

## Time Travelers

BY CHARLES GERENA

**The Fifth District's storied history is attracting a growing number of heritage tourists**

Every year, about half a million people visit a mountain-side near Charlottesville, Va. There's no theme park or luxury resort to see. Instead, they have come to learn about a Virginian who wanted to be remembered for supporting political, intellectual, and religious freedom. They have come to see Monticello, the former residence of Thomas Jefferson.

The house and grounds offer a glimpse into how the nation's third president lived out his retirement years — tourists enter the same doorway that foreign dignitaries, government officials, and other guests used when they visited “the sage of Monticello.” Monticello also reflects Jefferson's progressive thinking and penchant for innovation — he designed an early copy machine so he could maintain records of his writings and stocked the library with as many as 6,000 books, which later became the nucleus of the present-day Library of Congress.

In a modern society where many goods and services have become commoditized and boring to some

consumers, one-of-a-kind experiences at places like Monticello can command a premium price. This has given communities a potential resource from which to extract economic value: their unique heritage.

“A lot of places have historic attractions, and we are very fortunate to have them,” notes Mark Shore, director and CEO of the Charlottesville/Albemarle County Convention & Visitors Bureau. Two other presidential residences are within 30 miles of Monticello: James Monroe's Ash Lawn-Highland in Albemarle and James Madison's Montpelier in Orange County.

Heritage tourism uses the local landscape, architecture, artifacts, and practices that make a particular place special. It includes physical sites as well as the deep-rooted traditions and native skills that define a community. In short, it encompasses any experience that portrays a collective history, from watching a Cherokee Indian perform the eagle dance in western North Carolina to touring a rice plantation in South Carolina's Lowcountry.

There is considerable overlap between these experiences and activities involving culture or the arts. According to a 2001 report published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the primary difference is that heritage tourism is place based. “... Viewing the work of a great master artist in his home and studio is a heritage tourism experience, while viewing those very same pieces of art in a traveling exhibition is a cultural tourism experience. The content is the same while the context is different.” Still, the lines between heritage and cultural tourism are easily blurred.

Sightseeing based on heritage or culture is as old as tourism itself, driven by people's motivations to rediscover their past. Interest in this

*Monticello, the former home of Thomas Jefferson, embodies the intellectual legacy of the man who invested 40 years of his life in its design and construction.*



once-niche market has heightened over the last two decades, both on the consumer side and the producer side. Not every community has successfully mined its heritage resources, though, nor does every place have something marketable. Ultimately, economics plays a big role in determining what parts of a community's heritage get preserved and what parts are lost to the ages.

### The Way to Preservation

"The issue is whether or not you look at the decision over a long enough period of time," explains Elaine Carmichael, a Wisconsin-based tourism development consultant who helped West Virginia plan its National Coal Heritage Area. She says studies have shown how historic preservation delivers financial rewards in the long run. But developers looking for short-term rewards may not be interested in such projects.

It often takes a wealthy individual's intervention to preserve a historic property, says Amy Webb, director of heritage tourism at the National Trust. When a property comes on the market, an affluent person has the financial resources to take advantage of the opportunity, whereas a private or nonprofit entity would probably have to raise money to do it, and that can take time.

This is how the collection of presidential residences in central Virginia was preserved for future generations and heritage tourists. Monticello, Montpelier, and Ash Lawn-Highland were saved from extinction by people with money and an appreciation of history, then turned over to nonprofit groups that serve as caretakers.

Uriah Levy was one of America's earliest historic preservationists, believing that the houses of great men should be preserved as "monuments to their glory." The naval officer and real estate entrepreneur purchased Monticello in 1836 from a local druggist, who was mired in debt and unable to make minimal repairs to a house that was already deteriorating

when he bought it from Thomas Jefferson's family a few years earlier. Levy immediately began restoring Monticello's interior, repairing the exterior, and reclaiming the gardens that had been cut down by the previous owner. Eventually, he opened the home to others who admired Jefferson as much as he did.

His nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy, saved Monticello for a second time after it was seized by the Confederacy during the Civil War and tied up in legal disputes following Uriah's death in 1862. He gained control of the home in 1879 and poured more money into its restoration from his earnings as a lawyer, investor, and U.S. congressman. He, too, allowed visitors to tour the house and grounds until he sold it in 1923.

The Thomas Jefferson Foundation purchased Monticello after the Levy family's offer to sell the home to the federal government became mired in congressional debate during World War I. The group immediately opened the home to the public and attracted 20,000 visitors, each paying a 50-cent admission. It used this income, as well as gift shop sales and fund-raising, to pay off the money it borrowed to buy Monticello and to stabilize the property over the next 20 years.

The foundation's mission has evolved from preserving Monticello as a shrine of Jeffersonian ideals to expanding into other activities. "The transition was evolutionary," notes Daniel Jordan, the foundation's president. "If you have a great resource, why not make it a center for scholarship and outreach?" The goal now is "to save and to share."

Today, the foundation operates a center for Jeffersonian research, whose scholars-in-residence have published 25 books and organized more than 20 conferences worldwide. It also runs a center for historic plants that propagates heirloom varieties and distributes them to individuals and institutions. The centers have roots in Jefferson's dedication to scholarship and horticulture.

## Packaging History in the Fifth District

Heritage tourism isn't limited to the four walls of a historic home or county museum. It comes in various packages, generally falling under one of three categories: natural (landscapes, native plants, and animals); cultural (festivals, crafts); and built (monuments, industrial sites). Here are some examples in the Fifth District:

### Natural

- **Catawba Indian Reservation:** A 1.5-mile trail with interpretive signs shows how the Catawba used to live on this 714-acre reservation near Rock Hill, S.C.
- **Natural Bridge:** Owned by Thomas Jefferson at one point, this formation has attracted visitors to southwest Virginia since the 1800s.

### Cultural

- **Hanover Tomato Festival:** Held annually in Hanover County, Va., this event celebrates the popularity of its native fruit with music, cooking contests, and appearances by winners of the Little Miss Tomato and Tiny Miss Tomato pageants.
- **Tamarack:** Since 1996, millions of people have visited this facility in Beckley, W.Va. to sample fine art, crafts, and cuisine native to the Mountain State. Visitors can watch six resident artisans daily in observation studios.

### Built

- **Biltmore Estate:** Billed as America's largest private home, the opulent residence and grounds of George Vanderbilt in Asheville, N.C., offers a glimpse into the lifestyles of the rich and famous during the Gilded Age.
- **U.S.S. Constellation:** This National Historic Landmark, launched in 1854, was the last all-sail vessel built for the U.S. Navy. It has hosted visitors to Baltimore's Inner Harbor since 1955.

— CHARLES GERENA

## The Past as a Source of Pleasure and Profit

Tourism has been around for a long time. The Romans traveled to see the pyramids of Egypt, while young Englishmen went on “grand tours” of Europe during the 18th century, often accompanied by a tutor.

“Tourism was considered the domain of the elite and the wealthy,” says Dallen Timothy, an associate professor of community resources and development at Arizona State University. He co-wrote a book on heritage tourism and edits an academic journal on the subject.

As per-capita income rose during the 20th century, the average person had more resources and leisure time for tourism. Advances in transportation also made travel easier and less expensive for the masses.

At the same time, the move to a more services-based economy left many Americans yearning to learn more about the way life used to be. “The more modernized society becomes, the more people are going to appreciate heritage tourism. [It’s] all about nostalgia,” notes Timothy.

States like Virginia are rich in colonial and Civil War history, so it’s

not surprising that Charlottesville, Williamsburg, and other cities in the Old Dominion have been involved in heritage tourism for a while. But it’s only since the 1990s that this market has been broadly recognized.

One reason is the need for new avenues of economic activity in rural areas. The decline in agriculture and manufacturing has idled labor and other resources. Also, as the economy has become less goods-oriented, communities have been pursuing service niches like tourism.

Urbanized areas have been turning to heritage tourism for similar reasons.

## Matewan Turns to Tumultuous Mining History for Tourism

All around Matewan, W.Va., are reminders of its place in labor history. The exterior of the old post office still has bullet holes from the May 19, 1920, gunfight involving the town’s chief of police, the mayor, local miners, and the security guards hired to evict unionized workers from company-owned homes.

Interest in this violent episode has brought some heritage tourists to Matewan. But the town’s isolated location in southern West Virginia and lack of amenities mean that it faces steep hurdles in trying to become the next Colonial Williamsburg.

John Sayles’ 1987 movie, “Matewan,” raised awareness of the town’s story, says Christy Bailey. She manages the National Coal Heritage Area, one of 27 regions of historic significance designated by U.S. Congress. Tourists who came to Matewan shortly after the film’s release expected the quintessential coal mining community they saw on the big screen. In reality, Matewan looked like any other small town of the 1980s, which is why the film was shot in neighboring Thurmond.

Massey Energy joined with local business owners and residents to form the Matewan Development Center to preserve more of the town’s history for tourists. The organization marshaled well over \$1 million in state and federal funding to restore nine buildings and helped the town earn National Historic Landmark status in 1997. It also stages an annual reenactment of the historic gun battle, as well as a Hatfield-McCoy Reunion Festival to commemorate the notorious family feud that took place in and around Matewan.

Bailey says Matewan has done a good job of preserving its historic resources but needs help in interpreting them for the public. “You see the town, but

you don’t know what it means,” she argues. A replica of the town’s former train depot houses a visitor’s center where people can sign up for a guided tour or view exhibits, but visitors are mostly on their own when the center is closed.

And there is little else to do, other than rent an all-terrain vehicle and ride the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System. “This is the coalfields, so you’re not going to find opera here,” says Cleeta Mullins, executive director of the Coalfield Convention and Visitors Bureau.

While Matewan has a compelling story to tell, there are limitations on the size of the tourism sector that can be built around it. The town has little infrastructure to support throngs of visitors. The closest lodging options are a six-room bed and breakfast and a Super 8 motel about eight miles away. Additional accommodations and a regional airport are available less than 15 miles northwest in Williamson, but the roads leading there are narrow, curvy mountain passes that are difficult for tour buses or recreational vehicles to negotiate.

Also, Matewan is isolated from heritage sites such as the Beckley exhibition mine, both from a geographic and marketing standpoint. This makes it harder for tourists to justify a separate trip, putting the onus on town officials to offer quality historic attractions and effectively market them. “People will go off the beaten path if there is something they want to see,” notes Bailey.

For now, five more buildings await restoration. The money and business support for heritage tourism isn’t there anymore, says Johnny Fullen, mayor of Matewan from 1984 to 1998. The population has shrunk, businesses have closed, and the town barely has the resources to keep police officers on the streets. — CHARLES GERENA





Downtowns that aren't the economic hubs they once were are being rediscovered for their historic theaters, while old manufacturing facilities are being redeveloped to give tourists a glimpse into the nation's industrial past. For example, Bethlehem Steel's shuttered plant in Pennsylvania is being turned into a museum of industrial history.

Finally, the tourism industry started identifying culture and heritage as a distinct submarket. Initiatives like the National Park Service's National Heritage Areas and the National Trust's program laid the groundwork on the federal level in the 1980s.

"There are two ways of making money in tourism — get more visitors to come, and get the visitors who come to spend more money and stay longer," says Webb of the National Trust. Tourism officials realized that, at some point, bringing in additional visitors begins to erode a community's quality of life. So, "the idea of looking at high-value travelers had an awful lot of appeal."

According to a 2003 report by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), travelers who participate in heritage, cultural, arts, or historical activities or events spend more money per trip on average — \$623 vs. \$457 for other travelers. And their trips last longer — 4.6 nights vs. 3.4 nights. Part of the reason is that this category of tourists tends to be wealthier, with a median household income of \$55,600 in 2002 compared to \$42,409 for the nation as a whole.

At the same time, baby boomers are getting older, and tourism experts believe that older people have a

greater interest in their roots. "As people age, they become more nostalgic," says Arizona State's Timothy. The TIA's report confirmed this assessment, finding that baby boomer households comprised 41 percent of heritage tourism-related trips in 2002.

The report also found that college-educated households accounted for 58 percent of heritage and culture-related trips (by comparison, about 24 percent of people older than 25 have a college degree). Generally, people who are knowledgeable about history are more likely to get something out of heritage tourism, plus education influences a person's level of affluence and travel.

These trends have converged to make heritage tourism a lucrative part of the travel and tourism industry. Nationwide, 217 million person-trips were taken for heritage and cultural purposes in 2002, or one in five of all domestic person-trips taken that year. (A person-trip equals one individual traveling 50 miles or more away from home, one way.)

The South Atlantic region, which includes the Fifth District and three other states, is a popular destination for heritage tourism, receiving about 26 percent of historic and cultural trips in 2002. Among the top 10 states for heritage tourism were Virginia (number six) and North Carolina (number nine). (The District of Columbia did not rank in the top 10, despite its wealth of historical and cultural attractions.)

Where it has succeeded, heritage tourism has brought new economic activity to communities. Jobs in hospitality and tourism tend to offer

lower wages than other employment sectors, but they provide a secondary source of income for rural residents like farmers, says tourism consultant Elaine Carmichael. They also provide entry-level jobs for young people.

### Intangible Preservation

Preserving the less tangible aspects of a community's history is just as important as preserving physical sites like Monticello, but it can be even more difficult to accomplish. "If you preserve a building, you can solicit donations to protect it or charge admission," notes Robert Healy, an economist at Duke University who has studied tourism development. "But what if heritage is embodied in what a person knows how to do?"

Healy believes the answer is to convert the intangible aspects of heritage into things with economic value. For example, decoys that used to be carved for hunters of waterfowl along the Eastern Shore of Maryland are sold and exhibited as art. In the small town of Cherokee, N.C., an outdoor drama called "Unto These Hills" recounts the triumphs and tragedies of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, who have lived in the mountains of North Carolina for hundreds of years.

Besides preserving its heritage, a community has to give tourists something that feels real and relevant. "The consumer expects [authenticity] now and is more demanding," says Randy Cohen, vice president of research and information at Americans for the Arts. "As Americans travel around the country, we want to learn about our history and understand where we came from, the good and the bad." **RF**

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