

Tar Heel Town: Washington

Positioned on the banks of the Pamlico River, this Beaufort County town named for our nation's founding father draws on its earnestness and energy to experience a revolutionary reawakening.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

Sail up the Pamlico River any Friday afternoon, just as mariners have done since the 1600s. A small city appears off the starboard bow. Gulls circle above. As your boat slides past the opened train trestle, two young boys fishing from the tracks yell down and wave a welcome. Dozens of boats are anchored out across from the riverfront docks — sailboats, fishing boats, and family cruisers. Flags fly from their sterns.

Approaching the docks, the riverfront is awash with people, music, laughter, and the aroma of Down East barbecue. The smiling dock attendant directs you into your reserved slip and grabs your dock lines. The venue? A riverfront festival in Washington and just another day in this relaxed corner of the world.

“We came for the river”

In 1776, Colonel James Bonner honored George Washington by naming the settlement on the Pamlico River after the famous patriot. Signage at the entrance to the city on U.S. Highway 17 proclaims: “The Original Washington.” Residents, numbering more than 10,000 now, lay claim to the distinction of being the first American community named after our first president.

While the river was responsible for Washington's settlement and growth as a commercial port (goods arrived at the Havens and Fowles riverfront warehouses from faraway locales like Europe and the West Indies), it is now, in part, responsible for Washington's growth as a port city known for a highly desirable quality of life. In the past 10 years, Washington has invested heavily in its future while preserving its past. Signs of that commitment are everywhere.

Just ask Mike and Maureen Davis, and their son, Will. They decided to leave their home of Naperville, Illinois, and relocate in the Southeast. After researching and visiting Brunswick, Georgia; Beaufort, South Carolina; Wilmington; and Washington, they unanimously settled on Washington. “For many reasons,” Mike says. “We like the small town atmosphere: the rich history, the ongoing restorations, plans for future development — but most of all, we came for the river.”

On the riverfront, Washington recently built new docks — because city officials understand that it's all about the river. The docks allow not only locals to tie up and enjoy what downtown Washington has to offer, they also allow those who travel the East Coast by boat to sample some Washington-style Southern hospitality. The city is only a half-day cruise up river from the Pamlico Sound and the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway.

And word is getting out.

Travis Boyd, a dock attendant for the city, says visiting mariners rave about their experience. “They tell me they come for the historic sites, the food, the art, and the serenity they find here,” he says. “I’d have to say 99 percent of my customers thoroughly enjoy their visits.” Boyd also says technology is partly responsible for the news getting out. “I’ve seen people in their boats using laptops to email family and friends about Washington.”

Waterfront mix

Washington’s Estuarium, the only facility of its kind in the country, is located just a leisurely stroll east from the city docks, along the recently renovated waterfront. Inside, visitors learn how the features of the Coastal Plain affect the environment and quality of life of its residents. Inside, much like aquariums, tanks hold examples of local marine life. Exhibits also demonstrate the importance of coastal estuaries. Outside, a lagoon surrounded by a lengthy boardwalk gives visitors an up-close look at the Down East estuary infrastructure.

Estuarium Manager Blount Rumley is proud of the popularity of the facility. “We’ve had visitors from as far as China and Australia,” he says. “And we’ve had folks from all but two states in the U.S.” Don’t try looking up “Estuarium” in your dictionary (as I did) — you won’t find it. Rumley’s wife, Mary, has been given credit for creating the term. Just beyond the Estuarium lies the riverfront site of the former Moss Planing Mill, North Carolina’s last operating waterfront lumber mill, which provided lumber products from 1895 to 1992. The site is slated for a \$30 million residential and commercial development called Moss Landing. The project will include 12 riverfront brownstone-styled town homes, 36 luxury condos, an inn, a conference center, and approximately 60 boat slips. Completion is projected for early 2006.

The Moss Landing development is new construction, but work will soon be underway on a project designed to restore an old treasure to former glory — and then some. The Hotel Louise, on Main Street, built by M. Thomas Archbell around 1900, is just steps away from Washington’s waterfront. Over time, the hotel lost its luster. Progress Partners LLC decided the time was right to renovate. Work will soon begin on The George – Little Inn at Washington. The hotel will have more than a new name. When renovated, it will offer a Mediterranean restaurant, spa, luxurious rooms, and rooftop garden condos.

Repeat performance

Another ambitious renovation is taking place downtown — the Turnage Theater. C.A. “Cat” Turnage opened the theater in 1928, on the second floor of 144 West Main Street. In the early years, the original theater booked vaudeville acts and ran silent films; Red Skelton was one of the noteworthy performers. Later, when vaudeville faded, a second theater was constructed on the street level — one that incorporated a more popular style of stadium seating found in newer movie theaters. While the ground floor theater has been silent for more than 26 years, it will come back to life very soon — with renovation

credited to dedicated supporters of the arts.

Several years ago, local residents formed The Turnage Theaters Foundation. Partners soon stepped up — Washington's Committee of 100, the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Development Association, and most recently, the East Carolina University School of Theater and Dance.

John Shearin, director of the School, thinks it's "a natural" for the university to have a relationship with the historic theater 30 minutes east of the Greenville campus. "We're planning on doing summer programs at the Turnage," he says. "Our students are excited about the possibilities."

Jerry Smyre, president of the Turnage Foundation, says the \$3.1 million project (funded generously with grant money) will bring live theater to Washington in 2005. "The reopening of the Turnage will show the level of commitment to the arts we have here in Washington," he says. Since the theater is a block from the river, a romantic walk along the city docks after a performance will be difficult to resist.

Preservation and restoration is nothing new in Washington. Early in the 1970s, the city developed a restoration and preservation agenda that targeted many residences and commercial structures. A few of these include our state's second-oldest courthouse (circa 1786), now a library. The Bank of Washington (circa 1854) is now a delightful restaurant, and the Seaboard Coastline Railroad Depot (circa 1904) is now the home of the Arts Council.

While the city is experiencing investor-funded preservation and renovation projects, personal projects are every bit as important. It takes homeowners to revitalize neighborhoods, and Washington has seen more and more people move downtown and roll up their sleeves, including people like Jeffery Phipps.

Phipps, associate professor of costume design at ECU (and a member of the Turnage Theater Foundation Board), left Florida to relocate in Washington. He discovered a wonderful Victorian cottage, circa 1896, on Second Street and went to work bringing his historic cottage back to life. "Our downtown area is getting a lot of attention," he says. "My neighborhood is just that: a place where you feel a sense of community. People here actually use the sidewalks."

Plenty to do

Using the sidewalks allows Phipps and his neighbors the opportunity to not only enjoy the waterfront, but also enjoy a meal on Main Street. Choices are plentiful. How about a bag of Bill's hot dogs? They're classic around here, and the chili is renowned throughout our state. Have a taste for fresh salmon? Try the Curiosity Shoppe Cafe. For a late night sandwich and a basketball game, don't miss the Mill Cafe. Local media types gather here, so it's the place to hear breaking news first. Afterward, try Scoops Ice Cream parlor for a hand-packed cone. Instead of walking back home, consider spending a bit more time downtown. There's usually something artful happening.

And art is what the Beaufort County Arts Council is all about. Throughout the year, live theater, crafts, festivals, and music keep calendars filled. But the most popular event for locals has been a recent addition — Music in the Streets. Joey Toler, program director for the council, explains: “Music in the Streets (the third Friday of the month from April to October) has gained tremendous momentum since we started the program last year,” he says. “We’ve gone from a few hundred people to several thousand.” Six blocks of Main Street are blocked off for the evening, and performers are spread out along the thoroughfare. “We draw quite a bit of area talent,” Toler says. “We have everything from bluegrass to classic rock to barbershop quartets performing on any given night. It’s become a real social event. Families come downtown to hear music and chat with friends.”

Music in the Streets draws local residents downtown, but the event that draws the most visitors is the East Carolina Wildfowl Arts Festival and Decoy Carving Championship. Held in January, the festival draws visitors and exhibitors from throughout the Southeast. The East Carolina Wildfowl Guild believes the festivals help “conserve and perpetuate wildlife arts and practices of individual handcraftsmanship native to Eastern North Carolina.” Some carvings have fetched thousands of dollars. The duck-calling competition alone is worth a visit.

Those looking to expand their education turn to Beaufort County Community College to train for local careers and to prepare for transfer to universities across the Tar Heel state. The college has the largest service area of any community college in the state and is a leader in distance education.

Someone who has witnessed much of the city’s evolution over the years is Rachel Hackney, executive editor of the Washington Daily News. The newspaper has been published by the Futrell family for more than 50 years and is the smallest daily paper in the country to win a Pulitzer Prize. Hackney has lived in Washington since 1980, and she is enthusiastic about the changes she’s seen. “Washington has seen a steady growth in preserving its historical structures,” she says. “But in the last five years, there’s been a remarkable surge in expanding cultural opportunities. Washington is developing avenues of economic prosperity by becoming a very cosmopolitan community.”

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