Vettel and his staff of digital archivists can barely contain their enthusiasm.

Stonewall Jackson Hotel: There are many good bed and breakfasts in Staunton, most located in beautifully restored historic houses. But if you are going to spend just one night in Staunton, make it the Stonewall Jackson. Built in 1924, it followed the inevitable path to oblivion until the City of Staunton and developer Armada Hoffler spent \$21.1 million to bring it back. Reopened in 2005, it sports 124 elegantly appointed guest rooms, almost 8500 square feet of meeting and event space, an indoor pool, fitness center, business center, gift shop, restaurant and lounge. The rooms are just the right size—quiet, comfortable, with all the amenities you need and none of the gimmicks you don’t.

So go ahead and check in. Overlooking the magnificent lobby is the original Wurlitzer organ on the mezzanine. You are a short elevator ride from the parking garage where you left your car this morning. Take a shower, put your feet up, order a cocktail; pretty soon it will be time to go out for dinner.

Tonight reservations have been

made at one of the city’s newest restaurants, Staunton Grocery. Don’t let the simple name fool you; this is a world-class establishment. “From the farm to the table,” is Chef Ian Boden’s philosophy. Fully 80% of his dishes come from producers right here in the Valley. Try his squash blossom bisque with green pumpkin, pea shoots and shaved shallots for an appetizer. Follow with heritage pork loin, sweet potato puree, cipollini, broccoli rabe and house-cured pancetta. You will not be disappointed.

Blackfriars: Another product of passion, this time for the Great Bard. Ralph Cohen and Jim Warren originally brought Shakespeare to the masses with a touring company in 1988. By 2001, they had created a replica of the only indoor theater in 17<sup>th</sup> century London. Called Blackfriars, it burned to the ground in the Great Fire of London.

It has now, at a cost of \$3.5 million, risen from the ashes in Staunton—an intimate theater-in-the-round made of Virginia white oak, with balconies and a *yard* for the *understanders*, a trap door for hell, a painted sky for heaven, and a bare stage for earth. Two companies, touring and home, perform a repertoire “that blows the cobwebs off Shakespeare.” Their motto: We do it with the lights on.

The company uses original practices when staging productions. And herein lies an “Aha” moment—those famous soliloquies, *To be or not to be* etc.—they were never meant to be uttered by an actor talking to himself; they were addressed *to the audience*, seeking its input, feedback, participation, approval or disapproval. We never knew Shakespeare could be so much fun!

And so our day in Staunton concludes. For the more adventurous, we might head across Beverley Street to the eclectic new American restaurant, Zynodoah, a hip, urban (albeit smoky) watering hole. Or we may retire to Sorrels Lounge in the Stonewall to be mesmerized by the gas fire. It’s just a few short steps to

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the elevator to our room. And tomorrow bears promise of made-to-order omelets at Stonewall's restaurant, 24 Market.

Ahhhhh. Passionate about Staunton? You bet.

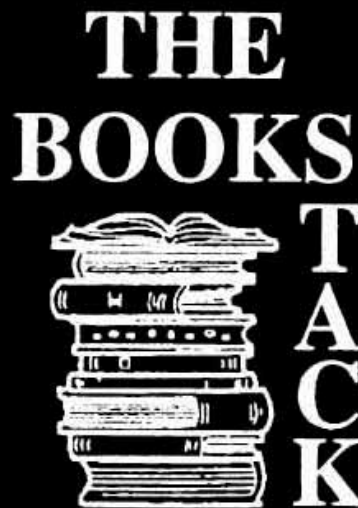
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Phil Audibert has been writing and doing photography since age 16 and won three first place awards from the Virginia Press Association recently. Living on the same Orange County, Virginia farm since 1957, Phil and his wife Susie, a photographer in her own right, spend their time between dogs, horses, vintage cars, land preservation, gourmet cooking and following and photographing the Keswick foxhunt on foot.

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