



This black & white photo is courtesy of the NC Collection of UNC Libraries; it is a turn-of-the-century peanut field in Halifax County

Halifax County, N.C., Birthplace of American Independence, Is Building a Dynamic Future

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Located in the Roanoke Valley of northeastern North Carolina, Halifax County is rapidly reenergizing its regional economy and reinventing the local culture to prosper in the post-textile era. In this close-knit county of more than 56,000 residents, anchored by the urban center of Roanoke Rapids, the enthusiasm is palpable. Buoyed by major new industrial, commercial, and retail development including Carolina Crossroads and Premier Landing, overall investment is robust and confidence is soaring about the future of this nationally recognized "micropolitan" hub. Just ask Starbucks, Harley-Davidson, Belk, Hilton Hotels, Hampton Inn, Marriott, Outback Steakhouse, Farm Fresh, and the recently opened Randy Parton Theatre.

Halifax County is bordered by seven neighboring counties as well as Lake Gaston and the Roanoke River, fortuitously positioned along I-95, halfway between New York and Florida, making it a convenient stop for travelers. It is in close proximity to the metropolitan markets of Raleigh-Durham, Norfolk-Newport News, and Richmond. This strategic location (950,000 residents within 60 miles; 11 million within 180 miles) makes greater Halifax County extremely attractive to a wide variety of commercial, consumer, and tourism interests. In addition to the recent surge in economic development, Halifax County is also nationally recognized as a premier destination for outdoorsmen, offering some of the finest fishing and hunting in North Carolina.

Formed in 1758 by the North Carolina Colonial Assembly, Halifax County gained notice throughout the colonies in 1776 when the Fourth Provincial Congress met there and unanimously adopted the *Halifax Resolves*, making North Carolina the first colony to propose independence from England.

Halifax County continued to gain wealth and prominence through the decades, sustained by the river port, the Roanoke Navigation Canal (a bypass around the river rapids for boats transporting goods from Roanoke, Va. to coastal seaports), and by the Wilmington-Weldon railroad, connecting eastern North Carolina to the Richmond and Peterson railroad, creating a major transportation hub.

The community of Brinkleyville in Halifax County also jump-started North Carolina's viticulture industry when Sidney Weller founded Medoc Vineyard in 1835, distributing muscadine-based wine along the eastern seaboard. In addition to muscadine, the production of scuppernong-based wines boosted North Carolina's prominence in wine making until Prohibition forced the industry underground.

The turn of the century brought a focus of industry over agriculture. Agribusiness certainly remained, and peanut cultivation rose, along with other traditional field crops. However, it was the booming textile industry that sustained Halifax County's economy for most of the 20th century.

The 1979 movie *Norma Rae*, portraying a young, single mother working at the local textile mill who embarks on a mission to unionize her workplace amid backlash and danger, was based on the story of Crystal Lee Sutton who worked at the JP Stevens mill in Roanoke Rapids. She was fired for "insubordination," and it was present-day Roanoke Rapids Mayor Drewrey Beale who, in his then-role of police chief, escorted Sutton from the plant after she climbed on a table and held a simple sign: "UNION" for all her co-workers to see.

Today, Mayor Beale is an enormously popular and well-respected leader in Halifax County. Indeed, to the best of his knowledge, he is the only mayor that routinely addresses his constituents on a weekly radio call-in show and gives his mobile telephone number on the air for anyone to use as they wish. Mayor Beale, a Halifax native is in his second mayoral term and is unmistakably enjoying the rejuvenation of the local economy. In an interview with *Carolina Business* at the newly opened Randy Parton Theatre he quoted Helen Keller and said, "It is worse to have eyesight and have no vision than to be blind."

Native developer Michael Dunlow and business partner George Ragsdale are the forces behind the Carolina Crossroads and Premier Landing developments that beckon travelers from I-95. Carolina Crossroads is a 1,000 acre commercial and entertainment development, currently in Phase I, hosting a brand new Hilton Gardens hotel, an upscale RV park, and the development's cornerstone, The Randy Parton Theatre. In March 2007, billiard champion Jeanette "The Black Widow" Lee announced plans to build her first Black Widow Billiards at Carolina Crossroads. The new 130-acre power center, Premier Landing, features new retail stores and national chain dining. This center, anchored by Wal-Mart, Belk, and Farm Fresh, has also attracted Harley Davidson and Starbucks, two retailers who perform rigorous due diligence to their site selection.

Currently in Year One of a projected five-year build-out, Carolina Crossroads represents more than \$260 million of planned investment for Phase 1 alone, creating more than 2,400 new jobs, and having a regional economic impact worth more than half a billion dollars.

Entertainment District Concept Becomes a Reality

The groundbreaking of the Randy Parton Theatre in late 2005 officially kicked off Phase I of the Carolina Crossroads development. The event attracted more than 10,000 who came out to hear Mr. Parton and his superstar sister Dolly perform along with other legends of the Grand Old Opry. Since that

time, Carolina Crossroads has featured headlining entertainers such as Big & Rich, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Charlie Daniels, Jason Aldean, Trace Adkins, Hank Williams, Jr., Gretchen Wilson, and beach music favorites Clarence Carter, Delbert McClinton, The Tams, and The Embers. Carolina Crossroads has also recruited the Great American Frontier Show, a Classic Corvettes car show, and a hot air balloon festival to its event schedule.

The Randy Parton Theatre officially opened in July 2007 in a beautiful, state-of-the-art, 1,500-capacity theater. Mr. Parton's wife, Deb, contributed significantly to the design, and, with foresight in mind, designed the amenities to allow for corporate use on the days the theater is not open for performances. Mr. Parton told *Carolina Business* that he "hopes that the variety of [his] performance with the Moonlight Bandits band will keep visitors coming back time and again. There really is something for everyone." He added that the matinees are nearly sold out through the end of the year, and that tickets for the Christmas shows are also moving faster than expected. To spread the word about the new venue and the "Little Bit of Life" variety show, Mr. Parton has retained the integrated marketing firm FrenchWestVaughan, located in Raleigh and New York City, to handle strategic advertising, promotions, and PR initiatives. "The Randy Parton Theatre is already attracting significant attention to Roanoke Rapids and the transformation that is underway in Halifax County," said Rick French, CEO of FWV. "The opportunities are unlimited and the upside for the entire Roanoke Valley is tremendous."

Roanoke Rapids was the first North Carolina city to employ Tax Increment Financing, and did so as a means to build the Randy Parton Theatre. TIF uses future gains in taxes to finance the current improvements that will create those gains. This increased site value and investment creates more taxable property, which increases tax revenues, or "tax increment," that can be used to help pay any part of the property's debt service that is not covered by the lease of the property collected by the city.

The Northeastern North Carolina Regional Economic Development Commission announced in August 2007 the launch of a new continual marketing plan targeting the group tour industry. Four cities, including Roanoke Rapids, in the region have been selected as hubs for attracting motor coach operators, travel writers, and tourism planners to see and experience the many attractions throughout the region. This opens up the opportunity for increased cooperation from existing tourism entities, and new partners such as those at Carolina Crossroads.

Increasing Halifax County's Tourism Portfolio

The 2006 Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties						
Prepared for the North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development						
By the Travel Industry Association of America						
County	Expenditures	Percent	Payroll	Employment	State	Local

	(Millions)	Change (2005/2006)	(Millions)	(Thousands)	Tax Receipts (Millions)	Tax Receipts (Millions)
Halifax	60.34	8.1%	8.07	0.46	3.65	1.4
The Northeast Region of North Carolina still receives the least expenditures in Travel and Tourism dollars than any other region in the state, according to the NC Department of Commerce.						

Lori Medlin, Executive Director of the Halifax County Convention & Visitors Bureau, is optimistic about the future. "We have been laying the groundwork to support this growth in the tourism industry," said Medlin. "For many years, we have greeted visitors on their way to other destinations. Now, with so much to offer, we ARE their destination."

Clearly, the State of North Carolina believes in Halifax County. But Halifax County is not just Roanoke Rapids. The sister towns all have special attributes they are able to parlay in tourism and heritage development.

In 2006 alone, Governor Easley announced a grant for the Haliwa Saponi Indian Tribe for event promotion. The governor also announced a tourism grant to market and promote the newly-opened Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park and Eco-center in Scotland Neck. The park is the world's largest waterfowl preserve and home to more than 3,000 birds and more than 170 species from every continent on the globe. In addition, the state's Department of Transportation granted enhancement monies to help fund a new museum in Roanoke Rapids, housed in a 1900s power house along the old navigation canal that was converted to generate power. The Roanoke Canal Museum opened in September 2005. There is also a 7.5-mile nature trail that follows the bed of the old navigation canal from Roanoke Rapids Lake Park (a public day use area on Roanoke Rapids Lake funded by Dominion Power that opened in May) to River Falls Park (site of the rapids and wildlife landing) in Weldon.

Littleton and Lake Gaston offer unparalleled water activities and spectacular sunsets, as well as performances at the Lakeland Cultural Arts Center. The town of Hollister offers stellar outdoor recreation at Medoc Mountain State Park, including hiking trails, camping and canoeing in Little Fishing Creek, as well as a large annual pow-wow every April. Halifax County has two canoe/kayak launches and camping platforms along the Roanoke River in the towns of Halifax and Tillery as part of the Roanoke River Partners Paddle Trail, and the rapids in Weldon are a popular destination for kayakers.

Enfield is an agri-tourism mecca, home to the famous Aunt Ruby's Peanuts by A&B Milling Company and to the annual Peanut Festival the first weekend in October.

The town of Weldon plans to petition the state legislature for an official designation as the Rockfish Capital of the World (as is proclaimed on the bridge that connects Halifax County to Northampton County on U.S. Highway

158). This is sure to bring even more visitors to the town to visit the Roanoke Canal Museum, Roanoke Canal Trail and navigation canal aqueduct, Civil War sites like the Weldon-Wilmington Railroad Trestle and Confederate cemetery, The Centre (a 1500-seat theatre) at Halifax Community College, and the planned Weldon Historical Museum in the old passenger rail depot.

In 2003, Weldon joined the N.C. Department of Commerce's Small Town Main Street Program which assists the growing number of small, rural towns that need downtown development assistance but are not likely, due to size or resource limitations, to pursue the regular Main Street program. Selected communities receive on-site technical assistance from the Small Town Main Street staff, including organizational development, market analysis, business assistance, promotions, and design.

The town of Hobgood is the Little Town that Could, home to a beautifully restored 1890 railroad depot, and Hobgood Country Church Museum, originally Hobgood Methodist Church (circa 1881), both located on the lovely town square complete with street lamps, engraved bricks and a fountain. Hobgood hosts the annual Cotton Festival the second weekend in October.

Halifax is the county seat and, as the home of the *Halifax Resolves*, our nation's birthplace of independence. Halifax offers a copious amount of history on display at Historic Halifax on Davie Street, and regularly portrays this milestone in the "First for Freedom" drama, written by Halifax County resident Maxville B. Williams, with performances at The Centre and outdoors at the Halifax County Courthouse on July 4th. The town of Halifax also memorializes the significant contributions of its African-American heritage with the Remembering Tillery Project and the Allen Grove Rosenwald School.

Resident and tourists alike can sit back at the end of the day (or night!) and breathe comfortably in Halifax County. The option of infinite varieties of activities will keep families busy for years to come. Citizens and visitors can nod their heads to the past acknowledging the fascinating history of Halifax County, while looking forward to the bright future that community leaders have in store.