Each year, the National Trust Main Street Center recognizes the best and the brightest—five Main Street communities whose passion, innovation, and inspiring success serve as a model for comprehensive commercial district revitalization throughout the nation.

Selected by a nationwide jury of five community development experts, each of the winners has proven that incremental progress—and persistence—pays off, creating economic vitality, a unique sense of place, and a greater commitment to community by all of its residents.

**READ ABOUT THE INSPIRING ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE 2012 WINNERS:**
The city of Bath sits along a three-mile stretch of the Kennebec River in coastal Maine which, in the 18th and 19th centuries, held more shipyards than any comparable waterfront in America. Bath earned its moniker, “City of Ships,” from the reputation of its wooden ships. Shipbuilders across the nation knew that “Bath-built is best-built.” Today, Bath’s shipbuilding heritage remains part of its flourishing culture and economy. The Maine Maritime Museum, a short stroll from downtown, offers interactive exhibits to captivate visitors and innovative programs to educate Bath’s youth. Bath Iron Works (BIW), the one shipyard that survived through two world wars by building tough battleships, frigates, cruisers, and destroyers for the U.S. Navy, is now the largest private employer and taxpayer for the city.

The maritime economy wasn’t enough for downtown Bath at the turn of the 20th century, however. The decline of the shipbuilding industry and the construction of malls and shopping centers on the periphery sent downtown’s businesses in search of greener pastures. To make things worse, construction of the Route 1 viaduct over the Kennebec in the 1920s zipped east-west traffic through the community. By the time drivers spotted Bath’s picturesque downtown, it was too late—they had already crossed the Sagadahoc Bridge.

Urban renewal in the 1960s seemed to promise a bridge over troubled waters, but not all of Bath was convinced. The Bath Daily Times reported on April 18, 1963, that “30 merchants spoke against urban renewal, saying ‘the project would get rid of all the little fellows.’ It would call for the removal of 77 of 102 stores…with no provisions for renovations.”

Local community leaders and small business owners bucked the nationwide trend and successfully resisted the urban renewal plan. The historic Greek Revival, Italianate, Federal and neoclassical buildings that give downtown Bath its distinctive charm owe their survival to the vision of these preservation pioneers.

**Finding Main Street**

When the Bath Business Association was formed in 1991 to entice shoppers downtown, the occupancy turnover rate on Front Street was still high, and many of its architectural treasures remained empty. The association achieved much, but felt like it needed to expand the scope of its downtown projects beyond retail events. To take the next step, the association’s board decided to explore the Main Street Approach, and invited the National Trust Main Street Center to conduct a formal assessment of the city’s revitalization efforts.

The Main Street Approach found fertile ground in Bath. At this point, Bath had already been listed as a National Register Historic District in 1973 and received the National Trust’s President’s Award in 1977. Along with strong preservation values, the “support local” ethic had also sunk deep roots in Bath. As long-time Bath resident Darreby Ambler remarked, “our independent bookstore has survived the coming and going of two large chain bookstores, and our small pharmacy held on while Rite Aid came and went right down the street.”

Exhibiting its pioneering spirit once again, the city of Bath successfully lobbied the state legislature to launch a statewide Main Street coordinating program. With the broad support of the local community, Bath was selected as one of Maine’s first four Main Street communities in 2001. Main Street Bath was formed to lead a new, comprehensive effort to help the “little fellows” compete with the big-box retailers and malls. At long last, there was a how-to strategy that matched the town’s can-do spirit.

**Transforming Bath’s Image**

Main Street Bath began transforming its image by giving out simple “I Love Bath” buttons, bags, and flags. By promoting events downtown through press releases, the Internet, and social media, Bath built a steady presence as a tourist attraction while
strengthening community pride. The city takes a comprehensive, innovative approach to marketing that is a model for Main Street communities everywhere. One example is “So You Think You Know Bath,” an annual quiz-show fund raiser that pits teams from local nonprofits against each other to show off their knowledge of Bath history. This live show makes Bath’s historic past relevant again to young people.

Bath’s schedule of events boasts 18 annual promotions that leverage its ability to bring together local business owners as a single community. “Gift of Bath” certificates, which are accepted at over 70 businesses, allow Bath locals to easily spread the word about their favorite downtown shops to friends out of town. In 2011, the city sold more than $7,000 worth of certificates, money guaranteed to stay in Bath. And for the winter holidays, Main Street Bath organizes more than 40 businesses to produce a cooperative multi-media advertising package.

On a more regular basis, Main Street Bath’s “Business Barometer” program brings local merchants to a quarterly roundtable discussion where they share sales information and collaborate on promotional plans. By joining forces, Bath businesses are better able to compete against department stores and category killers.

Main Street Bath has combined promotion and design elements to combat that other threat to downtown—the Route 1 viaduct. “It isn’t the viaduct that keeps people going on to Camden,” said City Planning Director Jim Upham in 2010. “It’s what Route 1 looks like before the viaduct.”

The way to allure commuters into the city, therefore, would be to change the view. Main Street Bath teamed up with the city, the Department of Transportation, and the Bath Garden Club to renovate the crossing area that runs under the viaduct. With new plantings, a new granite crosswalk, and strategically placed Downtown Business Directory signs, the crossing is now an inviting entryway into downtown for both pedestrians and motorists.

A branding effort in 2010 unified Main Street Bath’s diverse marketing strategies under a sleek new logo with a stylized sailing ship on white waves that reflects the city’s nautical heritage. The “City of Ships” of the 18th and 19th centuries has become “Maine’s Cool Little City.”

Three-legged stool

“In a state that has lost much of its traditional economic base,” says Maine Governor Paul LePage, “Main Street Bath’s brand of grassroots, volunteer-driven economic development effort is needed.” Indeed, the organization’s ability to mobilize residents to step up and work for the betterment of their hometown has made Bath a thriving center of commerce and the envy of small towns all over Maine.

This community support arises from the consistent care that Main Street Bath has taken to ask residents what they want from their city. Twice a year, downtown shoppers are asked to complete consumer surveys by Main Street Bath volunteers. In 2010, this effort was expanded to a residential survey mailed citywide and made available online.

The results of these surveys, which are professionally analyzed, help business owners fine-tune or expand their inventories to cater to their target audience. The survey findings also help Main Street leaders determine what kinds of businesses they need to coax into Bath to meet the needs of townsfolk and visitors. Downtown shoppers have been delighted to see the ice cream shop, shoe store, toy store, and coffee shop with wireless internet that were high on their wish lists move into Bath.

Main Street Bath’s strong partnerships with local and state organizations complement this ground-level attention to the community’s wishes. Bath’s first downtown rehabilitation effort in 1971 was spearheaded by a tripartite partnership that consisted of the Bath Chamber of Commerce; Sagadahoc Preservation Inc.; and an ad-hoc committee of city council, property owners, and merchants. It was funded by Bath Iron Works, and did important work in renovating downtown streets according to preservation guidelines with wide brick sidewalks and period streetlights. Main Street Bath still follows this “three-legged stool” approach that makes sure business owners, residents, and city government are represented equally on its board.

Heritage Days

Bath’s signature summer festival, “Bath Heritage Days,” was on its last legs when Main Street Bath took over and transformed it into a hugely successful celebration that draws more than 50,000 people downtown every year. This year, the 40th Heritage Days kicked off with a Fourth of July parade led by Grand Marshal Clayton Grover, who has built ships for Bath Iron Works for 60 years. Because the festival coincided with the 50th birthday of the Maine Maritime Museum, its theme was “Celebrating Our Maritime History,” and it featured many events held on the waterfront, including a tug-of-war competition, fireworks, and outdoor concerts.
The Kennebec River, fouled for years by neglect and industrial pollution, has been cleaned up and is today part of Bath’s appeal. A waterfront park provides sojourners with a boardwalk for fishing and benches for lounging by the riverside. As one stands gazing west toward the vitality of Front and Center streets, it becomes clear that Bath has always had unique character, blending history with industry and progress with respect for the past. The combination of the sophisticated technology of Bath Iron Works with the lush nature preserves spanning 1,738 acres at the Kennebec estuary and the venerable architecture of the downtown makes Bath one of our Great American Main Streets.

**Culpeper, Virginia: Be a Culpeper Local**

Watched over by the ancient crests of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the streets of Culpeper were, like most of Virginia, surveyed by a young George Washington during his time as a frontier surveyor. Culpeper’s now thriving Davis and Main Streets made up the principal intersection of the town’s original 1759 layout, which is still dotted with scores of vernacular, Italianate, and neo-Classical style brick buildings. Trez S. Holmes, manager at the bank which has been on that intersection since 1901, relates endearing stories from her older customers who described how in the 1940s and 50s, “it was common...to get dressed up to come downtown. Ladies wore white gloves, and the gentlemen donned suits and hats.”

While visitors these days may not be as dapperly dressed as the men and women in the post-war era, they are equally eager to have a good time while out on the town—and, thanks to Culpeper Renaissance, Inc. (CRI), they are able to do so. After close to 25 years of continuous revitalization efforts, there’s lots to do in Culpeper’s downtown everyday—from dining at old stalwarts such as Cameleer, Knakal’s Bakery, or the Frost Café to checking out newer initiatives like the weekly Farmers Market and the annual wine, food and arts festival, the Taste of Culpeper. Today, everyone wants to “Be a Culpeper Local.”

**“Don’t Tread on Me”**

In December 1775, the Culpeper Minutemen, a battalion of 350 proud Virginian Patriots, besieged the British fort at the Battle of Great Bridge, brandishing white rattlesnake flags that read “Liberty or Death” and “Don’t Tread on Me.” Keen-eyed Culpeper riflemen played no small part in bringing this first Revolutionary battle fought on Virginian soil to an overwhelming American victory—the only Whig casualty was a soldier with a wounded thumb. The Culpeper Minutemen rallied under the same flag for the Confederate States in the Civil War, and again under the 116th Infantry in World War I. In the 20th century, however, with the bloody battles of times past safely behind glass in the galleries of the Museum of Culpeper History (which uses the rattlesnake in its letterhead), a new kind of team was required to combat a new kind of problem.

Culpeper Renaissance, Inc. (CRI) was formed in 1987 by a group of concerned citizens roused to action by the Norfolk Southern Railroad Company’s threats to bulldoze over an important part of the town’s heritage—it’s once
bustling downtown train depot. First constructed in 1852, then rebuilt in 1874 due to the ravages of the Civil War and again in 1904 after a fire, the depot now had to survive its own declining passenger rail usage rates, which had forced Norfolk Southern to take cost-saving measures.

CRI astutely recognized that this new threat to the depot was, in fact, part of the broader decline of downtown Culpeper that had begun in the 1960s, when a bypass for U.S. Route 29 diverted travelers to newly constructed strip malls at the north and south ends of town. The resulting migration of locally owned downtown businesses into the suburbs, leading to an appalling occupancy rate of 14 percent, left historic buildings on the corner of Main and Davis crime-riddled husks with trees growing through the roofs. Downtown Culpeper, as one longtime resident put it, was beginning to die.

**The Heart of Town**

Emergency rescue procedures were needed to revive the heart of Culpeper. In 1988, CRI found what Culpeper needed in the comprehensive practicality of the National Trust’s Main Street Four-Point Approach® and promptly enlisted with the Virginia Main Street Program. A $4 million bond issued through partnerships among CRI, town and state governments, and other private and public entities helped jumpstart downtown restoration efforts.

The rehabilitated station opened in 2000, and where once it had served as a catalyst for future revitalization efforts. “Before [the depot was fixed up] at this end of town,” says Linda Corbin, “you wouldn’t be caught coming down here.” Corbin, who works at Raven’s Coffee Shop—a favorite haunt of Culpeper Mayor Chip Coleman—also says that travelers coming from New York or Charlottesville often disembark at Culpeper to spend a few leisurely days on Davis Street before heading home.

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© Culpeper Renaissance, Inc.

Culpeper Renaissance, Inc., was formed in 1987 to save an important piece of the town’s history, its 1904 train depot, pictured above left before renovation. Today, the restored depot (below left) sees thousands of Amtrak passengers a year and has served as a catalyst for revitalization efforts downtown.

What was once the E.J. Nottingham Clothing Store in the 1930s has been restored and now houses It’s About Thyme, one of many great destination restaurants in Downtown Culpeper.

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© Culpeper Renaissance, Inc.

Indeed, the “Depot” has come a long way from its days as a defunct liability of Norfolk Southern; instead it ushers in more tourists and greater private investment in the town. According to Amtrak, in 2011, 10,930 train passengers used the Culpeper station, which is on the Crescent, Cardinal, and Northeast regional lines. A pocket park and plaza, which were created as part of the train depot’s restoration, are used for popular farmers markets, summer concerts, and other community events. Even the unused freight section of the restored depot has found a use. Converted to a multi-purpose community facility in 2001, it now houses the town’s Visitors’ Center, Chamber of Commerce, Department of Tourism, and many conference spaces.

When author Norman Crampton recognized Culpeper as “One of America’s 10 Best Small Towns” in 1993, many of these changes had not yet happened. Even then, Crampton had the foresight to note that “Culpeper has the three essentials: location, location, and location.”

Through its train depot, Culpeper remains embedded in the transportation networks that link its heart to the nation’s capital and onto the rest of the country. In October 2010, a partnership between the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) and Amtrak started a new daily service between Lynchburg, Washington D.C., and communities along the Northeast Corridor. Along with existing services on the Crescent and Cardinal regional lines that offer easy access to Culpeper, the downtown is poised to become a true regional hub for culture and entertainment.
Old & New

Economics aside, Culpeper’s long history remains at the core of its enduring charm and is a key component of CRI’s preservation efforts. CRI had downtown Culpeper listed as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places in 1987, a designation that allowed the town to regulate the sensitive restoration of Davis Street. An Architectural Review Board, formed to closely monitor the historic integrity of redevelopment efforts, engages the services of many talented consultants and architects.

And there is much to save. As a staging area and hospital center for both the Union and Confederate armies, who occupied Culpeper in turn during the Civil War, the community has a rich heritage of monuments and structures left behind by both sides. A visitor to Culpeper’s historic district can relive moments of Civil War history, strolling into the boyhood home of Confederate General A.P. Hill, who led his famed “Light Division” on Lee’s First Invasion of the North; or paying his or her respects at the house on Main Street where another Confederate officer, “The Gallant” John Pelham, succumbed from artillery wounds sustained at the Battle of Kelley’s Ford.

When a 5.8 magnitude earthquake shook Culpeper, 36 miles from its epicenter, on August 2011, many of these precious historic buildings were damaged—a church that once served as a refuge for General Robert E. Lee and Civil War calvaryman Jeb Stuart is now riddled with cracks and fissures. The town rushed to save what it could. After surveying the damage, city officials determined that one historic building had to be razed. However, with a sensitivity borne of years of conservation awareness, great efforts were made to ensure that neighboring buildings with shared walls were kept intact. Even the original bricks from the rubble were salvaged to build a monument to the church on the site.

Culpeper’s concern for its heritage stems not just from love of its history but also from the warmth of its people. Owner of Raven’s Nest Coffee House, Jessica Hall, says that “the people in this town care not only about the physical well-being of the buildings, but about each other in a touching and heartfelt day-to-day existence.”

With more than 26,000 volunteer hours clocked with CRI, it is obvious that the residents of Culpeper, both old and new, are devoted to their town. Recognizing that a broad base of community support is necessary to achieve its vision for downtown Culpeper, CRI is an equitable partnership between public and private sectors, which establishes consensus among all downtown stakeholders and镇 residents. Thanks to this unity of purpose, any visitor to Culpeper, casual or frequent, will heartily agree that the town deserves the numerous recognitions and awards it has won for its vibrant downtown—one of “America’s Top 10 Small Towns,” the American Planning Association’s “Great Street 2011,” and, now, the National Trust’s 2012 “Great American Main Street Award.”

Along with its success in attracting more than 300 new businesses, Culpeper is seeking to establish an arts and cultural district that will serve the entire region. As a centerpiece for this district the town is renovating the State Theatre, an Art Deco cinema that opened in 1938. Theatre Foundation’s “1,000 for 1,000” campaign. Launched in January 2011, the fund-raising campaign asked Culpeper locals to become a part of the renovation effort by contributing as little as $25 a month over three years.

As Tad Loving, vice chairman of the State Theatre Foundation Board boasts, “When you consider all the good things the State Theatre will bring to the regional economy for years to come, it’s hard to come up with a better example of a community-based, community-supported stimulus project.” It is clear that even after all the obstacles it has successfully overcome, downtown Culpeper is still looking for the next new thing to pursue. With a long history that is continually being made, Culpeper remains an exciting place to visit and to live.

Moving Ahead

Despite its many achievements, Culpeper Renaissance, Inc., is not resting on its laurels. Working with the Town of Culpeper and its Department of Tourism, CRI is now seeking to establish an arts and cultural district that will serve the whole region. The initiative began with the approval in 2010 of an Arts and Culture District Overlay, which offers tax incentives for arts-related businesses downtown. As a centerpiece for this new district, the town is renovating the State Theatre, an Art Deco cinema that opened on Main Street in 1938. Central to this project were contributions from the residents of Culpeper themselves, through the State

Culpeper by the Numbers

Main Street began: 1988
Population: 10,000
Net new jobs: 683
Net new businesses: 324
Building rehabs: 390
Housing units: 62
Vacancy rate when Main Street started: 86%
Vacancy rate now: 2%
Jacksonville, Illinois: Urban Re-renewal

In 2008, a young couple in Jacksonville, Illinois, was looking to buy their first home so they could start a family. A friend at church told them to check out the Pink Palace, a beautiful 1905 house within walking distance of downtown. Wandering through the classic four-square-style house, the Bendorfs were fascinated to hear the Cinderella story beneath its refinished wood floors and freshly painted exterior.

Three years earlier, the Pink Palace—so named for its grimy pink walls—was a drug-aided apartment house in a crime-ridden neighborhood, foreclosed on by the Farmers State Bank and Trust Company. Though its value was at an all-time low of $15,000, no one was willing to invest in the extensive renovation the house needed. The bank decided to ask Jacksonville Main Street (JMS) for help.

Looking beyond the Pink Palace’s dilapidated façade, JMS saw great potential for a community project. The Pink Palace would spark the residential complement to the commercial revitalization Jacksonville Main Street had helmed for the past decade. JMS launched the “New Life Project,” which brought unlikely bedfellows under one roof—students of the Lincoln Land Community College, inmates from Greene County Work Camp, local downtown business owners, and community development organizations. Their common goal: to transform the Pink Palace into a welcoming single-family home, while retaining its historic character.

The New Life Project was a true collaborative effort: in addition to larger-scale public and private grants, it was also funded by donations from the community. For example, a local masonry contractor trained volunteers in foundational brick repairs at no charge, saving the Project $18,000 in bricklaying fees. Electrical material, flooring, kitchen cabinets, and even the porch roof were donated by local business owners impressed by the project’s commitment to reviving the neighborhood.

The Bendorfs enthusiastically bought the Pink Palace—now mostly painted fern green—for $68,000, more money than JMS and the Farmers State Bank ever expected to get for the property. Today the Pink Palace success story continues to inspire civic pride in Jacksonville homeowners, initiating a trend of revitalization projects all over downtown and in the neighboring districts.

The Ugly Stepchild

The resourcefulness and determination displayed by the New Life Project testifies to why Jacksonville earned a Great American Main Street Award. JMS was founded in 1999 to undo damage done by urban renewal. In the late 1960s, a rerouted highway diverted traffic away from Jacksonville’s bustling downtown. The city desperately accepted a HUD grant to turn the old town square into Central Park Plaza by 1974.

Far from delivering on promises of a quick fix, however, four new “quadrant” buildings that made up a poorly designed pedestrian mall in the town square closed off its north and south sides to traffic, eliminating 75 percent of downtown vehicular traffic. The city attached unattractive steel canopies to private storefronts, and installed dark covered walkways that quickly became the haunts of criminals.

The plan also demolished 63 historic buildings, decimating Jacksonville’s built heritage. By the 1990s, the citizens of Jacksonville were just about ready to give up. As Kristan Hoffman of the Farmers State Bank put it, “our downtown had been pegged the ugly stepchild. No one wanted to talk about it, deal with it, or had any idea how to handle it.”

Main Street success stories rarely celebrate demolition, but in order to reclaim their downtown, JMS needed to restore it to what it had been. This time, they planned to turn the downtown district into what Jacksonville residents wanted it to be. To do so, JMS solicited community input through charrettes for a revitalization master plan.

A $100,000 Façade Improvement Grant from the city leveraged more than $1 million of private funds to remove the urban renewal-era canopies and rehab 24 buildings around the plaza. Like the canopies, the urban renewal quadrants also had to go. These buildings had been sold to private developers when they were completed so the city had no control over their use. JMS finally raised the money to acquire one of the buildings and tore it down. This bold visual statement rallied community support. Today, all four quadrant buildings are gone, allowing the city to reopen South Main Street just this year, with North Main soon to follow. Traffic patterns around the square have been restored to their original state, and electrical and water main upgrades, landscaping, and sidewalk improvements have further enhanced the town square’s charm.
Main Street Collaborations

JMS understands that it isn’t enough just to restore the old, and that a forward-looking attitude is necessary to bring Jacksonville’s business district into the new economy. JMS pushed for Jacksonville to be designated a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District and revived a subsidiary for-profit community development organization, the Jacksonville Enterprise Zone Development Corporation (JEZDC). Among the many economic initiatives they have spearheaded is JEZDC’s low-interest loan program, which helps small businesses make essential structural improvements when banks are unwilling to get involved.

Another component of the revitalization effort is attracting businesses back downtown, and JMS’s Economic Restructuring Committee does this very well. Its Upper Story Tours and Spacewalks that showcase Jacksonville’s potential to would-be entrepreneurs have led directly to at least two building sales and four business openings.

Main Street Manager Judy Tighe credits Upper Story Tours, one of their earliest programs, with changing negative perceptions of downtown by showing people its potential. Juxtaposing rundown upper-story lofts with the few that had already been refurbished by brave property owners, the tours gave potential investors a before-and-after view of these spaces.

“It gave them ideas, gave them food for thought,” says Tighe. “A lot of people who came through changed their attitudes, and told me ‘hey, I could do this too!’”

Today, these efforts have resulted in a phenomenal infusion of $17 million in private reinvestment and $7 million in public improvements with a net gain of 57 new or expanded businesses and 131 new jobs, while the vacancy rate has dropped from 27 to 6 percent.

Key to the many successes of JMS is the strong lattice of partnerships the organization has forged with the city and its neighbors. The state government, mayor, city council, city maintenance department, chamber of commerce, Jacksonville Regional Economic Development Corporation, Jacksonville Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, and local businesses all have representatives on its 22-member board. In turn, these organizations offer JMS representation on their boards.

These partnerships have bolstered support for the Main Street program and provided expert advice where needed. Jacksonville’s Historic Preservation Commission, for example, advises JMS on preservation advocacy and education initiatives, ensuring that the historic character of the commercial district is maintained even in the midst of economic development. Furthermore, as it has done from the very beginning, JMS regularly asks for community feedback to ensure that the program is acting in accordance with what people need and want.

This collaborative spirit is also reflected in JMS’s financially sound practice of cultivating a diversified revenue stream. One-third of its budget is covered by a city resolution that provides an annual line item; another third comes from sponsorships, events, and project grants; while the rest comes from donations and fund raisers. As with the Pink Palace, contributions like advertising and in-kind support from local businesses and the community play a large part in keeping the revitalization effort running.

The Downtown Turnaround

In May 2011, the city of Jacksonville threw a massive Downtown Turnaround Celebration in the “new-old” town square, with a festive parade featuring the World-Famous Budweiser Clydesdales cantering down the newly reopened South Main Street. With food and wine vendors, live music, and children’s pavilions, there was something for everyone. The Big Eli #16, a 650-foot touring Ferris wheel which was built in 1936 by Jacksonville’s own Eli Bridge Company for the Utah State Fair, was moved back home for this special weekend. Having appeared as a scenic element in Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon, this celebrity amusement park attraction received a warm welcome in its hometown.

The organizers of the celebration explored the limits of imagination in concocting fun and unusual activities to present downtown as a new, vibrant district. The Imagine Foundation, a local nonprofit community arts organization, put up a Fine Arts Tent in the square with works by 14 artists hailing from Illinois, Missouri, and Colorado. To involve the community further, the foundation got
Valley Junction, West Des Moines, Iowa:
A-May-Zing Revival

Turning north from Railroad Avenue onto Fifth Street in West Des Moines, Iowa, you know that you’ve entered the historic Valley Junction district when the landmark Gateway Arch heaves into view. Built out of steel girders to resemble a railroad trestle bridge, the Arch evokes West Des Moines’s early years as a busy railroad hub. Today, Valley Junction is just as busy as when it was buzzing with the switching facilities and repair shops of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad in the 1890s.

As self-described son of Valley Junction, Vincent Valdez puts it, “Valley Junction is many things—a historic community, an arts community, a business district, an entertainment district, and a place that is progressive and welcoming to so many.” With newly renovated and expanded streetscapes, spruced-up historic buildings, and more than 150 independent businesses, Valley Junction is truly a place where “great things come together.”

It wasn’t easy to get to where it is today. Ever since it was incorporated in 1893, Valley Junction has struggled with numerous threats to its existence as a community. During the Great Depression, the relocation of the Rock Island Railroad left Valley Junction a ghost town. In the mid-1970s, the opening of the Valley West Mall drew shoppers and retailers away from downtown, and Valley Junction gained the rough-and-tough infamy of a railroad town. Then, in 1993, just as Valley Junction got all dolled up for its centennial celebration, the Raccoon River flooded its banks and poured into the city. Not a single building escaped damage. Businesses had to cope with up to six feet of water, broken doors and windows, warped floors—and, for a time, dampened spirits.

But Valley Junction did not simply survive these challenges—it thrived on them. Each crisis united the community further, under the common goal of revitalizing the district. Guided by the Historic Valley Junction Foundation (HVJF), which was accepted into Main Street Iowa in 1987, local property owners and merchants persevered in building up West Des Moines’s one and only downtown. Today, like the multimillion dollar levee built in the wake of the Great Flood of 1993, the Main Street Four-Point Approach® is a bulwark against blight in Valley Junction.

Celebrating Community

From a district with only three annual promotional events, Valley Junction now hosts more than 65 event days that bring in scores of residents and visitors each year. The district prides itself on being safe and family-friendly, with festivals that cater to people from all walks of life—a far cry from its rough-and-tough days as a railroad town, when the only stores on Fifth Street were dive bars and liquor stores. Among Valley Junction’s offerings are a weekly farmers market and concert series, Gallery Nights that showcase brand-new art, a Cinco de Mayo festival that celebrates the town’s large Latino community, and, of course, A-May-Zing Days, West Des Moines’s signature month-long celebration of the city’s heritage. There is truly something for everyone.

These events bring shoppers who become so enamored with Valley Junction’s charm that they come back again and again. More than 50 percent of HVJF’s annual $500,000 budget comes directly from special events revenue, not to mention the many intangible, long-term benefits that come from a vibrant roster of events. The Tallgrass Grocery Co-op, for example, a cooperative retail store with more than 800 member-owners, decided to set up shop in Valley Junction in 2011 because of the success of its weekly farmers market.

“The farmers market provides an opportunity to reach out to local growers already delivering produce to the open market,” say owners Linda and Carlyn. “It also [has] a captive audience of consumers who support locally owned businesses.” With its efforts to educate consumers on the health benefits of local, in-season foods, Tallgrass adds greatly to the quality of life in the community.

The strong partnerships that come out of these events are also invaluable, weaving HVJF and Valley Junction even tighter into the social life of West Des Moines. HVJF’s Executive Director Jim Miller regularly
attends city council meetings to stay informed about major decisions being made in the city. Countless volunteer hours are donated by West Des Moines city staff, the chamber of commerce, and the historical society. Seniors at West Des Moines Human Services, along with students and their parents from Phenix and Hillside Elementary schools, also volunteer regularly with HVJF. Indeed, the strong, cooperative partnership that enables HVJF and the city of West Des Moines to share manpower, expertise, and experience makes Valley Junction a model Main Street community.

**Preservation Goes Green**

HVJF’s partnerships with Iowa’s State Historic Preservation Office and Main Street Iowa have raised the standard of historic preservation in Valley Junction. With most buildings dating to the early 1900s, façade and building improvements are reviewed by HVJF’s Design Committee and city staff to ensure that the original character of the district is maintained. For the same reason, HVJF partnered with the American Institute of Architects to create and implement a Design Pattern Book to guide homeowners in their home restoration projects.

HVJF also offers sign and awning grants to qualified businesses to encourage historically appropriate signage. This program complements a recent initiative to install hundreds of directional signs throughout the Des Moines metro area to usher visitors into Valley Junction. The visual harmony of Valley Junction made HVJF’s 2010 comprehensive branding initiative a success—"Great Things Come Together in Valley Junction!"

More than 240 building rehabilitations have taken place in Valley Junction under the stewardship of HVJF. One of the district’s biggest success stories is the Historic City Hall. Built in 1905, it housed West Des Moines’s fire department, city jail, and the city council chambers until 1952. Today, re-opened to the public after more than 50 years, the old city hall serves as HVJF’s headquarters and the visitors welcome center. When the city purchased the building in 2007, however, it had been left in deep disrepair by successive private owners. HVJF stepped in to help.

Supported by funding from 14 different sources, including a state Historic Preservation Grant and a Main Street Challenge Grant, work began in 2010 on restoring city hall’s past. Masonry repairs on the exterior recreated the original brickwork, and doors and windows were refitted to their original specifications. On the inside, the carpeting was removed to restore the earlier cement and wood flooring, and replicas of the original tin ceilings were installed.

Though one eye was focused on the past, the other was directed toward the future. On a structural level, efforts were made to reuse existing materials or to use materials with recycled content as far as possible. This could be subtle—the countertops in the welcome center, for example, have the sheen and speckled strength of granite. In actual fact, they were constructed from beer bottles and walnut shells.

More overt measures were also taken to make Historic City Hall the model of sustainability it is today. Having won a $557,000 Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grant, the city equipped the building with four geothermal heating wells, daylight sensors to control lighting, water-conserving...
fixtures, and 20 photovoltaic solar panels on the roof. Completed in May 2011, the restoration, which won Preservation Iowa’s “Sustainability in Preservation” award, balances historic preservation with green technology.

**Small Business Development**

At the May 2011 grand opening of Historic City Hall, the building received a unique tribute—a delicious cake replica of itself. This custom cake edifice was created by Carefree Patisserie, a bakery specializing in gourmet cupcakes, and a great example of HVFJ’s small business development efforts over the years.

Carefree Patisserie began as a booth in the weekly farmers market in 2006, with owners Jennifer and Christine lovingly crafting their cupcakes at home. By the end of the season, they decided to set up a permanent storefront in Valley Junction. With HVFJ’s help in all stages of the startup process—lease negotiations, business plan reviews, design assistance, cooperative advertising, and so on—the bakery experienced rapid growth and success. After just five years, the business had to move to a larger location downtown to meet the demand for its products.

And this is but one of the many local businesses that have flourished under HVFJ’s care. The organization offers Valley Junction merchants a business development revolving loan fund, which can be used for equipment, fixtures, inventory, working capital, and other approved business expenses. On a larger scale, HVFJ was also a founding member of a similar scheme for all Main Street communities in Iowa—the Main Street Development Loan Fund.

Streetscape amenities, including pedestrian lighting, benches, flower planters, and trashcans, make Valley Junction a pleasant place for after-dining strolls and window shopping. All of these amenities were part of HVFJ’s 1999 Valley Junction Streetscape Master Plan, which continues to guide the beautification of downtown. Recently, HVFJ also spearheaded a state-of-the-art shared sprinkler project on Fifth Street, where a central sprinkler control room was installed and extended to serve groups of contiguous buildings. The sprinkler system enables businesses to share the costs of underground work and risers, encouraging more property owners to rehabilitate buildings along the street.

Nineteen years after the Great Flood of 1993, the Valley Junction community has made a full recovery. Or, more accurately, it has surpassed what it was before. In Valley Junction today, you can snap photos of the historic caboose in Railroad Park and relive West Des Moines’s railroad past, while checking out the latest local artwork at a nearby gallery and doing your part for the “buy local” movement. It only takes one visit to know that in the years to come, Valley Junction will continue to survive—and thrive!

**Valley Junction by the Numbers**

- Main Street began: 1987
- Population: 56,609
- Net new jobs: 406
- Net new businesses: 197
- Vacancy rate when Main Street started: 10%
- Vacancy rate now: 3%
- Housing units: 23
- Public investment: $43,000,000
- Private investment: $13,800,000

This historic caboose located in Railroad Park at the south end of the district is a popular photo destination in Valley Junction and speaks to the community’s railroad roots.
To watch the Main Street spirit in action in Washington, Missouri, you should first look at how mindfully the city treats its old buildings. When the U.S. Postal Service decided to cease postal operations in downtown Washington in 2008, the fate of the historic building looked bleak. A handsome red brick building with arched windows and a neo-Classical pedimented entryway, the Old Main Post Office has been beloved by Washingtonians since it was built in 1922.

Downtown Washington, Inc. (DWI) stepped in. Working with its sister organization, the Historic Washington Foundation (HWF), DWI bought the post office. Tax credits and grants, including the $10,000 Johanna Favrot grant awarded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, were applied toward restoring the entire exterior and interior of the building, using the original blueprints as reference. To raise additional funds, DWI’s Organization Committee threw a Post Office Bash during the Fourth of July celebrations in 2010, with fireworks on the riverside at twilight. The event raised close to $12,000 for the renovations.

Today, the Old Main Post Office houses DWI and HWF offices, along with many local businesses—all while retaining its postal functions. DWI received approval from the USPS to run a contract postal unit in the building, and it has trained every one of its employees to work the postal counter. In downtown Washington, you can mail gift packages to friends and family all over the world with the help of the city’s dedicated Main Street staff.

Of Cabins and Civic Centers

Unlike many of the nation’s Main Streets, downtown Washington never suffered a period of major economic decline in the middle of the 20th century. Its stability was actually one of the reasons why Washington was selected as one of its five pilot communities by the Missouri Main Street Connection in 1989.

Nonetheless, stability did not make Washington complacent. From the beginning, DWI has been hard at work protecting the downtown’s architectural heritage and putting old buildings to new uses. DWI’s first project after adopting the Main Street approach was the renovation of the city’s oldest standing structure, the Log Cabin. Built in 1834, it gained a second life as the home of DWI’s offices. With the offices moving to the Old Main Post Office in 2010, plans are now under way to refit the cabin once again, now for an Artist-in-Residence Program.
Having saved the city’s oldest building, DWI turned to its second oldest—the Frederick Bleckman building. DWI purchased and renovated the 1856 structure, constructing a 12,000 sq. ft. pavilion around the building and installing outdoor electrical and water services. In 2007, it was unveiled as the new Main Street Civic Center. Washington’s outdoor farmers market, meeting and office spaces, and upper-floor apartments are now sheltered beneath its welcoming green roof. These new facilities add another level of public engagement to Washington’s downtown, and are greatly enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

And the city’s preservation efforts don’t end there. The Calvin Opera House on Elm Street is a downtown cinema treasure, built in 1909 with a stage, screen, and seating capacity of 900. DWI wants to buy the building, which has passed through many hands and is falling into disrepair, and return it to its original use. Another project close to the everyday life of the community is the hope of preserving the building that housed Droege’s Supermarket. Washington’s own neighborhood grocery store, Droege’s was established by the son of a German immigrant in 1867, and closed in 2011 due to competition from chain stores.

Along with big building overhauls, Downtown Washington, Inc., also pays attention to details of design at the ground level. DWI’s Design Committee helped the city write its Design Guidelines in the early 1990s, and again in 2009 when they were revamped. The committee was also heavily involved with the Jefferson Streetscape Project, which remodeled the intersections, repaired sidewalks, and expanded green space. Plans to improve Washington’s Main, Elm, and Front Streets are currently under way.

The Design Committee also provides invaluable services to local businesses, such as free façade renderings that show property owners what can be done to beautify their buildings. In 2009, DWI introduced a Sign and Awning Matching Grant fund, which covers up to 50 percent of the total cost of design and construction for historically appropriate signs in downtown locations. These grants encourage local merchants to enhance the appearance and consistency of their signs.

As Missouri Senator Brian Nieves puts it, “Downtown Washington has surpassed all expectations by consistently achieving more than seemingly possible in the restoration and promotion of its historic sites.” Indeed, in its many landmark renovation projects, Washington is a constant inspiration to downtown property owners all over Missouri.

Nowhere Else But Washington
But it takes more than clean streets and beautiful old buildings to make a Main Street come alive—you also need a reason for people to come. Well, DWI has that covered, too. In the last 30 years, 56 new businesses have opened downtown, welcome additions to those that have served Washingtonians for decades. They include antique stores, art galleries, riverfront restaurants and taverns, and even a brewing company.

DWI’s efforts are the reason why Kimberly Lutz, owner of The Fudge Shoppe, can say, “there is nowhere else I would rather have started my business than in downtown Washington. When you walk through our streets, you can feel the heritage and community that so many other places are missing.”
DWI organizes many training programs to help small business owners compete with big-box retailers and chain stores. In 2009, a trainer from the University of Missouri Extension offered a seminar in Washington called “How to Start a Business,” which equipped budding entrepreneurs with the essential planning and technical skills needed to run a small business. Recognizing the need to bring small business owners up to speed in the age of Facebook and Twitter, DWI has held several social media training sessions for Washington merchants.

Membership also plays a key role in the Main Street program’s success. DWI’s Gift Certificate Program is now 20 years old, and is a service offered free of charge to all member organizations. Members of the public can order personalized gift certificates from DWI and use them in participating businesses, which are then reimbursed for the full amount of the certificate. In 2010, the program was responsible for nearly $60,000 of spending in downtown businesses.

Over the past 30 years, DWI has also developed a phenomenal roster of special events that draw people downtown in droves and bring in more than $65,000 a year. They include the Chili Cook-Off, the Main Street BBQ & Bluesfest, and the Fine Art Fair & Winefest. One particularly innovative event that makes historic preservation relevant is the October Murder Mystery Dinner. Held in Washington’s local Busch Brewery, which was built in 1854, the event incorporated the building’s history into the narrative, giving participants a peek into its colorful past.

**Volunteerism and Community**

All of these events and initiatives would not have been possible, however, without the enthusiasm of Washington’s residents and their willingness to volunteer their time for their community. Long-time resident Raymond H. Frankenberg II boasts that “Washington’s highest values are volunteerism and community.” The personal relationships built on these values form a solid foundation for the continued growth of the downtown.

Service organizations like the Washington Lions Club and the Washington Jaycees play key roles in downtown activities, contributing much-needed manpower and funds. The former group donated money to install street signs downtown, upgrade electric facilities in key event areas, and even replace worn-out trash cans in the shopping district. Within DWI itself, each of its Four Point committees runs its own volunteer recruitment campaign for daily operations and special events, which are always very well subscribed.

Another long-term resident, Julie Scannell, testifies to the strong community spirit in Washington. “People here give generously of their time and energy,” says Scannell. “In Washington, everyone knows that if you show up, you’ll be part of something significant!”

Thanks to the generosity of its volunteers, Washington was one of the first towns to be named a DREAM Community in 2006, was designated a Preserve America Community in 2008, and won Missouri Main Street Connections’ Greatest Achievement Award in 2010.

In the future, building on the many arts-related events held in Washington, DWI hopes to form an Arts Council and to designate downtown as a Fine Arts District. The people of Washington have the creativity and drive to make their city a place where the arts will flourish. One up-and-coming young Washingtonian is Bulgarian-born photographer Slava Bowman.

Motivated only by her love for downtown Washington, Slava sets out each morning to explore a new corner of her city with her camera. She interviews residents and business owners about local history, captures breathtaking natural vistas and stately old buildings in her viewfinder, and posts her findings on her blog, Re-Discover Washington. Through her eyes, she promises to “take you where you have been curious to go, but never ventured to.” With young artists like Slava in town, it is no wonder that Washington, Missouri, is one of our Great American Main Streets.

**Washington by the Numbers**

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**Conan Cheong is the Nancy Campbell intern at the National Trust Main Street Center. Originally from Singapore, he writes at the crossroads of art, technology, and people. He can be reached at ccheong@savingplaces.org.**