



WHITHER WASHINGTON?

A Foothills Forum/
Rapp News
Special Report

Can the county seat with a rich history write a new chapter?

County-town tensions come into focus as Washington verges on historic change

STORY BY JULIA SHANAHAN on Page 10

BY BOB HURLEY | For Foothills Forum

Venerated as one of the Piedmont's most historic and beautiful villages, the Town of Washington also is disparaged sometimes as a movie set, even a ghost town. But whatever you think of the town, 2023 will be a year of great change and challenge, sparking renewal, potential growth and, inevitably, friction for Rappahannock's county seat. Site plans for the first phase of Rush River

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DRONE PHOTO COURTESY
ROBERT STEPHENS

TOWN

From Page 1

Commons were approved by the Town Council last month, planning for a new courthouse is underway, and there's an effort to breathe new life into vacant and shuttered properties. All are daring town officials and some residents to believe a municipal renaissance might be in the offing.

"I'd say the town is poised for a renaissance, not necessarily growth," said Mayor Joe Whited, who has been sworn in. "I think folks who say it's always been this relatively sleepy spot don't look back at the 1950s and '60s when it was a busy, bustling town. A lot of long-term residents tell me they'd love to see a return to that kind of community, in some way. I feel we're in a spot where that could happen."

Folksy, to be sure. But the upcoming serial decisions on the look and shape of the town dwarf last year's multimillion-dollar broadband showdown. And a handful of elected and unelected town and county officials, who likely never expected to find themselves in the eye of such a storm of local reckoning, can be expected to confront waves of "we-know-better" community input.

Nicknamed "Little Washington" for its close proximity to Washington, D.C., the town sits on about 182 acres. According to the 2020 census, the population now is 86 – the lowest ever. However, Town Administrator Barbara Batson estimates the population, in fact, could be as high as 150.

In the mid 1970s, it was almost 200. The village had a gas station, auto garages, a car dealership, general store, theater, bank, museum, firehouse and furniture and antique stores. The Inn at Little Washington opened in 1978, in a building that once housed a garage and later a gift shop.

Named after the nation's first president, George Washington, just weeks after he announced his retirement, the town has labeled itself "The First Washington of All."

Town lore claims other "firsts," too. Among them:

- ▶ Stuart's Store, a merchandise store – which in later iterations became the Washington Cash Store, the county Health Department and now is owned by the Inn – was located on the corner of Main and Calvert Streets. William Stuart privately loaned money from a vault in the building. The federal government, which no longer recognized private banks, closed the operation in 1920. It was believed to have been the last private bank in the United States.

- ▶ In 1950, Dorothy Davis and an all-woman Town Council were elected. Remarkably, the all-woman slate defeated an all-male ticket, making national news, including in Life magazine. Davis was the nation's first woman mayor with an all-woman Town Council.

- ▶ Merrill Motor Company, on the



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

"It used to be that you'd walk through town and see your neighbors on their porches or gardening. Now you see no one," said Pat Giles, who moved to town in 1969.



"I fear a sense of community is slipping away and I don't know what will bring it back," said Mary Ann Kuhn, who came to Washington in 1994.

site of today's Patty O's restaurant, was a Ford dealership with cars displayed in the front window. Merrill closed in 1979 after 50 years, receiving an award from Ford for having a dealership operate under the same ownership for a half century.

In 1973 Jenks Hobson was appointed minister at Trinity Episcopal Church. "When I got here, there were homes and apartments that people were living in that now are owned by the Inn or

other businesses," said Hobson, who now lives in retirement in Amissville. He noted that several properties owned by outside investors sit vacant and are slowly deteriorating. "As a result, a lot of the housing stock has vanished and what is available now is financially out of reach for many families," he said.

Pat Giles, who lives on Gay Street, remembers lots of moms and children when she moved to town with her two

babies in 1969. "We'd get together for play dates," said Giles. Her husband, Skippy, owned the Washington Cash Store, a general store that closed in 1988 and now is owned by the Inn. "There were about 30 kids in town. There were activities like block parties and caroling during the Christmas holidays. It was a really fun community for kids to grow up in."

But, as Giles explained, when children graduated from high school they left, seldom returning. "There was little for them to come back to, in terms of jobs. Eventually their parents sold their homes. Now only one or maybe two people live in these homes, a lot of them retirees. It used to be that you'd walk through town and see your neighbors on their porches or gardening. Now you see no one."

Mary Ann Kuhn came to Washington in 1994. A Town Council member for 17 years – six as vice mayor – and a previous owner of Middleton Inn on Main Street, she said: "I've always been interested in the soul of the town. When we lost the Country Café and the Post Office on the corner of Main and Middle Street, I felt we lost the beating heart of the village. That's where locals congregated. I fear a sense of community is slipping away and I don't know what will bring it back."

As a resident for 30 years, Fawn Evenson has seen a lot of change. "When I first moved here it was a very lively town always with something to do," she said. "There was a group I called the 'party of the month club,' where a multi-generational gang of us would get together and have a party at someone's house once a month. Today, because there was no young group that came behind us, all that's gone away."

Evenson strongly supports Rush River Commons, planned to be the town's first mixed-use development. "I'm very excited. I'm hopeful it's going to bring people into town, but there has to be something for them to come visit," she said. "This town is dead and we need more businesses and shops to attract visitors and new residents."

'Something new'

With the Town Council giving final approval to the first phase of the privately-owned and funded project, Rush River Commons is expected to break ground early this year.

It will include 18 residential rental units, a new home for Rappahannock's Food Pantry, and commercial space that could house offices or a café.

A proposed second phase, which would require expanding the town's boundary by about four acres, is planned to include offices and space for community and arts activities. Space could also be available for a new, expanded county library, should library officials choose to relocate.

Additional housing units could also be built, although the county Board of Supervisors currently is opposed to more housing in the project.



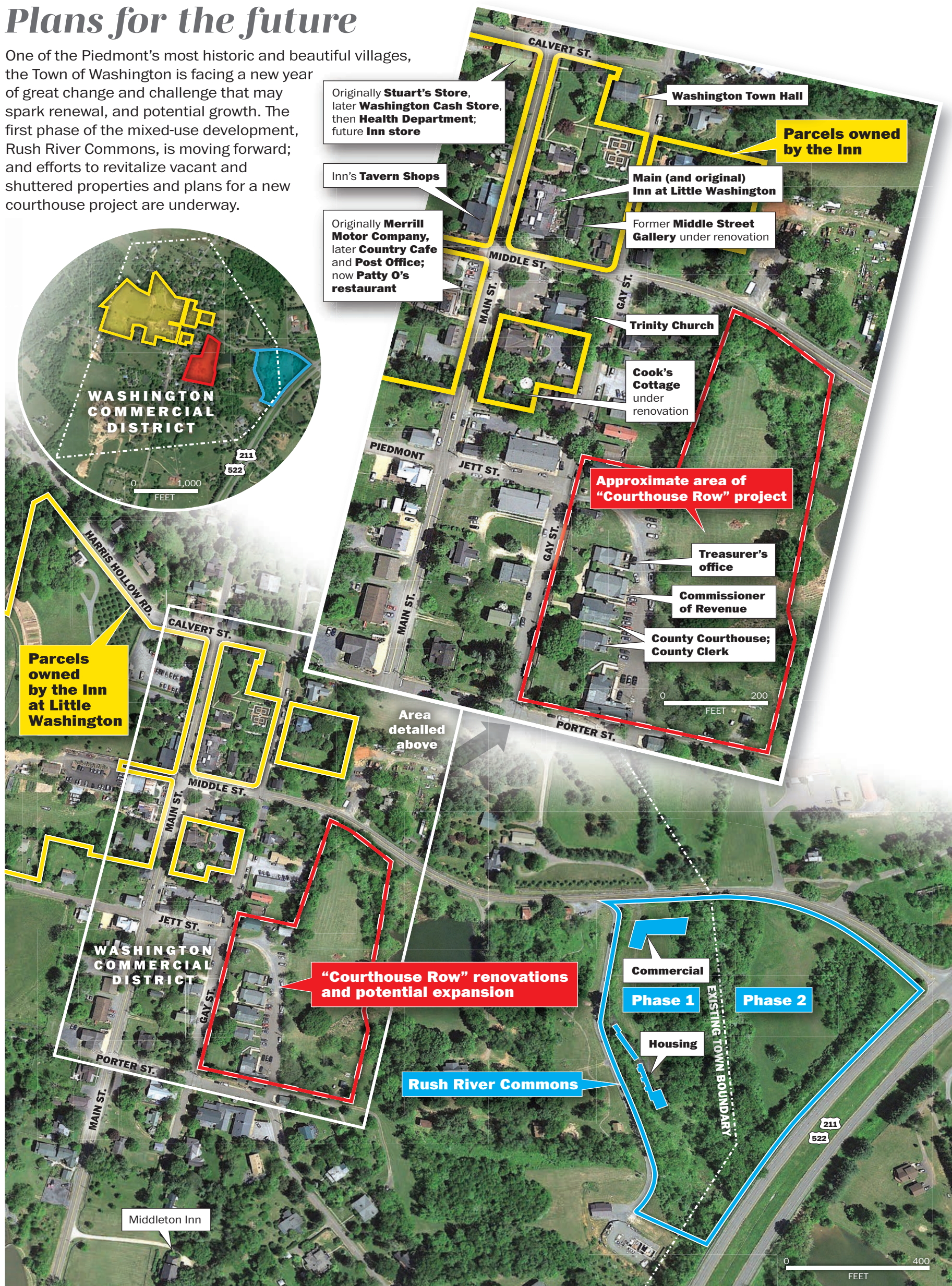
The ladies take charge as Mayor Dorothy Davis, standing, greets the all-woman council which will help her run the village. They are (l. to r.) Elizabeth Racer, beautician; Dorothy Hawkins, Louise Price, teacher; Asah Miller, Bobbie Critzer, Ruby Jenkins

Mayor Dorothy Davis, standing, leads an all-woman Town Council, as seen in a 1950s magazine story.

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Plans for the future

One of the Piedmont's most historic and beautiful villages, the Town of Washington is facing a new year of great change and challenge that may spark renewal, and potential growth. The first phase of the mixed-use development, Rush River Commons, is moving forward; and efforts to revitalize vacant and shuttered properties and plans for a new courthouse project are underway.



Sources: Inn at Little Washington; Rappahannock County Building Committee; Rush River Commons; Satellite images: Google Earth

By Robert Hurley and Laura Stanton for Foothills Forum



HISTORY

Town boundary adjustments through the years

► 1796 – Three landowners – George Calvert, James Jett, Jr., and James Wheeler – petitioned the Virginia General Assembly to establish a town “by the name of Washington on land of your said petitioners.” An act was passed establishing the Town of Washington on a footprint of 25 acres.

► 1797 – A second act was passed by the General Assembly, adding five acres of land to the town that were owned by William Porter.

► 1894 – The Virginia General Assembly passed an act to expand the town’s boundaries by 300 yards in each direction bringing the acreage to 226 acres. No historical records are available to document this boundary change.

► 1985 – Realizing no accurate survey existed for the town’s boundaries, then mayor Newbill Miller and the Board of Supervisors (BOS) agreed to review the town boundaries as set in 1796, 1797, and 1894. As a result, the town was rechartered by the Virginia General Assembly, bringing its acreage to just over 179 acres.

► 1999 – The town and BOS reviewed boundary adjustment applications from citizens whose property straddled the town-county lines. It was unanimously agreed that five lots be included within the town’s boundaries, bringing the area of the town to 182 acres.

— Based on research by author Maureen Harris, who wrote a history of the Town of Washington and detailed the changing boundaries of the town.

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues.

The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

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BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Nancy Buntin lives with her 106-year-old mother Betty on Main Street.

TOWN

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To date, the Supervisors have sought a series of concessions from the town in exchange for approving the boundary adjustment. But negotiations between the Supervisors and town are stalled, leaving the second phase in limbo.

Since its establishment in 1796, the town boundary has expanded five times, growing from 25 to the current 182 acres. The most recent adjustment was in 1999, when five lots straddling the town-county line were included within the town. According to county resident Maureen Harris, who conducted extensive historical research, including a review of Town Council and Supervisors minutes, all five adjustments were approved without controversy.

And despite the angst swirling around the latest proposal, former town Mayor Fred Catlin, who will remain a member of the Town Council, said: “I want to stress that County Administrator Garrey Curry, Wakefield Supervisor and Chair Debbie Donehey and other members of the Board of Supervisors have been helpful in having a dialogue on the adjustment.

“We have worked to address their concerns and the concerns of county citizens. Although the change process is stalled at the moment, I want to stress that the second phase would benefit the county with new services and tax revenue. It also gives the town control to make sure it meets our site and architectural guidelines. No one wants this to become an eyesore or unwanted development,” he said.

Nancy Buntin, who was born and raised in the town and now lives with her 106-year-old mother on

Main Street, is urging the county to cooperate with the town.

“I want the county to give consent to that part of land [Rush River phase two] coming into the town,” said Buntin, whose father, William, served as county sheriff in the 1970s and ‘80s.

“Making this adjustment so transactional seems so ‘old’ to me, especially when our population keeps decreasing,” she said. “Rush River is something new. I can understand why some people are afraid the atmosphere of the town and county may be altered. But this project fits into the county’s and the town’s comprehensive plans and I don’t see it as a gateway to big developments like the one going on at Clevenger’s Corner.”

Hobson, the former Trinity Church minister, agrees. Arguing that Rush River Commons would breathe new life into the town and provide more affordable housing options, he said: “Let’s do it, let’s get it done, and let’s enjoy it.”

Refashioning the Courthouse complex

A year after the town became the county seat in 1833, work began on a courthouse, clerk’s office (now housing the Commissioner of Revenue) and the jail. All still are in use today, but need major renovations.

Last year, the county’s Buildings Committee began discussing a 2020 report detailing badly needed repairs for buildings on Gay Street’s “courthouse row,” including the courthouse, court clerk’s office, old jailhouse, the offices of the Commissioner of Revenue, Treasurer and Commonwealth Attorney, and the old county administration building.

The report found multiple “issues of dire concern for life safety and/or security that are recommended for immediate review and remedy.”

The Buildings Committee agreed a new complex would be less expensive. Restoring and expanding the existing structures and constructing additional office space is estimated to cost \$12 million. A stand-alone complex to house a number of court-related functions, including the Clerk of Court, Commonwealth Attorney, and administrative staff, could cost at least \$9 million.

A proposed design unveiled last August depicted a big two-story building about five times the size of the current courthouse. It was largely panned by residents who spoke at a Board of Supervisors meeting in September, saying it was too large and not in keeping with the architectural character of the town.

The Buildings Committee is expected to present three new design options to the Supervisors at its Jan. 4 meeting. Plans also are under discussion to renovate other county buildings, including the old Methodist Church on Gay Street that housed the RAAC Theatre, which is owned by the Rappahannock Association for Arts and Community. The committee is working on these alternative plans with Alexandria-based consultant, Wiley-Wilson.

“There is no question that a building that size is important to the town and the county,” said former Mayor John Fox Sullivan. “But it’s not a town versus county issue,” he said. “Everybody wants something that is attractive and in keeping with the village’s aesthetics. I think the Building Committee is going about this in a reasonable way, and we will have the involvement of the town’s

A look at the Town's Architectural Review Board

► **1975** – The “Washington Historic District” was listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

► **1985** – The Town passed a Historic District Ordinance which created the Architectural Review Board. According to the town's Comprehensive Plan, the board is charged with maintaining the “unique historic fabric of the village” through the application of standards and guidelines. It reviews plans for new buildings, and changes to the exteriors of existing structures to assure the architectural integrity of the historic district.

The current ARB members:



► **Drew Mitchell, Chair:** “For more than two decades I have been involved in the National Trust for Historic Preservation. My husband Bill and I didn't just write checks, we furthered

NTHP's mission by restoring a handful of historical residential and commercial buildings, one of which was featured in Preservation Magazine. For over 25 years I've also owned and operated a successful design firm headquartered in “Big” Washington called Fathom Creative. Although the name highlights the artistic side of the business, its longevity is largely due to our well-earned reputation for our adherence to objective, universally-established design principles.”

► **Wes Kerr, Vice Chair:** “At a young age I started gaining experience in historical preservation. First learning techniques and procedures to restore antiques, and later using this awareness to develop residential and commercial reconstruction strategies that were in keeping with modernization norms, while remaining respectful of historical aesthetics.”

► **Deborah Harris, Secretary:** “As a member of this community for more than four years and as a local business owner (Gay Street Inn), I have a vested interest in serving the town in this capacity.”

► **Nanette Edwards:** “My volunteer experience includes 20 years of serving on many boards and committees for Historic Boulder, Inc. in Colorado. Through my association with Historic Boulder, I learned about different architectural styles and the importance of preserving the architectural integrity of buildings within historic districts.”

► **David Knight:** “Having been a full-time resident of the village for over a year and a half, I am passionate about preserving our town's architectural heritage while also positioning it for future success. A native of Lexington, KY, I graduated from Hampden-Sydney College with a degree in Political Science. I returned to Lexington to obtain a Master's Certificate in Historic Preservation from the University of Kentucky. I later worked for The Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation, a non-profit that protects, revitalizes, and promotes the historically significant buildings that contribute to Lexington's architectural identity and sense of place.”

– Excerpted from ARB member submissions on file with the Town office.

► Architectural Review Board, which is an added layer of review.” Sullivan underscored his near certainty that the existing historic courthouse and neighboring structures will remain intact, with some repairs to allow the space to be used for other purposes.

Village's 'special feel'

Whether it is the new courthouse complex, the second phase of the Rush River Commons, new building projects by the Inn, or the renovation or construction of other buildings, all exterior plans must be approved by the town's Architectural Review Board.

In 1975, the entire town was listed as an historical district by both the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historical Places. That designation deemed the town's buildings and structures worthy of historical preservation. Ten years later, the Town Council passed an ordinance creating the Architectural Review Board (ARB), charged with protecting the style and historic character of the town.

“Since about 90% of the town is already built, most of our time is spent on modifications to existing buildings,” said Drew Mitchell, chair of the ARB and owner of Avon Hall, a historic manor home in the town. “Our role is to follow historic guidelines set by the state government for things like roof or window replacements, or new construction. In making decisions, we take into consideration the very special feel of

our small village. At the same time, we want the review process to be as user-friendly as possible,” he said.

The ARB played an important role in reviewing the Rush River project where it successfully sought changes to the first phase.

“Rush River is probably the village's biggest private project of its kind. The original size and style of the project's residential units crossed the line for what the ARB believed was compatible with the rest of the town. We worked with them very successfully to redesign a portion of the project, so now it comports with the village's character,” Mitchell said.

As for phase two of Rush River, the ARB will be involved only if the town boundary is expanded. “If the developer decides to go ahead with no adjustment, we'll not have a role – that will be up to the county,” said Mitchell.

The ARB also will have jurisdiction over the design of the new courthouse complex. “It is within the town's historical district,” said Mitchell. “Even though the county owns the property and would be constructing it, the complex still falls under the ARB guidelines and is subject to our review and approval.”

Mitchell said he hopes the design for a new courthouse will be resolved in advance of it coming before the ARB. “Usually, the ARB's review of designs comes at the end of the process, which makes it difficult for us to make changes. To avoid that, we are attending planning meetings for the courthouse with the objective of hashing out design issues before the ARB gives its final approval.”



Washington Mayor Joe Whited.

BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Bringing in more businesses

Whited is launching an effort to attract new businesses. “In the near future, I plan to host a meeting of businesses and commercial property owners and talk about their future plans,” he said. “I think a discussion among that group, including the Inn, about options for utilizing commercial spaces and vacant buildings might help us identify policy changes that could attract new business and enhance the community.”

Whited already has spoken with Town Council members about a variety of incentives to encourage prospective business owners who now are “sitting on the fence,” to locate in the village.

“Given the sheer amount of foot traffic generated by the Inn, especially now with Patty O's, I think it is important to have them participate in this effort,” he said. “If the Inn continues to grow, foot traffic in the town will continue to grow, and that creates a market opportunity for new businesses.”

The Inn, which will be celebrating its 45th anniversary at the end of this month, has two new projects in the works – renovating the “Cook's Cottage” to add new guest rooms and restoring and relocating a building that was part of the Middle Street Gallery.

“We are excited about these projects, as well as the future possibility of a spa, a store in the old health department building, and an ice cream shop,” said Bob Fasce, the Inn's general manager. “Our projects are in the center of town and on our campus, so there will not be any big expansion going on. They wouldn't affect any residences.”

As for the future of the town, Fasce said he welcomes new businesses. “I think we are on the cusp of something big. I would encourage the use of buildings that are not being utilized. Nothing like a Starbucks, but something authentic to the town's character. If our guests had some extra things to do like visiting new shops, art galleries, or even a nice deli, they'd stay here longer and that would be beneficial to everybody.”

Caroline Antsey, who chairs the town's Planning Commission, is optimistic that the town may be writing a new chapter in its history. “I think this is a very exciting time for Little Washington,” she said.

“Our finances are strong, our governing bodies are functioning well, and our residents are engaged. The first phase of Rush River Commons will begin in earnest soon. The Inn has plans to expand, but within their footprint, thereby allowing for residential opportunities. And I'm confident that the new courthouse project will result in a design that respects the town's historical character.”

COMING UP

Washington mix:

Some town buildings spring to life, some languish

► NEXT WEEK

Cooperation or conflict?

From buildings to boundary changes, county-town tensions come into focus as Washington verges on historic change

BY JULIA SHANAHAN
Rappahannock News Staff

The Town of Washington is on the cusp of historic change. But the town and county will have to overcome an historically tumultuous relationship if a series of vital building projects are to get a green light.

The Board of Supervisors is considering a new courthouse and renovating buildings it owns in the courthouse complex, along with a small section of the proposed Rush River Commons development which, for now, straddles the town-county line.

But already, past acrimony infuses the negotiations. The county might be the local political heavyweight, but the town has a powerful ace up its sleeve — the county cannot proceed on its projects without the approval of the town's Architectural Review Board (ARB).

And the county is playing hardball, demanding that work on its buildings be free of ARB oversight, in return for it agreeing to a four-acre boundary line adjustment, backed by the town, that would bring all of the Rush River Commons project within the town boundaries.

Newly-elected town Mayor Joe Whited is sensitive to earlier bad blood. "...my commitment is open and frequent communication, and I hope that allows us to move past some of the rough patches we have had in the past."

What will this process look like?

The county Buildings Committee is working with private consulting firm Wiley-Wilson on more conceptual designs for a new courthouse, which will go to the Board of Supervisors — and eventually, to public hearings.

Piedmont Supervisor Christine Smith, also a member of the Buildings Committee, estimated the new courthouse — from design approval to the end of construction — would take at least three years. A first preliminary design was torpedoed at a Board of Supervisors meeting last year by county residents who criticized its aesthetic and its large size.

The committee now is considering three more designs by Wiley-Wilson.

"I'm happy they're making progress," said ARB chair Drew Mitchell, who will lead the board's process to approve the design. "It sounds like they're listening to people."



FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

A fraying courthouse is among the buildings in need of repair.

The new courthouse will likely occupy roughly 19,000 square feet, according to proposed site plans, and be constructed in an undetermined location on a plot of land that roughly spans east to west between the intersection of Warren Avenue and Gay Street and the intersection of Gay Street and Mount Salem Avenue. The county plans to restore the historic courthouse, but the Supervisors have not discussed what exactly will be done with the building.

The other county-owned buildings being considered for renovation or restoration include:

- ▶ The Rappahannock Association for Arts and Community Theater
- ▶ The Court Clerk's office
- ▶ The old jailhouse
- ▶ The Commissioner of Revenue
- ▶ The Treasurer's office
- ▶ The Commonwealth Attorney's office
- ▶ The former county administration building

The deterioration of county buildings has been an issue for a decade, but has only recently been prioritized.

The Board of Supervisors started working seriously on plans to restore and renovate those on Courthouse Row in early 2022, despite multiple surveys dating as far back as 2012, which showed damage and decay that likely will cost millions to fix.

"I don't think anything stalled the process," Smith told the Rappahannock News last March. "It's just a matter of we've established priorities, and some of the work takes

a long time to do. And it isn't just the Buildings Committee, it's also getting buy-in from the Board [of Supervisors] as a whole and funding the project. So you know, it's not like you just decide to do something and you do it. There are a lot of layers, and you work through them one thing at a time."

The county hired Wiley-Wilson in 2019 to survey county buildings. Most, according to a report released February 2020, were found to be more than 130 years old and to have "many compromised or antiquated building systems." The consultants also highlighted multiple "issues of dire concern for life safety and/or security that are recommended for immediate review and remedy."

The town, on the other hand, wants the Board of Supervisors to agree to a four-acre boundary adjustment, to allow town resident Chuck Akre's proposed Rush River Commons development to be brought under a single jurisdiction — that of the town.

While town officials have indicated they're open to working with the county, the Board of Supervisors last year requested that the town consider a list of "concessions" in return for the county agreeing to the adjustment.

Chiefly, the county demanded that the town amend its zoning ordinance, to eliminate the Architectural Review Board's control over the exterior appearance and design of county-owned properties in the town.

The town rejected the county's list of concessions.

In an interview, former Mayor Fred Catlin defended the ARB. "I

think it's fair to say that the role of the Architectural Review Board is to ensure the guidelines established by the Department of Interior for a historic district [are adhered to]," he said. Catlin, still a Town Council member, added: "It is not the role of the ARB to impose personal whims ... of any members onto a project."

Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier, the longest serving Supervisor and chair of the Buildings Committee, claimed in February 2022 that the boundary proposal would set a bad precedent for future developments that might straddle the town-county line.

"What are they [the town] going to do the next time somebody has a much larger parcel who wants to come into the town to develop at a higher density than they can do under the county ordinance?" Frazier said at a February Board of Supervisors meeting.

With site plans for the Rush River Commons development officially approved by the town and construction slated to begin in coming months, negotiations between the town and county will have to resume in 2023 if Akre's team wants to build on the roughly four-acre parcel just outside the town's boundary.

Betsy Dietel, RRC spokesperson, declined to comment on their future plans for the boundary line adjustment proposal, but said they're looking forward to beginning construction.

Can the town and county reach an agreement?

Jurisdictional and personality differences between the town and county are fertile ground for disagreement — they have different zoning regimes and taxing powers.

"I think negotiation requires two-sided conversations to figure out where there is movement available, and I can't tell you where that would be right now," said Wakefield Supervisor and Chair Debbie Donehey. "But I think we're all open minded."

Frazier has said in interviews with the Rappahannock News that he thinks Washington is a "dying town." And at public meetings, Piedmont Supervisor Smith has said she doesn't think Washington should be an incorporated town.

But in a statement to the Rappahannock News, Smith writes: "I have a positive, respectful →

➔ relationship with the members of Town Council and both the incoming and outgoing mayor. That does not mean we always agree. I really appreciate that ARB Chair Drew Mitchell and other representatives from the town have been attending the buildings committee meetings. We will have to find ways to work together.”

Frazier argues the town should cooperate with the county, not the other way around, saying: “the Board, just like the proposed courthouse, serves the entire County, including [Little] Washington.”

Frazier also claimed Mitchell should recuse himself from any vote on the courthouse complex because he is a neighboring property owner.

“At our 9 Dec Building Committee meeting, Mr. Drew Mitchell spoke, he said he ‘wore several hats,’ one of which is the Chair of the ARB and one as the next door neighbor to the project,” Frazier wrote in a statement. “He apparently never thought about that before he spoke, but as the Chair of the ARB, he will have to recuse himself from discussions because he is the neighboring property owner.”

Mitchell has been attending the monthly Buildings Committee meetings, keeping tabs on the process, he said, and trying to keep open a line of communication between town and county. He said once the courthouse design comes to the ARB for its final approval, the body will focus more on state requirements that are put in place



2022 FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

“The Board, just like the proposed courthouse, serves the entire County, including [Little] Washington,” said Jackson Supervisor Ron Frazier, who chairs the Buildings Committee.

that Mitchell said are more “tactical and objective,” rather than making a decision based on their own opinions.

“We need to start having those conversations before people are tired of the process, so if we’re involved earlier on, people are going to be a lot more open,” Mitchell said.

Other members of the Board of Supervisors said in interviews they’re hopeful the town and county can agree, despite the county’s demand for concessions.

Donehey said the county wanted the ARB sidelined because some buildings owned by the town are exempt from ARB oversight, so the county felt the exemption should also apply to its buildings in the courthouse complex. She said when she talked to Catlin, he was open to making a recommendation to change that policy so some town-owned buildings, like the town hall, would be subject to oversight from the ARB.

“We were feeling kind of one sided,” Donehey said. “Why does the county have to do something that the town doesn’t do? The town’s now going to rewrite their documents so that they’re held responsible to the ARB as well.”

Donehey said she hopes to resume negotiations with the town no later than February, but that will depend on the availability of people on both sides. For the time being, she said, it’s too early to know in which direction the county was headed.

Stonewall-Hawthorne Supervisor Van Carney, the newest member on the Board of Supervisors, said he thought “the town and the county can always work together.”

“I would be thrilled to help the town and do whatever I can to further its identity as a town,” Carney said. “When I was a kid, the town was a town where we all hung out, and it was great. So I have a warm spot in my heart for it.”

Whited said that with newer members on the ARB and Board of Supervisors, and with his new role as mayor, he’s hopeful that the bodies can work together in the new year to complete some of these historic changes.

“I think it’s ... working with the teams who are doing the construction, working with the community to make sure ... [the community] knows what’s going on, and that as much as possible, we’re enabling the folks there to move forward with their projects as quickly as possible,” Whited said.

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WHITHER WASHINGTON?

Some town buildings spring to life, others languish

BY TIM CARRINGTON

For Foothills Forum

If Washington's buildings form a stage set, as is often said, they would offer a perfect backdrop to a sweeping drama mixing elements of renewal, uncertainty and neglect.

For more than four decades, the tiny town has reinvented itself, as the Inn at Little Washington expanded its culinary and lodging empire, lifting some two dozen buildings from their past lives. Meanwhile, a parade of outsiders built and renovated homes for retreating, retiring or remote-working.

Both patterns are continuing – investment in Washington's commercial, public and residential structures is estimated to be about \$23 million since 2010, with half a dozen major home

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renovations completed since 2016. But alongside the rejuvenation is a parallel trend: a scattering of residential, public and commercial structures have slid into limbo, waiting for required approvals, bold investors, or an economic environment more supportive of rebuilding and remodeling.

Part renaissance, part limbo

Washington's peculiar mix — part renaissance, part limbo land — may be unavoidable since different buildings occupy different places in the life cycle. Realtor Alan Zuschlag reasons that the presence of a few derelict or under-used buildings is a small price to pay for a location “that doesn't become a museum, but a living, breathing town.” The greater worry, he added, would be a push toward “grandiose plans,” artificially imposing a particular pattern on the entire town.

Mayor Joe Whited is concerned about the structures stranded in uncertainty, but he mainly sees continuing renewal. With remote workers joining retired people and weekenders, he says, “We're on the cusp of something that could be really good.” He predicts that businesses will eventually fill the vacant commercial spaces, and that home renovations will continue. But he added, “We want to maintain the things we love.” His predecessor, Fred Catlin, who continues as a member of the Washington Town Council, underscores the town's “eclectic” character: In his view, the goal isn't uniformity of design but harmony within a varied composition.

Washington's two biggest projects — Rush River Commons and the Courthouse Row complex — are moving slowly, but in some form, both will come to fruition, albeit after painstaking cycles of scrutiny and approval. The first phase of Rush River Commons, a multi-purpose development project within the current town borders, is underway after three years; but the second phase requires a slight expansion of the town's boundaries, a controversial change that is subject to continued town-county wrangling. An initial courthouse plan has been sidelined following mainly negative reactions, and alternatives are waiting to gain traction.

Caroline Anstey, who chairs Washington's Planning Commission, said, “When I first came in 2013, there was a little bit of a sense that things were frozen. Now I see a Renaissance town, a town that's good at a number of things — food, art, music and drama — and it's about diversity.”



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CAROLINE ANSTEY
TOWN PLANNING
COMMISSION CHAIR



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Unrenewed and unfinished

But while the big projects are inching toward resolution, the unrenewed, unfinished and in some cases un-cared-for corners of Washington will continue to exert political and administrative demands on the town and its residents, as well as on the county, which owns a number of the buildings now stranded in limbo. Washington Treasurer Gail Swift said she worries that Town Clerk Barbara Batson and others involved in clearances, zoning procedures and legal details “will be so busy they can't see straight” as the various building dilemmas are sorted out.

Here are 10 structures — owned by the county, private individuals or businesses — where the future is unclear. Many enjoyed a storied past, or at least a steady stream of tenants, along with a kaleidoscope of functions reflecting the diverse interests in the county. But the future seems to elude these buildings, each of which is awaiting a compelling idea and a convinced investor. All might plant a sign in front posing the question: “Now what?”

► **The county jail:** The historic lock-up has been without prisoners since 2014, replaced by the regional facility north of Front Royal. Completed in 1836, the building now houses equipment and surplus furniture, and is awaiting a new idea and a new function.

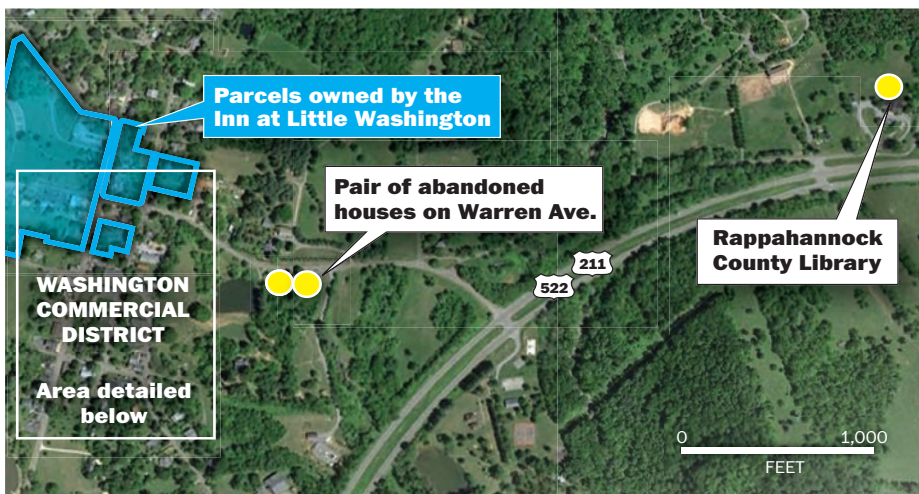
► **The community theater:** Erected in 1890, and now a county property, the space is also in line for a new vision, following earlier lives as a Methodist church, the Washington Town Hall, the Washington Fire Department, Ladies Auxiliary Thrift Store, the Ki Theatre and the Rappahannock Association for the Arts and Community (RAAC) Community Theatre. Expenditures to bring the structure up to code as a theater are exorbitant, and RAAC is now using the larger, newer theater across the street. After staging locally acclaimed productions including “Uncle Vanya” and “Waiting for Godot,” and multiple renditions of “No Ordinary Person,” the older building's next act will be less dramatic: In its first meeting of the new year, the Board of Supervisors agreed to restore the building for use as “a flexible office space” for county employees while a new courthouse is under construction. Once the new courthouse structure is in place, the county employees will presumably vacate the former theater, setting the stage for another re-think.

► **The county library:** The beloved structure might expand and renovate at its current location on U.S. Route 211, though the topography of its site presents complications. Or it might move to Rush River Commons in the town center, though opponents of this idea threaten a fight. If the books move elsewhere, decision-makers would face the new dilemma of finding a new purpose for the existing structure.

► **The Packing Shed:** Deteriorating at the corner of Porter and Gay streets, the structure is owned by Jeff Akseizer, an associate of resident investor-developer Jim Abdo. Built in

Properties in limbo

The Town of Washington's powers of reinvention, on regular display by the Inn at Little Washington, are legendary. But a mix of town structures – some owned by the county, others by investors or individual – have been stranded in a limbo zone, awaiting investment, renovation and the glimmer of some new purpose. Real estate professionals warn that the longer such buildings sit empty, the faster they lose value. Here are 10 town wallflowers, about which residents naturally wonder what's next.



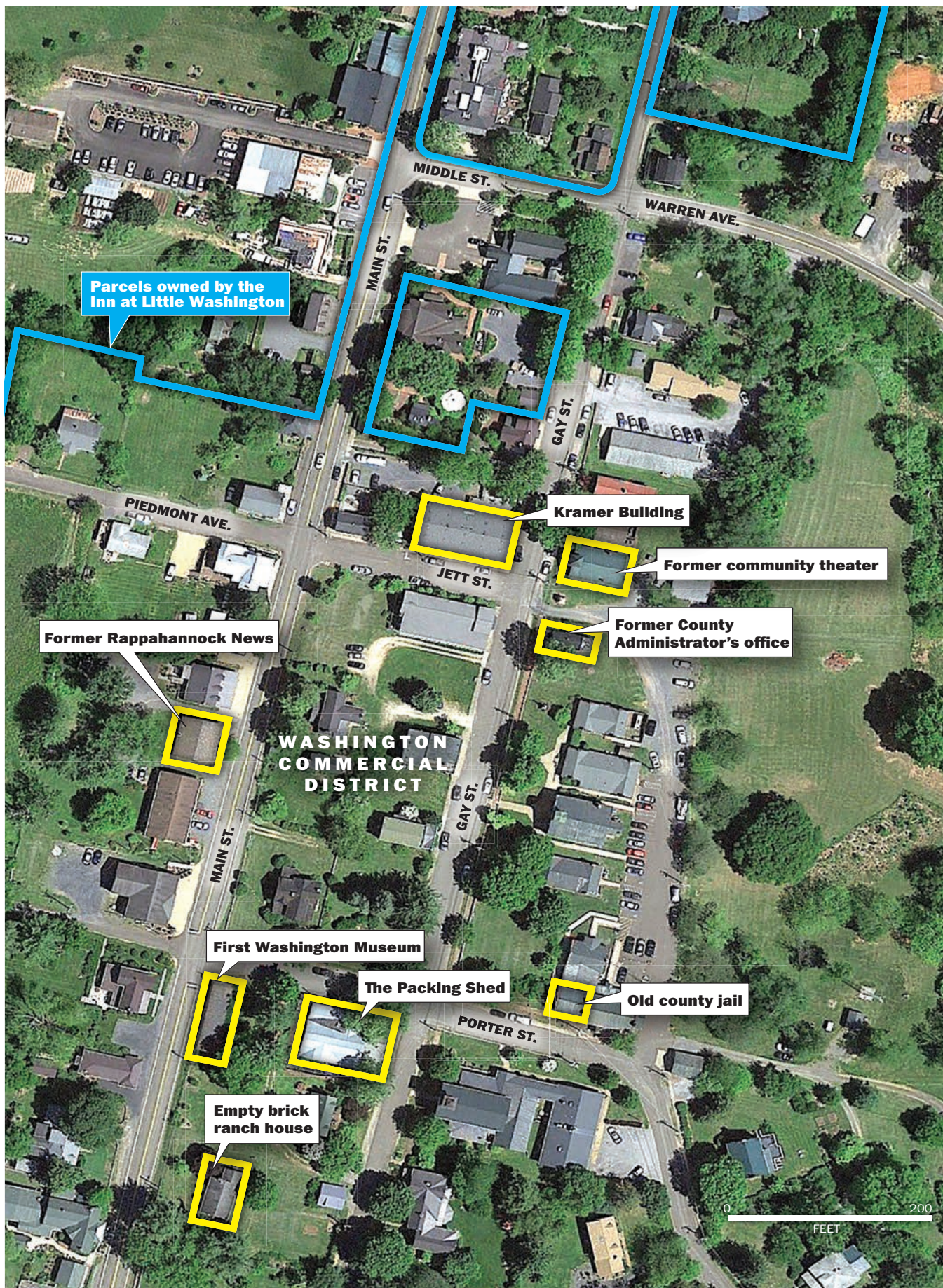
➔ the 1920s as an apple packing facility, it has since been used as a business office, a shop for furniture-maker Peter Kramer, a showroom for antiques, a photography gallery, an office for RAAC, a home for the Washington Thrift store, a studio for painter Kevin Adams, a gallery for the "Six Pack" artists' group, and a video rental called Cinema Paradiso. The parade of shifting identities may be approaching its conclusion as the building slides into terminal neglect. After a pipe sprung a leak last year, forcing a temporary shutdown of town water, officials have informally raised the idea of razing the Packing Shed.

► **Empty brick ranch house:**

Downhill from the Packing Shed and facing Main Street stands an unassuming brick ranch house that has been maintained, but sits empty.

► **First Washington Museum:**

The structure at the corner of Porter and Main streets, owned by Abdo, is awaiting a new life. Abdo, whose ambitious 2014 rejuvenation plans ignited one of the county's least civil debates, owns the structure along with several others in town. He has lowered his local profile to the point of invisibility, offering only vague suggestions of how he might bring the building back to life.



► **The tiny office building on Gay Street.**

Built in 1857 to serve as a law office, the free-standing, wood-framed work cubicle has been used by Commonwealth Attorneys, private lawyers, the County Extension Office, the Home Demonstration Agent's office, and the County Administrator. It's no one's office now, and sits jammed with boxes and papers.



► **Kramer building:** The building housed Tula's, the popular eatery and bar, and is owned by Rob and Christine Bangert Grey, who own Whippoorwill Farm on Piedmont Avenue. The Greys have refurbished the lobby and upstairs of 311 Gay St., where Tula's was located, but haven't revealed plans for the restaurant itself.

► **Warren Avenue pair of vacant houses:** Visitors approaching Washington from the eastern Warren Street entrance see the newly

Sources: Inn at Little Washington; Satellite images: Google Earth

By Tim Carrington and Laura Stanton for Foothills Forum

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constructed and landscaped post office along with a pair of empty and dilapidated private houses. Catlin says the structures are “in desperate need of restoration,” but no one expects a solution any time soon.

▶ **The former Rappahannock News building on Main Street:** Also owned by Jim Abdo, the town has only a preliminary site plan for this commercially-zoned building, but its next use isn’t known.

The Covid lockdown and its impacts contributed to a number of buildings being stuck in limbo. Zuschlag points to a menu of problems inhibiting developers and investors: waves of workers leaving the workforce, building materials snarled up in supply-chain tangles, and rising interest rates in the face of pervasive inflation. “Right now isn’t the time to start big projects or ambitious projects,” he concluded.

However, on the residential side, Covid has actually propelled investments. Three years ago, David Pennington, now a psychotherapist, and Seth Turner, a real estate broker, set out from Washington, D.C., to explore a possible weekend retreat in Rappahannock County, where they had a few friends. They landed on a vacant — and significantly compromised — house at 41 Harris Hollow Rd., with an intact guest house in the back. Covid hit, and the two — both in their 30s — decided to live mainly in Rappahannock County and invest in rejuvenating the entire property they’d bought. “There are nice people, good art, good food and good drink,” said Pennington.

The main house on their Washington property had water in the living room, more water in the basement, a roof needing replacement, a ruined electrical system and a long-cold heating apparatus. The community ties and congenial ambience kept the rehabilitation from becoming a nightmare for its new owners, whose affection for their new home only increased. When Pennington and Turner planned their marriage in October 2022, they opted to hold the ceremony at Washington’s Trinity Episcopal Church, where Turner is now a regular reader.

The experience demonstrates the town’s appeal to young remote workers, who, in this case, faced the ruinous condition of a long-vacant structure. But

WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?



Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

▶ More at foothills-forum.org

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business investments, or the renovation of county-owned buildings like the jail or the old theater, aren’t as simple as residential makeovers like the one that transformed 41 Harris Hollow Rd. There, the rehabilitation was the result of two people seeking an address in a location they hoped to inhabit. In contrast, a new business or arts center needs to capture the public imagination, then draw in customers by offering experiences people have reason to value. An owner’s excitement isn’t enough to assure success.

Alexander Neill-Dore, who manages a tightly scheduled home-building and renovation business, is waiting for the commercial activity to catch up with the rehabilitated homes. “For a town with such allure for so many people, it’s odd that there are so many places that are vacant,” he said, adding that as a county resident himself, he’d enjoy another restaurant and coffee shop that he and his girlfriend might frequent on evenings and weekends.

Washington’s various boosters recognize that despite the retirees and remote workers, the town’s population has dropped to just over 100 from a high of 300 in 1900 — a shift duly noted by potential business owners. A more encouraging sign is the local workforce of some 250 people employed by the county’s administrative offices along with the Inn and other businesses in the hospitality sector. Few could afford to live in the town, but if there were more diversions and eateries, they might spend more time and money there. This, at least, will be the case that Mayor Whited says he will make as he meets in coming months with the existing and prospective business community of Washington.



DRONE PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT STEPHENS