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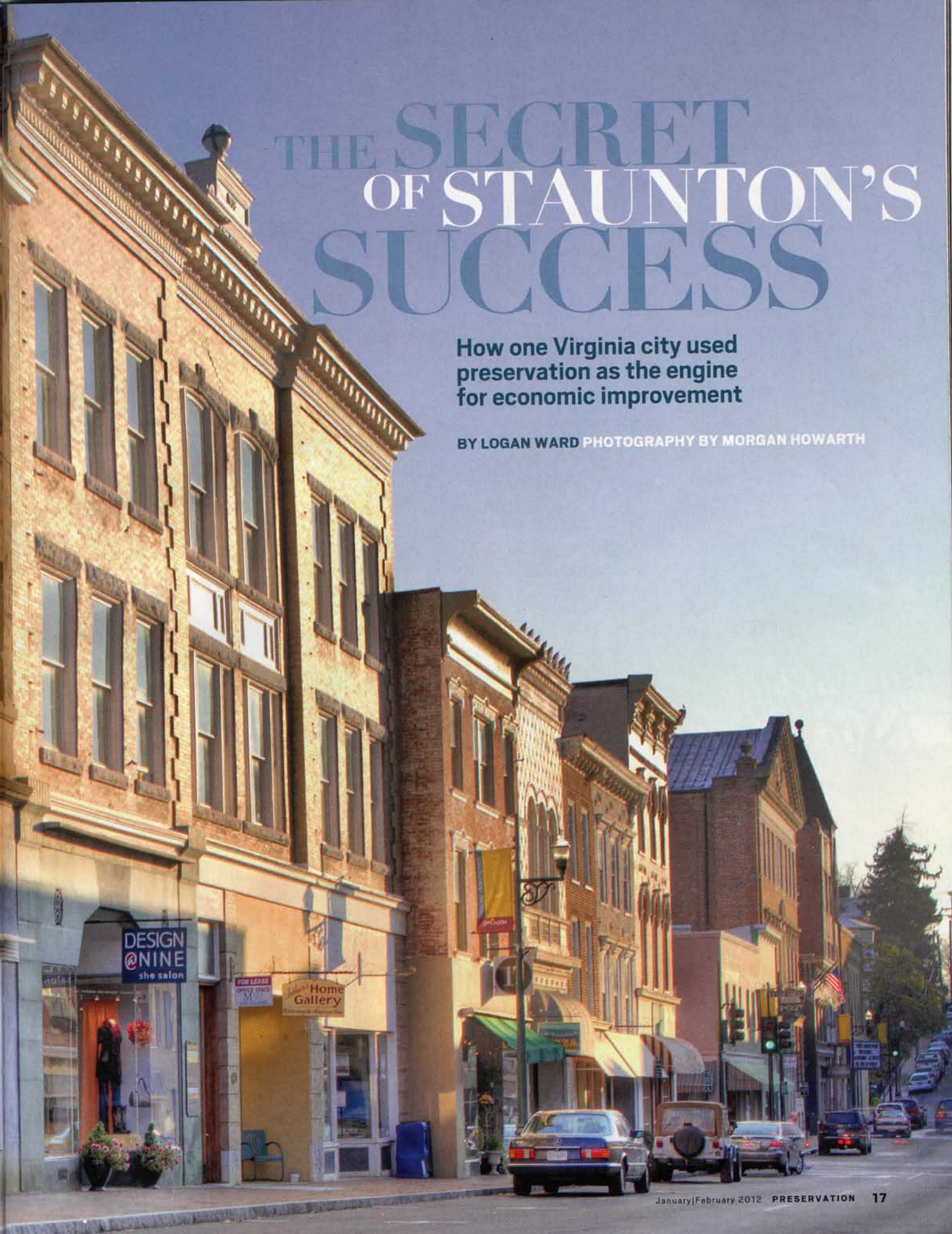
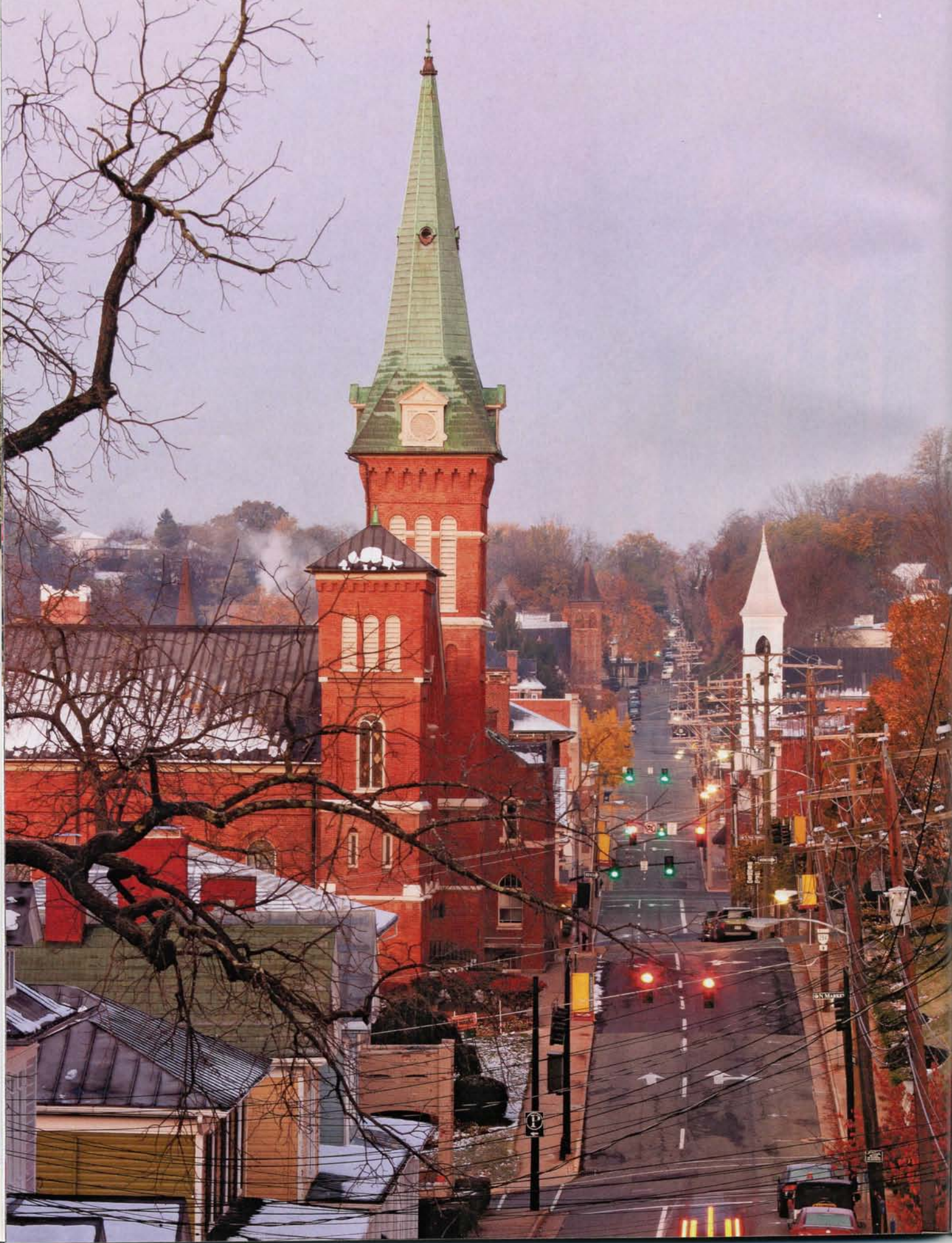
THE SECRET OF STAUNTON'S SUCCESS

How one Virginia city used preservation as the engine for economic improvement

BY LOGAN WARD PHOTOGRAPHY BY MORGAN HOWARTH





Amid the clink of china and caffeine-fueled breakfast chatter, Janet Thomas recounts the morning regulars couldn't find her restaurant in downtown Staunton, Va. It was 1980, and Thomas, on the advice of my tablemates—Kathy and Bill Frazier—had forked over $1,200 to restore the Beverley Building's 1888 facade. "It was a lot of money," says Thomas, a fixture at her family's restaurant for almost four decades. "But we wanted to put the building back like it was when it was built." During those days of suburbanization, when downtowns everywhere were crumbling, Bill Frazier and his future wife, Kathy O'Neill, worked for Historic Staunton Foundation (HSF). They were pushing skeptical local business owners to invest in preservation, starting with storefronts, many of which had been renovated with white paint, plate glass, and aluminum in an attempt to look "modern."

To avoid disrupting business, Thomas tells me, a carpenter worked off-site for weeks, hammering together the storefront that HSF had designed for free. One Tuesday, the restaurant closed early, and the carpenter arrived and worked all night, removing the plate glass and replacing it with his historically-appropriate wood-framed rendition.

The next morning, Thomas watched as her regular patrons passed without entering. Some paused, shrugged, and then kept going. "I about had a heart attack," says Thomas. "I thought, 'Oh, my God! We spent all that money and not a soul stopped. How are we going to pay for that?'"

Initially confused by the new look, the customers soon returned. Three decades later, tourists visiting the rolling hills of the Shenandoah Valley often join a new batch of regulars at the Staunton institution. "People thought we were crazy for wanting to fix up facades," says Bill Frazier, tucking into a plate of poached eggs and corned-beef hash. But the bustling Beverley Restaurant—and so much else about this town—proves that Historic Staunton Foundation was absolutely right.

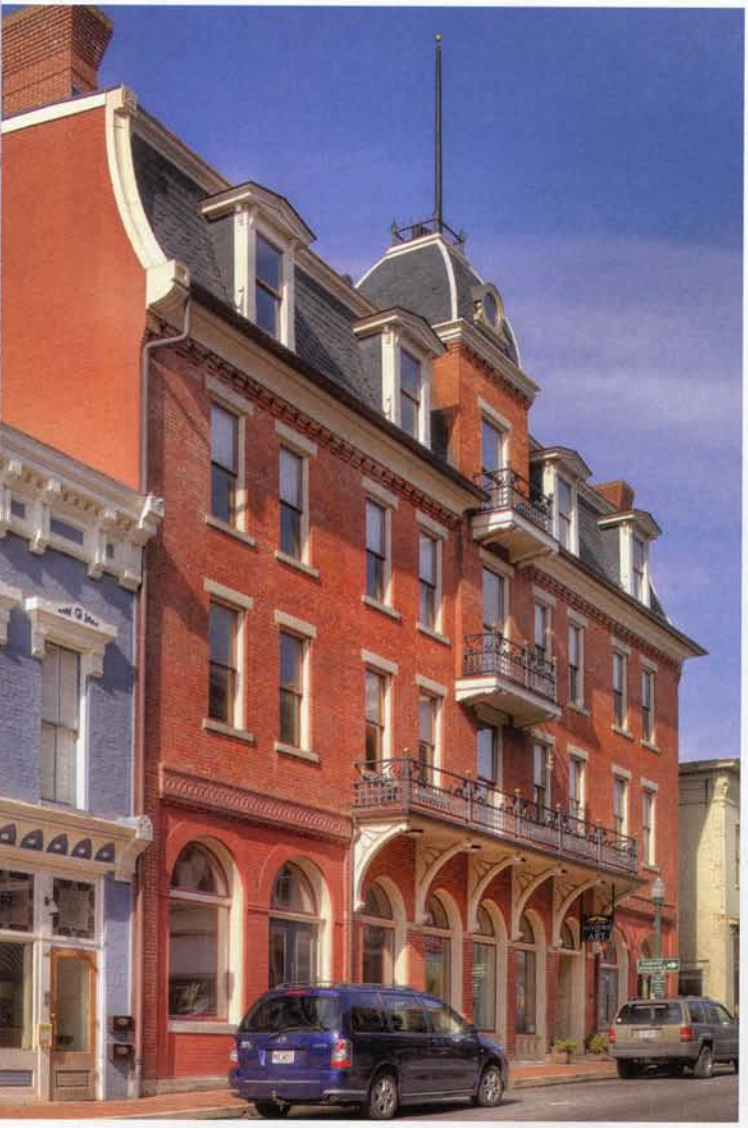
Beginning with a few restored facades, Staunton has completely turned itself around. Restaurants, shops, and live music venues line the small grid of downtown streets. In this age of the multiplex, the city of 25,000 people has two downtown cinemas housed in pre-World War II buildings. In addition, since 2001, the American Shakespeare Center, a repertory company that performs in the world's only re-creation of London's Blackfriars Playhouse, has drawn out-of-town visitors, many booking rooms next door at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel & Conference Center, housed in a rehabilitated 1924 hotel.

Opposite: Looking west on Frederick Street; Above: Kathy and Bill Frazier (standing) with Janet Thomas at the Beverley Restaurant

All you have to do is look around at the beautifully maintained buildings designed in an eclectic mix of architectural styles to realize that historic preservation drove Staunton's renaissance. In the city's five distinct historic districts, property values have climbed by 279 percent on average since 1983. Since 2000 alone, more than $50 million in private investment on historic tax-credit projects—from single-family homes to mixed-use commercial projects—has poured into the city.

"From the moment I arrived in Staunton, I was impressed," says Daniel Heifetz, director of the Heifetz International Music Institute, which invites top violin, viola, and cello instructors to teach a six-week summer course for gifted kids. Last summer, Heifetz announced he was relocating from a New Hampshire campus to historic Mary Baldwin College in Staunton. "These colleagues of mine are turning down invitations to Aspen, Lake Como in Italy, and castles in France. I want to give them an experience that nourishes them spiritually in a place they will enjoy being. If downtown had not been well preserved, the Heifetz Institute would not have moved to Staunton."

None of this success was inevitable. The Beverley Restaurant may have undergone an overnight transformation, but Staunton's rebirth has been long and hard-fought. The struggle began 40 years ago, during a dark time when Staunton's fate nearly took a very different turn.



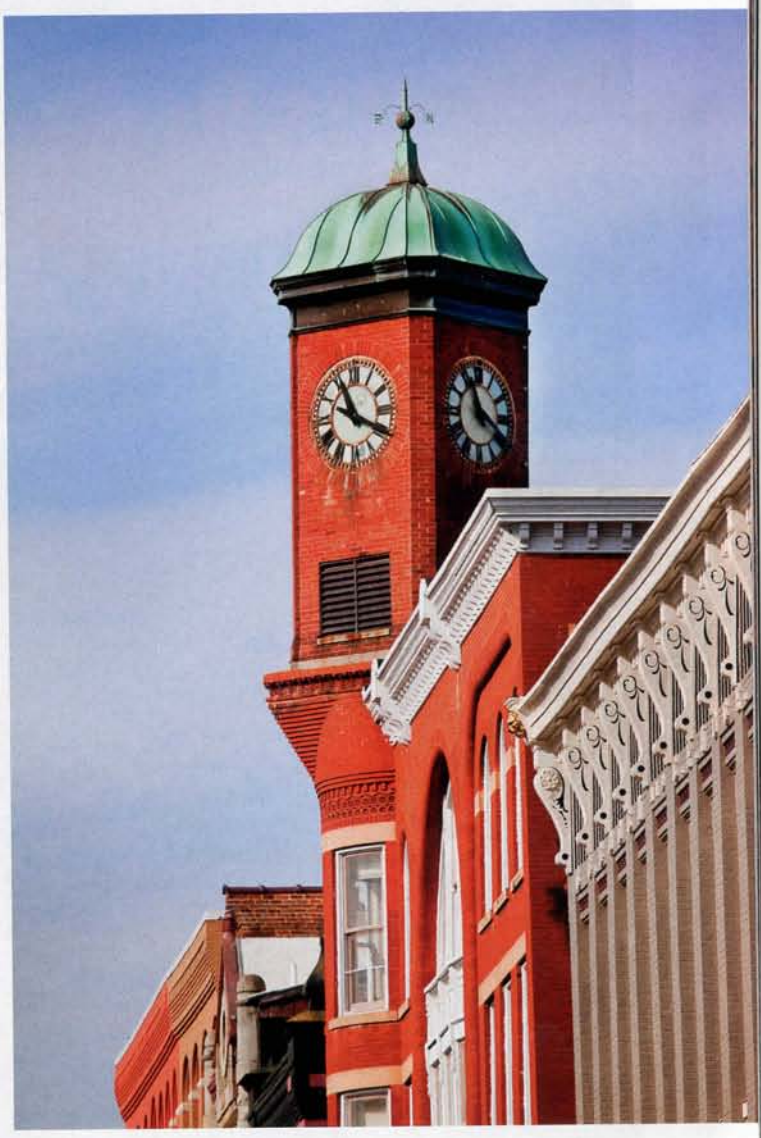
Left: The R.R. Smith Center for History and Art, restored by HSF and other local groups using historic tax credits.

The automobile practically killed Staunton's architectural history. In the 1960s, responding to complaints about traffic congestion and a lack of parking on Staunton's narrow streets, the city tore down old buildings and paved over the empty lots. By 1966, it had razed a swath of 32 historic buildings, including the home of Staunton's Civil War mayor, Nicholas Trout, just north of the town's main drag, Beverley Street. In 1971, the city approved the Virginia Department of Transportation's plan to knock down the historic train station, the 1854 American Hotel, and a row of 19th-century warehouses, known collectively as the Wharf, to accommodate a massive four-lane thoroughfare.

"If everybody had gotten enough parking to suit them—the banks, churches, city hall, and so forth—there wouldn't be too much left in between to remind us what Staunton used to be," says longtime resident Doug Roller.

Roller and a citizens group began organizing around a kitchen table. Calling themselves Historic Staunton Foundation, they fought the road project and won. The Wharf was deemed a historic district. Next, HSF bought and rehabilitated the Sears House, an 1866 Tuscan villa-style cottage on a prominent downtown hilltop.

By 1976, HSF had hired the freshly minted University of Virginia architectural historian, Bill Frazier, who in 1977 became the foundation's first executive director. He was certain that the key to continued success was education. Frazier began by conducting an exhaustive architectural inventory of the city and then, working with his small, newly hired staff, started nominating properties to the National Register of Historic Places. To highlight Staunton's architectural treasures, HSF built a portable exhibit that could be set up in schools and building lobbies, Joni Mitchell's voice—"They paved paradise and put up a parking lot"—looping in the background. It launched a weekly newspaper quiz called *Downtown Detail*



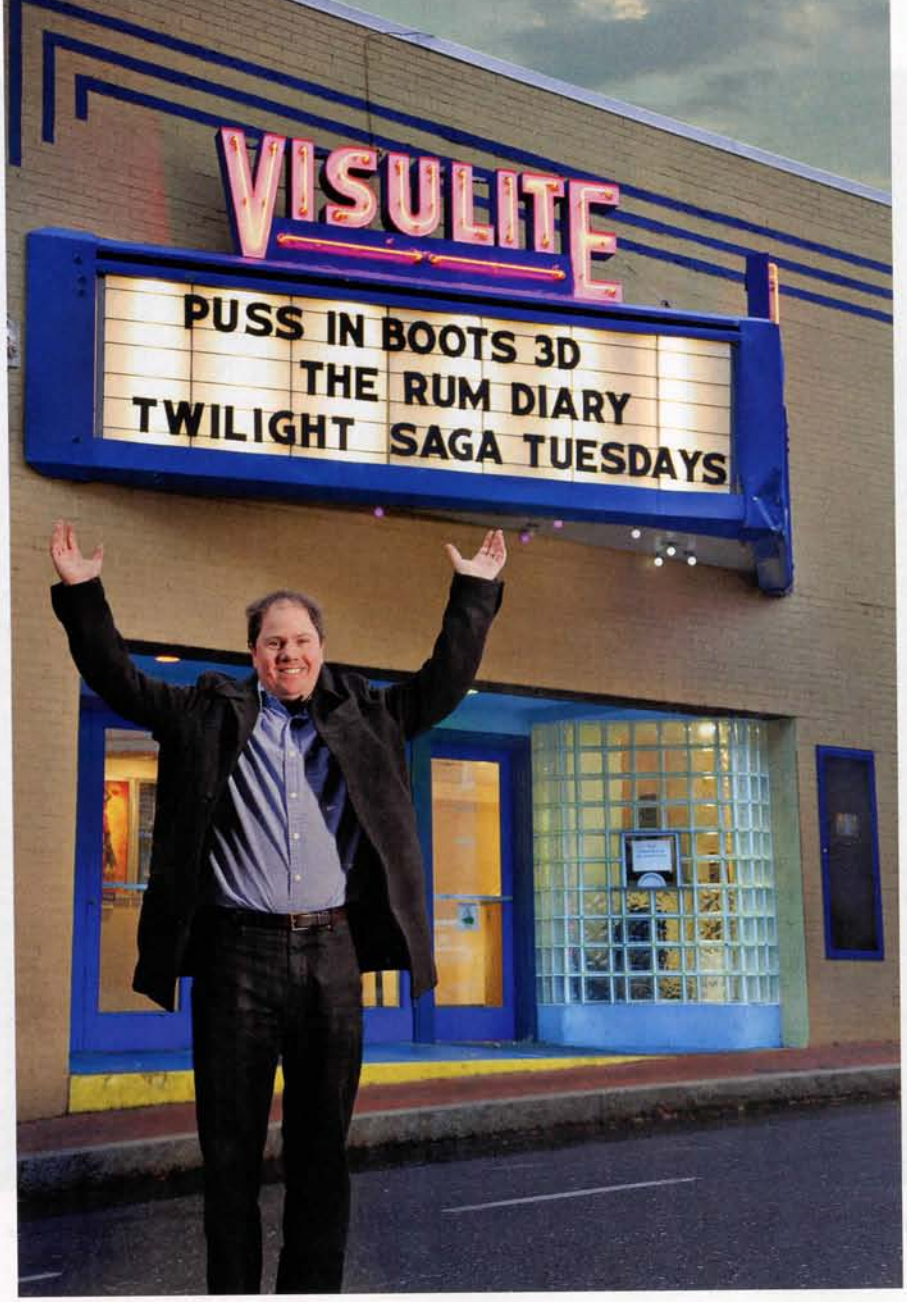
Center: The stained-glass skylight and coffered ceiling at the 1903 National Valley Bank; Right: Looking west on Beverley Street toward the Staunton clock tower

with a photo of an architectural element—an arch or cornice, for example—and an invitation to readers to identify the building. "The next week, we'd show the detail and where it was and give a little history of the building," says Frazier. You'd see people on the sidewalks craning their necks skyward. "It got people to notice."

While attending a preservation seminar at Cornell University, Frazier had his own ah-ha moment. In small communities, one speaker said, the problem of neglect is usually a lack of economic development, while in big cities it's the opposite problem—rampant development. If HSF was going to save old buildings, preservation had to be a magnet for business. That turned out to be the key to four decades of success.

HSF developed its own facade improvement program, offering free design services to downtown business owners, such as Janet Thomas, who agreed to restore their historic storefronts. The idea was that investment in buildings would deliver tangible returns. With double-digit inflation rates and stagnant growth, that was a tough sell. But the nonprofit organization kept pushing, and soon buildings up and down Beverley Street were covered in scaffolding. Year after year, HSF documented the amount of money invested in preservation and its positive economic effects. City council members and city managers eventually got on board. "Before that, you had nobody doing anything for 10 years except talking about demolition," says Frazier. "It was a big shift in the city's consciousness."

City government leaders proved their commitment in the late 1980s, for the first time tying Staunton's economic development plan to historic preservation. In 1996, the council passed a historic preservation ordinance to prevent inappropriate renovations, such as vinyl siding and window replacement in historic districts, and partnered with HSF, which had grown from the kitchen table to 500 members strong. Instead of tearing down



Left: Adam Greenbaum in front of the Visulite Cinemas; Above: Facade ornamentation on the 1912 Dixie Theater

old buildings, over the next couple of decades, the city initiated streetscape beautification projects, including burying electrical and phone cables along Beverley Street and installing decorative brick sidewalks and street lamps. In 2005, the city invested in the $21 million rehab of the 1924 Stonewall Jackson Hotel.

"Historic preservation is such an important part of who we are in Staunton that you can't separate it from the city's economic growth," says Economic Development Director Bill Hamilton, who helped launch the department more than two decades ago. "Most businesses that come to look at Staunton respond very well to the central business district, whether they are retailers or manufacturers looking to locate on the city's perimeter. I'm proud to take them downtown to talk about what we've tried to accomplish."

After breakfast at the Beverley, I stroll over to the Wharf parking lot, where Staunton's farmers market is in full swing. A jazz combo is jamming beside a stall heaped with apples. A boy toddles over waving a dollar bill, drops it into a horn case, and rushes self-consciously back to his mother. Other parents push strollers while shoppers carrying baskets and canvas bags walk stall to stall, sipping coffee from stainless steel travel mugs. If the 1971 road project had proceeded, this farmers market would not be here. Nor would the long row of handsome brick warehouses that rise up in the background and now house The Wine Cellar, Blue Mountain Coffees, Byer's Street Bistro, and the Jolly Roger Haggle Shop.

Contrary to the opinions of early naysayers, preservation has

been an economic driver for Staunton. The charming architecture, walkability, and lively cultural scene draw more and more people to town, including the jazz band's singer, Julie Plumbley, a pathologist who moved here six years ago. "I like that Staunton feels like a real town, not just a suburb of some place," she says.

The sentiment is echoed by Adam Greenbaum, who arrived in Staunton by train in 2004. The thirtysomething New York screenwriter and movie buff had spent the previous year traveling up and down the East Coast, looking for a location to open a movie theater. "I popped out at the train station into this amazingly preserved Victorian town," he recalls. "It just blew me away. So many towns were run down, and all businesses had moved to the outskirts. Downtown Staunton had this real energy, which was especially striking for such a small place." He rescued a theater from ruin and launched a state-of-the-art cinema, with comfy lounge seats and 3-D capability. And the crowds have been coming ever since: On average, the restored Visulite draws 3,000 people per month for an evening at the movies.

The immediate challenge is for Staunton to continue building on its own success—a difficult prospect in this time of economic turmoil. The housing market slump and volatile stock market have hurt some large adaptive-use projects, including The Villages at Staunton (an early-19th-century campus that had been a mental hospital) and Gypsy Hill Place (the 1927 high school). HSF and two sister nonprofit organizations are also struggling to pay off lingering construction costs after converting the 1895 Eakleton Hotel into the R. R. Smith Center for History and Art. And like most cities these days, Staunton struggles to control sprawl along the main corridors leading into its historic downtown.

As HSF Executive Director Frank Strassler says, "We've done a great job with downtown, but we need to revisit the architectural inventory and take a look at the houses outside the historic districts that weren't as threatened or seen as important in 1971. Do we create new historic districts? Do people in those neighborhoods want design guidelines?"

HSF's board president, Betty Vellines, says it's up to residents to determine whether more of Staunton will be protected. She has confidence they'll say yes. "People here understand how historic architecture gives them a sense of continuity between past and future," Vellines says. "I'm inspired by the spirit of this place."

David J. Brown, executive vice president and chief preservation officer of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who served as HSF executive director during the 1980s, agrees: "Often when city governments think about what type of community they want to have in 15 or 20 years, historic resources and preservation get short shrift, whereas in Staunton the ethic of preservation has been integrated throughout the community as a whole," he says. "They're using historic buildings and landscapes as tools for the future of the city."

Historic Staunton Foundation President Betty Vellines and Executive Director Frank Strassler at the R.R. Smith Center for History and Art

As proof, Bill Hamilton mentions a recent meeting with a nationally-known manufacturer that has shortlisted Staunton in its search for a home. He says the manufacturer's top five criteria are, in order, historic preservation, cultural attractions, a music scene, a local-foods movement, and environmental sustainability. Even if the search's outcome isn't a win for Staunton, Hamilton says, "it was really nice to see a company that validates everything we've worked on over the years."

Logan Ward, a Staunton, Va., resident since 2004, is the author of See You in a Hundred Years.