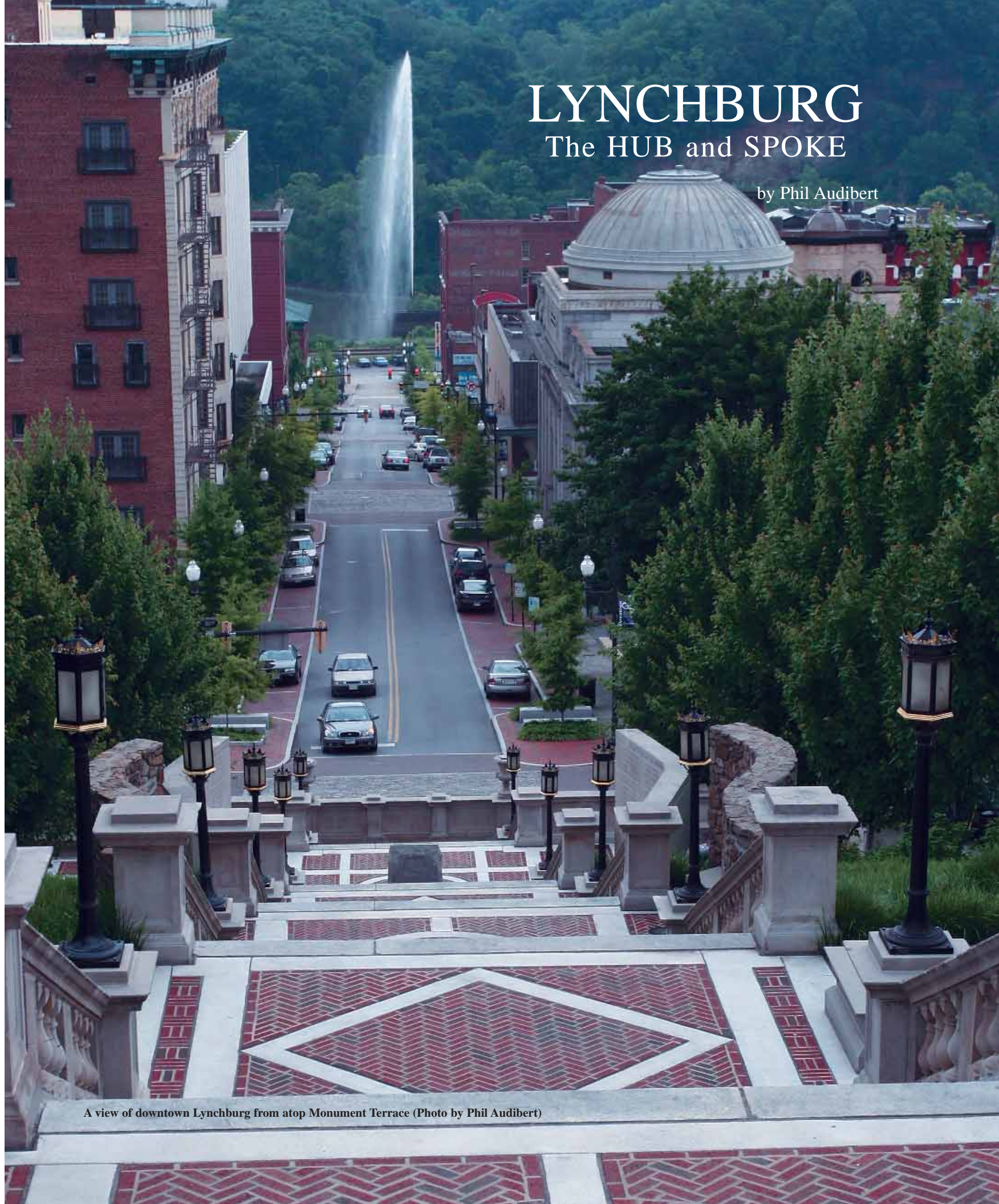


# LYNCHBURG

The HUB and SPOKE

by Phil Audibert



A view of downtown Lynchburg from atop Monument Terrace (Photo by Phil Audibert)



Because of the James River and nearby Smith Mountain Lake, Lynchburg is the origination point for the Fish Virginia First program that has now spread throughout central and southwest Virginia. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

**I**n Lynchburg, the good folks at the Convention and Visitor's Bureau promote what are called hub-and-spoke tours. Tourism Director, Beckie Nix explains. "You hub up and stay in Lynchburg because Lynchburg has the infrastructure, the lodging and dining and shopping and so forth. And then you sort of spoke out in a different direction on each day of your stay here to take in all the sights."

The Hub and Spoke: What a great name for a pub in England! Not bad for a catchy way to map out a tourist itinerary, either. But in Lynchburg's case it goes deeper than that because it accurately describes the geopolitics of Central Virginia. Lynchburg is the drive shaft that keeps the area's economic wheels turning.

It is at the center of everything. Lynchburg is not only the hub around which the counties of Bedford, Campbell and Amherst revolve, it is also the center of Central Virginia. And, in Nix's words, "It is located within a one day's drive of 70 percent of the population of the East Coast."

Lynchburg is indeed a hub, hosting a wide and balanced variety of industry and business that, because of its diversity, has managed to weather the recession better than some of its neighbors. It is an arts and culture haven, a recreational magnet and an educational core, boasting five colleges in and around the city. Its architecture revolves around all styles: Greek Revival, Federal, Georgian, Victorian and everything in between. And its history played a

central role in Virginia from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson, from the Civil War to World War II.

Speaking of history, Lynchburg can trace its beginnings directly to its lifeline, the James River, when John Lynch established a ferry crossing here in 1757. By 1786, the town had earned its charter and was off and running as a commercial center. In those days, tobacco was king, and at one point Lynchburg was the second-wealthiest city in the United States, behind only the whaling center of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Using the James River water road, tobacco planters loaded hogsheads of tobacco onto shallow-draft pole boats known as bateaus, and ferried them down river to Richmond. They returned loaded to



Cyclists pedal past Amazement Square, a converted tobacco warehouse that now houses an interactive children's museum. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

Printer and Select Bank chairman Danny Thornton sees a bright future for Lynchburg. (Photo courtesy of Progress Printing)



the gills with goods imported from England and Europe. To this day, the Batteau Festival reenacts this vital commercial link every June.

The arrival of the railroad added more transportation spokes to the wheel.

By the time of the Civil War, three converging railroads and the James River with its canals had turned Lynchburg into a major transportation, distribution, training and storage center for the Confederacy. It was also the site of a major military hospital complex that treated 10,000 wounded following the Battle of the Wilderness in May of 1864.

But Lynchburg really hit its stride at the turn of the last century. It is nicknamed the City of Seven Hills or the Hill City, "because those tobacco magnates who moved here located on top of the knolls of downtown," says Nix. Today each knoll is an historic district, and all told, some 70 Lynchburg buildings are listed on the National Register.

Lynchburg, of course, suffered the fate of most American cities during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The spokes drained the hub to the suburbs. But now that core is on its way back, with vibrant downtown and riverfront revitalization programs.

An abandoned tobacco warehouse is now an interactive children's museum

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The magnificent Georgian mansion Villa Kriselea was built in 1911. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

The entrance to the Confederate Soldiers burying ground at the Old City Cemetery (Photo by Susie Audibert)



Shoes are everywhere at the Craddock Terry Hotel because it used to be a shoe factory. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

called Amazement Square. The Parlor Ballroom and Lofts is a one-man downtown revitalization project. The Craddock Terry shoe factory has been turned into a boutique hotel with a footwear motif. Its award-winning restaurant, Shoemakers, also houses a microbrewery. Another Craddock Terry building contains Riverviews Artspace.

And the future is even more exciting. Once construction crews complete the sewer separation job, the city will launch its waterfront revitalization and amphitheatre construction projects. That will be followed by the Bluff Walk, an elevated pedestrian shopping mall that overlooks the river.

Oliver Knutner is a man who recognizes a good thing when he sees it. He is very much involved in revitalizing the downtown district. "It's a huge job," he says. "They're really doing it the smart way." Once that work is done, he'll finish restoring and renovating three buildings he owns, converting them into upscale apartments, restaurants and boutiques. "There's a lot going on in downtown Lynchburg," says Knutner.

One of the reasons for this rebound is Lynchburg's good fortune to not put all of its eggs in one economic basket. Employers, such as the huge health care concern, Centra, or the nuclear equipment manufacturing and service industries of Areva and Babcock and Wilcox, are evidence of the area's economic diversity.

And no story about Lynchburg is complete without mention of the late Jerry Falwell. Nix says no matter whether you are for or against him, "the one thing you can't deny is his impact on Lynchburg, the economic impact of Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist Church. It is just far-, far-reaching. And from a tourism aspect, the thing we really appreciate is that everything they're doing for Liberty's students, they open up for the public as well."

She points to the first-in-the-western-hemisphere Snowflex complex, an "outdoor artificial snow slope where you



In Colonial days, Lynchburg's tobacco was ferried to Richmond aboard shallow draft boats known as bateaus. Every June, Lynchburg hosts the Bateau Festival that re-enacts this vital 18th-century commercial link. (Photo courtesy of Lynchburg Convention and Visitors' Bureau)

Poplar Forest was Thomas Jefferson's "little secret," a place to escape from visiting throngs at Monticello. (Photo by Susie Audibert)



can snow ski, snowboard, inner tube, year-round in a T-shirt and shorts." It's open to the public. Nix adds that Liberty, with its enrollment of 45,000 students on campus and in its distance learning program, makes its sports facilities available to the people. "So as we promote and sell Lynchburg as a destination for leisure travel, we can also promote it as a destination for group travel and for sporting events using those venues. They've been great to work with."

Danny Thornton is a native of neighboring Amherst County. He is what you would call a "here-before." He returned to Lynchburg to help build his family's business into "the largest privately owned printer in Virginia." He's also the chairman and co-founder of the new Select Bank that, because of good timing and wise business decisions, was not caught up in the subprime

mess. He points to the "variety of Lynchburg's industrial base and employment base." He is excited about the city's future. Daniele Mason, another "here-before" like Thornton, is a Realtor with Marks Realty. "Lynchburg is a wonderful place to buy property, because it appreciates. It's a great place to raise a family."

Dennis Gibbs is what you'd call a "come-to," an entrepreneur extraordinaire who arrived in Lynchburg five years ago to acquire an addition to his considerable collection of rare automobiles. "And I didn't want to leave," Gibbs says with a smile. "I saw the potential for the city, for the area, the James River, all the historical buildings, the hills around the city. It's just a fabulous place."

Gibbs set about adopting what he calls "needy children," mostly turn-of-the-

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**The National D-Day Memorial near Bedford depicts the June 1944 landing on the beaches of Normandy. (Photo courtesy of Lynchburg Convention and Visitors' Bureau).**

last-century buildings that desperately needed his help. He's purchased and restored a beautiful Victorian on Rivermont, the Jones Memorial Library, even a 1920s-era automobile dealership. For Gibbs, it all started with the magnificent Georgian mansion, Villa Kriselea, built by P.A. Krise around 1911. Known locally as Villa Maria, it had fallen into disrepair. Gibbs remembers a flock of 25 buzzards inhabiting the upstairs hall. Today, Villa Kriselea, in all its Georgian splendor, hosts public and private events, such as weddings.

Time to spoke out from the hub. A must-see is Poplar Forest. Drive out Route 221, past Wyndhurst with its upscale shops and 21,000-member forward-leaning YMCA. Further out you will find, tucked in behind a residential subdivision, an architectural gem best known as Thomas Jefferson's "little secret." This was a country retreat to which he could escape from the throngs of visitors that would beset him at Monticello.

He started construction on this modestly sized but perfectly proportioned

octagonal house in 1806, while still president. Classic Jeffersonian touches abound, such as an entrance hall and three identical hexagonal side rooms which form a square 16-foot-tall skylit room in the center of the building. Stretching out one side is a long low service wing with a deck. The house is flanked on both sides by identical earthen mounds, and behind them he concealed octagonal privies! Jefferson would hole up here (in the house, not the privies) for two weeks to a month at a time. "I have fixed myself comfortably, keep some books here, bring others occasionally, am in the solitude of a hermit," he wrote contentedly.

Another peaceful place is found at the end of the spoke that leads to the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford to the west. This town lost 19 young men on Omaha Beach, June 6th 1944, more, per capita, than any other town in the nation. The stirring memorial depicts men scaling cliffs and wading ashore as small geysers of water, representing bullet strikes, erupt all around them. A good place to stay while visiting Bedford is Terrapin Cabin just off the Blue Ridge Parkway where you are

literally five minutes from both the Appalachian Trail and the James River.

Other spokes to explore from Lynchburg include the Arts Along 460 driving trail. One of the most scenic roads in the country, the Blue Ridge Parkway is close by, as is one of the seven wonders of the world, Natural Bridge. To the north, off off Route 29 in Amherst County, is Sweet Briar College with its stately grounds, buildings and equestrian center. Other institutions of higher learning include Lynchburg College with its Daura Gallery and Randolph College and its magnificent Maier Museum of Art. All of these institutions contribute mightily to the local economy.

And just a 40-minute drive south lies the fishing and boating mecca that is Smith Mountain Lake. It is one of the best freshwater striper fisheries in Virginia (the state record was caught here). Speaking of fishing, you can find all the equipment you need at Angler's Lane, an Orvis store in nearby Forest that also carries brands such as Barbour, Filson and many others. You can put that new gear to good use with the Fish Virginia First program that was recently launched at a Bassmasters tournament at Smith Mountain Lake. The cooperative effort "to promote Lynchburg as a premier fishing destination," has now expanded to include all of Southwestern Virginia.

And if water sports are your gig, be sure to avail yourself of Beaver Creek Canoe Rentals and the James River Float Company. The latter can take you all the way down the water road to Richmond, if you'd like. There are several good public and private golf courses in the area—in particular, the Sam Snead-designed Poplar Grove in Amherst County.

Back at the hub, be sure to check out Blackwater Trail, an eight-mile complex of biking and hiking trails that wends along a creek in downtown Lynchburg. They'll even lend you a bike! Or, maybe you should save your energy for a brisk jog up the 139 steps of Monument Terrace, which honors Lynchburg's war



The river geyser makes an exclamation point for the Lynchburg skyline. (Photo courtesy Lynchburg Convention and Visitors' Bureau)

dead. From the top, look down onto the town and note the geyser in the middle of the James River. It is the second highest in the country. Then turn around and walk straight into the Old Court House, now home to the Lynchburg Museum.

From there make your way to the museum's branch at Point of Honor, Dr. George Cabell's 1815 mansion overlooking the James River. Don't miss the magnificent paper mural by Dufour called *Monuments of Paris* in the parlor.

Time now to go to Harlem Renaissance poet Anne Spencer's home and garden on Pierce Street. Painstakingly planted and built by her husband, Edward, the garden with its "rooms," is where she reportedly felt most comfortable. Regular visitors, who could not find overnight accommodations in then-segregated Lynchburg, included George Washington Carver, Langston Hughes, Thurgood Marshall, W.E.B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Finally, perched on top of one of Lynchburg's hills, is a gem that is both free

to the public and open from dawn to dusk every day. It is the Old City Cemetery. As you bump along its steep cobblestone streets, you pass various mini-museums: from a reconstructed rural 19<sup>th</sup> century train station to a "pest" house containing a down-to-the-detail recreation of a country doctor's office and quarantine facility for Civil War yellow fever and smallpox victims. Some of them may be among the 2,200 Confederates who were laid to rest in the middle of this cemetery that is 75 percent African American!

The cemetery has a scatter garden for ashes, a lotus pond, a butterfly garden and 200 varieties of roses. It even contains a section populated by Lynchburg's infamous bawdy ladies, one of them a madam who died the third-richest woman in town. And although it has been closed to new residents since 1965, there is still an active Potter's Field here for Lynchburg's indigent. Here and there, you come across a different kind of memorial, such as a rusted child's pedal car. That's all that family could afford as a whimsical marker. It

makes you realize that this place is a celebration of life, not death. Near the cemetery's hilltop entrance is an old metal wagon wheel with a broken spoke, another symbol of the wheel of life not turning anymore.

Well, here in Lynchburg, the hub and spoke are turning just fine, thank you. If you're not quite ready to take the plunge to move here, at least come for a visit. Make the city your home base, your hub, and then make forays along the spokes from there.

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Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs since he was 16. Recently, he won several first-place awards from the Virginia Press Association. His wife, Susie, is also a photographer. Please visit them at [AudibertPhoto.com](http://AudibertPhoto.com).