



History and Culture

The history of the Town of Gordonsville is reflective of the history of our nation. From the expansion of the railroad to the Civil War and years beyond, the events in the life of the Town give it a character today that residents and visitors alike cherish and strive to protect. The following narrative gives a sense of the Town's unique history and culture, initiatives being undertaken to preserve them, and future goals and objectives for their enhancement.

Gordonsville's Place in History

Nathaniel Gordon, having purchased a plantation at the foot of the southwest mountains in Orange County in 1787, operated a tavern there at a crossroads past which stages ran on the "Fredericksburg Great Road" leading north, and the Richmond Road leading east.



Figure 1. The Gordon Inn, early 20th Century (Virginia State Library).

Familiar until as recently as the 1940's, the Gordon Inn Tavern stood near the commemorative monument at the traffic circle in present day Gordonsville. During the early national era, prominent people, both neighbors and travelers, stopped at Gordon's Tavern. In 1802, Thomas Jefferson recommended it as a "good house", and in 1824, Major General the Marquis de Lafayette was given a reception there. By 1813 the tavern and its dependencies had become known as Gordonsville, when Nathaniel Gordon was appointed the first postmaster at that place. After Gordon's death in 1820, the tavern was sold but Dr. Charles Beale, Gordon's son-in-law, retained some of the property. When the Louisa Railroad (later the Virginia Central, then the Chesapeake & Ohio, and currently known as CSX), reached Gordonsville in 1840, it was Dr. Beale who foresaw and planned a town, essentially the Gordonsville of today. A map showing this proposed plan of development by the "Gordon Land Company" is on display in the Council chambers of Town Hall. In the spring of 1853 Beale made his will and directed that Dr. George S. Newman "come down immediately after he plants his corn" to layout lots on both sides of Main Street, to number them and to plan for streets and alleys.

In the early 1850's, the junction of the Orange & Alexandria Railroad with the Virginia Central, and the intersection of the two turnpikes from the Valley of Virginia served to bring produce and passengers to early Gordonsville. This caused the Town and surrounding areas to grow and develop.

During the Civil War, Gordonsville was of vital importance to General Robert E. Lee and his Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in the transportation of troops and supplies. In 1862, Major



General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson had his headquarters at the old Gordon Tavern for several days. Wounded soldiers were brought to Gordonsville to be cared for at the Gordonsville Receiving Hospital (centered around the Exchange Hotel) and in churches and private homes. Some 700 of those who died at the Receiving Hospital were later re-interred in Gordonsville's Maplewood Cemetery.

"By Act of the General Assembly of Virginia, passed on July 9, 1870, Gordonsville became an incorporated town", one of only two in Orange County. The General Assembly also established the town's boundaries and provided for the town's administration.¹

Also during this time, there was flourishing activity in Gordonsville, largely encouraged by the railroad companies and particularly by the Chesapeake & Ohio. Throngs of black women swarmed about the station platform when the many trains came in, balancing on their heads large platters of succulent edibles. Gordonsville's fried chicken was nationally famous until after World War 1. Dr. George Bagby, Virginia author, humorist, and in 1869 a newspaper editor in Gordonsville, proclaimed the Town "the chicken-leg centre of the universe."²



Figure 2. Serving fried chicken to train passengers in Gordonsville (photo archives).

In the 1880's, the economic prosperity of the Town was curtailed when the Orange and Alexandria railroad (then known as the Virginia Midland railroad) constructed a rail line to the west of Town that provided a shorter route to Charlottesville for rail traffic from the north, pulling trade away from Gordonsville. Despite this decrease in rail traffic through the Town, however, Gordonsville continued to serve as an important stop for both passenger and freight rail until the mid-20th Century.³

Historical Sites

Located within the Town are numerous structures of historical and architectural significance that exemplify the Town's rich and important history. These structures provide a link with other periods of the Town's growth and development and create a diversity of architectural styles, materials and details. These structures contribute to Gordonsville's allure as an attractive and interesting place in which to live and visit.

The primary concentration of notable structures is located along Main Street between the traffic circle and Grove Avenue. These buildings attest to the Town's basic evolution as buildings in the vicinity of the Old Gordon Tavern extended along Main Street to meet with the development that occurred in the vicinity of the railroad. Many of the buildings provide an interesting example of mid- to late-nineteenth century architecture that occurred as the Town's growth accelerated with the prosperity of the railroad. While most of the structures in the area are individually notable, the real importance results from their number and continuity, with each structure serving to complement the other, thereby creating a unified relationship.

¹ "Gordonsville, Virginia: Historic Crossroads Town", William H. B. Thomas, 1971.

² "Gordonsville, Virginia: Historic Crossroads Town", William H. B. Thomas, 1971.

³ www.piedmontsub.com/Gville.shtml; May 23, 2014.



The following describes numerous structures throughout the Town that are noteworthy for their role in its development. The letters correspond to those shown on the map at the end of this section.



Figure 3. The Kibler House today (staff photo, 2014).

A. The Kibler House. This home on East Gordon Avenue at the end of Gentry Drive is believed to be the oldest remaining structure in Town. Built between 1800 and 1810, the structure was originally located across from the Gordon Tavern and was moved to its present location in the early 1930's. Today, the structure is the location of the Gordonsville Veterinary Hospital.

B. The Sampson House. Also located on East Gordon Avenue, the small original wing of this house dates to the early 1800's, but is believed to be slightly newer than the Kibler House. The larger addition to the house was made around 1860.



Figure 4. The Sampson House today (staff photo, 2014).



Figure 5. The Old Stables today is a private residence (staff photo, 2014).

C. The Old Stables. The present house at the corner of Gentry Drive and East Gordon Avenue once served as a stable and was constructed around 1805. It is believed to have served the Gordon Tavern, the Town's first structure, which was built around 1794 and demolished in 1947.



D. Memorial Hall. This structure, located at the southeast corner of King and Main Streets, was built around 1910 by the Maplewood Memorial Association and once served as a meeting place for various community activities and as a town hall.



Figure 6. Memorial Hall today (staff photo, 2014).



Figure 7. The Magnolia House, present day. (photo by Jeff Poole).

E. Magnolia House. Located between the CSX railroad and Commerce Street, this home was originally a hotel that opened in 1873 and served railroad passengers.

F. Exchange Hotel. The Gordonsville Exchange Hotel, located along the railroad at South Main Street, is one of the more prominent historic structures in the Town. Originally built as a tavern near the depot in 1840 to serve the newly extended Louisa Railroad, the building burned in 1859 and was rebuilt in 1860 as what is now the Exchange Hotel. During the Civil War, the Exchange Hotel was occupied by the Confederate States of America and used as a receiving hospital. In post-war years, the hotel was the site of a Freedman's Bureau where newly freed slaves could attend school and receive medical and court services. In the late 1880's, the structure



Figure 8. The Gordonsville Exchange Hotel, present day. (photo by Jeff Poole).



was returned to its original use as a hotel, and remained as such until it became a private residence in the early 1900's. In the late 1930's it was sold and used as a boarding house and later, apartments. In 1971, Historic Gordonsville Incorporated purchased the structure, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. The Civil War Museum at the Gordonsville Exchange Hotel opened in 1989; in June of 2002, the Hotel was acknowledged as an African-American Memorial Site.⁴ In 2013, the structure underwent extensive renovations such that each room features information and exhibits related to the various uses of the hotel over its life span. Today, the Exchange Hotel is the site of many cultural events within the Town, and is also considered to be one of the most haunted structures in the country.



Figure 9. The Freight Depot (staff photo, 2013).

G. Freight Depot. The freight depot located at the railroad and Depot Street was built around 1850 and, with the demolition of the Chesapeake and Ohio passenger station in 1979, is the only surviving depot in Town. The Town's original passenger depot is believed to have been attached to the freight depot in the direction of the Exchange Hotel. It was moved away from the railroad tracks to its current location in 2004.

H. Busbee's Store. This structure is a survivor of the Town's 1916 fire and is an excellent example of a commercial structure of the post-Civil War period. It was constructed between 1870 and 1880 and is a prominent feature of the Town's historic downtown.



Figure 10. The former Busbee's Store, present day (staff photo).



Figure 11. The E. J. Faulconer House on Main Street (staff photo, 2013).

I. The E. J. Faulconer House. This home, located on Main Street near King Street, was built in 1856.

⁴ www.hgiexchange.org/history.htm; April 25, 2014



J-O. Historic Churches. There are several churches within the Town that are interesting examples of church architecture and which have played important roles in the Town's history. Christ Episcopal Church was built in 1875 (J). The Presbyterian Church (K) on Main Street was constructed between 1843 and 1851. The Methodist Church (L) on Main Street was built in 1873 and Gordonsville Christian Church (M) was constructed in 1853.⁵ Union Baptist Church (N), located on Cobb Street, was constructed in 1953; and Bible Way Church (O), located at the corner of Central and Mt. Carmel Streets, was constructed in 1930.



Figure 12. Historic churches. Clockwise from the top left: Christ Episcopal Church, Gordonsville Presbyterian Church, Gordonsville United Methodist Church, Gordonsville Christian Church, Union Baptist Church, and Bible Way Church (photos by Jeff Poole, Town staff, and other contributors).

The map below illustrates the location of these structures (each letter on the map corresponds

⁵ Town of Gordonsville Comprehensive Plan 1979; Rappahannock-Rapidan Regional Commission.



to the letter of each structure noted previously):





Preservation Initiatives

Over the years, the Town has initiated and participated in local and national efforts to preserve and enhance the rich and distinct historic character of the Town. These initiatives are described below:

Historic Overlay District

In October 2009, the Gordonsville Town Council adopted the Town's first Historic Overlay District (HOD) ordinance for the Gordonsville Historic District, an area of town that was designated as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. To provide oversight and review in this regard, Town Council appointed a 5-member Board of Architectural Review (BAR) in November of 2009. The BAR assisted the Town in developing enhanced guidelines for the historic district as a tool for assisting property owners in the renovation and care of their properties. These guidelines were adopted by Town Council in July 2010.

Through these actions, the town seeks to protect individually significant properties, to protect community health and safety, and to promote the education, prosperity and general welfare of the public. The identification, preservation and enhancement of buildings, structures, settings, neighborhoods, places and features with special historical, cultural and architectural significance accomplishes this. To achieve these general purposes, the Town of Gordonsville seeks to pursue the following specific purposes:

- (a) To preserve and protect buildings, structures and properties which serve as important visible reminders of the historic, cultural, and architectural or archaeological heritage of the town, the Commonwealth of Virginia, or the nation;
- (b) To assure that, within the town's historic district, new structures, additions and related elements will be in harmony with their setting and environs;
- (c) To promote local historic preservation efforts through the identification and protection of historic resources throughout the town;
- (d) To maintain and improve property values by encouraging the upkeep, rehabilitation and restoration of older structures in a safe and healthful manner, and by encouraging desirable forms of development that will lead to the continuance, conservation and improvement of the town's historic, cultural and architectural resources and institutions within their settings;
- (e) To promote tourism and enhance business and industry, while also promoting an enhanced quality of life within the town through the protection of historic, cultural and archaeological resources.

Appendix C is a listing and brief description of the historic structures located within the Historic Overlay District.

The map below shows the boundary of the District:



Freight Depot Renovation

The freight depot still stands today (shown at right), but was moved away from the tracks in 2004. Federal enhancement funds have been awarded for the renovation of the freight depot, which began in 2016.



Figure 13. The freight depot today (staff photo, 2013).



Historic Gordonsville Incorporated



Figure 14. The Gordonsville Exchange Hotel and Civil War Museum (photo courtesy of Sandy James).

In 1971, a group of concerned citizens formed Historic Gordonsville Incorporated for the purpose of repairing, rebuilding and restoring the Gordonsville Exchange Hotel. In 1996, the Virginia General Assembly added HGI to the list of historical societies that may receive state funds to aid them in maintaining the hotel and providing educational programs for Virginia's students. In 2013, HGI fully renovated the Exchange Hotel such that each room of the structure provides information on its varied uses over time.

The Journey Through Hallowed Ground

[The Journey Through Hallowed Ground](#) is a 180-mile long historically rich and scenic corridor that stretches generally along U.S. Route 15 from Gettysburg, PA to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in Albemarle County. Touted as an area of the Country "with more history than any other region of the nation"⁶, the JTHG corridor was created to educate visitors about its significance to the history of America and to enhance the heritage tourism efforts of towns and communities along the way. The Town of Gordonsville is located at the southern end of the JTHG corridor and embraced its creation by adopting resolutions in support of both the National Heritage Area and the National Scenic Byway in 2006.



In 2008, President Bush signed into law the legislation that designated the area encompassed by the Journey as a [National Heritage Area](#). In October 2009, the corridor was designated as a [National Scenic Byway](#) by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation. These designations signify the national importance of this corridor in the history of the United States and enable communities within the corridor to undertake efforts to enhance and protect their place in history.

There are several projects being undertaken as part of the JTHG initiative that may benefit the heritage tourism efforts of the town. The Journey's [Corridor Management Plan](#) will serve to guide the efforts of communities along the corridor as they seek ways to protect and promote their local features and characteristics that contribute to the historic and cultural significance of the Journey. In addition, the development of [wayfinding and signage plans](#) will give communities guidance for signage styles and other interpretive mechanisms that may be used to enhance the experience of visitors travelling along the corridor. The JTHG [Living Legacy Project](#) will involve localities along the corridor in the planting of trees to commemorate the sacrifices made by 620,000 soldiers killed

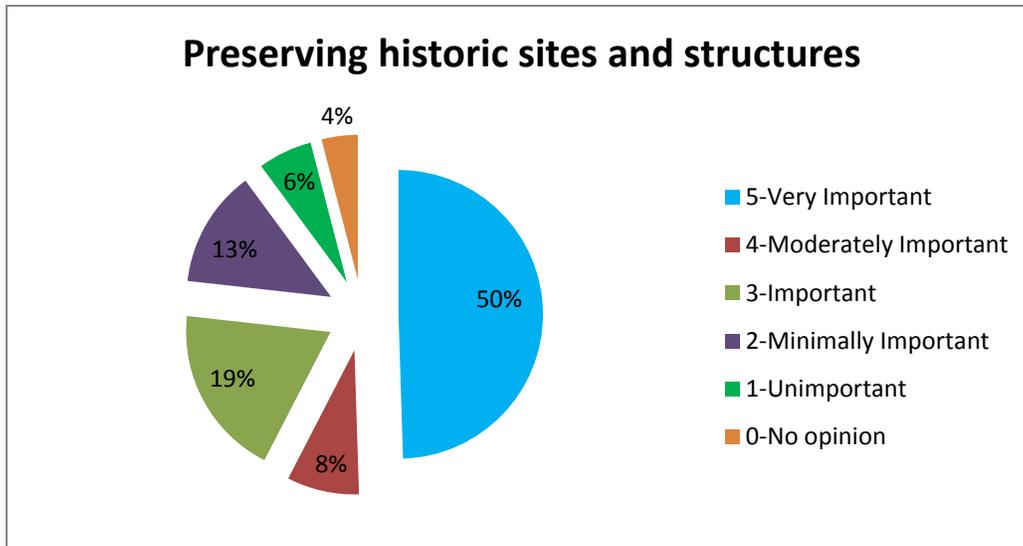
⁶ Journey Through Hallowed Ground; www.hallowedground.org; May 21, 2012; internet.



during the Civil War. Gordonsville played a role in the planning of this particular initiative; in the summer of 2011, the town hosted JTHG consultants and planners as they travelled the corridor to research the implementation of the Living Legacy Project. Supporting these initiatives will serve to further the mission of the Journey and will enable the town to showcase its role in the history that serves as the foundation for the creation of the corridor.

Community Meeting and Survey Responses

Responses to the Community Survey and comments made during the Community Meetings in the fall of 2011 indicate a strong citizen preference for the preservation and enhancement of historic sites and structures within the town. Fifty percent of survey respondents indicated that preserving historic sites and structures in the town is very important. The graph below illustrates the breakdown of all responses related to this issue:



During the community meetings, many ideas regarding the preservation of the town's history were discussed and are listed below:

- Maintain historic properties
- Promote the Town's history
- Compile historical information about the Town to provide a record for future generations
- Continue to seek grants/funding for historic preservation
- Work to expand the boundaries of the Historic Overlay District
- Explore re-construction of significant historic structures (Gordon Inn, Passenger depot, etc.)
- Promote the African-American history in Town
- Provide/develop an architectural record of the structures in Town
- Put historic markers or plaques on historic buildings in the Historic District
- Consider the adaptive reuse of the switching station along the railroad



History and Culture Goal

The Town of Gordonsville should encourage the preservation, development, renovation and maintenance of historic and cultural resources throughout the Town which will enhance the visitor experience as well as that of the community for those who live and work here.

Objective A. Develop/provide educational materials about historic, architectural and cultural significance of properties and structures for property owners and prospective owners.	
Objective B. Protect and maintain the historic character of the Town, and consider enhancement of the present Historic Overlay District.	
B1.	<i>Seek funding through grants to compile an inventory of potential sites/ structures.</i>
Objective C. Promote the history of the Town and its cultural and historic diversity of all ethnic groups through time.	
C1.	<i>Continue to work with Historic Gordonsville to organize events and festivals that highlight and promote the cultural and historic diversity of the Town.</i>
C2.	<i>Identify sites within the Town for the location of Historical Highway Markers.</i>
C3.	<i>Work with local residents to compile documents, photos and oral histories of the Town.</i>
Objective D. Promote the restoration of the 1841 Freight Depot.	
D1.	<i>Support continued enhancement grant funding for the freight depot renovation.</i>
D2.	<i>Work with Historic Gordonsville to renovate the Freight Depot as an historic landmark and explore its potential as a passenger rail station within the Town.</i>
Objective E. Promote historic tourism within the Town.	
E1.	<i>Develop a walking tour of structures within the Town's Historic Overlay District.</i>
Objective F. Work with business and preservation groups in the Town to promote, encourage and assist in various efforts to capitalize on the Town's place in the Journey Through Hallowed Ground.	
F1.	<i>Modify the Town's Land Development Ordinance to incorporate by reference the design guidelines established as part of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground initiative, as well as the Virginia Department of Transportation's "Transportation Efficient Land Use and Design" guidelines.</i>
F2.	<i>Develop a wayfinding signage program that acts as a "brand" for the Town and serves to inform the traveling public of the shopping, dining and tourism opportunities in the historic downtown.</i>