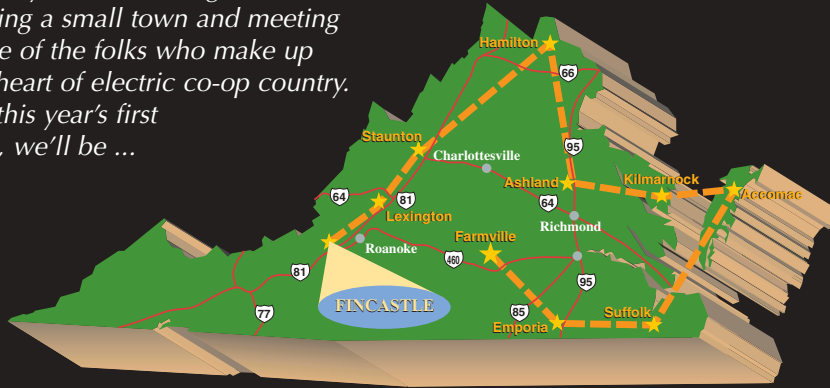


down home series

Again in the year 2004, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's first stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in Fincastle

by Anita Firebaugh, Contributing Writer

At A Glance...

Founded: 1772

Named After: George Lord Fincastle

Population: Approximately 350

Best Known For: Annual New Year's "Ring of the Bells"

Historical Tidbit: Lewis and Clark set off on their expedition from Fincastle.

As they have for two centuries, the bells of Fincastle tolled at midnight on December 31 in one of the nation's oldest New Year's celebrations.

The simple ceremony of ringing the bells at the Botetourt County Courthouse and the town's four churches has been an honor for some families for generations.

Willie Simmons, like his father and grandfather, rings the courthouse bell. He

hasn't missed New Year's Eve in the belfry in 40 years. Similarly, others at the Fincastle Presbyterian Church, the Fincastle Baptist Church, the Fincastle Methodist Church, and St. Marks Episcopal Church, have long traditions as bell ringers.

The ceremony starts at 11:35 p.m. The courthouse bell tolls and is followed in

sequence 12 seconds later by the Presbyterian Church bell. The other church-bell ringers chime in at 12-second intervals. Just before midnight, a bugler plays Taps at the courthouse.

Then the bells strike out a number — two strikes, 10 strikes, 10 strikes, four strikes — in honor of the New Year.

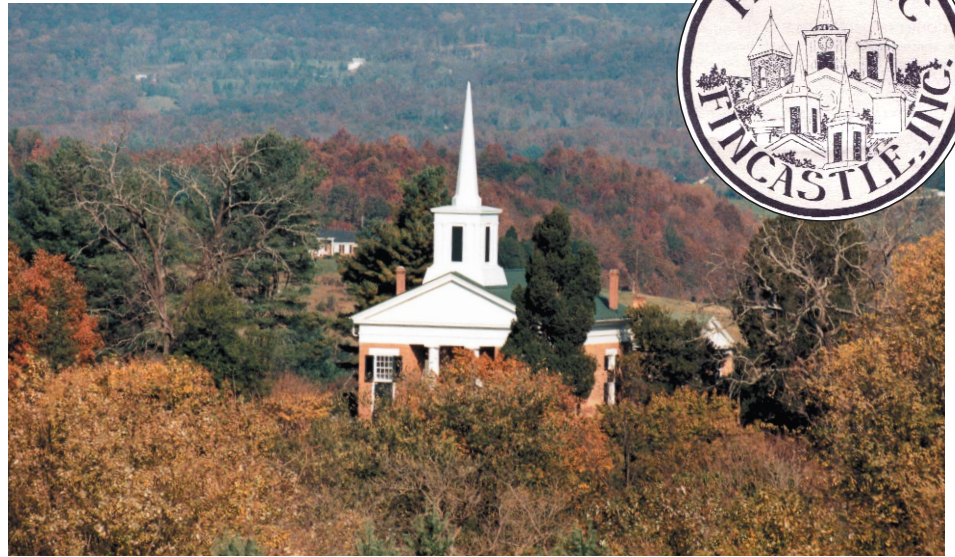
"After that I shoot the gun. Then we toll for as long as our ears can stand it, about 10 minutes," Simmons says. Townsfolk shout and cheer. "It's a joyful time."

Old-fashioned strings of red, yellow, green, blue and orange bulbs brighten the Courthouse Square. The lights are placed by the Society to Keep Fincastle Lit. Simmons and his "sweet wife," **Brenda**, have hung the lights for the last 18 years. Thousands drive through town in December.

The Godwin Cottage, erected prior to 1880, is an example of Federal architecture. Historic Fincastle, Inc. member **Paige Ware** says it reminds her of Monticello.



The Botetourt County Courthouse has been rebuilt four times. The structure last burned in 1970. Valuable historic documents were saved because of an 1800s fireproof vault. Genealogists from all over the country visit the records room to search their history.



Fincastle Presbyterian Church is one of several churches in Fincastle that are a dominant force in the community. Historic Fincastle, Inc.'s special logo shows off the six steeples of the town skyline.



Willie Simmons, a wood turner and member of the Botetourt County judicial system, with his constant companion Jasper.

“The darkest day in the town of Fincastle is the night the lights have been cut off,” Simmons says.

Such traditions are important to the historic community’s 350 residents. The town, a virtual museum of American architecture from the late 1770s through the 20th century, was named in 1772 for George Lord Fincastle, son of Lord Dunmore, lieutenant governor of Virginia.

The Becky Holmes House on Back Street is said to be the oldest surviving structure in the town. It was built by the town’s founder, Israel Christian.

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Fincastle always has been the Botetourt county seat. At its inception, the town served an area that stretched to the Mississippi River and included part of Wisconsin. Folks who lived more than 500 miles away were excused from jury duty.

German, Scots-Irish and English immigrants settled here. Land records signed by George Washington, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and other famous founding fathers are in the courthouse.

Fincastle was a major new-frontier settlement. It served as a supply station for settlers heading west. The Lewis and Clark expedition set off from Fincastle. Clark returned to marry a Fincastle girl.

From 1885 until the 1910s, Fincastle was a popular resort. Folks flocked to Fincastle Springs to heal consumption. “The waters” attracted visitors from as far as New Orleans. During this boom, the town sustained the Western Hotel and Hayth’s Hotel. The latter is now an apartment complex.

“To me, it’s a bunch of old buildings,” Willie Simmons says of the historic atmosphere of the town. He smiles. His aunt, **Dottie Kessler**, is a genealogist and charter member of Historic Fincastle, Inc. (HFI). The non-profit organization has restored a dozen prominent buildings in the town.

HFI’s special logo shows off the six steeples of the town skyline. **Edwin L. McCoy**,





Edwin L. McCoy, editor of *The Fincastle Herald*, has worked in the town since 1984. The Herald was established in 1866. (The sign in the window is wrong, McCoy says.)

The Fincastle Herald editor, says the emphasis on the steeples is warranted. “I think that those churches are a dominant force in the community and have been historically and continue to be,” McCoy says. Three antebellum and two late 19th-century churches still serve their congregations.

“Fincastle is representative of a lot of rural county seats that you find,” McCoy says. “Even though it’s the county seat, it’s not the central commercial center for the county. It is the hub of a local government.”

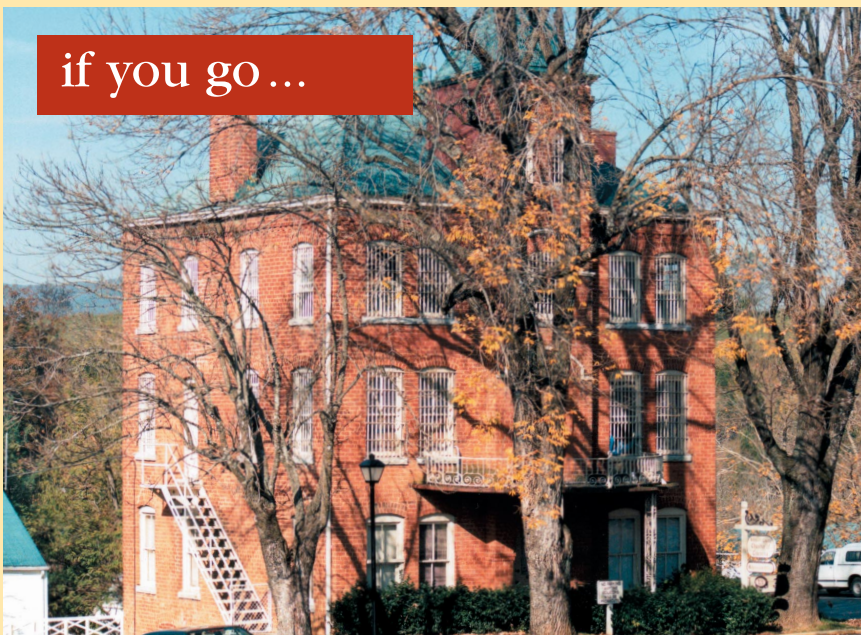
The prominent steeple belongs to the Botetourt County Courthouse, the site of great activity.

The courthouse, the county’s fourth, was restored to the original Thomas Jefferson design after a 1970 fire. The fire spared the court records because the third courthouse, built in 1845, had a fireproof vault. The undamaged papers are important to genealogists tracing their family tree.

“The longer that I work as a researcher in this office, the more intrigued I become with



Ruth Gwinn (left) of Leivasy, WV, spent time with county researcher Pat Honts of Troutville in the records room of the Botetourt County Courthouse.



if you go ...

A self-guided walking tour through Fincastle is a must-do for history buffs. The tour guide provided by Historic Fincastle, Inc. points out 36 historical structures in the town, all within walking distance of the **Botetourt County Courthouse**. Structures range from the **Old Jail**, built in 1897, to the **Fincastle Presbyterian Church**, a portion of which was built in 1771. Architectural styles range from Federalist to Victorian Romanesque.

The **Botetourt County Historical Museum**, located beside the courthouse, is open seven days

The Old Jail, built in 1897, is part of the Courthouse Complex. It once held the Fincastle Branch Library.

a week, Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and Sundays from 2 to 4 p.m. The museum is in a historic building and contains artifacts donated by members and friends of families who have lived in Botetourt County since its formation in 1770. Call (540) 473-8394 to learn more.

the wealth of information,” **Pat Honts** says. She works in the courthouse, helping people find “priceless documents” in the vault.

“People are so appreciative of the information that our records can provide,” Honts says. “Sometimes people are shocked with something that we discover.”

The two staff researchers receive 1,000 requests for assistance each year. “There never seems to be enough time to do all of the research that we are asked to do,” Honts says.

Visitors aren’t the only ones who search the records. Simmons is typical of the Fincastle families who know their origins. His paternal great-grandfather commissioned a gun, the Painter rifle, from his maternal great-grandfather. “It’s just an old farm rifle, nothing fancy about it at all, but one generation of my family made it for the other and I think that’s as cool as can be,” he says.

Paige Ware, a lifelong Fincastle resident, has been with HFI since 1970. She has been the librarian at the Fincastle Library for 25 years.

She gives tours of the town. At The Big Spring, she points out the Godwin Cottage,

“which looks to me like a smaller version of Monticello.”

On “Peck’s Corner,” she shows off the historic homes of E.C. Westerman, Peggy Davis, and the Simmonses. “All these houses at one time belonged to the Peck family” she says. The Pecks were “a family whose parents didn’t believe in the children marrying,” Ware says. Three siblings lived alone, one to a house. All died without heirs.



Paige Ware, a lifelong Fincastle resident, has for 30 years helped preserve the historic nature of the town.

Genealogists will find vast information at the courthouse and at the **Fincastle Branch Library** on Academy Street. The library is open on Monday and Thursday nights for night owls who can't give up the hunt for a lost ancestor.

For those less historically inclined Fincastle has special community events. **Independence Day** starts off with a fireworks display put on by the Simmons family. September 25 and 26, Historic Fincastle, Inc. sponsors the **Fincastle Festival**. The two-day arts and crafts show has taken place since 1968. For more information, log on to www.hisfin.org.

In October, the Bank of Fincastle sponsors a **Fall 5K and 10K race**. Runners of all ages traverse the hills of Fincastle. Visit www.bankofincastle.com for the 2004 date.

The year finishes out with holiday lights and the ringing of the bells on **New Year's Eve**.

Outside of Fincastle, **Buchanan**, 20 minutes to the northeast on Rt. 11, has small shops and art galleries. Be sure to view the swinging bridge across the James River. Call (540) 254-1212 for more information.

To the north on Rt. 220, **Eagle Rock** has a monument to the Monacan Indians, who lived there hundreds of years ago. Also visit the kilns, the last lock monument, and large grain silos.

Following Rt. 43 to U.S. Rt. 220, take Route 615 to **Oriskany** and the **Roaring Run Furnaces** for a hiking trip to a scenic waterfall.

To the southeast of Fincastle, visitors can head down Rt. 11 to **Troutville** for a unique shopping experience at **The Apple Barn II**, the number-one Cat's Meow dealer in the nation. Call (540) 992-3551 for more information.

Six miles south of Fincastle on Rt. 220, **Ikenberry's Orchards** offers a unique grocery experience. Buy fresh apples, cider, homemade apple butter, jams, and jellies or Etzler Country Ham for a take-home treat. Open Monday through Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sundays 12 to 5 p.m.

Two more miles to **Daleville** puts you on the path to the **Appalachian Trail**. Check at Outdoor Trails (540-992-5850) in Botetourt Commons on Rt. 220 for information. Also at the Commons, **The Wine Gourmet** is a great place to experience local wines. Log on at www.winegourmet.biz for more information.

Call **The Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce**, (540) 473-8280, or visit the Web site at www.bot-co-chamber.com for other things to see and do in Botetourt. ■



Eula Rosenberger, with the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce, left Fincastle but returned because she loves the people and the historic community.



Christine Poindexter (left) and Joan Boothe work in the Fincastle Town Office. They are always happy to show off the town's souvenirs.

visitor to town should see the sunrise from the hill.

At the Fincastle Town Office, employee **Christine Poindexter** says Fincastle is wonderful. "I like small towns. Everybody knows everybody," Poindexter says. "It's like family when you live in a small town."

Her co-worker, **Joan Boothe**, agrees. "People are very nice," she says. "You feel safe here."

Indeed, the people, not the historic buildings, make Fincastle a charming and quaint county seat. The town is full of good people, Dooley says.

Fincastle is where folks "come out and sit on the back of Willie's pickup truck," Ware says. "The whole neighborhood comes out to discuss the world's problems."

"I can't imagine living anyplace else," Simmons says. "I don't know everybody in the town, but it's a comfortable place to be. This will always be my home." ■



Patty Dillon Dooley was born and raised in Fincastle. She has worked for *The Fincastle Herald* for 39 years.

Ware also shows folks the cistern in the yard of **George and Virginia Dillon**. The Dillons' daughter, **Patty Dooley**, born and raised in town, has worked for *The Fincastle Herald* for 39 years.

The area has changed, Dooley says. The theater and stores that drew folks to town are gone. People drive everywhere.

"We'd walk to school, walk to church. They were right there. We didn't have to

drive. And everybody took care of each other," Dooley recalls.

Today, Fincastle bustles. It is not quiet. Outside, the siren atop the community center sounds. **Bill and Velda Lanahan** of Baltimore and **Darla Rader** of Summersville, WV, stand near the courthouse. "It's a lovely little place. Just beautiful," Velda Lanahan says before leaving on a walking tour.

Inside, her relative, **Ruth Gwinn** of Leivasy, WV, scours records for her ancestors.

At the Fincastle Presbyterian Church, Frank Cory and Randall Hays paint a fence. They worry about encroaching growth. "We want to keep it green," Hays said. "Both of us came here, I guess, to get away from crowds."

The town enchants them.

"As the county seat, it has a lot of good history," Hays says. He enjoys the Botetourt County Historical Museum.

Eula Rosenberger, who works for the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce, is fascinated with the town graveyards. Godwin Cemetery, located at the Fincastle Methodist Church, is a tranquil place. Every



Frank Cory (rear) and Randall Hays attend Fincastle Presbyterian Church. On a warm weekend they painted wrought-iron fences in the cemetery.