Culpeper
Virginia
Basic Facts

City Status:
Town, incorporated 1834

Population:
16,379

Median Age:
31.9

Median Household Income:
$57,908

Community Group:
Culpeper Renaissance, Inc.

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Introduction

The Town of Culpeper is located in Virginia’s north-central Piedmont Region along the Route 29 technology corridor and amidst views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Culpeper is “between the skylines” of Washington, D.C. and the mountainous Skyline Drive. The town is centrally positioned between Richmond, 80 miles to the south, and Washington, D.C., 76 miles to the northeast. Charlottesville is 45 miles to the south. These larger cities are easily accessible to Culpeper via Routes 15 and 29.

Culpeper, the county seat of Culpeper County, has seen the area’s economy transition over the years from largely agricultural, prior to the 1980’s, to service, including banking, insurance, real estate, legal, and engineering; distribution; and manufacturing. The major employers now include industry and the Culpeper Regional Hospital. The Museum of Culpeper History is located on Main Street as are a variety of specialty stores and restaurants. There are an estimated 2,000 downtown employees in Culpeper.

Culpeper was originally surveyed by a seventeen-year-old George Washington, who was hired by the sixth Lord Fairfax in 1740 to define the county boundaries. George Washington again surveyed Culpeper in 1759, the same year it was founded as the county seat by the Virginia House of Burgesses, and recorded that the town occupied a “high and pleasant situation”. Culpeper grew as a courthouse and central market town, becoming a regional marketing center along a stage coach route and later along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. As Culpeper became a major trading and shipping point, commercial and residential development moved from courthouse square to the railroad tracks. The warehouses of this district, as well as the proximity of the railroad, were a mixed blessing as it made Culpeper an attractive supply station for both Confederate and Union munitions. Civil War
troop tensions resulted in great devastation to the town from the more than 100 battles and skirmishes fought in the area.

The town, originally named Fairfax, was renamed Culpeper in 1870 for Lord Fairfax’s mother, Catherine Culpeper, the wife of a colonial governor of Virginia. Of George Washington’s first survey, the original alleys and 10 town blocks remain. There are landmarks and buildings from each of the eras of Culpeper’s history, however most of the downtown buildings were constructed after the Civil War. An 1888 fire code required buildings to have a brick or stone veneer and a metal or slate roof which has created the unified appearance still apparent in the character of Culpeper today. The downtown area is now listed as an historic district of 140 structures on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. Seventy of these structures are industrial and commercial buildings built between 1900 and 1940.

Today, most of Culpeper’s commercial development is on Davis Street which runs perpendicular to Main Street. It is bound on one end by the railroad and the other by Mountain Run River, connecting the courthouse and the old train depot. The depot has been renovated and serves as visitor’s center and Chamber of Commerce office, while still acting as a passenger station for daily Amtrak service to Washington, D.C. Culpeper has a large social service program that is viewed as the best in the state, with a large office and training center downtown. Downtown retailers work together to ensure that each store’s goods are unique to provide niches for each. Although Culpeper is experiencing the growth effects from Washington, D.C., it has been named the Best Small Town in Virginia (Norman Crampton) and one of America’s Top 10 Small Towns.
## Community Profile: Culpeper

### Downtown Improvement Process Timeline

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<td>Bypass built around town center pulls business from downtown.</td>
<td>Culpeper lays the groundwork for the establishment of an historic district and architectural review board.</td>
<td>Culpeper Renaissance is founded; becomes a member of the Main Street program; historic district is placed on the National Register of Historic Places; creates historic overlay district and forms architectural review board; develops design guidelines</td>
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<td>CDBG planning study reviews downtown Culpeper’s revitalization needs. Town awarded with CDBG Downtown Facade Improvement Grant.</td>
<td>Partnership between the Town of Culpeper and RC Theaters redevelops a town owned parking lot into a four screen theater.</td>
<td>ISTEA and CDBG grants are used in the Railroad/Depot district to renovate the Depot, update streetscape, work on blighted buildings, and plan for urban landscaping.</td>
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1987-1988
Culpeper is first town in the Certified Local Government Program and receives grant funds to complete the Culpeper Historic Handbook and Design Guidelines.

1990-Present
Culpeper completes utility, light work, and sidewalk projects with its own money and services.

1993
Culpeper is voted Best Small Town in Virginia and one of America’s Top 10 Small Towns.

2001
Public transportation comes to Culpeper in partnership with the Virginia Regional Transportation Association.

2002-2003
Culpeper Historic Streetscapes and Entryways Project receives ISTEA funding.

2007
Town adopts Community Design Plan.
Plan of Culpeper’s Downtown District
Cross-section of Main Street

Community Profile: Culpeper
Downtown Improvement Process

1960s: Bypass Built
Culpeper’s downtown area changed in the 1960s as U.S. Route 29, formerly running through the heart of Culpeper, was rerouted away from Main Street and its bypass was built even further from downtown. Residential, commercial, and industrial growth moved from the central business district to areas north and south of downtown, while Main Street became more automobile oriented.

1980s: Historic District Established
Culpeper began to lay the groundwork for an historic district in downtown with the creation of the Historic and Cultural Conservation Board (HCCB) in 1980. The objectives in establishing an historic district were: “the preservation and protection of historic structures, the maintenance of architectural and cultural resources as tangible reminders of the Town’s earlier periods of settlement and development, the development and maintenance of appropriate settings for historical resources, and the promotion of the local economy with regard to property values and tourist trade based upon the character of the Town’s historic buildings and environment.”

Defined in 1982 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987, the Culpeper Historic District was cited for its “importance as a county seat in the Piedmont area of Virginia.” It is roughly bounded by Edmonson, Stevens and West Streets and the railroad tracks and contains 140 commercial and residential structures.
The HCCB later focused on architectural review, becoming the Architectural Review Board in 1992. The town adopted an historical cultural district ordinance, that later became an historic overlay district ordinance, for the historic district enabling the Architectural Review Board to review any proposed new construction or exterior changes to existing buildings to ensure its architectural compatibility with other structures in the district. The Board uses the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards and the Culpeper Historic District and Design Guidelines, in its decision making process.

1987: Beginning Revitalization Efforts

Culpeper Renaissance, Inc. (CRI), is a mostly volunteer group, founded in 1987 to focus on improvements and investments in downtown Culpeper’s central business district. Culpeper became a member of the Virginia Main Street program in 1988 with CRI as its administrating body. Through partnerships with the government, chamber of commerce, and other public and private entities, over $10,000,000 had been spent in downtown Culpeper by 2000, with 268 historic restorations and rehabilitations, 135 new businesses, and 214 new jobs created. CRI has been a continuous force throughout and continues to encourage partnerships for a successful downtown now and in the future. One such partnership with the Town of Culpeper is a local tax abatement program offered to residential, commercial, and industrial properties within the Main Street program area. Rehabilitated properties that qualify are exempt from local taxes and a tap fee incentive program that waives additional tap privilege fees for changes to existing commercial and residential structures of allowable zoning uses in the Main Street program area. Tap fees are charges levied on businesses for hooking up to a municipal water supply.
1987: Culpeper Becomes a Certified Local Government
In 1987, Culpeper became the first town in the Virginia Department of Historic Resource’s Certified Local Government (CLG) program. “Designation as CLGs gives local governments a way to participate more formally in the state and national historic preservation programs.” The goals of the CLG program are to “promote viable communities through preservation, recognize and reward communities with sound local preservation programs, and establish credentials of quality for local preservation programs.” “Certified Local Governments are eligible for grants that can be used to survey architectural and archaeological resources, prepare nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, create preservation planning documents and programs, create public education programs, and rehabilitate publicly owned buildings listed on the national register.” A CLG grant was used to develop and prepare the Culpeper Historic District and Design Guidelines in 1988.

1990-Present: Town-funded Streetscape Projects Begin
In 1990, Culpeper began improving downtown streetscapes using its own money and service personnel. Utilities were buried and upgraded, sidewalks were improved, and new streetlights were installed. This work has continued, one project a year, through the present.

1993: Revitalization Work is Recognized Nationally
Over a decade of hard work on the part of the Town of Culpeper, Culpeper Renaissance, Inc., and many public and private partnerships resulted in Culpeper being cited as one of “America’s Top 10 Small Towns” in Norman Crampton’s book The 100 Best Small Towns in America. Culpeper also won the title “Best Small Town in Virginia” in the book, both sources of great pride for the community.
1995: Facade Grant Program

Realizing that rehabilitated building facades are just as important as upgraded utilities and services in improving the streetscape, two facade grant programs became available to property owners in Culpeper. The CRI created a Matching Funds Facade Grant Program that matches private funding with town money to improve commercial building facades. Meanwhile, a CDBG Facade Loan Program provided low interest loans for similar improvements.


Culpeper received a CDBG grant for a planning study of downtown revitalization needs around the Culpeper Depot in 1995. The study included a proposed improvement plan to prevent and eliminate slums in the area including streetscape improvements, public utility upgrades, and storefront improvement programs. In 1997, a CDBG application for the implementation of this program was submitted and later funded.


The Culpeper Depot was rebuilt in 1904 on the site of the original 1854 depot after a 1900 fire. The depot’s attached freight area is twice as long as the passenger station, possibly making this the longest depot in Virginia. With plans to locate a visitor’s center, the Department of Tourism and the Chamber of Commerce in the building, the Town of Culpeper traded property with Norfolk Southern Railroad for relocation of their freight offices.

ISTEA funding was received in 1995 to renovate the passenger end of the Culpeper Depot and its surrounding streetscapes. This initial project, completed in 1998, also resulted in new parking, lighting, landscaping, and water lines as well as a redesigned intersection for entry at East Davis Street and Commerce Street. $700,000 of ISTEA funding was used for this initial depot rehabilitation and the improvement of five surrounding properties.
A $700,000 CDBG grant was received concurrently in 1997 for improvements to the 200 block of East Davis Street within the Depot District. This grant enabled multiple activities that included: acquiring two improved properties and two vacant parcels; relocating one business; demolishing two blighted commercial structures; rehabilitating eight storefronts, five commercial structures and three warehouses; leveraging $212,000 in investor-owned projects in the project area; providing multiple streetscape and parking lot improvements; removing overgrown vegetation; and replacing 785 linear feet of water line. Work on the CDBG grant, matched with funds from a private developer, was completed in 2001.

Further ISTEA funding totalling over $700,000 was received in 2001 and 2003 to renovate the unused freight portion of the Culpeper Depot as a multi-purpose community facility. Today, the Culpeper Depot is a gem in the historic district. Along with being home to the Culpeper Visitor’s Center and the Chamber of Commerce, the depot became the transportation hub for public transportation via vans, Greyhound Bus, and Amtrak Train, though Greyhound Bus service ended in 2005-2006. The new public open space created adjacent to the station when buildings were removed is now used for public gatherings such as the farmers’ market and concerts, and is the location of the community Christmas tree. An old caboose has been placed at the freight end of the station by Norfolk Southern Railroad to remind visitors of the depot’s history. Additional improvements included vintage lighting, landscaping, textured road surfacing, and 10 parking spaces.

1999: A New Theater Comes to Downtown

In 1998 RC Theaters did not renew its lease with the Culpeper Town Mall, causing the Town to realize that it would be losing a valuable cultural asset. In 1999, a public-private partnership between the Town and RC Theaters redeveloped a Town-owned parking lot on Main Street into a state-of-the-art four screen theater.
2001: Local Public Transportation is Offered in Culpeper
Beginning in 2001, Culpeper, in partnership with the Virginia Regional Transportation Association, began offering one fixed-route bus for public transportation. The initial success prompted the addition of a second bus in 2002. Ridership now exceeds 2,500 riders a month. Culpeper Depot is the downtown boarding and transfer point, linking the local bus to state and nation-wide transportation. Virginia Railway Express (VRE) has expressed interest in extending its commuter line to Culpeper from Manassas as well, which would provide alternative means for commuting to northern Virginia.

2002-2003: Culpeper Historic Streetscapes and Entryways Project Receives TEA-21 Funding
Recognizing that entries into a downtown area are important to retaining the historic character of a town, Culpeper applied for and received $430,000 in TEA-21 funding in 2002 and 2003 to improve the gateways into downtown on U.S. Route 29 Business. Also included in this project were improvements to the Historic District’s pedestrian and handicap accessibility. Utilities were also placed underground as part of this project.

Additionally, Culpeper received a $15,000 matching grant from the Virginia Department of Forestry in 2002 to develop a Master Tree Plan to replace street trees in Culpeper’s Historic District. This plan was used for preliminary planning of the second downtown improvement phase of the TEA-21 grant and responded to the Urban Design & Community Appearance Plan adopted in 2002.

2004-Present: Restoration of the State Theater
The State Theatre was built by State Senator Benjamin Pitts in 1938 as a vaudeville movie house, and was originally named the Pitts Theatre. Of the thirty theatres that Senator Pitts built in the state of Virginia, it is the only one still in use as a movie
theatre today. After leasing the building to Regal Cinemas in 1973, it was renamed The State Theatre and it served as Culpeper’s primary movie theatre for 55 years.

After the Theater closed in 1993, it remained unoccupied until 2004. In an effort to save the building from demolition, Mr. Greg Yates purchased the property and later donated it in February 2006, to the State Theatre Foundation, Inc., a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. In May of 2008, the State Theatre was placed on both the State and National Registers of Historic Places and the $8 million renovation is set to be complete in 2013 with a restored art deco marquee. The Theatre plans to partner with the Library of Congress Packard Campus for Audio-Visual Conservation, located just 10 minutes away, to develop film festivals and show classic films in 35mm.

2007: Town Adopts the Community Design Plan
The Community Design Plan is the result of a public visioning process completed by a private consultant. Adopted in February of 2007, the plan focuses on underutilized buildings and lots in the downtown and gateway areas of Culpeper. Redevelopment is focused on Smart Growth and transit links to the Washington D.C. metro area. The ultimate goal is to make the community more pedestrian friendly and attract tourism. Furthermore, the plan seeks to provide more high density housing in downtown and emphasize the importance of urban vegetation.

Ongoing: Preservation and Streetscape Programs at Work
Several public groups have recently moved to or taken up residence in the Culpeper Historic District. These groups serve as positive examples of Culpeper’s programs at work. The Town Offices moved from 118 West Davis Street to a new, larger Town Hall at 400 South Main Street in January 2004. Additionally, an historic district residential living zoning ordinance was passed to create upper story apartments over commercial buildings in the historic district. The apartments have primarily been created on Davis Street and have helped the downtown character of Culpeper.
The Future
The town has spent the past decade focusing on areas of visual and aesthetic concern that apply to the downtown area: “entrance ways, or gateways, into Town; continued maintenance of the Historic District; signage; landscaping along road shoulders; landscaping within road medians; interior landscaping in parking lots; visual quality of open space; cohesiveness of development styles within commercial areas; coordination of individual design elements within overall site context; on-site landscaping; buffering and screening; and implementation of pedestrian systems (i.e. sidewalks, bikeways and trails).”8 “The Town proposes to maintain Culpeper’s traditional town character, beautify the major entrance ways into the Town, protect scenic views and important landmarks, develop guidelines for residential and non-residential development, and work with developers to improve design.”9

Culpeper’s most recent Comprehensive Plan, updated in 2008 and assisted by the consulting firm of McBride Dale Clarion of Cincinnati, received accolades from the Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association. The committee announced that the comprehensive plan is exemplary for other small, urban communities striving to be vibrant places that respect their heritage while preparing for growth and change.

Helpful Links
Culpeper Chamber of Commerce
www.culpepervachamber.com

Culpeper Visitor Center
www.visitculpeperva.com

Culpeper Renaissance Inc.
www.culpeperdowntown.com
Elements

Streetscape Elements

Lighting:
globe lights, both sides of Davis Street

Parking:
marked parallel parking on street; designated off-street Town parking, free

Paving:
asphalt roads; concrete sidewalks with grid pattern; concrete pattern changes at curb cuts; stamped concrete crosswalks

Planters:
some individual business owners have added planters and window boxes

Public Spaces:
small open space in front of Town Hall, pocket park in front of Depot

Other Features:
bike racks and bike lane that intersects Davis Street

enhanced alleyways
Streetscape Elements:

Seating:
a few benches, intermittently placed at waiting points such as in front of Town Hall

Signage:
banners on light posts, historic district signs, Main Street Community sign

Trash:
some trash receptacles; no consistent interval; no standard character

Trees:
few with no consistent interval

Utilities:
underground on Davis Street
Conclusions

Perched Midway between D.C. and Skyline Drive, Mount Vernon and Monticello, the Town of Culpeper offers a unique opportunity to experience small town Virginia with eclectic style. Its proximity to the ever growing D.C. metro area has helped to spur downtown reinvestment and community growth. This growth plays a large part in the success of the downtown by increasing the community tax base. By taking advantage of the rail line and active train depot, Culpeper has been able to lure visitors from miles around. The continued success of Davis Street’s revitalization, with the help and organization of Culpeper Renaissance, Inc. and the Chamber of Commerce, has become infectious throughout the town.

With Davis Street nearing completion, the community has now turned its focus to Main Street and is actively working to revive buildings and storefronts. Culpeper has a bright future and a committed group of individuals invested in its success. Every user feels welcome downtown. The variety of shops and services offered allow the downtown to be an enchanting visit for young and old, and people from all walks of life. Expect more great things from Culpeper in the future as this community presses ever forward.

On August 23, 2011 at 1:51 p.m. an earthquake of magnitude 5.8 shook the community. The epicenter was in Mineral, VA, less than 40 miles from Culpeper. As a result 8 buildings in Culpeper were damaged beyond repair and subsequently condemned, including one historic structure in downtown. Despite this setback, downtown revitalization continues.
Citations

Text Citations
6. Ibid.
8. Town of Culpeper Comprehensive Plan, p.XII-5.