

**Tenn. AG accuses Food City of unlawfully selling opioids A3**

**Pomrenke motion to change sentencing denied by judge A3**

**Judge James Jones taking senior status, moving to semiretirement B1**

# Washington County News

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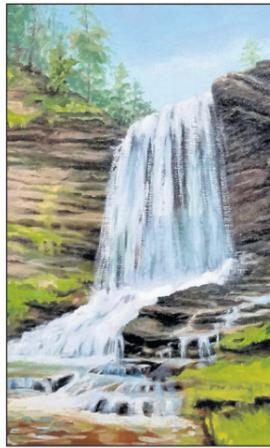
**SPORTS**



Bristol's baseball team renamed to State Liners

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**OPINION**



Nature art exhibit will celebrate region's biodiversity

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**COMMUNITY**



Petition makes the rounds to attempt to save Dooley house

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## Grenade tragedy still under investigation

Authorities were slow to release details of explosion but say they are still waiting on more information



**Asher Hurley, 12, was killed on Dec. 23 by a MK2 grenade that was purchased at the Fancy Flea Antique Mall in Shallotte, North Carolina.**

BY JOE TENNIS  
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — The first information released to the public about an explosion in Abingdon that killed a 12-year-old boy two days before Christmas came that night at 7:16 p.m.

Town officials tweeted a message on Alert Abingdon: "EXPLOSION at 269 KING ST ABINGDON. Please use caution in the

area. December 23, 2020 at 07:11 PM."

It was nearly two weeks before anything else was released. It came Jan. 5 after inquiries by the local news media about a published obituary penned by the boy's father in the Bristol Herald Courier.

"We had it out on Twitter that night. It's in the public's eye. We're not trying to hide anything.

It's still an active investigation," Abingdon Police Chief John Holbrook said.

"As soon as somebody called and asked, we put something together and sent it out," Holbrook told the Bristol Herald Courier. "We really didn't have a whole lot to release."

Holbrook recalled that night,

See **GRENADE**, Page A5

## FROM TRAILS TO THAILAND



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

David "Paragon" Calvert meditates as a Buddhist monk in Thailand in early 2020 before moving to Damascus.

# The monk at Mojo's

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON  
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

**D**AMASCUS, Va. — A business owner with ties to an Asian monastery is scheduled to return to his community in Thailand as soon as his local restaurant is sold.

After owning and operating Mojo's Trailside Café & Cof-

fee in Damascus for nearly a year, David "Paragon" Calvert said his "work is finished. I need to move on."

Calvert is selling the eatery in hopes of returning to the Pa Pae Meditation Retreat in the mountain area of Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he lived as a Buddhist monk for two months before personal rea-

Having steered the Damascus eatery through the 2020 pandemic, owner David Calvert hopes to sell it and return to Buddhist monastery

sons and COVID-19 restrictions forced him to leave during the country's shutdown.

Calvert, who was visiting from California last spring, purchased the Damascus landmark after a tragic accident took the life of the beloved restaurant chef,

See **MOJO'S**, Page A6

## Damascus still planning for Trail Days in May 2021

BY JOE TENNIS  
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

DAMASCUS, Va. — The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is urging thru-hikers to stay off the Appalachian Trail, but newly elected leaders in this "Town of Many Trails" still want to bring back the annual Trail Days this year.

"As it stands now, we are planning Trail Days as if it were going to happen in May," said Trail Days Chairwoman Susan Coleman.

The conservancy's advisory to stay off the 2,190-mile-long Appalachian Trail, which spans from Georgia to Maine, was in response to COVID-19 concerns. That's the same reason Trail Days was canceled last May.

"I think hikers are still going to continue to hike," Coleman said. "I just don't think the amount of hikers will be as much as it has been in the past."

Trail Days is a popular festival that features a parade, auction, workshops and lectures, music and more over three days.

In years past, as many as 20,000 people have attended the event in Damascus, which has about 1,000 residents.

The Appalachian Trail runs through Damascus, cutting through the town park and following the sidewalks along U.S. Highway 58.

Consistently since 2004, Trail Days has been a proven moneymaker for this town in eastern Washington County, netting more than \$37,000 in 2018, according to town Treasurer Eva Meyer.

Tuesday Pope, the town clerk, said this year's Town-Wide Yard

See **TRAIL**, Page A2

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**Bristol, Virginia, accepting bids for Exit 5 project B2**

**Interstate 81 Bristol District projects in the works this year A2**

**Hassinger House to be sold after council vote B3**



# Washington County News

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**ART**



A Likely Yarn hosting outdoor knitting party

» A3

## Historic house in Abingdon to be moved

BY JOE TENNIS  
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — Big wheels are set to roll the historic Dooley House from Pecan Street to Park Street in Abingdon today.

That's the plan for David Dalton, the entrepreneur who stepped in to save the structure from proposed demolition by Sinking Spring Presbyterian Church, which owns the structure next door to the church.

Earlier this year, church leaders said the 1849 brick house is too costly to maintain and announced plans to raze it in favor of constructing a picnic pavilion, according to the church's website.

But members of the Historical Society of Washington County got involved to save the house. Walter Jenny, president of the society, tried to also persuade town officials to extend Abingdon's Old and Historic District so the house would be protected.

Town leaders — including Jason Boswell, the former zoning director — also worked to find a solution to save the house and have it moved.

In stepped Dalton, 61, a resident of Charlotte, North Carolina, and a part-time resident of Abingdon.



DAVID CRIGGER/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

The historic Dooley House in Abingdon has been lifted off its limestone foundation and prepared to be moved today.

See **DOOLEY**, Page A5

**COMMUNITY**



Old Glade Antique Tractor Association's summer show is here

» B1

## DAMASCUS, VIRGINIA



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABOVE: Damascus businessman Ralph Wilson has opened Main Street Coffee & Cream on Main Street in town. LEFT: Wilson, who has been in the restaurant business for years, does most of the baking at the shop. He offers everything from éclairs and donuts to bagels, muffins and pies.

**ENTERTAINMENT**



Court reporter hosts custom murder mystery dinners

» B3

# Coffee & Cream

## After COVID forced delays, new Damascus bakery opens this summer

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON  
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

DAMASCUS, Va. — Business just got a little sweeter for Ralph Wilson, who opened a new coffee and bakery business in Damascus on Memorial Day weekend.

Main Street Coffee & Cream has been a long-awaited venture for the business owner, who had planned to open in 2020.

Wilson, who didn't know how COVID-19 would impact the community, put the project on hold until this spring.

It may be just as well, said the owner, because in the meantime, he decided to add ice cream and soft serve to the menu.

After talking to bikers and hikers coming through town, he learned that ice cream was at the top of their lists. He's also offering homemade grab-and-go chicken and tuna sandwiches and wraps.

Traci Seats of Bristol, Tennessee, stopped in at the store for ice cream last week while making a nostalgic visit to her former hometown.

"This is really nice. This restaurant

building used to be Shorty's Shoe Repair back in the 1970s," said Seats, whose father, Scottie Thomas, operated a cabinet shop next door.

The coffee shop is the third business for the local entrepreneur. In addition to the coffee shop, he owns Damascus Diner and Dragonfly Inn in town.

"And this one may be the last," Wilson said with a laugh.

The owner said he's had unexpected problems getting the newest business off the ground.

"Maybe I didn't plan far enough ahead because COVID is still affecting my business life in different ways. It has taken forever to order restaurant equipment because many things were out of stock or put on backorder for months," said Wilson.

"Realistically, it will be mid-June before the shop becomes fully functional."

Wilson faces another hurdle as business owners try to recover in the wake of the pandemic.

Employers are facing the challenges of

a labor shortage thought to be caused by increased unemployment benefits from the federal government.

"I had to wait until high schools let out for the summer," said Wilson, who hired two students to help serve ice cream and soft serve.

"And I will still need more employees as we get busier this summer."

Wilson said he is thankful to have found two experienced employees to help run the new business.

Ellen Trent has worked in the restaurant business since she was 16. Her brother-in-law Blake Trent ran a coffee shop at Virginia Highlands Community College, where he recently became a certified Cisco networking technician.

Wilson does a lot of the baking himself, making fresh éclairs, bagels, donuts and pies. He also serves parfaits for breakfast and offers 12 flavors of ice cream.

The owner has been in the restaurant business since he worked at a Holiday Inn

See **COFFEE**, Page A5

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**Pomrenkes given prison sentences**  
**CRIME & COURTS — B3**

**Abingdon townhouse gutted by fire**  
**CRIME & COURTS — A3**



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**SPORTS**



Holston High takes its first full district title since 1984

» B2

**COMMUNITY**



Historic home in Abingdon set for demolition

» A5

**EVENTS**



Genealogy expert, host of PBS show to speak at historical society

» B1

## Authorities ID missing murder victim

» Sheriff: Remains discovered in Mendota belong to Athina Hopson  
 » Hopson believed to be third victim of 'serial killer' in 2019 slayings

**BY DAVID MCGEE**  
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS  
 ABINGDON, Va. — The search for Athina Renea Hopson is over. Hopson was 25, a wispy 5 feet, 2 inches tall and just 114 pounds when a family member reported her missing on March 21, 2019.

Police were initially told she was last seen with a man who drove her to rural Mendota, Virginia, to clean his trailer. That man, James Michael Wright, 24, first told authorities he'd "dropped her off" March 18. Wright later told authorities Hopson's body fell out of the back of his truck while crossing the

North Fork of the Holston River. He said he was taking her to the hospital when the body fell out of his truck, and he dropped it in the river, according to court records.

No remains were found in the river.

In a May 9, 2019, jailhouse confession, Wright wrote that he shot Hopson and two other women. Their bodies were recovered, but multiple searches for Hopson again proved fruitless.

"On Jan. 11, 2021, the Washington County Sheriff's Office responded back to the scene of previous murders involving three victims in the Mendota

area," Sheriff Blake Andis said to begin a Friday morning news briefing. "Detectives, going on a tip, went back to that area. A search was conducted, and skeletal remains were found."

Those remains were sent to the Roanoke western regional office of the medical examiner, where DNA analysis confirmed it was Athina Hopson, also known as Athina Huff, Andis said.

"We haven't gotten a complete analysis from the medical examiner's office, but preliminary investigation on Ms.

See **MURDER**, Page A3



Washington County Sheriff Blake Andis holds a missing person poster during a press conference on Friday morning. Remains identified as Athina Hopson were recovered on Jan. 11 in Mendota, Virginia. Hopson is believed to be the third victim of James Michael Wright. Two other victims were recovered in 2019.

## MOUNT ROGERS OUTFITTERS



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Mike "Lumpy" Price, owner of Mount Rogers Outfitters in Damascus, Virginia, says things are looking up for the outdoor supply business following months of low traffic.

## End of the tunnel

Outdoor supply shop in Damascus sees rebound after months of lost profits

**BY CAROLYN R. WILSON**  
 FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS  
 DAMASCUS, Va. — A Damascus business owner is starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel after enduring months of lost profits due to COVID-19.

Mike Price never anticipated what the world would look like after he purchased the 30-year-old Mount Rogers Outfitters two years ago.

"Being a new business owner was totally different than what I envisioned," said Price, who is best known by the locals as "Lumpy."

After the pandemic hit the small town of Damascus, Price said his profits shrunk by

70% compared to 2019, even though he has remained open as an essential business throughout the virus outbreak.

"Early in the pandemic, there still were hikers out on the Appalachian Trail who needed food and fuel," said Price. "Some of them hadn't been able to get a can of fuel to cook with for 470 miles, which is the equivalent of 30 days of hiking from Georgia to Damascus."

Hikers sent him postcards thanking him for his continued service during a time when many businesses were closing.

"I was grateful for everyone who walked

See **OUTFITTERS**, Page A6

## Region struggles with vaccine supplies

**BY DAVID MCGEE**  
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. — Northeast Tennessee residents are receiving the COVID-19 vaccine at more than twice the rate of Southwest Virginians, but Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam said Wednesday the state will be able to order more doses starting today.

In addition, a Ballad Health official said the health system is "concerned" about the supplies coming into this entire region at a time when the number of cases and hospitalizations is finally declining.

As of last Wednesday, about 25,000 first-dose vaccines had been administered in the 10 counties and two cities of far Southwest Virginia, and about 3,300 people have received both doses. That 28,135 total represents 4.6% of the 602,900 total vaccines administered across the commonwealth, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

Asked about the perceived disparity during his teleconference with the news media, Northam said he recognizes the frustration.

"It's not just the Southwest. It's the Eastern Shore, where I come from, and anywhere in Virginia — people are saying why aren't we getting more doses? The shipment comes into Virginia, and we dispense it based on population-based data. That's the way the system will continue to move," Northam said. "I think the challenge moving forward is going to be supply dependent."

The state is currently administering about 26,000 vaccinations per day, but Northam directed state health officials to double

See **VACCINE**, Page A6

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