



Section 3

Regional Setting & History

Regional Setting

The Town of Luray is located in Page County, and is situated near the geographic center of the County. This location has contributed favorably to Luray's function as a cultural and economic center for the surrounding region. The 2010 U.S. Census reported that the Town of Luray had a population of 4,895 residents.

Page County lies in the eastern half of the Shenandoah Valley. On its eastern border are the Blue Ridge Mountains; on its western border is the Massanutten Mountain range; and in between flows the South Fork of the Shenandoah River. The mountains and valley area abound in scenic beauty and offer a multitude of natural outdoor recreational opportunities. Shenandoah National Park, with its mountain crest of Skyline Drive, extends along the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east. Additionally, the Town of Luray is the location of the internationally-known "Luray Caverns." Because of these and other attractions, visitors are drawn to the Luray area year-round.



Topography & Climate

Luray's topography is primarily rolling hills with elevations varying from 800 feet to 1,000 feet. The surrounding landscape in Page County is mountainous terrain with elevations as high as 4,000 feet at the Hawksbill Mountain. The Hawksbill Creek flows through the Town, and is a tributary of the South Fork of the Shenandoah River. The Creek and the South Fork merge approximately six miles to the north of Luray. The headwaters of the Hawksbill Creek begin on the steep, wooded slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Luray lies in an area with generally fertile agricultural soils. The general soil characteristics in the area are usually derived from limestone and are loamy, well-drained and have clay subsoil. The average length of the growing season is approximately 185 days.

The Town of Luray enjoys a moderate climate. The winters are not extremely cold, with the mean daily minimum temperature in January being about 34 degrees Fahrenheit. The summers are warm, with a mean maximum temperature in July of 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The average annual snowfall is around 27 inches, and the average annual precipitation is about 39 inches, evenly distributed throughout the year. Luray's physical environment -- with no extremes of temperature, precipitation, or topography -- makes it suitable for most types of development and activities.





History: The Town of Luray is Established

The Town of Luray was officially established by act of General Assembly on February 6, 1812, on ten acres of land near the Hawksbill Creek. On March 21, 1871, by act of General Assembly, the Town became an “Incorporated Town,” containing approximately 442 acres.

In 1781, Direk Pennypacker located the Redwell Furnace about a mile north of the current Town at Yager’s Spring. Here, Pennypacker operated a forge and a foundry making nails, farm tools, kettles, stoves, and other iron products. The iron works was later renamed the Isabella Furnace. More industry was located about a mile south of Luray at Willow Grove Mill. The small village known as Mundellsville contained a flour mill, carding mill, tannery and blacksmith shop. The economy of the Town would prosper from the nearness of the local industry. On August 21, 1812, the Town of Luray was surveyed on the lands owned by Mr. Isaac Ruffner. The first streets platted were Main Street, due west of the Hawksbill Creek, to the top of the hill at present day Court Street. Court Street was called Peter Street in memory of Peter Ruffner, an early

pioneer in the area. Three blocks of three lots each on either side of Peter Street were laid out. Three cross streets were mapped out due north and south, going west from Hawksbill Creek. These were Water Street (now Hawksbill Street), High Street (now Bank Street) and West Street (now Court Street). The first house was built here in 1814.

The lots were all the same size and contained about half an acre. The rear alleys did not appear on the first plot but were added very early. It was the custom to lay off a town in half acre lots such as those in Woodstock and New Market. These early plats often provided for “out lots” of five acres each. These “out lots” adjoined the Town and were probably used for pasture land.

In 1818, the Town was extended by adding 26 lots. The Town now had 44 lots and the eastern end was at Hudson’s alley near the railroad. These lots were conveyed to the purchasers by Isaac Ruffner on May 9, 1818. The first plat was recorded in the Clerk’s Office at Woodstock, which at the time was the county seat of Shenandoah County. The extended plat was later recorded again in the Clerk’s Office at Luray, when the new County of Page was organized in 1831.

About 1845, according to Howe’s History of Virginia, Luray contained several mercantile stores, two or three churches, and a population of about 500. A description of Luray, in 1867 indicates Luray still had a population of 500. During the 1880’s the population of Luray more than doubled, from 630 in 1880 to 1,386 in 1890.

The Town continued to grow in size from its original 442 acres that was established by the Town Charter in 1871. In 1941, the first annexation occurred when 289 acres were added to the Town for a total of 835 acres. Ten years later, 284 acres were annexed for a total of 1,365 acres. In 1963, the Town added 410 acres for a total of 1,775 acres. The recent annexation effective since January 1, 1985, added an additional 1,220 acres for total of 2,995 acres.

Luray Becomes a County Seat

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, citizens living in the eastern portion of Shenandoah County – which is now Page County - traveled 35 to 40 miles to the Town of Woodstock, which served as Shenandoah's county seat. During this era, a county seat served as an important location for conducting essential business such as recording deeds, paying property taxes, and settling disputes in civil court. Therefore, the Town which served as the location of a county seat was usually the undisputed epicenter of civic life for a county and region.

For the citizens who lived in the far eastern portions of Shenandoah County, traveling to Woodstock was not only far in distance, but it was an arduous trip as well. Often the trip entailed crossing a mountain pass and several streams. This inconvenience prompted the General Assembly to establish Page County in 1831 with Luray, due to its central location, becoming the logical place for this new county seat. The establishment of Luray as the county seat of the newly formed Page County ensured that the Town evolved into the center for civic, cultural, and economic life.

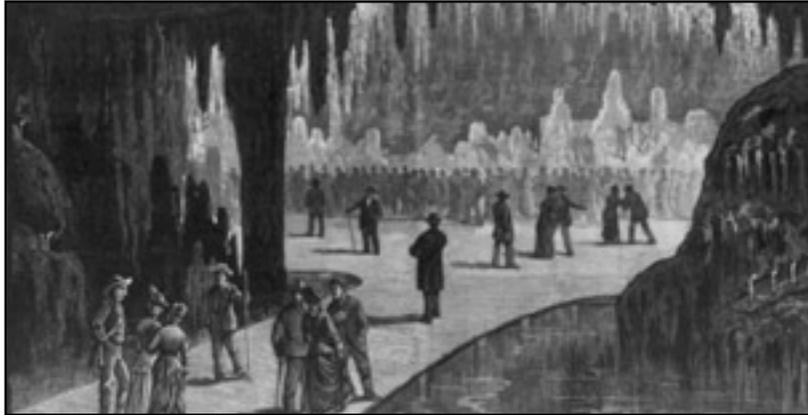


Railroad and Tourism Serve as Early Economic Engine

As the case with many towns and cities in the Shenandoah Valley and surrounding region, railroad expansion brought economic prosperity to Page County and the Town of Luray. Before 1881, transportation in Page County was by wagon or by water. Extensive water travel was by flat bottom and gondola boats on the Shenandoah River. Produce was hauled eastward across the Blue Ridge Mountains to Culpeper for shipment. In addition, Page merchants often took produce westward across the Massanutten Mountain to New Market for shipment by rail.

The Shenandoah Valley branch of the Norfolk and Western Railroad extends 238 miles, from Hagerstown, Maryland to Roanoke, Virginia. The branch was built and operated until 1890 by the Shenandoah Valley Railroad Company. On April 18, 1881, a train ran 144 miles from Hagerstown, through Luray, and then onto Waynesboro.

The first annual report of the railroad was published in 1880. The next report dated May 2, 1883, stated that the Caverns of Luray had been purchased by the Luray Cave and Hotel Company, owner of the attractive and convenient hotel known as the Luray Inn; that a large restaurant and excursion house had been built near the passenger station; and that during 1883, the caverns were visited by more than 15,000 persons.



Luray Caverns Becomes Tourism Anchor

As far back as 1793, a cave near the present Luray Caverns was known to Native American and settlers alike. However, it was not until August 13, 1878, that the Caverns were officially discovered and subsequently opened to the public. The Luray Caverns are one of the largest in the country, with over forty rooms. The coming of the railroad made visiting the caverns more accessible, and it has since become a major tourist attraction.

Today, Luray Caverns attracts over half a million visitors yearly to the area, and with the opening of the Shenandoah National Park and Skyline Drive during the 1930's, the area's tourist potential has continued to increase.



The dedication of Luray's Bicentennial Planter was the culmination of Bicentennial events

Luray Celebrates Bicentennial

In 2012, the Town of celebrated its bicentennial year, and throughout the year numerous events took place commemorating this important milestone. Events included a bicentennial "kickoff" festival, the rededication of the Barbee Confederate Monument, a Ruffner family reunion, bicentennial tree planter and time capsule dedication and various other social gatherings and events.



U.S. Congressman Eric Cantor (with Mayor Barry Presgraves) recognizing Luray's Bicentennial in spring of 2012.

Excerpts from an article by Joe Farruggia of the Page News and Courier:

How Did Luray Get Its Name?

The number of explanations for how Luray got its name are probably as varied as the people who have come up with those explanations over the past 200 years.

In the Centennial edition of the Page News and Courier, dated Friday, Aug. 16, 1912, a couple of interesting theories are noted, along with the statement that the “origin of the name Luray is debatable ground.”

One is that the Town was named for the province of Lorraine, France, and that early settlers from that area were reminded of the pastoral landscape of their homeland.

Another theory posited in that article is that it comes from a corruption of the name of “one of our prettiest girls, a Miss Lew Ray.”

A third theory, and apparently the one most popular and accepted at the time, was that Luray evolved from the name of Lew Ramey, the Town’s first blacksmith.

Perhaps the most colorful explanation (and most likely the most garbled one as well) is that it has its roots in an Indian name – but there seems to be a difference of opinion as to what the name was or what it meant. One is that the Town “takes its name from the Indian word Lorraine, the original name given by the Indians to the Hawksbill. Not being versed in the Indian classics, we do not know its significance, but have been told it means ‘crooked waters.’”

In 1976, [John] Waybright [former editor of the Page News and Courier] wrote a paper on the topic.

In the paper he discounted the Lorraine, La Reine, Lew Ramey and Lew Ray theories, and even the idea that Luray was derived from a Native-American word.

But he did conclude that the Town was given its name by William Staige Marye, Peter Ruffner’s son-in-law.

Waybright wrote that Marye “chose the name in honor of his ancestors, who came to America from Luray, France.”

In fact, Waybright noted that “Mr. And Mrs. E.D. Herzberg visited Luray, France in the 1970s and did research to prove that the two names were related.”

The towns actually became “sister cities,” and dignitaries from both towns visited each other with great fanfare, Waybright recalled recently.

Waybright also noted that William Staige Marye “probably did not seek the advice of his German neighbors” when he named the Town, because they most likely would have insisted upon a German or even an English name instead of one of French origin.



Photos from in and around Luray, France