Community Profile: Franklin

Franklin

Basic Facts

City Status:
Town, 1876; City, 1961

Population:
8,582

Median Age:
40.7

Median Household Income:
$33,174

Community Group(s):
Downtown Franklin Association, Inc. (DFA)
Franklin Southampton Economic Development Inc.
Franklin-Southampton Area Chamber of Commerce

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Introduction

The City of Franklin is located on U.S. Business Route 58 near the eastern edge of Southampton County, in southeastern Virginia. It is 85 miles southeast of Richmond, 50 miles from Hampton Roads, and just 10 miles from the North Carolina border. Franklin is surrounded by peanut farms and cotton fields giving the City a distinctly agricultural feel.

Franklin was desirable to early European settlers, as well as Native Americans 10,000 years before, due to its location at the head of the navigable Blackwater River and the Nottoway and Meherrin Rivers. By 1835, Franklin, known then as Blackwater Depot, had become an important center for trade and transportation as ferries, steamboats, and the railroad made it possible to travel from Norfolk to Franklin and back in a single day. Many people at this time traveled just for the novelty of the trip.

Historically, much of the employment in the City was related to Franklin’s agricultural heritage including peanut and cotton farms. The agricultural economy of Franklin and Southampton County meant that there were many slaveholders in the area. In 1831, in and near the county seat of nearby Courtland (then called Jerusalem), Nat Turner’s rebellion took place, with a group of 70 African-American slaves killing 58 white people in 36 hours. This insurrection shattered the relative tranquility of the area at the time and may have been a reason for Franklin becoming a training center for Confederate Army recruits during the Civil War. General Lee used the Blackwater River to transport provisions for Confederate troops. Union forces shelled a Franklin supply depot in 1862 in an attempt to weaken the Confederacy’s link and ultimately retreated due to the formidable Confederate troops and the large, impenetrable gun battery in the town.
After the Civil War, the lumber and peanut trades flourished with the help of Franklin’s centralized location at the junction of the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad and the Blackwater River. A sawmill, built in 1855, was Franklin’s first industry. The Union Camp Corporation’s lumber, pulp, and paper mill formed across the river from downtown in 1886 and continues to run today as International Paper using the renewable, and abundant, forest resources of the area.

Today, the Blackwater and Nottoway River system provides navigable boat access to the City and affords opportunities for water sports and fishing recreation to the area residents. Southampton Memorial Hospital is the largest employer and Franklin’s downtown is a key economic driver of the City. While the railroad and the rivers are key components of Franklin’s history, their presence is generally unobtrusive in the downtown area.

In 1999, Hurricane Floyd caused major flooding in the downtown area with the Blackwater River remaining at 23.8 feet above flood stage for 10 days. This natural disaster changed the look and feel of Franklin as streetscape improvements were obliterated, buildings were condemned, and the downtown area placed in a new floodplain. In the five years immediately following the flood, the City made huge strides in rebuilding its downtown and has been recognized throughout the state and nation for its revitalization program.
## Downtown Improvement Process Timeline

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<td>Early improvement efforts in Franklin include placing the downtown area on the National Register of Historic Places, joining the Virginia Main Street Program, and creating a Downtown Business Association.</td>
<td>The Barrett’s Landing ISTEA project is completed creating a waterfront park connected to downtown Franklin.</td>
<td>Hurricane Floyd strikes dumping huge amounts of rain, flooding the Blackwater River and downtown Franklin to epic heights for 10 days.</td>
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<th>2003</th>
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<td>Franklin receives a Tree City USA Growth Award.</td>
<td>Franklin reconstructs Town Hall with funds from the Virginia General Assembly’s Department of Emergency Service and a Rural Development Loan.</td>
<td>With a grant from the Department of Urban Forestry, Franklin begins work on a Master Tree Planting and Gateway Enhancement project.</td>
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November 1999
Franklin receives $700,000 in CDBG funding to help repair buildings and restore businesses to the downtown area.

December 1999
Main Street Franklin reopens along with 10 downtown businesses and much fanfare after being closed for 10 weeks after the flood.

Early 2000
A series of public workshops are held to get the public's input on rebuilding downtown Franklin.

2006
The Franklin Business Incubator opens in a rehabilitated 1907 former buggy factory that was later used as a peanut warehouse in the downtown area.

2008
The City of Franklin completes improvements to rehabilitate the old CSX train depot as a visitor's center using over one million dollars in ISTEA funding.

2011
Franklin receives Virginia Main Street Award for excellence.
Plan of Franklin’s Downtown District
Cross-section of Main Street
Downtown Improvement Process

1980s: Improvement Efforts Begin
In the early 1980s, responding to community concerns about the deteriorating commercial area, vacant buildings, and the reluctance of people to invest in commercial properties, the City of Franklin began the downtown improvement process. The Downtown Development Commission (DDC), consisting of downtown business owners, concerned citizens, a City Council member, the director of the Franklin/Southampton Chamber of Commerce, and the City Manager, was formed in 1982 by City Council to focus on the revitalization of downtown’s Central Business District. The DDC’s founding goals were to foster economic development and downtown enhancement. The Franklin Downtown Business Association (FDBA) was founded in 1986 to highlight downtown revitalization efforts through promotions and special events.

The City’s Department of Downtown Development provides guidance to implement the goals and projects of the DDC and the FDBA. The Department offers many services to new and existing businesses and property owners to provide support. These services include loan programs, interior and exterior improvement grants, design assistance, publicity and advertising, clerical services, and real estate activities such as marketing of property and lease preparation. Franklin has been recognized throughout the state for its business assistance program. In 1985, Franklin was invited to be one of the initial members of the Virginia Main Street Program with the Department of Downtown Development as its administrator.

Additional efforts in the 1980s included placing downtown Franklin on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985 and the 1989 construction of a stabilizing bulkhead to protect South Main Street’s shoreline from being undermined by the Blackwater River. The bulkhead project, creating a new river overlook at a cost of $326,000, included street tree planting, the addition of historic signage,
and nautical artifact installation. The bulkhead project is an example of Franklin’s philosophy of carrying out design improvements in stages, targeting a single area of town at a time. Focus areas appear in the DDC’s work plan including streetscaping assistance, pedestrian improvements, building rehabilitation, and handicapped accessibility.

1998-2004: Barrett’s Landing Project Completed
Barrett’s Landing, now a greenspace located along the Blackwater River, was the original location of Franklin Depot, where rail and river transportation converged in the 19th century. From the Barrett’s Landing site, travellers could take a steam train, then a steam boat, to reach the Outer Banks of North Carolina in the 1830’s. The same location was the site of a thoroughfare for General Lee’s army to transport provisions and the site of a Union strike during the Civil War. Over the years, however, the site had become overgrown, significantly eroded, and devoid of historical reference.

In 1995, the City began an ISTE funded project to enhance Barrett’s Landing and its environs. The Barrett’s Landing property was donated to the City by Union Camp Corporation to provide the match for the ISTE grant. Linked via walkways to the overlook at the protective bulkhead, the Franklin Historic District, and downtown Franklin, the project included streetscape improvements such as street furniture and historic lighting, relocation of utilities, landscaping, interpretive trails detailing the history of the site, a boat ramp, an event pavilion with electrical service, and an historic plaza. The project also addressed environmental issues, protecting the site from further erosion and reducing sediment and polluted stormwater run-off entering the Blackwater River.

More importantly, however, Barrett’s Landing, completed in 1998, allows residents and visitors to experience and understand the rail and water history of the City and the site. The docking facility provides public access to the river, previously inaccessible from Franklin. Barrett’s Landing has been described as the “most
popular and diverse of the Franklin parks. A large gazebo sits on top of the hill overlooking a scenic view of the Blackwater River. The park has a wharf and foot bridge around parts of the water’s edge. Barrett’s Park can be used for concerts, family outings, picnics, weddings or for just sitting on one of the many park benches and enjoying the peace and quietness of the park. Barrett’s Landing is also the ideal fishing spot in the City of Franklin.”¹ The summer concert series is also held there, attracting about 600 people for each of the 10 concerts. South Plaza with a historical marker pavilion, completed in 2004, was added to Barrett’s Landing using funds from the Elms Foundation and Camp Family Foundation.

**September 16, 1999: Hurricane Floyd Destroys Downtown**

Although downtown improvements had begun in the 1980s and were progressing nicely, Franklin’s improvement story began again in September 1999 when flooding from Hurricane Floyd, the second of two back-to-back hurricanes, destroyed downtown. Over 20 inches of rain fell in Eastern North Carolina and Virginia in two weeks causing North Carolina’s full Chowan River and drainage from the Petersburg/Hopewell area of Virginia to drain into the Blackwater River.² For nine days downtown was inundated by 5 to 25 feet of water from the flooded Blackwater River, contaminated by sewage, pesticides, garbage, propane tanks, and other hazardous materials and waste.

Franklin’s wastewater treatment plant was under 20 feet of water, the public safety building housing the police, fire, and rescue squads under 5 feet, and the City Hall under 12 feet. As the flood waters receded, city workers found that most of Franklin’s public records, files, and maps were destroyed in the flood. Most of the streetscape elements survived and only required cleaning, however some of the sidewalks needed to be replaced. Barrett’s Landing, finished just before the flood, fortunately sustained only minimal damage. Listed as a financially stressed community prior to the flood, Franklin now faced the need to spend a great deal of money to renovate or rebuild public buildings and services. FEMA and the
Commonwealth of Virginia funded the new wastewater treatment plant while the City requested $7,700,000 from Virginia’s General Assembly for a new City Hall and public safety building.  

The flood waters impacted 194 businesses and 100 residences, eventually requiring the demolition of 40 commercial and 40 residential units that were irreparable. The average loss of revenue per business was estimated at $72,100, creating a earnings loss of $13,990,000 in the downtown area alone and affecting 1,290 jobs. Equipment and inventory losses totalled almost $31,000,000, lost wages were estimated at $7,300,000, and tax revenue was lost by the City in the first year alone. The average repair cost per building was $109,159, with the total costs for the downtown area being $19,900,000. Only 8% of the losses were covered by insurance. Over 2,000 volunteers, City workers, residents, business owners, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers helped with Franklin’s flood clean up. Unable to return to their properties for many days, there were daily informational meetings at the high school for residents and volunteers. A temporary village of mobile homes was created for businesses such as banks to continue offering their services. Block captains were assigned to account for residents and keep them informed of assistance programs. A temporary business assistance center was created to offer low interest loans to business owners ready to begin repairs and to accept donations from corporations.

**November 1999: CDBG Grants for Recovery Efforts**

Though the flood was devastating, it gave the City an opportunity to access additional federal and local funding for downtown improvements that were not available prior to the flood. A $700,000 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development was awarded to the City of Franklin to aid in the restoration and repair process of downtown businesses damaged by the flood. The City set up a Management Team to administer the grant and distribute money to property and business owners. The Management Team gave first priority to drywall and flooring improvements on
eligible buildings to minimize mold damage. Secondary funding priority went to owners who met application deadlines, buildings physically ready for improvements to begin, and retail businesses.⁵

Franklin received additional CDBG funding under an Urgent Need Open Submission (UNOS) grant approved by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (VDHCD), to aid in commercial building structural repairs and restoring the first floor of damaged commercial structures in the downtown business district. Unused funding under this grant was set aside for a later business incubator program. Later CDBG funding, received in 2000, provided $1,700,000 in housing assistance and $525,000 for storefront improvements and to create upper floor apartments in the downtown area.

**December 1999: “Building Back – Better Than Ever!”**

After 10 weeks of hard work, Franklin celebrated the grand opening of Main Street and 10 businesses reopening in their former locations on December 1, 1999. This ceremony was intended to raise the spirits of the City’s residents and make them aware of the businesses persevering in the hard times after the flood. As additional business reopened downtown, a ceremonial ribbon cutting was held to publicize the event and create excitement in the City. While many of the 182 businesses existing downtown before the flood have reopened and new businesses have moved downtown, about one quarter decided not to return, some because business owners decided to retire and others because building’s were demolished.

Many of the flooded buildings were in the 100 and 500 year flood plains. After the 1999 flood, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recalcuated the flood plain mapping and created a GIS model of the City. This information was used by FEMA to create new flood maps. Resulting changes in the flood zone meant that when irreparable buildings were demolished, FEMA did not allow them to be rebuilt. Each building now has flood elevation markers enabling business owners to know where to place items out of harm’s way in case of another devastating flood.⁷
FEMA also helped individual businesses flood proof their buildings and many now own flood insurance. New ponds were built to help alleviate poor drainage problems. A mobile trailer, Flood Central, was located within the downtown area, allowing business and property owners easy access to City building information and permits. Building permit fees were waived for flood reconstruction efforts during this time. The Franklin Flood Fund, created by the local non-profit, Camp Foundation, provided assistance to business owners who needed to make repairs to buildings and replace equipment and inventories.

Franklin was fortunate to have many sources of funding made available for rebuilding the City, with a focus on the highly damaged commercial district. Funding sources were organized such that the local, state, and federal government could work with private civic and business groups and individuals to ensure that Franklin was rebuilt in a way that would best serve its citizens. The City government coordinated overall rebuilding activities while supervising each project, supporting the downtown area, and making infrastructure repairs and improvements. Franklin’s Director of Downtown Development, through the Main Street Program, provided facade design services and business assistance including a Commercial Business Improvement Program to help restore the first floors of commercial buildings. The private sector, including CSX, the Elms Foundation, the Garden Club, and International Paper provided donations of property, money, and time to help provide matching funds required for federal and state grants. Other sources of state support included the Department of Emergency Services, the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Business Assistance, and special funding from the General Assembly. Included was funding for stormwater retention ponds, and sidewalk and other drainage improvements funded by the DHCD on a matching basis with the Economic Development Administration. Without such a wide group of supporters and funding sources, “Building Back—Better Than Ever!” would have been an impossible task for the City of Franklin.
Early 2000: Public Workshops Determine Franklin’s Future

As a result of the flooding from Hurricane Floyd, Franklin’s Master Plan became obsolete. Priorities changed and Franklin was given an opportunity to make changes to their devastated City that would have been inconceivable or impractical had the City not suffered such losses. The City, with the aid of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, hired several design firms to help gather public input for the master planning effort, flood recovery, and reconstruction as part of this twelve-month process. The City and its design team were charged with developing initial design concepts and funding strategies for restoration and revitalization that incorporated FEMA initiatives and volunteer efforts; conducting a City-wide Open House to review these efforts and solicit input; refining design concepts based on feedback; preparing a final plan including budgets, funding resources, and timetables; encouraging businesses to return to the downtown by providing assistance for inventory replacement and building repair; drafting architectural design guidelines for rehabilitation and new construction; and developing “a vision for downtown Franklin that reaches beyond the previous functions of the business district.”

Key public officials, public works personnel, administrators, business leaders, property owners, the Downtown Business Association, and volunteer groups were interviewed to solicit their input. Workshops were conducted by the design team for downtown merchants, property owners, and corporations to assess the level of need resulting from Hurricane Floyd and to “brainstorm a vision for downtown, looking at physical and programmatic opportunities and considering the financial and market opportunities and constraints, developing and prioritizing short and long range goals and conceptual ideas.” Categories of objectives and strategies identified in the community workshops were land use, circulation/transportation, community-use space, economic development, design standards/beautification, public use, tourism, and potential funding/grants. Ideas resulting from the workshops included rebuilding City Hall downtown to support the City’s support
for downtown revitalization, encouraging merchants and property owners to use the upper floors of commercial buildings for residential development, rehabilitating the vacant Peanut Warehouse as a small business incubator, providing parking behind stores, creating pedestrian walkways and connecting downtown areas with walkways and trails, centralizing parking and providing a trolley service, and creating a farmers’ market. The result of this process created a plan for “key activity centers and functions to provide for economic growth, diversified uses, better land utilization, and a unique and varied downtown experience.”

**2000 – 2001: A Time For Cheer**

In September of 2000, Franklin marked the anniversary of the flood with a town celebration at Barrett's Landing. Along with unveiling a monument to thank those who helped in the recovery efforts, the celebration included street painting and other fun activities for a City that had been focused on work and recovery for the past year. Franklin's efforts were also recognized with a featured article in the July/August 2000 issue of *Preservation Magazine* and with the receipt of the first ever Virginia Downtown Development Association (VDDA) President’s Award for its recovery from Hurricane Floyd.

**2002: New City Government Buildings Open**

Prior to the flood, the City of Franklin had preliminary plans for renovation of the existing City Hall to accommodate the growing City offices. When City Hall and the public safety building were flooded, destroying records, crippling communication throughout the city, and resulting in $1,000,000 worth of damage on the City Hall’s first floor alone, a difficult decision was necessary: should all public buildings be moved out of the downtown area that was now a flood plain? Citizens overwhelmingly supported rebuilding City Hall in the downtown area.

With reconstruction costs for the needed public buildings initially estimated at $8,350,000, the Virginia General Assembly approved $4,000,000 in Department of Emergency Service funds for the reconstruction of City Hall and the renovation
of the public safety building. This, coupled with a $2,500,000 Rural Development Loan and a $250,000 grant, funded the rebuilding of Franklin’s administrative infrastructure. After much planning, City officials decided to demolish the old City Hall in 2001 to make way for a new building, elevated 6.5 feet from the ground. The flooded public safety building was converted to a fire station. Meanwhile, the new police headquarters and court building were relocated on higher ground away from the downtown area to prevent a repeat of the communication loss experienced during the flood. Franklin’s Department of Social Services moved to the renovated Bank of America building downtown. All of these building opened with great fare in 2002, almost exactly 3 years after the flood.

2001-2004: ISTEA Funds New Downtown Visitor’s Center
Most of the streetscape improvements made prior to Hurricane Floyd remained intact after the flood. Once recovery was nearly complete, Franklin started where it had left off and began additional streetscape improvements. The City received a total of $1,345,000 in ISTEA funding between 2001 and 2004 for improvements on South Main Street and Second Avenue. The funding helped to finance the new City master plan, the relocation and rehabilitation of the CSX freight depot into a downtown Visitor’s Center, underground utility relocation on South Main Street, and the repair and improvement of pedestrian facilities along South Main Street and Second Avenue. Construction of the Visitor’s Center began in the summer of 2004 and included landscaping on the street front as well.

2003: Tree City Growth Award
The City of Franklin received a Tree City USA Growth Award in 2003 for its continued efforts in community forestry. To receive a growth award, a community must provide education and public relations, partnerships, planning and management, and tree planting and management for its urban forest, as well as spending at least as much on the forest as in the previous year. As a part of this effort, Franklin’s Beautification Committee, a group of gardeners, arborists, landscape designers, and architects, advises the City Manager and residents regarding the planting and conservation of trees and vegetation.

2004: Master Tree Planting and Gateway Enhancement
Franklin received a $10,000 grant from the Virginia Department of Forestry’s Urban and Community Forestry Program to develop a Master Tree Planting and Gateway Enhancement Plan for the City. This grant, along with a $7,500 grant from the Camp Family Foundation, funded the production of an inventory of existing trees and gateways to the City and the initial set of plans. These initial set of plans
served as a catalyst for considering how Franklin’s gateways could be improved.

2006: Franklin Business Incubator Opens

The Franklin Business Incubator (FBI) opened in the spring of 2006 in downtown Franklin. This facility, placed in a renovated 40,000 square foot historic buggy factory, provides space and resources for starting new businesses. Before purchase by the City, the structure was being used as a peanut warehouse. “Whether you are an existing small business or want to provide a new service, engage in light industry, or open a restaurant or bar, the FBI will provide you with the environment, resources and property management staff to get your business growing the minute you open your doors. Cost effective space, administrative services, and professional equipment such as phones, copy machines, fax machines, and computer access will all be provided.” The FBI is also a designated Technology Zone.

This multi-million dollar project was funded through the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Economic Development Administration ($1,192,795), the Virginia Department of Business Assistance ($500,000), and the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development ($390,340). The FBI complements the Regional Workforce Development Center (RWDC) located at nearby Paul D. Camp Community College. The RWDC, with $1,500,000 from private sources and local governments and $3,275,000 from the Virginia General Assembly, provides employer-customized services for training and placing potential employees.

2009: City of Franklin Gateway Enhancement Plan

Building on the work done in 2004, the City of Franklin hired Kimley-Horn and Associates to complete a Gateway Enhancement Plan for all of Franklin. Funding for the plan was again provided by the Virginia Department of Forestry and the Camp Family Foundation as well as from the City’s Beautification Commission. The 2nd Avenue gateway was implemented, with funding support from Virginia Main Street, CSX, and the City of Franklin. A copy of the plan is available via the City’s website: http://www.franklinva.com/content/com_develop/gateway.pdf

2011: Franklin Receives Award for Excellence

In March 2011, the City of Franklin and the Downtown Franklin Association received two Virginia Main Street Milestone Achievement Awards for the investment of over 40,000 volunteer hours since 1997 and the rehabilitation of more than 250 buildings since 1985. The Association also received Building Improvement awards for the new Farmer’s Market and the downtown concession and restroom project.
## Streetscape Elements

**Lighting:**
pedestrian scale lighting in character with the rest of the streetscape elements.

**Parking:**
free public parking lot downtown; on-street parallel parking as well

**Paving:**
asphalt roads; concrete sidewalk, with some areas of brickwork

**Planters:**
supplied by individual business owners

**Public Spaces:**
riverfront park adjacent to main street; amphitheater
**Streetscape Elements:**

**Seating:**
lots of seating provided at/around the park; consistent with rest of street furniture; not many places directly on Main Street

**Signage:**
little signage throughout town; welcome sign at entry; no banner system

**Trash:**
cans consistent in appearance with the rest of the street furniture

**Trees:**
some street trees (bordering parking lots); no consistent intervals; large container plantings of Crape Myrtles every two blocks.

**Utilities:**
some overhead, mostly buried

**Other Features:**
riverwalk; murals; street wall
Conclusions

In 2010, Franklin faced a major setback when International Paper closed its local factory. The City lost over 1,000 jobs along with a community icon that had been in operation over a century. After two years in the dark, International Paper returned to announce the start-up of its new fluff pulp enterprise. The company re-purposed its Franklin facility to manufacture fluff pulp, a key ingredient in super absorbent products such as baby diapers, adult incontinence and feminine hygiene products, and medical wipes. By May 2012, the Memphis, TN-based company vowed to invest $83 million and hire approximately 200 workers to make the pulp. Manufacturing resumed in June 2012 at one-third of the original capacity, and the company has considered leasing other parts of the mill to interested firms.

Today, the City of Franklin is determined to maintain its small-town feel and compact downtown in spite of continuous development pressures from Hampton Roads to the east. Focus has shifted from recovery efforts to managing growth and distinguishing place-making characteristics. Franklin has embraced its unique heritage by establishing and marketing a brand throughout its downtown and gateway corridors. The community is literally rooted in the paper mill industry, and a tree is a natural symbol for the City and is reflected in its motto “Growth--Community--Spirit”. Community branding does not only enhance the charm and atmosphere of the City, it helps to distinguish Franklin in the marketplace.
Citations

Text Citations
3. From the office of the Mayor, James P. Councill III, City of Franklin. “From the City Council of the City of Franklin, Virginia on Behalf of its Citizens”.
6. Ibid.

Image Citations
1. Image provided by Dan Howe, June 2011.