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VIRGINIA MAIN STREET

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER

Design



WHAT DID IT USED TO LOOK LIKE?

Historic Downtown Building Investigation

What did that 1910s building with the elaborate metal building cornice, boarded over transom and 1950s aluminum storefront used to look like? An invaluable source of information towards rehabilitating a historic downtown is an archive of old photographs, surveys, maps, and other images of your community's historic business district.

Forces of Nature and the High School Marching Band

Prominent civic buildings, schools, and churches will always be well documented by professional and amateur photographers alike. However, if it were not for costumed Elks Club members and marching bands on parade, the "hundred-year" flood and the "blizzard of the



*Holiday parade in Danville, Virginia, c.1955
This image was used to replace missing upper-story windows and future replacement of cornice for two downtown buildings.*

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century", many photographic images of our historic downtowns would not exist. Details of original storefronts or old projecting signs can often be seen over the rising water line. Installations of Vitrolite glass panels around storefronts and metal cornice details are seen in their pristine condition above costumed pilgrims riding on a tissue-papered hay wagon. Newspapers and private citizens broke out their cameras and started snapping.

On the next few pages you will find the resources the savvy Main Street Director and community board members can utilize to find those precious images for building information to add to your historic district survey files.



*Flooding in Waynesboro, Virginia, c.1940
This image was used for investigating typical historic wood storefronts and styles of streetlights.*

Start Your Search Here

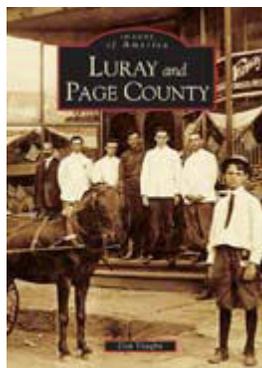
Become familiar with your local resources.

Community Photograph Collections: Many communities have historic societies or foundations, college libraries, and public libraries with photograph collections. Create a working relationship with the holders of these collections. Also, newspapers archived at the library may be a resource. Look for editions during natural disasters or holidays that usually have parades. The images may not be high quality due to most being transferred to microfiche, but something is better than nothing.

Private Photograph

Collections: If the current or past owners of the building do not have a few photographs hanging up in the showroom or jumbled in a hatbox upstairs, there is always at least one person in town that seems to have a collection of photographs of local history and buildings. Your public librarian or historic society may be able to direct you. Also, some communities have a private history museum or a camera store that has an interest in historic images.

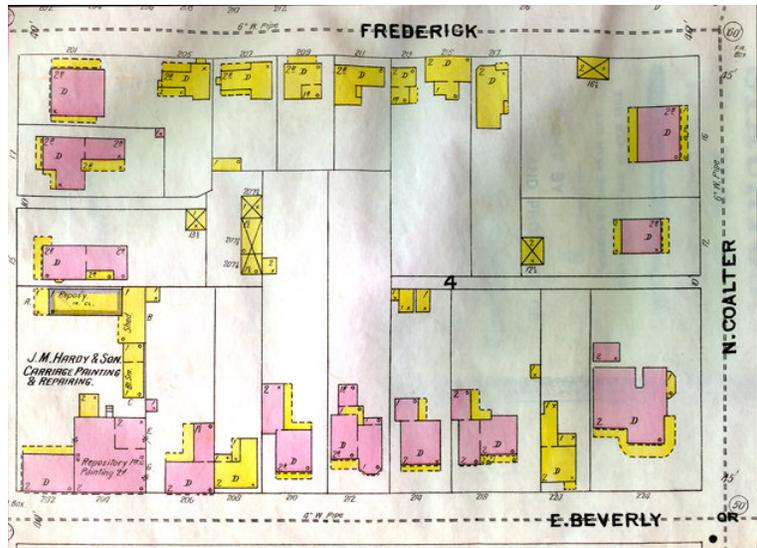
Publications: Be sure to purchase a copy of any publications featuring photographs of your community. The *Images of America* series from Arcadia Publishing may have a publication that covers your town or region with many historic photographs attributed to community or private photograph collections. The holders of these collections may have images of your missing building(s) that were not used for publication but perfectly suited to your research. Your local newspaper also may have published retrospectives that contain the very images you need.



Resources not to be overlooked

The following resources are invaluable.

Neighbors: Check to see if images of the neighboring buildings can provide some information on that one elusive property. Being able to see a sliver of the original wood cornice bracket or pressed metal window hood is a great help towards appropriate rehabilitation.



Portion of Sanborn map of Staunton, Virginia.

Sanborn Maps: Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps are detailed city plans created by the Sanborn Map Company. These maps report a wealth of building information such as building footprint, building material, business type, number of stories, and existence of wood porches or balconies. Typically, a city in Virginia will be mapped and have revisions to those maps periodically between the years 1885-1970. Check with your local library or

historic society first for printed originals, typically bound in large books. Sanborn maps are also available online or at the University of Virginia Library's microfilm collection. Be sure to get color copies, since important information on these maps is color-coded.

Surveys: Historic plats and surveys by local surveyors may be available from the community archives. These can also provide footprints of buildings from earlier times that may be helpful in dating or identifying images. At times, entrance door setbacks may show up on these surveys.

Artistic Interpretations: Be wary of artistic renderings of buildings, even the architect's own drawings. A building element may have been eliminated during construction, or the skill or style of the artist superseded the need for accuracy. The building may never have looked that way. Verify this type of information or image with any of the sources previously mentioned.

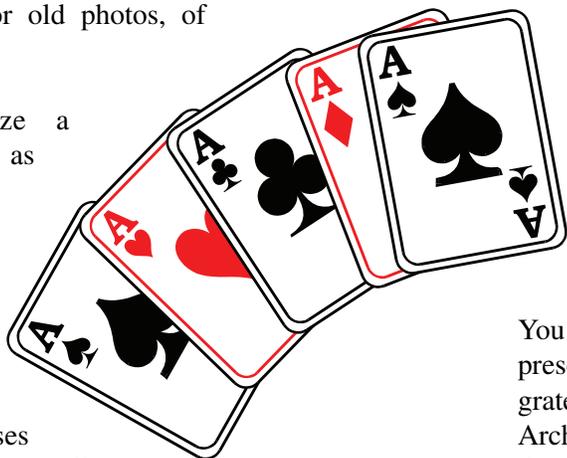
Are you feeling lucky?

Try these resources below during your down times--surfing the web and antiquing over the weekend to look for old photos, of course.

Web Sites: Utilize a search engine, such as Google or Yahoo!, using the "image" function for photographs of your town. They often lead to E-bay and other on-line auction houses or retail sites that sell photographs and postcards.

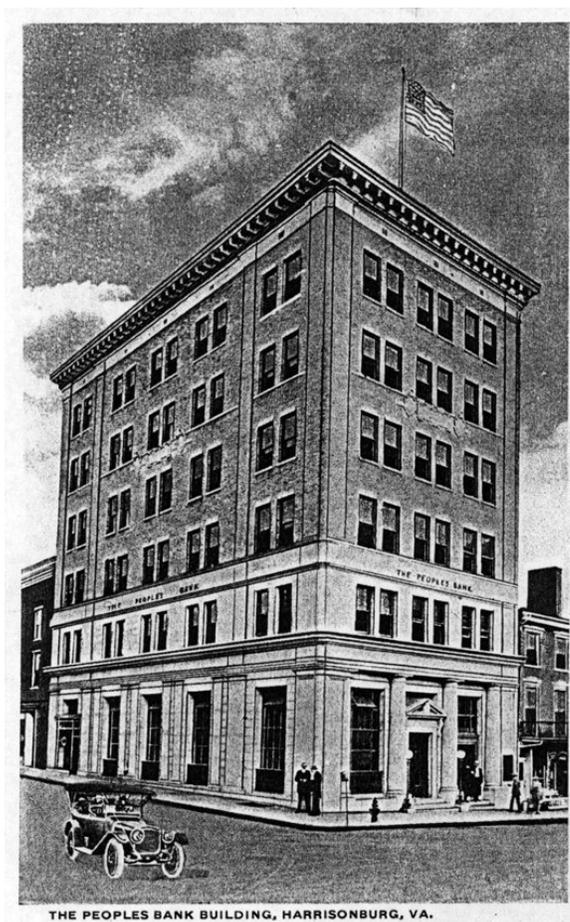
Remember to "right-click" or "save image to file" of any image found on-line. You may not be the high bidder; however, a low-resolution image is better than no image. Also, images of your buildings may have made their way to the Library of Virginia or even the Library of Congress. Plan a visit if they seem to have enough images to make a trip worthwhile, but verify how to acquire the images from these sources before you go. Otherwise, the library may be able to make an electronic or print copy and send it for a fee.

Retail Sources: Don't forget to search through the postcard section in a local used bookstore or antique show. However, take a moment during your trip up north or out west to thumb through the postcard and old photos booth marked "Virginia". You might be surprised!

***Protect your findings***

You've found some images, and the word is out that you are interested in old photos and surveys of your business district. Now purchase, copy, scan, or photograph any and all images. Scan or digitally photograph the prints, or better yet the originals, at a high resolution (300 dpi), burn images onto a CD, and put in a safe place. (Remember CDs generally have a life span of 15 years. When new data collection technologies are purchased, be sure to transfer your collection at that time.)

You have just created an archive that a future historian, preservationist, or Main Street Director will be utterly grateful for, not to mention your current Main Street Architect! And, if by any chance, you stumble over a downtown building that another Virginia Main Street community might be interested in, by all means share your findings with that community's director.



Postcard showing an example of an artistic interpretation in Harrisonburg, Virginia.