



The Martha Washington Inn

# Destination Abingdon

The best kept secret in the Old Dominion

by Patrick Baker  
Photos by Hay Hardy

**D**ining at Martha Washington Inn, catching a production of *Singin' in the Rain* at the Barter Theatre, exploring the Highlands Festival, teeing off at The Virginian, experiencing the thrill of NASCAR at the Bristol Motor Speedway, or sneaking away for a quiet day of fly fishing on White Top Laurel River. Welcome to Abingdon, Virginia, the best kept secret in the Old Dominion.

Upon arriving in Abingdon, visitors who ease their way through downtown can't help but feel a sense of tranquility descending upon them. The town, founded in 1778, is nestled gently against the Appalachian Mountains and has all the

qualities of small town life, but with a singular combination of culture, art, and sporting opportunities found nowhere else. To understand and appreciate Abingdon,

you need look no further than David and Ruth Ann Henry. "We can't imagine living anywhere else," assert the Henrys, who possess the rare qualities of friendliness and fine Southern hospitality that make their hometown such a gem.

David and Ruth Ann Henry



Both David and Ruth Ann's families have resided in Abingdon for generations. David is a veteran fisherman, upland bird hunter, and musician, playing ol' time and bluegrass music. When asked about his musical talent, he humbly replies, "I am not really a musician."

Ruth quips, "Oh, come on, you can play pretty good." That was the only opening David needed to tell me about his

guitar playin' and bluegrass pickin'. When they are not off hiking the Creeper Trail, you might be lucky enough to catch them at home. Just listen for the twanging of "Wildwood Flower" and follow the sound.

Abingdon's historic district, mountains, and valley farms speak eloquently for themselves. After many years in the business, Abingdon realtor Carol Jones is still awed by the spectacular mountain views and lush valleys. Over the last decade, Carol has seen the real estate market in Abingdon shift from the attraction of rural living toward an increasing demand for homes in the historic district. Carol attributes this new emphasis to the desire to walk to the theaters and restaurants and window shop through the downtown. Carol contends, "Abingdon offers a high quality of life with endless possibilities for people in all stages of their lives." Additionally, Carol notes that the area encompasses a very enticing feature with its three small colleges within the Abingdon metropolitan area, if there is such a thing. Emory & Henry, Virginia Intermont, and King College all call Abingdon home.



Carol Jones

When Ken Johnson, a local realtor, discusses Abingdon, you can detect his pride and fondness for the area. Ken explained to me that Abingdon offers people the rare opportunity to enjoy all the

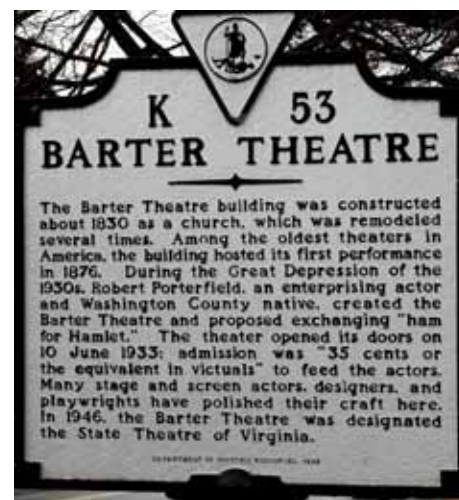
The Barter Theatre on Main Street



benefits of a larger city without sacrificing a small town feel. When asked about what he considers special, Ken quickly responds, "Holston Lake provides waterfront living at its best, but with the added bonus of being only a few miles from town." Ken also expounded on the vast recreational options and the hard-to-find opportunities of owning mountaintop acreage for that perfect cabin view. It's clear from Ken and Carol that Abingdon is a special place.

### Places to Visit and Things to Do

Once downtown, the Martha Washington Inn and Barter Theatre comprise a commanding presence. The Inn was built in 1832 as the private mansion of General Francis Preston and his lovely wife Sarah. The building has been variously transformed from a women's college to a Civil War hospital; in 1935 it became The Martha Washington Inn, one of Virginia's finest hotels. The Inn prides itself on elegant accommodations and fine dining with patented Southern charm. Strolling out the Inn's entrance, from the porch you encounter the historic Barter Theatre, a veritable Virginia landmark. The theater was founded during the Depression by Robert Porterfield, an out-



of-work New York actor with an enterprising spirit who had a novel proposition: patrons bartering produce and livestock to gain admission. He proclaimed, "With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh," and the concept of trading ham for *Hamlet* was an immediate success. The theater employs a full troupe of actors and actresses and is recognized as the State Theatre of Virginia. Their list of alumni is as impressive as any off-off Broadway ensemble: Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Garry Collins, and Larry Linville, just to name a few.

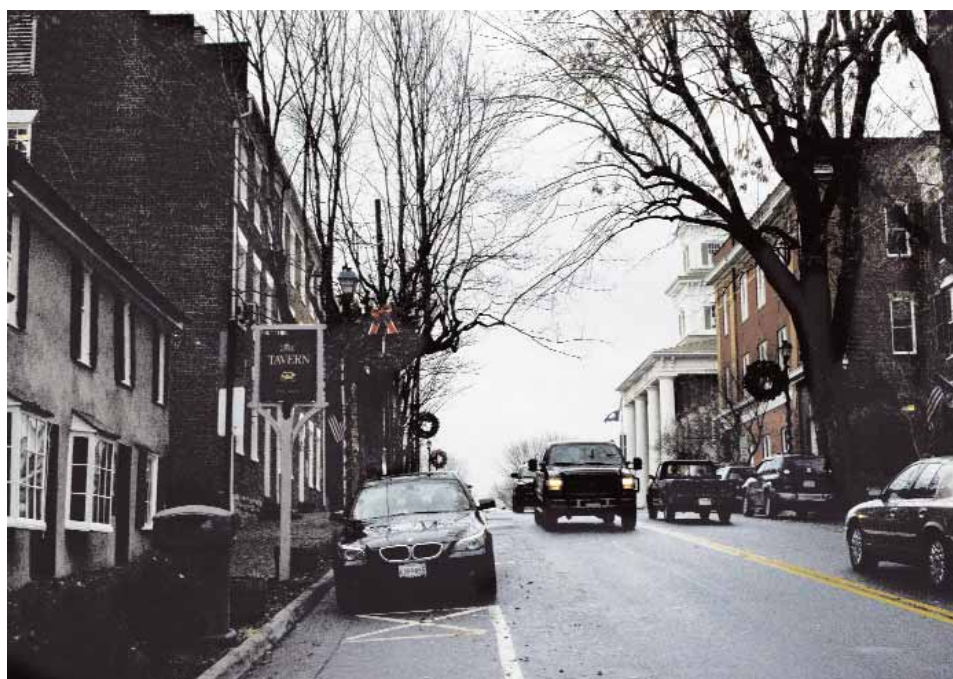
If you find yourself in Abingdon during the first two weeks of August, you will quickly notice that the Highlands

Festival is in full swing. The festival has become known as one of the top 100 tourist events in North America and one of the top 20 in the Southeast, with an estimated 200,000 visitors each year. The festival includes the region's top artists, musical offerings from bluegrass to Celtic, antiques and crafts, and a host of other activities.

The Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail has become a destination all its own, with mountain biking, hiking, and dozens of great streams for fishing. This rails-to-trails area actually began as a Native American footpath, but later became well known to the white man, Daniel Boone among them. In the early 1900s the Virginia-Carolina Railroad was constructed. The railroad hauled lumber, iron ore, supplies, and passengers, earning it the nickname Virginia Creeper from the struggles facing the great steam beasts as they climbed the steep mountain grades. In 1977, the Creeper ran its last load, having failed to turn a profit since the Great Depression. The railroad's failure has become our gain: one of the most rugged and picturesque trails in the United States. The total trail length is 34.3 miles from Abingdon to the North Carolina border and includes over 100 trestles and bridges as well as sharp curves and steep inclines. The Bike Station and Blue Blaze offer shuttles and bike rentals.

### Cuisine and Dining

After spending last summer in Abingdon, I quickly learned that the area boasts an abundance of dining experiences that will please even the most discriminating palate. No trip to town would be complete without a visit to The Tavern. The restaurant resides in the oldest building in Abingdon. Built in 1779 as a tavern and overnight stagecoach inn, it is one of the oldest buildings west of the Blue Ridge. The Tavern has entertained such guests as Henry Clay; Louis Philippe, King of France; President Andrew Jackson; and



The county court house at the top of the rise on Main Street

Pierre Charles L'Enfant, designer of Washington, D.C. Alison's features casual dining at its finest, replete with their world-famous potato soup. The Starving Artist Café offers the perfect combination of a busy Manhattan lunch spot that doubles as an art gallery. The Café provides outstanding soups, gourmet sandwiches, and seasonal outdoor dining. Be prepared to enjoy the art while you wait, or take a seat outside and watch life slowly pass by.

If you are an adventurer, then travel up Route 19 to Pounding Mill, Virginia. There you will encounter Cuz's Uptown Barbeque. Don't be fooled by its appearance; that's right, it's an old dairy barn that has been converted into a unique dining experience. The Cuz offers 2-inch steaks and prides itself on its Thai curry.

### The Sporting Life

The sporting opportunities abound in the mountains and valleys of Southwest Virginia. Sportsmen need only venture a short distance from historic Abingdon to discover fishing, golf, kayaking, rock climbing, hiking, upland bird hunting, and mountain biking. Whether your dream is finding yourself on a pictur-

esque lake or experiencing the early morning mountain fog, you will find it here!

One of the best kept secrets in Virginia is Breaks Interstate Park, "the Grand Canyon of the South." Located right on the Virginia-Kentucky state line, the park features the deepest gorge east of the Mississippi River as the mighty Russell Fork River carves its way, as she has for the last hundred million years—give or take a few. The kayaking and whitewater rafting are superb, including some class 5 rapids. If your passion is rock climbing, hiking, or just taking the leisurely stroll, you will be rewarded here. The park provides a wide variety of wild flowers and bird watching opportunities as well.

For those sportsmen who thrive on the thrill of big game, the Clinch Mountain Wildlife Management Area offers an abundance of potential. This is the second largest wildlife management area in Virginia, spanning over 25,000 acres of Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, and Russell Counties. The area is renowned for its outstanding deer, turkey, and bear hunting. The Big Tumbling features excellent trout fishing with large



A fisherman at Beartree Gap Lake

plunge pools and sharp drops in elevation. I can tell you from experience that the stream has earned its name. While navigating your way up the mountain and through numerous switchbacks, you will find a 300-acre jewel, Laurel Bed Lake.

If your preference is the beaten path, but you still desire that rustic mountain experience, then Hungry Mother State Park is your getaway. Legend has it that the park earned its name when Native Americans destroyed several colonial settlements. Molly Marley and her child were among those taken hostage, but they escaped. After several days of wandering, Molly collapsed. Later, her child was found alone in the woods, but the only words the child could utter were, “hungry mother.” Located about five miles from Marion, Virginia, and right off Interstate 81, even the directionally challenged can reap the benefits of this excursion. Hungry Mother Lake is a 108-acre postcard with a reputation for excellent fish-

ing. It is limited to non-gasoline-powered boats, making those relaxing canoe trips more serene.

In one of my previous articles, I clearly stated and thought it was understood that I was not willing to give away my new-found honey holes in God’s country. Well, after being prodded by some loyal *Virginia Sportsman* patrons, I did the next best thing: I contacted my friend Bruce Wankel at the Virginia Creeper Fly Shop and tricked him into giving me his. Sorry, Bruce. When Bruce told me that he has anglers arrive from places like Texas, Florida, and Tennessee to fish in Southwest Virginia, I was sold. Bruce said the area offers excellent bass fishing and that some of the best trout angling in the area can be found in the tailwaters of the Holston Dam. The Virginia Creeper Fly Shop offers a complete guide service and drift boat trips that can put you in the right place to catch those citation trout and smallmouth bass.

Now I will share a few spots with all those anglers who enjoy a challenge and prefer to get off the beaten track. The Pound River, located in Dickenson County, has a special regulation section below the Flannagan Dam that holds an excellent brown trout fishery. Set your drag loose and try to come when the weather is counter-intuitively *not* hospitable; you might find yourself hooked into a 22-inch brownie. The South Holston River has an excellent special regulation area as well that features nonstop rainbow action, and as you venture into the headwaters you will be amazed at the vividly colored fish and their vicious hits. Even famed artist James Prosek could not do these beauties justice. The Smith River also offers excellent trout waters, and the Dan River provides superb striper fishing. The area holds unlimited fishing opportunities, and the Jefferson National Forest covers vast tracks of land throughout Southwest Virginia.

## The Arts and Local Vineyards

Abingdon has emerged as one of the most interesting and diverse cultural centers in Southwest Virginia. After dinner at The Tavern, step next door and you will discover The New Light Gallery. The gallery offers fine contemporary art in all mediums, serving up about nine exhibits a year. The Arts Depot is located in a nineteenth-century train station and usually presents twelve rotating exhibits per year. The Depot offers a full display of visual stimuli from a collection of working art studios to a distinctive focus on regional art and artists. Finally, The William King Regional Arts Center features changing exhibitions from regional to world art and an outdoor sculpture garden.

The wine experience in Abingdon is flourishing, as several new vineyards

and wineries have chosen Southwest Virginia as their home. I recently spoke with Bob and Janet Carlson, owners of Abingdon Vineyard & Winery. Bob proudly explained that the vineyard has just completed its fifth season. The winery now boasts 23 different types of wine and grows 13 varieties of grapes. The excitement in Bob's voice was contagious as he discussed the growing market of wineries in Virginia and especially the budding opportunities in the area. Several other vineyards are located in Southwest Virginia: Davis Valley Winery and Vineyard; Dye's Vineyard in Honaker; and Mountain Rose in Wise.

Whether you spend a day or decide to spend a lifetime, once Abingdon has you in her grasp, she won't let you go.

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The author is an avid fly fisherman and bird hunter. He and wife Karen reside in Grundy, Virginia, where he attends the Appalachian School of Law. Feel free to contact him at pbaker@asl.edu.

## THE MARTHA WASHINGTON INN



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*The Martha is home to so many poignant legends which are part of the history and the mystique of this elegant Virginia treasure. Here you'll find a splendor associated with the grand hotels of a bygone era along with a history 170 years in the making. Your arrival at The Martha will ensure a rewarding change of pace as you experience this treasured, historic landmark.*



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