Fredericksburg
Virginia
Introduction

The City of Fredericksburg is located where the coastal plain meets the hilly Piedmont of Virginia. Centrally situated on Interstate 95 and U.S. Route 1 between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, each capital city is only 50 miles away. U.S. Route 17 and State Route 3 provide additional east/west access to the City. The Rappahannock River marks the northwest boundary of the downtown area.

The many historic sites in the area, including Mary Washington's home, George Washington's boyhood home, and Civil War sites, contribute to tourism and service businesses being the major employers in Fredericksburg. "Gettysburg is recognized principally for Civil War tourism; Williamsburg for Colonial period tourism. Fredericksburg offers a heritage tourism destination associated with the full spectrum of American history, set in the context of active, healthy, and attractive commercial and residential neighborhoods."1 Mary Washington Hospital and University of Mary Washington are other major employers. Rather than being an employment or retail center, Fredericksburg has become an urban and cultural center for the region whose population is approaching 250,000. Downtown residents, suburban employees and customers, and tourists provide most of the revenue for downtown businesses, though “downtown Fredericksburg has yet to reach its peak or realize its full potential.”2

Fredericksburg, “where America grew up”, was chartered in 1728 as an official inland port and immediately became a busy colonial seaport. Although passage further upstream on the Rappahannock River was impossible, settlers took advantage of Fredericksburg’s location on the fall line to harness the water power and build many mills, including grist, textile, paper, and excelsior, and accompanying warehouses. The town, already an agricultural center, became the
seat of Spotsylvania County in 1732. Fredericksburg was an active place during the Revolutionary War, manufacturing munitions and serving as a location for Thomas Jefferson and others to draft the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. During the Civil War, Fredericksburg became a battleground due to its location between the northern capitol of Washington, D.C. and the southern capitol of Richmond. The river became a defensive position and the railroad, a corridor for army supplies. Fredericksburg changed after the Civil War as northern investors took over the mills and electrical power in the early 1900s and made it unnecessary for mills to be built near water. Power plants were built on the canal system of the Fredericksburg Water Power Company in the early 1900s. The last of these plants closed when the North Anna nuclear power plant came on line in 1980 because it was too expensive to continue generating electricity at such a small scale.

Today, Fredericksburg's main street is Caroline Street, a one-way street that runs northwest and is one block parallel to the Rappahannock River. Princess Anne Street, also one way, runs southeast and parallel to Caroline Street. Travelers can also access Fredericksburg’s downtown via AMTRAK. Fredericksburg has weathered 30 years of revitalization and refinement and now features completed downtown improvements. The City’s attention has now turned to riverfront improvements, a new City plaza, and the renovation of the light industrial edge of the central business district.

Community Profile: Fredericksburg
## Downtown Improvement Process Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Following the demolition of several important buildings, the Historic Fredericksburg Foundation is established to preserve remaining landmarks.</td>
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<td>1972</td>
<td>40 downtown blocks of Fredericksburg placed on National Register of Historic Places.</td>
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<td>1980s</td>
<td>Initial improvement efforts begin with the revitalization of the 900 block of Caroline Street.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997-1999</td>
<td>Charting Downtown's Future committee forms and delivers a report.</td>
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<td>2000s</td>
<td>Renovations move beyond Caroline Street to perpendicular cross streets and away from the central business district.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Mid-1980s</td>
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<td>City zoning updated to allow residential housing over commercial shops in the downtown business district.</td>
<td>Fredericksburg annexes land near I-95 for commercial hub and added tax base.</td>
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<th>2001-2003</th>
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<th>2004</th>
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<td>Historic Market Square, in the heart of Fredericksburg, is renovated.</td>
<td>Hurricane Isabel results in the loss of over 400 trees from the streets of Fredericksburg.</td>
<td>Fredericksburg builds a parking garage in the downtown area.</td>
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Plan of Fredericksburg’s Downtown District

Fredericksburg Area Museum and Cultural Ctr.
Market Square
Fredericksburg Visitor Ctr.
Parking Garage
AMTRAK Station
Lafayette Boulevard
Wolfe Street
Amelia Street
Wolfe Street
Hanover Street
Prince Street
Caroline Street
Princess Anne Street
George Street
William Street/King’s Highway
Rappahannock River
To City Docks and City Dock Park
Fredericksburg Visitor Ctr.
Fredericksburg Visitor Ctr.
Not to Scale
Community Profile: Fredericksburg

Cross-section of Caroline Street
Downtown Improvement Process

1953: Something Must Be Done!
The early 1950’s saw a number of commercial buildings razed to make room for new development. Local citizens, particularly concerned when an “exceptionally prominent” building was destroyed in the downtown area, founded Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc. (HFFI) to save the historic fabric and character of downtown. HFFI, still very active today.

Despite renewed interest in the downtown commercial core, new roads pulled commercial development to the edges of town in the late 1960s. City government stepped in to begin marketing Fredericksburg as a place with a unique, historic downtown character to attract tourists.

1972: An Historic District is Established
HFFI laid the groundwork for the establishment of an historic district in Fredericksburg’s downtown commercial business area. In 1971, the Fredericksburg Historic District was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The historic district encompasses 40 blocks roughly bounded by the Rappahannock River, Hazel Run Creek and Prince Edward and Canal Streets. HFFI aided the City in the adoption of a municipal historic zoning ordinance allowing mixed uses in the business district. Other incentives, including partial abatement of real estate taxes for qualifying rehabilitated properties and capital improvements in the historic district, helped downtown Fredericksburg retain its unique character. The incentives were so successful that between 1971 and 1990 property values in the historic district rose nearly twice as much as comparable properties elsewhere in the city.

A National Register designation does not protect an historic district. The City enacted legislation in the form of a zoning ordinance as early as 1968 to protect the district from inappropriate changes by property owners. Using the zoning
ordinance an Architectural Review Board could review proposed changes, including rehabilitations and demolitions and issue Certificates of Appropriateness.

1980s: Downtown Improvements Begin

Initial improvements began with the creation of a Downtown Development and Design Committee to develop a plan of action. Using this plan as a guide in the early 1980s, improvements began with complete renovation of the 900 block of Caroline Street including brick sidewalks, ornamental lamps, and upgraded curbs and gutters. By the mid 1980s, Fredericksburg became a member of the Virginia Main Street Program. This initial work was well received by the community and additional improvements to other blocks of Caroline Street, using HUD and CDBG funds, included adding better drainage and bump-outs at corners to slow traffic and create a more pedestrian friendly environment.

A facade improvement plan provided up to $500 to downtown property owners for architectural consulting from select professionals to prepare plans for improving street fronts of downtown buildings. Working as a loan program, those who qualified did not have to repay the loan if the improvements were implemented. Those who did implement the facade improvements served as a catalyst for others, creating a snowball effect that greatly improved the streetscape.

1980s: Zoning Ordinances Updated in Historic District

To encourage residential apartments above commercial shops in the downtown district, the city changed its zoning ordinances to reflect this return to historical usage. Allowing residences in these districts creates a more diverse environment and adds life to the streets during all parts of the day and week.

Mid 1980s: Fredericksburg Grows

The City of Fredericksburg annexed 4.5 square miles of land near Interstate 95 which has since become a large commercial shopping area. While this may sound
detrimental to the downtown area, the advantage is the larger tax base which provides more money to the City for downtown improvements.

**Early 1990s: Fredericksburg Leaves Main Street Program**

By the 1990s, Fredericksburg’s downtown streetscape improvements on Caroline Street were essentially complete. Public and private investment had resulted in rehabilitated buildings and very few vacancies in the downtown area. The City decided to leave the Main Street Program since most improvements had been completed.

**1992-1996: Local Public Transportation Becomes Available**

In 1992, the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) commuter rail line initiated service on its Fredericksburg line to Washington, D.C. The city received approximately $600,000 in ISTEA funding in 1993 to renovate the historic railroad station. Fredericksburg Regional Transit Service (FRED) began operating in 1996 with 13 buses to offer local bus service throughout the City and into surrounding counties. These local services complemented the already-existing national inter-city and Greyhound services.

**1997-1999: Charting Downtown’s Future**

Consisting of 29 citizens, downtown merchants, and City staff, the Charting Downtown’s Future Committee (CDFC) was established in 1997 to focus on management, maintenance, and marketing. The CDFC was concerned with developing a course for continued improvement, development, maintenance, management and sustainability of downtown Fredericksburg. The main objectives were: “to attract additional tourism revenue into the area by creating a more enjoyable and diverse experience downtown, to enhance downtown's position as the urban center of the Fredericksburg area by providing improved center-city amenities to the larger regional community, and to continue to protect the unique
character and historic integrity of the downtown as a neighborhood as well as adjoining neighborhoods.3

Recognizing that downtown serves three communities - downtown residents, employees and customers, and tourists - the CDFC sought to enhance Fredericksburg’s image as “historically and architecturally unique, livable and enjoyable place to work, walk, eat, shop, and visit”4 while strengthening the City’s focus on downtown preservation. Specific guidelines for development of the downtown area included widening the perceived boundaries of downtown; widening the variety of commercial, cultural, and historical offerings; developing pedestrian corridors; expanding sidewalks; creating a district-wide parking program; and developing a downtown advocacy program. The theme of the CDFC was “building upon Fredericksburg as a classic American living, working town”.5

Fredericksburg developed and adopted an Historic District Handbook in 1998 that provides guidelines on maintenance, rehabilitation, and new construction, as well as information on how preservation enhances the community’s development. This handbook provides clear guidance to property owners and investors and has been reprinted to keep up with the demand.

2000s: Continuing Improvements

Through the decade, Fredericksburg improved two to three blocks in the downtown area using public monies. Due to changes in the downtown improvement plan, streetscape changes on the 900 block of Caroline Street were redone in 1999-2000 to match the renovations on other blocks of the street. Later work focused on improving the streets perpendicular to Caroline including water and sewer upgrades.
With many of the streetscape improvements completed in the downtown area, the City has begun to look at other areas for improvement. Fredericksburg is focusing on riverfront improvements including creating a natural linear trail connecting parking, downtown, the library, Riverside Park, and the City Dock. Plans include a future plaza on the riverfront. The City is also focusing on the rehabilitation of light industrial buildings on the perimeter of the central business district with some warehouses seeing new lives as offices and apartments.

2001-2003: Market Square Renovations
Market Square was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994 as one of the only 18th century market areas in the country still in use as a public space. It was the focus of $500,000 in TEA-21 funding for renovations and revitalization. Additional funding was provided by the Gwathmey Foundation. The City matched this funding by providing grading and utility work. Archaeological work in Market Square uncovered what was once a cemetery in the Southeast corner resulting in a delay in the completion of the project. The Old Town Hall/Market House, located on the square, benefitted from $250,000 worth of grants from the Virginia General Assembly and is now home to the Fredericksburg Area Museum and Cultural Center. Alleys, improved during the project, lead from Caroline, William, and George Streets to Market Square. Formally completed in 2003, Market Square is used for events such as concerts and festivals.

2003: A Hurricane Strikes
Fredericksburg was hit by Hurricane Isabel in the fall of 2003, resulting in the loss of 400 mature trees from the streets of Fredericksburg. Many of the trees were lost due to narrow, inappropriate tree pits with impervious paving. The trees were unable to grow wide enough root systems to stabilize themselves in hurricane-force winds. The City has since improved its tree program to ensure more appropriate tree selection and improved planting procedures.
2004: A Place to Park

As suggested in the 1999 Comprehensive Plan and also in the report by the Charting Downtown's Future Committee, the City began accepting proposals for a parking garage in 2004. The garage, located a block from Caroline Street at the corner of Wolfe and Sophia Streets, is five stories and provides 297 spaces. The newly available parking attracted the attention of investors and a 99-room Courtyard by Marriott was constructed and opened in 2007, enhancing the downtown economy considerably.

Future

While most of the improvements are complete in the downtown area of Fredericksburg, the community is always seeking improvement. The City continues to add historical markers to increase interest for tourists. The most recent addition describes the quest for religious freedom in the City. According to Charting Downtown's Future, downtown Fredericksburg’s preservation is “ultimately dependent on its commercial health. The maintenance of our historic sites, the rental value of downtown properties, even the quality and attractiveness of our downtown restaurants result from and are dependent upon the flow of money into downtown Fredericksburg. No other element bears as directly on the future of downtown as proper and appropriate marketing.”
Elements

Streetscape Elements

Lighting:
antique-looking pedestrian lighting, both sides of Caroline Street

Parking:
2 hour parallel on-street parking, both sides of Caroline Street; 297-space parking garage built at 600 Sophia Street (paid parking)

Paving:
asphalt roads; brick sidewalks; change in materials at end of blocks

Planters:
tree pits are planted; plantings at seating areas; individual shop owners have added their own planters in front of businesses

Public Spaces:
small open space with built in brick planters and benches beside Visitor Center

Accessible curb cut of pebbles in brick sidewalk

Brick sidewalks, period lighting, and street trees

Informational signage, seating, and planters at visitor center

Brick sidewalk, planters, street trees, and benches

Barrels as trash cans

Merchants and property owners have claimed ownership of street trees by planting in the tree pits
Streetscape Elements:

Seating:
benches placed intermittently on street side of sidewalk; some benches on business side; in public space outside of Visitor Center

Signage:
no banners; Fredericksburg Historic Tour, Visitor Center, and bus stop signage; informational signage at intersections

Trash:
standard barrel receptacles; no consistent interval

Trees:
on both sides of Caroline Street; various heights as new trees have replaced declining trees as well as those that fell during Hurricane Isabel

Utilities:
underground on Caroline Street
Conclusions

Fredericksburg’s unique location halfway between Washington D.C. and Richmond has made it part one of the fastest growing regions in the country. Fredericksburg’s efforts to revitalize downtown started earlier than many communities and have proven successful through the continuous efforts of a variety of interested local organizations. The City was one of the first Virginia Main Street Communities, and though it no longer participates in the program, Fredericksburg is still a very active and vibrant downtown.

Fredericksburg has been able to retain its historical character while modernizing to meet the demands of populations from two major metropolises. Due to its size, Fredericksburg has the benefit of a well-orchestrated planning program and significant state interest. The City also has major growth potential as possible Metro line options have been considered to reduce automobile traffic in the region. Fredericksburg gains most from its high profile status, but the committed local and private interest groups have helped to capitalize on the City’s unique historical character and limit the commercialization of their community.
Citations

Text Citations
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.