Buchanan, Virginia
Introduction

Interchangably known as the “Gateway to the Shenandoah Valley” and the “Gateway to the Southwest”, the Town of Buchanan, in Botetourt County, is located in western central Virginia, about 30 miles northeast of Roanoke and 25 miles southwest of Lexington. In the valley between Purgatory Mountain and Cove Mountain, between the Allegheny and Blue Ridge Mountains, Buchanan rests near the Blue Ridge Parkway and the northwestern end of the James River and Kanawha Canal. Easily accessible from Interstate 81 and the Blue Ridge Parkway, Buchanan is located on State Route 43 also known as Lee Highway.

Founded in 1811 by Colonel John Buchanan and chartered a year later, the Town of Buchanan flourished as an early hub of transportation and a main point for crossing the James River via the historic Great Valley Road. A wooden covered toll bridge, charging five cents per person, horse, mule, oxen, and wagon, was constructed over the James River in 1851 by the Buchanan Turnpike Company. Businesses like taverns, stables, blacksmith shops, wagon and carriage makers, and general stores populated the town. By supplying goods for travellers and teamsters, and providing a place for trade of local goods and raw materials, the community thrived. As transportation changed, so did Buchanan’s commerce and manufacturing growth. During the early 1800’s, the James River facilitated trade between Buchanan, as a hub for agricultural goods from southwestern Virginia, to Richmond and the Chesapeake Bay area. Later, as an important Confederate supply depot during the Civil War, Buchanan supplied produce and pig iron to Richmond. Though generally unscathed by the War, Buchanan’s toll bridge was burned in 1864 to prevent Federal troops from crossing into Town.

Commerce and manufacturing declined following the Civil War. The James River and Kanawha Canal became less favorable to the rail transport that flourished between...
Salem and Lynchburg. In 1881 the two towns of Buchanan and Pattonsburg were combined into what its now its current jurisdiction.

When the railroad arrived in Buchanan in the early 1880’s, it forever changed the face of commerce in the community. Self-employed, skilled craftsmen became rare as industrial manufacturing dominated the region by the 1920. Buchanan then adapted to the automobile as a concrete bridge replaced the original wooden toll bridge in the 1930’s, allowing workers to live farther from town and work at the limestone quarry. Industrial production, including silicone and rubber products, limestone, and textiles, continued to provide employment in Buchanan through the 1980’s.¹

Today, Buchanan’s downtown has many of the amenities once common across small town America including banking, postal service, retail, gas stations, restaurants, and a library. Residents still rely on limestone quarrying and other industries for employment, and agriculture remains predominant in the region. Though the town’s residents are mainly low to moderate income, the community continues to thrive. Historic preservation has become a growth industry in Buchanan, as it continues revitalizing downtown and respecting traditional development patterns. The town has preserved architecture from the early 1800’s through the 1940’s to create an eclectic and quaint atmosphere for all to enjoy.

### Major Activities:

- May Day Celebration
- Fourth of July Carnival
- An Evening in Buchanan
- Friday Night Cruise In
- Mountain Magic in Fall - Bluegrass, Antiques, and Crafts Festival
- Downtown Ghost Tour
- Buchanan Tree Lighting Ceremony
- Buchanan Carnival
- Civil War History Month
- Botetourt County Annual Fishing Carnival
## Downtown Improvement Process Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Buchanan’s swinging bridge is replaced after being destroyed by flooding.</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>Community Design Assistance Center at Virginia Tech is hired to create downtown design guidelines.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>Hanging baskets and barrel planters are placed at existing utility poles.</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Buchanan Theatre reopens after 17 years of darkness.</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>Buchanan downtown revitalization program creates annual celebration.</td>
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<td>VDOT installs exposed aggregate curb cuts at intersections.</td>
<td>Buchanan Historic District is placed on the National Register of Historic Places.</td>
<td>Business owners place benches in front of their businesses.</td>
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<td>The Town celebrates its 200th anniversary and its inclusion into Tree City USA with an Arbor Day tree planting.</td>
<td>The Inn at James River House opens to welcome travelers by land and water.</td>
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Plan of Buchanan’s Downtown District
Cross-section of Main Street
Downtown Improvement Process

1985: Historic Swinging Bridge is Replaced
Buchanan’s 366 foot long swinging bridge is the last of its kind crossing the James River. The structural stone piers were originally built in 1851 as part of the Buchanan Turnpike Company’s toll bridge. In 1864, the wooden portion was burned to prevent Federal troops from entering the town. Following the war, the bridge was rebuilt only to be washed away in 1877. The third iteration was constructed as a toll free covered bridge. Then in 1897 the wooden bridge was replaced with a steel one, but the original stone piers were retained and used. By 1937, automobile traffic had become such that the smaller bridge no longer accommodated users. The new concrete James River Bridge was constructed with the provision that the suspension bridge be maintained to provide pedestrian access from commercial Buchanan to residential area that was once Pattonsburg and that the two bridges meet at the southern end. The swinging bridge was rebuilt again in 1985 after severe damage from flooding. In 1999, the original bridge was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Buchanan Historic District. The bridge again closed in 2003 as a result of damage from high winds before reopening in March of 2004. As part of Virginia’s secondary road system, the swinging bridge is maintained by VDOT and the Town of Buchanan.

1994: Downtown Revitalization Study
The Buchanan Planning Commission and Buchanan Town Council enlisted the assistance of Virginia Tech’s Community Design Assistance Center to develop the “Buchanan Planning Study” and the “Vision and Guidelines for Main Street Buchanan.” The “Buchanan Planning Study” focused on the Town’s potential for commercial, industrial, and residential growth, while the “Vision and Guidelines for Main Street Buchanan” focused on defining the character of Buchanan in an attempt to guide future growth to be compatible with and enhance the sense of community. These guidelines are drawn from the “Main Street Principles”.

Community Profile: Buchanan
Buchanan’s swinging bridge offers visitors a unique way to view the James River.
1995-2000: Streetscape Elements Installed
Since 1995, the Town has placed hanging baskets on existing utility poles and placed barrels with flowers at the base of utility poles along Main Street. For holidays and special events, flags are placed on the poles. Curb cuts in exposed aggregate were installed at intersections by VDOT in 1999. Benches have been placed by individuals in front of their business since 2000.

1999: Historic District is Recognized
As part of the downtown revitalization strategy, the area roughly along Main Street from 19th Street to the intersection of Interstate 81 and Main Street was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on January 27, 1999. The historic district contains 286 contributing buildings, sites, and structures, while 210 are non-contributing. The historic district qualified for listing based on its historical significance in transportation, commerce and industry, and its historically significant architecture. To date, the Town has not enacted any ordinance regulating the historic district and does not have an architectural review board.

2002: Buchanan Theatre Reopens
Constructed in 1914, the Buchanan theater functioned continuously until it closed in 1985. After years of abandon, a local couple purchased the theater in an effort to save it from decay and revive its rich heritage. A local non-profit, Standing Room Only, was then created with the sole purpose to support the theater. The owners, as well as volunteers from Standing Room Only, worked together to restore the building to operational capacity.

Buchanan Theater has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the United States Department of the Interior and has been recognized as Botetourt County’s oldest standing theater. As with theaters of its day, the facility boasts many unique characteristics including “Mouse-Tooth” shingles in the front gable, free standing ticket booth, and neon sign. Standing Room Only develops the...
entertainment programs, gathers the volunteers, coordinates the events with the theatre's owners and promote the theatre to the community and beyond.

**2003: Downtown Revitalization Program Anniversary**
While continuing revitalization, the Town of Buchanan celebrates its downtown revitalization efforts annually in June, with a reception at the Community House. Slides are shown with before and after photos and awards are presented to outstanding members of the community for the work they have done. In 2003, Buchanan celebrated $4,500,000 of private sector investment in the downtown, rehabilitation of 36 buildings, the generation of 50 new jobs, increased tax revenues, and the creation of more than 12 new businesses.

**2000s: Awards and Recognition**
Throughout the decade Buchanan received numerous awards including “Downtown Initiative Award” from Valley Conservation Council, “Good Neighbor Award” for leadership in historic preservation from the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation, Urban Forestry Award from the Mountain Castle District Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District, “Best Community Event Award,” and “Best Place To Take Guests” by the readers of the Roanoke Times Botetourt View.

**2012: Tree City USA**
In celebration of the Town’s 200th anniversary and its induction into Tree City USA, Buchanan held a public tree planting ceremony. The Valley’s Tree City USA localities and the Valley Beautiful Foundation jointly sponsored an Arbor Day Ceremony and tree planting at Buchanan Town Park. The Town used the event to encourage students, local and area residents, business owners, churches and civic organizations to “plant the seeds of tomorrow today.” Along with the planting, $1,600 was donated by Valley Beautiful and the Town unveiled an Arbor Day Donor’s Plaque. Buchanan’s Ceremonial Planting included the planting of sugar maples, red maples, flowering dogwoods and thornless honeylocusts on the Town
Park and at the Community House. Additional trees, including Leyland cypress, will be planted at the Town’s new Water Filtration Plant.

**2012: James River House Opens**

A 140-year-old, three-story frame building was renovated and opened as an Inn in 2012. The inn is an endeavor that grew out of Twin Rivers Outfitters, whose twin brother owners renovated the James River house to complement their river float business. The operation serves tourists and travelers while promoting the James River as the “Blue Way Trail” as part of Botetourt County’s tourism plan. The building resides in historic downtown Buchanan on Main Street, less than one block from the river front canoe livery and James River. The Inn boasts 5 guest rooms and is now the largest lodging in the Town.
Elements

Streetscape Elements

Lighting:
no pedestrian scale lighting; lights are on utility poles

Parking:
parallel, on-street parking, both sides of Main Street; free

Paving:
asphalt roads; concrete sidewalks; change in materials at end of each block

Planters:
small barrel planters and hanging baskets at utility poles

View down Main Street sidewalk shows appropriate business signage

Planter, flag, and hanging basket at light pole

Town entry signage

Grouping at light pole of flag, hanging basket, trash can, and planter

Concrete sidewalks

Sidewalk at crosswalk identified by textured and colored concrete
Community Profile: Buchanan

Streetscape Elements:

Seating:
benches at Town Hall entry and individual businesses

Signage:
seasonal and holiday flags attached to utility poles; entry signage

Trash:
green barrel trash receptacles at utility poles

Trees:
no street trees

Utilities:
overhead; will bury in future

Other Features:
swinging pedestrian bridge over James River

Wood and metal benches flank Town Hall entry

An awning protects this storefront and adds interest to the streetscape

Appropriate business signage is painted on the cafe window

The historical swinging bridge connects to downtown Buchanan

Barrel planter on the curb
Conclusions

Present Day Buchanan
With more than sixteen years of concentrated downtown revitalization efforts using the “Main Street Principles,” the Town has experienced more than 7 million dollars of private sector investment to purchase and restore more than thirty buildings in the downtown historic district. By June of 2010, where Buchanan once had 22 businesses, the Town experienced a net increase of 23 new businesses for a total of 45 in downtown. It took nearly 15 years to fill every storefront and house in downtown Buchanan.

Though efforts were slowed by the 2008 economic recession, Buchanan has continued its road to revitalization. The next stage includes renovating upper stories of Main Street properties for use as apartments and office space. This new growth makes building renovation feasible while enhancing the efficiency of downtown and expanding its customer base. As competition for business in Buchanan increases due to the development of strip malls in the southern part of Botetourt County, as well as the edge of Town, downtown businesses are forced to specialize and fill niche markets. The downtown and surrounding residential neighborhoods once again proudly represent the community’s dreams and aspiration.
Citations

Text Citations

Image Citations
1. Courtesy of the Town of Buchanan