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Again in the year 2003, 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 year's tenth stop, we'll be ...



VICTOR NEWMAN PHOTO/VIRGINIA INTERNATIONAL RACEWAY 2003



Down Home in **South Boston** and Halifax County

From fine art to motorsports, this Southside Virginia community has something for everyone.

If you read some headlines, it might appear that Halifax County and the town of South Boston face irreversible decline.

But Virginia's fourth-largest county features rewards for discriminating travelers, gracious hospitality, and underappreciated historical sites.

The Prizery is a budding gem of vital artistic and cultural contributions in downtown South Boston. Halifax County has two excellent state parks — Staunton River State Park, and the Staunton River Battlefield State Park, which is a joint venture between Halifax and Charlotte counties and part of Virginia's Civil War trails.



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Tamyra Vest, South Boston's community development coordinator, says the town has recently seen interest in new restaurants, specialty shops and entertainment businesses.

The Staunton River Battlefield State Park recalls the heroism of the Civil War, and is part of the Wilson-Kautz Raid driving tour. History buffs can relive June 25, 1864, when a Confederate army of old men and young boys stopped advancing Union

The town of South Boston has enjoyed a renaissance. The downtown section is the commercial hub of Virginia's fourth-largest county.

TAMYRA VEST PHOTO





TUCKER MCLAUGHLIN JR. PHOTO



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Tourism is becoming increasingly important to the South Boston and Halifax County region, according to tourism director Linda Shepperd.

Virginia International Raceway has drawn rave reviews from spectators and competitors from all over the world. (Inset) Local historian Doug Powell finds a story behind every name listed at the Halifax County War Memorial.

Doug Powell, an eminent local historian, explained, "I found there was a story behind each name, and tried to collect as much of that material and data as possible. I hope someday to make it available to the public, so that people can not only see the names on the memorial, but have a way to see the story behind those names."

The South Boston-Halifax County Museum of Fine Arts and History is worth a visit, with a theme of "Moving into the future, with an appreciation of the past."

You can enjoy the Halifax County Little Theater, which offers its interpretation on recognized plays and musicals.

Halifax County appreciates a good (and safe) party, topped by the delicious tastes associated

with the Virginia Cantaloupe Festival. The annual mid-July event honors the world-famous Halifax County cantaloupe.

The county also features the Virginia Summerfest, the Scottsburg Fourth of July Festival and the North Halifax Volunteer Fire Department marathon. South Boston has several popular annual events, including the Holiday Living Show, the biennial Prizery Art Show; the Southern Heritage Festival; and the C.H. Friend Antiques Show.

The annual Noland Country Fair Day in May celebrates the restoration of an early crossroads community at Providence.

Art lovers will appreciate the eclectic works of Bob Cage and his imaginative Sculpture Garden.

Visitors can stroll through the tranquil, picturesque historic Mountain Road district in Halifax. The residences cover a range of

TUCKER MCLAUGHLIN JR. PHOTO

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Halifax Town Manager Carl Espy IV notes, "The pace of life is certainly relaxed, and especially if one enjoys the outdoors."

armies, winning the only battle fought on Halifax County soil.

Their sacrifice, and the cost of freedom throughout the nation's history, is celebrated at the majestic War Memorial in the town of Halifax. The memorial lists the names of all known Halifax County dead from military conflicts in U.S. history.

The Prizery is a budding gem of vital artistic and cultural contributions in downtown South Boston.



If You Go...

The towns of South Boston and Halifax are “neighbors” more than ever, thanks to boundary adjustments, with something priceless in common.

Both towns feature warm hospitality, an excellent climate and surprisingly affordable attractions.

Don't miss the **South Boston/Halifax County Museum of Fine Arts and History**, open to the public, free of charge, Wednesdays through Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The museum is also open on Sundays, from 2 to 4:30 p.m.

The museum features diverse exhibits, including works of the artist of the month. Another highlight is a display on the origins and history of the scenic Staunton River.

There is also a permanent exhibit on Bill Tuck, the only Halifax County native to be elected governor of Virginia. Visitors can see the timeline of his life, visit his office, and view all of his memorabilia and awards. The museum features a series of framed, original cartoons depicting the political career of the Southside Virginia legend printed in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

Another exhibit highlights life around the country store, and another remembers now-underwater Nelson Island, showing 300-year-old Native American artifacts.

Call the museum at (434) 572-9200 or visit the Web at www.halifax.com/museum.

Group tours are welcome.



“Moving into the future, with an appreciation of the past” is the theme of the **South-Boston Halifax County Museum of Fine Arts and History**.

The **Prizery** is a valuable addition to the area's cultural and historic climate.

Jeffrey Allison, coordinator of statewide programs with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, said, “The Prizery has the potential to act as a major cultural center for Southside Virginia. The opportunities for access to educational programming in the arts, combined with the obvious positive impact on cultural tourism in the region make the Prizery a project that can only increase in its benefits to Virginians in the years ahead.”

For more information, call (434) 575-4249.

South Boston has a diverse assortment of shops and restaurants in its historic downtown section. An outstanding new addition is the **Bistro 1888**, featuring a three-diamond rating (434-572-1888).

There are a number of other choices, and the downtown business area also features a collection of shops and locally owned businesses, as the town seeks to carve out its own identity built around personalized service. There is also a variety of hotels, with more on the way.

For more information, contact Tamyra Vest, South Boston's community development coordinator, at (434) 575-4209, or visit their Web site at www.commdev@southbostonva.us.

The **Halifax County Chamber of Commerce**, at 515 Broad Street, has valuable information about the attractions in the area. **Nancy Pool**, the local chamber president, has been helping out-of-towners for 23 years. The Chamber office can be reached at (434) 572-3085, or you may surf the Web site at www.halifaxchamber.net.

The **Town of Halifax** is undergoing an extensive renovation project, which calls for aesthetic improvements and other enhancements.

Town Manager Carl Espy IV hopes to fashion a \$1.1-million streetscape and façade-improvement project to enhance the beauty of Main Street and the historic courthouse, which houses records dating back to the American Colonies.

The **Courthouse**, lovely at night, includes papers signed by Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry.

The newly dedicated **War Memorial** will also draw increasing interest in the town and local history in coming years.

There is also a very valuable resource for visitors to Halifax County and South Boston, provided by Dan Shaw. The information can be accessed on the Web at www.halifax.com, with a link available for virtual tours. ■

periods, from early 19th-century institutional buildings to Greek, Georgian and Colonial Revival, Queen Anne and Craftsman styles.

South Boston's Washington Avenue homes feature an architectural range from Victorian and Tudor to modern Arts and Crafts styles.

Halifax County has lovely plantation homes, luring architectural and history buffs. River Road, once a major transportation link, features historic homes, Carter's Tavern and the Brooklyn Tobacco Factory.

Recreational opportunities abound, from the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail, to hunting, fishing, and horseback riding and walking trails.

Canoeing and boating are popular diversions on three major Halifax County rivers. The Float on the Staunton Day is a headline event. There is considerable local pride in the inclusion of a portion of the Staunton River on the state's list of designated Scenic Rivers.

The Halifax County Fair showcases rising country music stars.

Volunteers host district and state softball

and baseball tournaments. South Boston has the Mason Day, Jr., and C.H. Friend baseball facilities. Halifax has a refurbished Mary Bethune softball complex. The annual Halifax County-South Boston Sports Hall of Fame is a highlight of the spring calendar.

There are antique shops with unexpected discoveries. Bed-and-breakfast operations offer serenity.

Falkland Farms draws visitors from across the nation to its bed-and-breakfast/hunting plantation.

NASCAR 2002 Daytona 500 champion Ward Burton is establishing a nature preserve for education and the protection of wildlife.

Halifax History

The town of Halifax has been the county seat of Halifax County since 1777. Portions of General Nathaniel Greene's troops were here in February 1789, after escaping Cornwallis' forces and crossing the Dan River. George Washington passed through the region in June 1791.

The present-day courthouse is a classical Greek Revival structure, built in 1839 by Dabney Cosby, Sr., one of Thomas Jefferson's master builders, Town Manager **Carl Espy IV** said.

The town has its own unique charm.

“The pace of life is certainly relaxed, and especially if one enjoys the outdoors,” said Espy. “The town of Halifax has a great small-town feel to it. It is still a village-quality living place that has quaint shops.

“Everything is within walking distance,” Espy commented.

Powell explained, “Halifax County has some key historical attractions that can be a destination for tourists.

“We have a Revolutionary War campaign that is like a sleeping giant as far as what it could do for the community if we promoted it. The War-Between-the-States efforts, and particularly the Battle of Staunton River Bridge, are much better documented now due to the site becoming a state park, but there's still opportunity there.

“The key role the county played in the expansion to the West, to the Frontiers, dur-

ing the French and Indian War period is another area that many people do not know about," Powell said.

Court records here are proving an increasingly valuable resource to learn more about the expansion of the nation westward from the Tidewater area of Virginia.

"Many of the central and western states contain many, many families who passed through Halifax County on their way West. We're key in the exploration of information by these people who are searching for that kind of thing," said Powell.

Renewal in South Boston

The town of South Boston has enjoyed a renaissance.

Tamyra S. Vest, the community development coordinator, explained, "The core shopping district and tobacco warehouse area in South Boston are both experiencing a revival of interest based on renewed appreciation of their historic qualities and anticipated spin-off opportunities presented by the Prizery and Southern Virginia Higher Education Center initiatives. The town has recently seen interest in new restaurants, eateries, specialty shops and entertainment uses."

The Visitors Center includes a Tobacco Heritage Exhibit, highlighting the planting, growing, harvesting, curing and prizing of tobacco.

The National Tobacco Festival permanent exhibit remembers when South Boston and Halifax County welcomed Hollywood celebrities during its seven-year run. The festival drew 165,000 people at its zenith.

The Prizery will include an auditorium/theater, banquet hall and art and music classrooms.

One of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in Virginia, Berry Hill, was recently closed to the public. Economic development officials are seeking new partners in the business/tourism sector for the mansion.

Racing Region

South Boston Speedway has been home to some of the biggest names in American stock car racing.

General Manager **Cathy Rice** said, "I think it's one of the best short tracks on the East Coast, or anywhere, because of the NASCAR Dodge Weekly Series."

The Speedway produced three modern-era Winston Cup regulars (**Jeff** and **Ward**

Burton and **Elliott Sadler**) and other drivers have had successful seasons in Busch and truck racing.

Richard Petty and the late Dale Earnhardt raced here. "South Boston Speedway has such a history," said Rice.

Virginia International Raceway has drawn rave reviews from spectators and competitors from all over the world. **Cal Frye**, the track's general manager, said, "The popularity grows because it's sort of an undiscovered venue. It is easily the most beautiful road-racing facility in North America, but you won't know that unless you visit it."

Tourism a Major Industry

Textiles and tobacco are declining, but tourism is more important than ever.

Linda Shepperd, the local tourism tsar, said, "We are just on the verge of seeing a tremendous growth in tourism. With our changing economy, we are looking to new avenues in ways that we can make this area grow.

"The community is finally starting to be aware of what we've got, and that other people are coming here and thinking, 'this is neat. I like it here.' They have things that other places don't have," said Shepperd. "We're going to do a better job of marketing that." ■

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South Boston Speedway is one of the finest short tracks on the East Coast, according to Cathy Rice, the track's general manager.