

The Founding of Basic City, Virginia to its merger with Waynesboro, Virginia 1890-1923



Written & Published by the
Waynesboro Historical Commission
Founded 1971
Waynesboro, Virginia 22980

Dedication

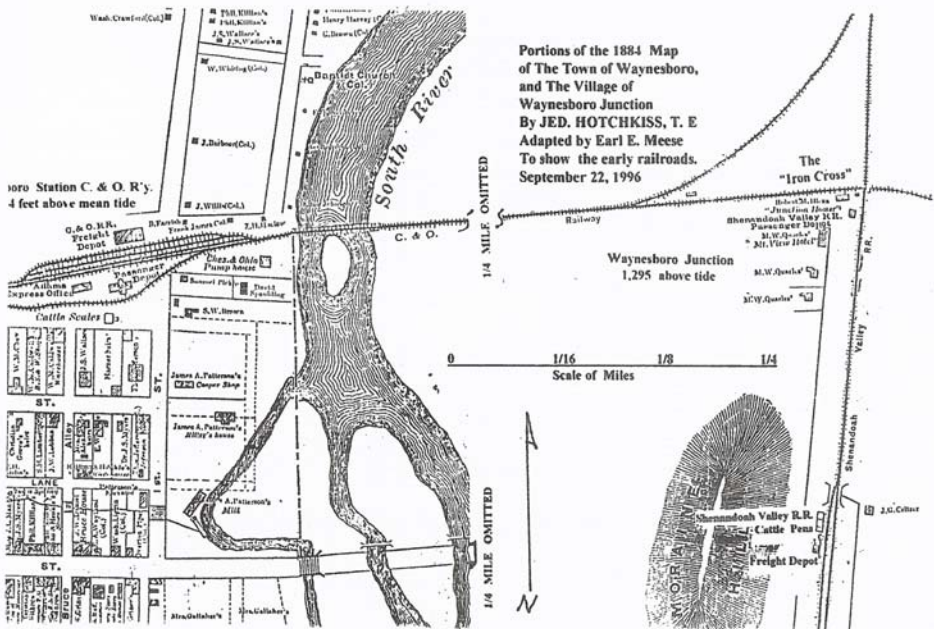
The Historic Commission of Waynesboro dedicates this publication to those men and women who made the vision of a new industrial and cultural center a reality. Their entrepreneurial spirit and optimism promised a new era for the Valley. Although they were unable to realize the grand design of Basic City, their drive to capitalize on advances in transportation, science, and education left a legacy for us all.

The Waynesboro Historical Commission would like to thank the following individuals for their outstanding support in making this project a success.

***Fredrick Zeh
Russell Shifflett
Phil Klann
George Hawke
Rick Harris
Mary Echols
Caroline Harper
Les Harper
Shirley Bridgeforth
Clover Archer***

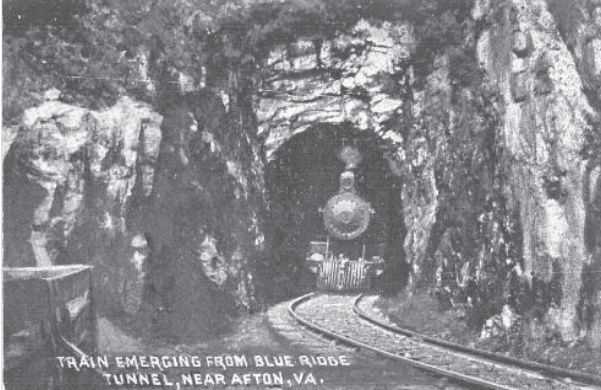
TO ITS MERGER WITH WAYNESBORO, VIRGINIA 1890-1923

The founding of Basic City, Virginia, was driven by the same forces that transformed the rural, agrarian economy of pre-Civil War America to the industrial, urban economy of the post-war period. Although the economic and psychological hardships of the Reconstruction years and the devastating depression of the 1870's were major stumbling blocks, the revolutions in transportation and in manufacturing created an environment ripe for change.



RAILROADS

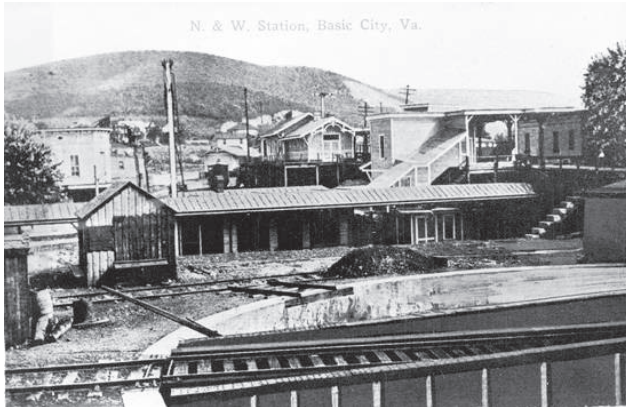
Sitting at the foot of the Blue Ridge and traversed by the South River, the area to the north and east of Waynesboro was open for development when transportation by rail became a reality. In 1856, Claudius Crozet, a French engineer and one of Napoleon's Generals,



completed a tunnel through the Afton Mountain. Considered an engineering marvel for its day, the tunnel was the first of four authorized by the Virginia Legislature to create an east-

west rail system to link communities within Virginia and beyond. The major east-west system became the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, or the C&O.

The C&O built two depots at "Overnight" or "Waynesboro Junction" as the area was designated before it was incorporated. One depot was for passenger and the other for freight. An express office and a cattle scale completed the services available to the public. A turntable, water tanks and a pump station allowed



"Overnight" to become a major service stop for the C & O. The two stations were later joined into one.

In 1881 a north-south connection was made with the opening of the Shenandoah Valley Railroad. The following year the railroad was extended to Big Lick (Roanoke), effectively opening the Valley from Roanoke, Virginia, to Hagerstown, Maryland, a total of 239 miles. In 1890, the financially troubled Shenandoah Valley Railroad was taken over by the Norfolk and Western Railroad.



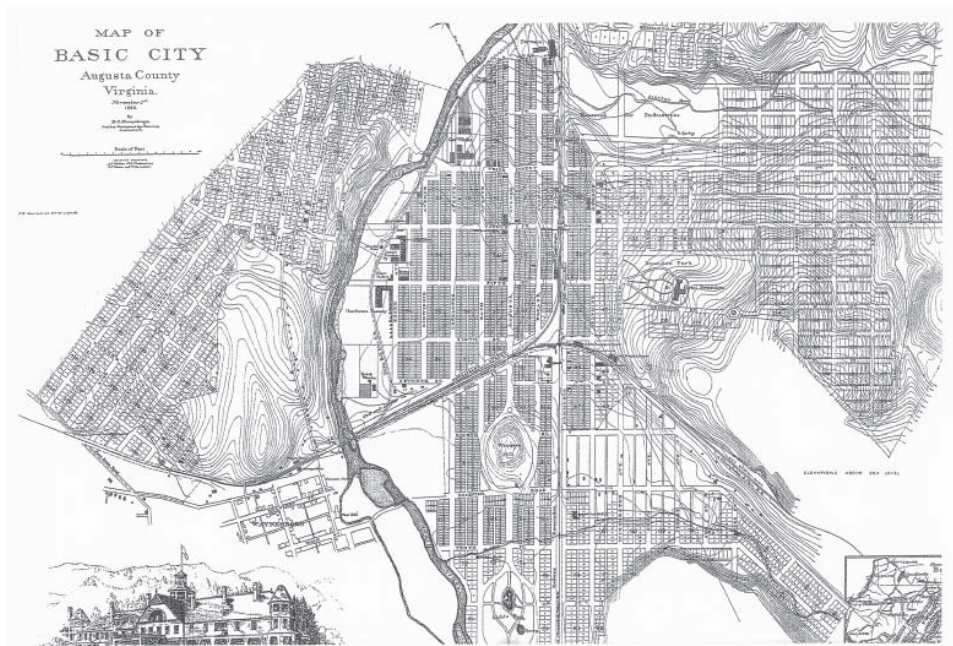
The Norfolk and Western depot was originally located next to the C&O depots and in front of the Belmont Hotel. In addition to its passenger and freight service, the N&W had a Western Union telegraph service for the general public.

In 1910, the old frame building was moved to the intersection of 7th Street and Augusta Avenue. A new station was built soon after on the Commerce Avenue site. A second N&W station was demolished 1925 by a runaway freight car that crossed Delphine Avenue, careened across Commerce Avenue and crashed through the roof of the N&W passenger station before coming to rest on the N&W tracks, killing one person and injuring another.

Destined for Greatness

A promotional brochure produced in 1890 claimed, “Ten passenger trains and fifty freight trains leave Basic City daily.”

It further stated, “Basic City is located near the very heart of the greatest coal, iron and limestone fields of America. Manganese abounds and the Crimora Mine supplies four-fifths of the total consumption annually in the United States... Located in the richest portion of the famous Shenandoah Valley, it has unlimited mineral and timber resources. Impure water, that parent of fevers, is unknown in the whole region. Lithia Spring bubbles up spontaneously and fills a lake sufficient for a town of thousands. Its bottom throbs and palpitates with a force that produces 1000 gallons a minute. The air is full of balmy exhilarant, not unlike the southern district of California.” The Iron Cross with its confluence of these two large national railways and a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of natural resources provided the ideal catalysts for an economic boomtown.



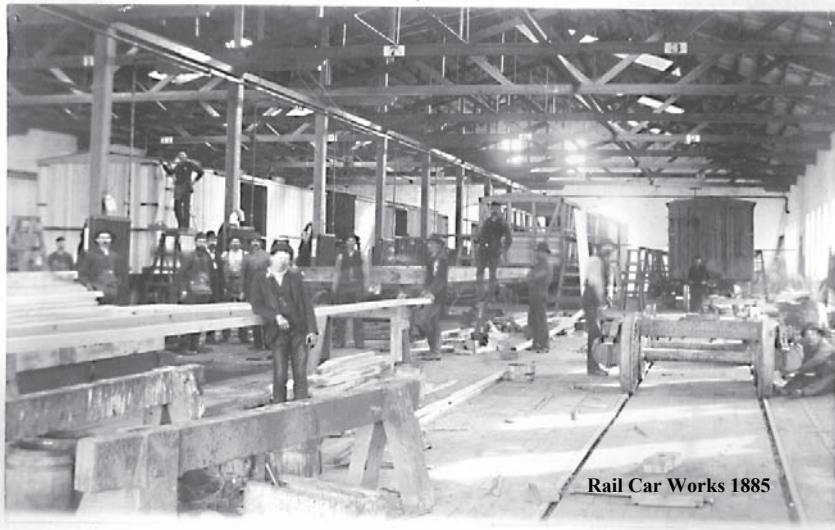
The potential for industrial development in the area surrounding the Waynesboro Junction was seen first by Richard N. Pool, a mining speculator, who chartered the area as Ingalls City in August of 1889. Pool was quickly overshadowed by Jacob Reese, a Pittsburgh industrialist who purchased much of the land in the area including an excellent source of water, Lithia Spring. On December 6th, 1889, Reese and a group of fellow developers declared their intentions by incorporating as the Basic City Mining, Manufacturing and Land Company and issued \$700,000 in capital stock.



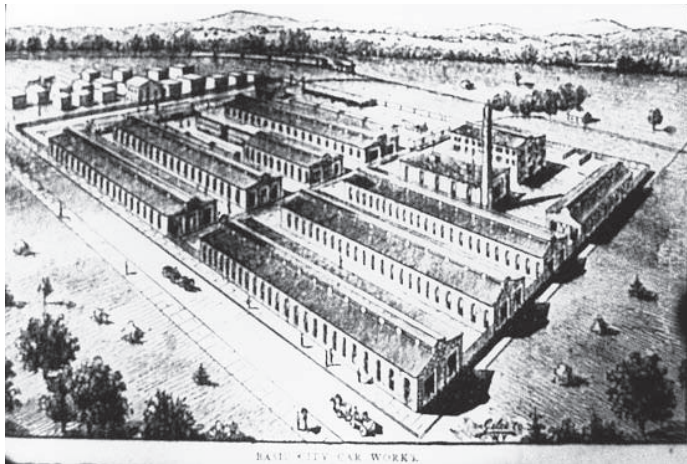
Basic City Mining and Manufacturing Land Co. Certificate - A stock certificate issued in 1891 to raise money for the anticipated opportunities in Basic City.

The corporation held 2,200 acres of land along both sides of the South River north of the intersecting railroads and eastward to the Blue Ridge. It also held options on properties with possible mineral deposits.

On March 3, 1890, the Virginia General Assembly approved the incorporation of Basic City. The newly created town purchased land from the BSMMLC including Lithia Spring for \$25,000. A key provision of the Act of Incorporation gave the city council the power to exempt “industrial and manufacturing enterprises” from municipal taxes for a period not to exceed ten years.



Rail Car Works 1885



From its inception Basic City was envisioned as an industrial center. Indeed the very name of the town was derived from Jacob

Reese's patent for a "basic" process for making steel. A proposed 200-ton iron blast furnace using the new system was projected as were a large facility to supply freight cars for the expanding railway systems, a paper mill, and playing-card factory. The vision of the future also included hardware, cigar, broom and a school furniture plants. The ambitious industrial base was to be supported by a water works and electric light and gas plants.

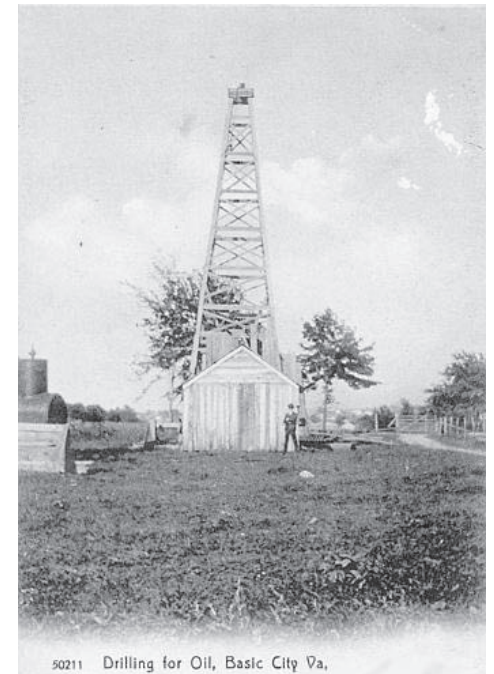
By the end of the year, the Basic City Mining, Manufacturing and Land Company had sold nearly 400 lots. With an opera house, a normal school and a newspaper to lend culture, Basic City was set to reap the prosperity promised by its founders.

Unfortunately the future was not without complications. The foundations for Jacob Reese's blast furnace were laid, but the enterprise became mired in protracted litigation between Reese and the Bessemer Company over patent rights. The investment in what was to be the cornerstone of Basic City's industrial empire was lost. The Basic City Car Works was built but on a lesser scale than the original proposal of a ten-building complex with more than a mile of rail tracks.

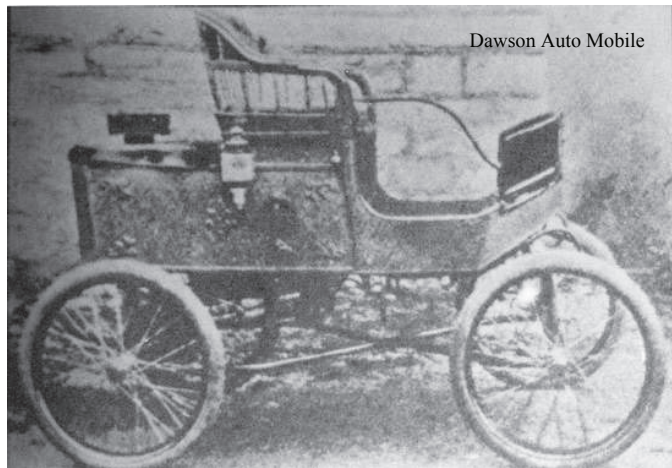
The Natural Gas and Oil Company of Basic City was created in 1891 to drill for oil, gas and coal. It too failed to live up to its promise. Again the investment was lost.

The Panic of 1893 and the growing unrest of the American labor force had a devastating effect on other interests in the Basic City economy. The playing card company failed, as did the school furniture, the barrel and crate, the match, and the hardware companies. Its three banks also became casualties of the down turn in financial fortunes.

Although Basic City was unable to fulfill the grand promises of its founders, it managed to become an industrial and transportation center in the Shenandoah Valley in the years following the panic. A number of new industrial enterprises were initiated, including the Dawson Manufacturing Company, which built the first automobile in

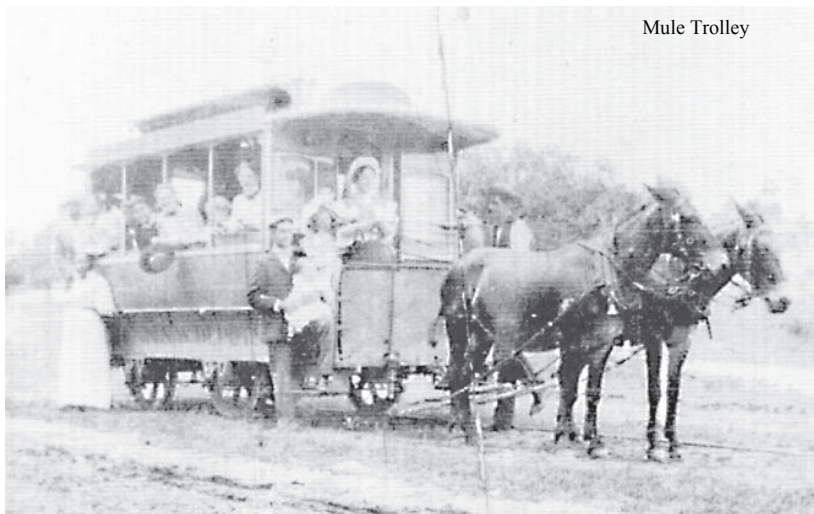


Virginia, one of the few steam-driven cars produced in America.



The transportation center created by the Iron Cross quickly provided new opportunities for businesses catering to travelers.

Waynesboro-Basic Trolley



Local inhabitants were able to move about Basic City and into

Waynesboro via a mule-drawn trolley system. Beginning at the Basic Station near The Belmont Hotel, the trolley traveled west of Wenonah School, across the river on Main Street, then left on Wayne Avenue to The Brunswick Hotel. The tracks circled the Brunswick Hotel before joining the tracks for a return trip to Basic City. It was owned and operated by O.H. Pattie from 1892-1902

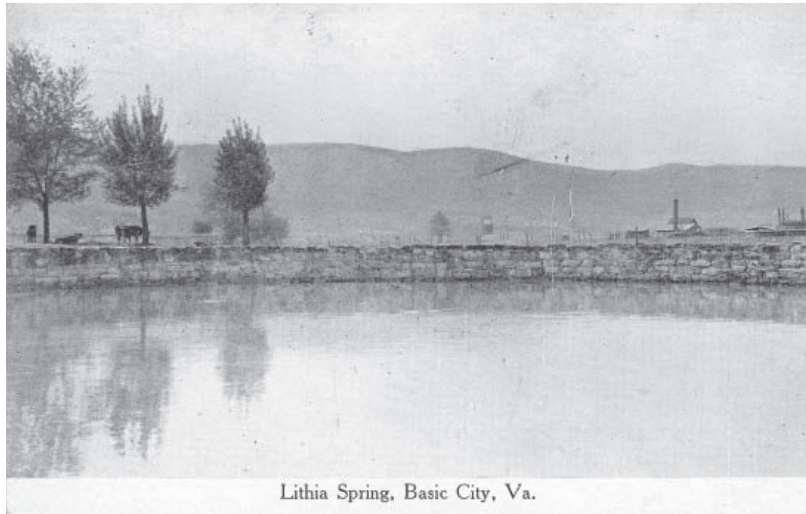
HOTELS

The mayor of Basic City, Mr. W. H. Gordon erected the first hotel at Commerce Avenue and 7th Street. Called the Mountain View Hotel at its opening, but later renamed The Belmont, it was ideally positioned adjacent to the N&W passenger station.

Catering to a transient population of merchants and salesmen, The Belmont offered its clients a billiard and poolroom as well as 25 rooms with electric lights, steam heat and porcelain bath fixtures with hot and cold water. The hotel also piped water from the nearby Lithia Spring for its guests.



Touted for its supposed relief from illnesses such as rheumatism and gout, the natural spring water contained a mixture of lithium salts, iron and magnesia and provided a mild laxative and antacid for its users. The miraculous waters also served as a component for making sodas.



In 1909, Mr. Hidy, Charlottesville merchant, paid \$7,000.00 for the Belmont and leased the hotel's operation to Mr. And Mrs. J. E. Porter who managed the Palmer House in Staunton. The Belmont Hotel's restaurant became a favorite stop for the railroad passengers.

Directly north of the Belmont was the Exchange Hotel with an adjacent restaurant. Although it was in operation in 1897, by 1902 the building was marked as a vacant hotel on the fire insurance maps for Basic City. By 1913 the restaurant was converted to a "Picture Theatre" and the vacant hotel to a boarding house.

The crown jewel of the Basic City hotels was the Brandon, which opened on Thanksgiving Day 1890. The magnificent Queen Anne structure was designed by the noted Washington, D.C. architect William M. Poindexter and built for the grand sum of \$45,000. The management spent an additional \$30,000 on furnishings chosen by the celebrated interior designer Philip Brown. The last word in elegance, the hotel brought style and luxury to its 200 guests for a daily rate of \$2.00. Gas chandeliers lighted the dining room and a brass band from Charlottesville serenaded the diners. Individual radiators in each room and gas and electric light made the Brandon a most comfortable hostel.




Because of its location, the Brandon became an ideal retreat in the summer months. Families escaping the heat of the lowlands on the other side of Afton Mountain were met at the station by the hotel's carriages and transported to the lobby. On the weekends the head of the household could join the family as they enjoyed the pleasant temperatures and the medicinal waters of Lithia Spring.



To occupy its guests, the hotel offered sports such as swimming, bowling and horseback riding and social events such as dances. For those who preferred a less strenuous retreat, the graceful veranda with its rocking chairs and cooling breezes provided a haven.

Hotel Brandon

Basic City, Virginia
ELEVATION 1700 FEET



A Noted Summer Resort

Affording the free use of the Famous Basic
Lithia Water.

Effective in the treatment and cure of Rheumatism, Gout, General Debility, etc.
Alum Water also Supplied.

80 Large, Well-Furnished Rooms

Steam heat, open fire places, electric lights, Lithia baths--ALL THE COMFORTS
OF HOME--300 yards from the junction stations of the C. & O. and N. & W. Railways.

In the "Alps of America" Overlooking the Famous
Shenandoah Valley

Brandon Hotel Advertisement



One of the highlights of the social life at the Brandon was the Brooks-Langhorne wedding. The bride was Phyllis Langhorne, a sister of the famous Lady Astor who was elected to the British Parliament and gained much international attention for her controversial politics and



CHISWELL DABNEY
LANGHORNE

her keen wit and sharp tongue. The father of the Bride, railroad-tycoon Chiswell Dabney Langhorne, reserved the entire Brandon for the wedding party and a special train was run from New York City to bring guests to Basic City. No doubt anticipating the coming avalanche of Yankees, the family chose the Hotel Brandon in Basic City for its ample size and close proximity to the railroad. The Langhorne lived in classic antebellum splendor in a huge brick manor house nestled along the western edge of Rockfish Valley named "Mirador". The groom was Reginald Brooks, the descendant of a large family of old-line New York aristocrats.

Over several weeks, carpenters refurbished the interiors where the three-day event would be held. By November 14, 1901, all was ready. At one o'clock that afternoon, with all 350 guests crowding the spacious lower hall at the Brandon, the ceremony began under a gigantic bell shaped arrangement of white chrysanthemums.

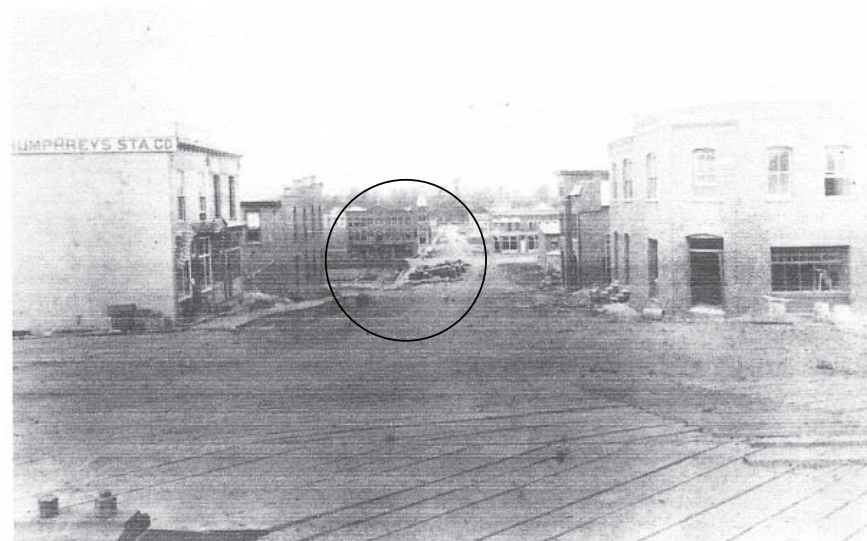
The Richmond Times reported, "The bridal party came down from the upper hall, the bride leaning on the arm of her father. At the foot of the broad stairway, Miss Langhorne was met by Mr. Brooks...the whole picture showing the beautiful bride, her handsomely gowned bridesmaids, and the brilliant group of exquisitely gowned guests, presenting a fairy scene indeed." After the ceremony, the party adjourned to the hotel's "big banqueting room", where they dined for hours at a 42-foot round table covered with roses, at the center of which stood an enormous silver cup: a gift to the bride from Harvard's Porcellian Club, of which the groom was a member. In the early evening the couple



departed by special train for a southern tour that was to end up in Aiken, S.C., before returning them to Mirador for the Christmas holidays.

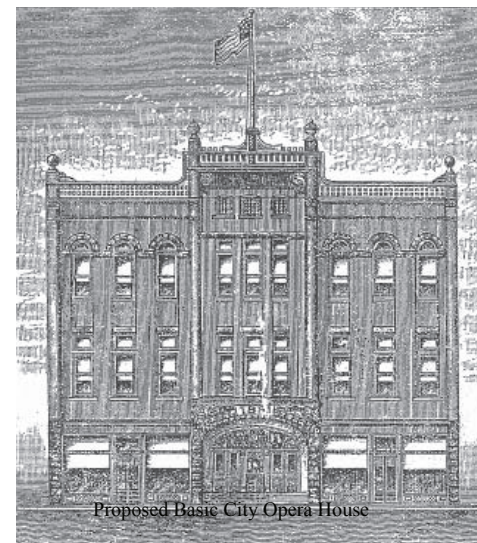
For the struggling enterprise of Basic City, it had been a rare moment of glory. Among the guests that afternoon were John Jacob Astor, Payne Whitney, Charles Dana Gibson and Stanford White. Lavish gifts poured into the Brandon from the Vanderbilts and the Harrimans, among others.

A fourth hotel was located in the Jordan Building at the corner of Augusta and 4th Streets, across from the ill-fated Basic City Opera House. The Central Hotel occupied the second floor. The lower floor was shared by the Basic City Bank, Craumer's Hardware, Lindsay and Roller's Grocery and a millinery shop. Situated blocks from the Iron Cross and its flow of transients, and without the potential trade generated by the opera house, the Central Hotel eventually went the way of the Exchange Hotel and became a rooming house.



Looking west along Fourth St. from railroad bridge, about 1890

The Basic City Opera House was planned directly across from the hotel at the corner of Fourth and August, Basic City's main street. The \$40,000 structure was to be built of granite and brick, making it fireproof. The first floor was to be given over to three retail shops. The second and third floors were given over to the Opera House. With its private boxes, orchestra, family circle and balcony, it was to seat over 1,000. The foundations for the new building were dug in 1891 and material for the new structure unloaded at the site. However, the magnificent, cultural center was abandoned before the walls were erected. No other entertainment center took its place.



Although Basic City was created from the unique configuration of the two national railroads and founded in support of a vision for an industrial complex, newly

formed city became the home to a growing population. Within a decade its population topped 1370. Its nearby neighbor, Waynesboro, could only boast 856. The burgeoning population required investments in Basic City's civic life.

SCHOOLS

The Basic City High School was built in 1912 at a cost of \$40,000. The school was constructed at 125 N. Bayard Avenue on Moraine Hill, an oddly shaped hill that some local inhabitants called an Indian mound. Others, however, argue that local Indian tribes were not mound builders and that the formation was a geological oddity. Because the school had space for the presentations of plays and musical events, the Basic City High School became a cultural center for the community. After the consolidation of Waynesboro and Basic City, the high school was renamed the Wenonah School.



There were two small school buildings designated for the African-American population, Basic Heights and Basic Elementary Schools. Both were deemed inadequate, as was the five-month schedule by the local African-American population. After some public pressure, the school board agreed to increase the schedule by a month if the parents agreed to raise the additional \$75.00 to pay the teachers. A Parents' School League was formed and after securing the additional funding

pressed for a new school. Ultimately the School Board agreed with the provision that the League raise half of the cost of the land and a portion of the cost of the new building. In 1924, the Rosenwald Colored School opened. It was named in honor of the philanthropist Julius Rosenwald who had funded several schools in Virginia.

The Basic Public School was located on Winchester Avenue between Fourth and Third Streets.

Recognizing the need for an institution of higher learning, Basic City's founders lured Professor George Washington Hoenshel, owner of the Shenandoah Normal College, to the newly formed municipality. Established in 1883 in Middletown, Virginia, the College migrated to Harrisonburg in 1887. The expanding curriculum soon exhausted the space available in its new home.

When Basic City offered a permanent home in new buildings designed to meet the needs of a modern college and space to accommodate 250 students, and with the added inducement of eight years of free rent, Professor Hoenshel agreed to move his successful operation.

The Shenandoah Normal College opened its doors in August of 1890. The building had 40 rooms including a 24 by 31 foot study hall. The



principal's office, dining room, parlor, recitation room and kitchen occupied the first floor. The remaining floors provided housing for the principal, his family and some of the students. The College offered three curricula: Teachers; Scientific; and Commercial. The students came from Maryland,

North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia. The bright future took a turn late on the evening of November 16, 1892. An uncontrollable fire consumed the building, destroying much of the college furniture and nearly half of the trunks and clothing of the students. The loss to the owners, the Basic City Mining Manufacturing and Land Company, was estimated at \$10,000.

Within a day, temporary quarters were found for the school and the academic year was completed.

Other municipalities in the Valley seized the opportunity and attempted to entice the College to move to their communities. In September 1893, the Shenandoah Normal College moved to its final home in Reliance, Virginia, occupying new quarters built to its specification. Three years later Professor Hoenshel died at age 38. The College continued for another twelve years before ceasing its operations.

First operated as the Brandon Institute, the new institution took over the former Brandon Hotel, which closed in 1913. It was later renamed the Fairfax Hall Junior College for Girls in 1920. Fairfax Hall was promoted as a quality institution for young ladies from across America. Its teaching staff of sixteen held degrees for Vassar, Wellesley, Cornell, University of Virginia, Columbia, Emory & Henry, Converse, Emerson College and Wesleyan Institute. A four-year college preparatory and general elective curriculum was offered as well as one-year cultural or “finishing” course for high school graduates. Educational standards were in full conformity with entrance requirements for Bryn Mawr, Wellesley and other leading colleges. Additional structures were added to the campus including a gymnasium, stables and a swimming pool. The school operated for over 50 years, closing in 1975. The hotel cum finishing school was restored in 1999 and opened as the Fairfax Hall Retirement Home in 2001.



Churches

Three houses of worship formed the backbone of the religious life of the area that was to become Basic City: a Baptist church at the south end of the Florence Avenue Bridge and two African Methodist Episcopal congregations on Port Republic Road. The Baptist church met first in a blacksmith shop on Ohio Street and in 1872 secured a deed for land on Minden Place as the Shiloh Baptist Church and erected a log cabin. Three years later, a large frame structure replaced the cabin. In 1924, the building was replaced by the current sanctuary.

In 1890, the Basic City Presbyterian Church was organized with 19 members, most of whom were sponsored by the First Presbyterian Church of Waynesboro. With the help of the mother church across the river, the congregation erected a building on Winchester Avenue and D Street. Unable to surmount its financial difficulties, the congregation dissolved in 1929 and reorganized as the Park Station Presbyterian Church. In 1932, it became the Second Presbyterian Church.

The Basic City Methodist Episcopalian Church was organized in 1891. Its first meetings were at the Shenandoah Normal College. After the College burned, the congregation temporarily used the Peas Green Store building on Bayard Avenue. In 1892, the congregation moved into its new house of on Winchester and 5th Streets. That structure was demolished and replaced by a new building. The congregation still occupies the site as the Basic United Methodist Church.

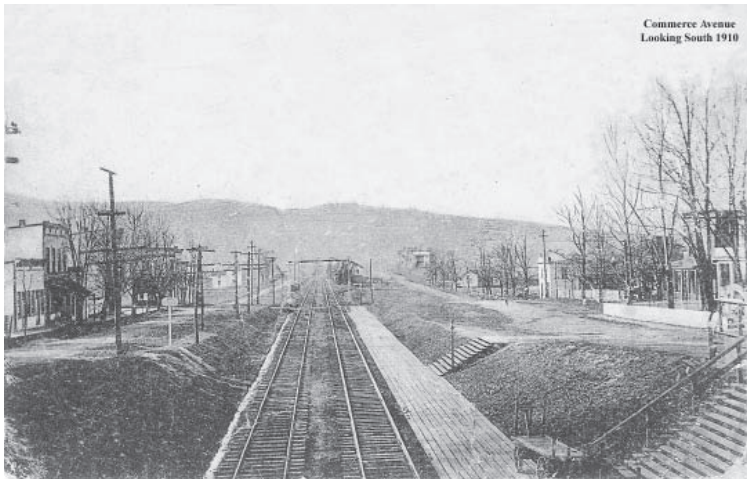
In 1892 The Union Baptist Church was organized. It African-American congregation first met in the Newcomb Building at the corner of East Main and Commerce Streets. By the end of the year, the church purchased an old school house from the South River District School Board. In 1904, it moved into its present home East Main Street.

In 1904 The Emanuel Episcopal Church of Staunton initiated a mission church in Basic City. St. Mary's Episcopal erected its own building on Winchester Avenue at D Street in 1906. The building is currently occupied by the Basic Bible Chapel.

By 1913 the United Brethren Church opened its own house of worship at Winchester Avenue and Rockfish Road, now East Main Street.

Commerce Avenue

Although the center of Basic City was projected to be at the junction of Augusta Avenue and 4th Street, the power of the iron cross and its role as a major transportation center for the Shenandoah Valley ordained that Commerce Avenue would be Basic City's business and entertainment center.



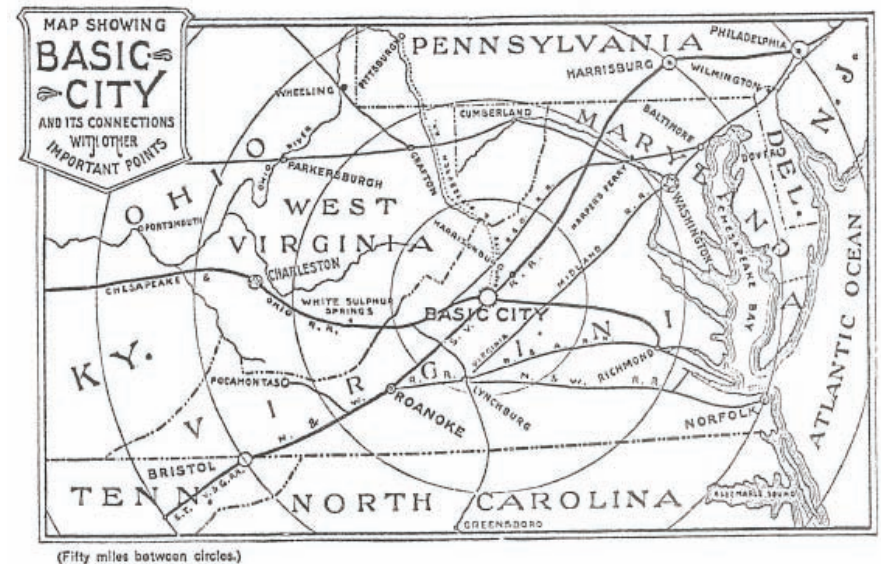
By 1897, Commerce Avenue provided its local and transient populations with a livery, two hotels, and a restaurant on its western side. On the eastern side were two meat markets, two groceries, three general stores, a professional office, a post office, a hardware store, a cobbler, a barber and a pool hall. By 1902, the offerings expanded to include a bowling alley, two drug stores, and a paint, oil and tin shop. Commerce Avenue also was the site of the mayor's office and the jail.

Being a railroad junction gave Basic City a reputation of roughness. Perhaps this was a carry over from the pre-Civil War days when the many laborers who toiled to cut the tunnel through the mountains made the area that became Basic City their home. The reputation was further enhanced by the access to liquor and other entertainments. While Waynesboro was a "dry" community, Basic City hosted a number of saloons that catered to those who were seeking a good time. At one time, Commerce Avenue had five such establishments within one block. Local legend has it that when Basic City jail was full, the policeman handcuffed the inebriated to an outside rail.

Merger

Within a few years of Basic City's incorporation, a number of citizens began to consider the advantages of consolidation with Waynesboro. Although the two municipalities had distinct personalities, the promise of economy of scale with a lowering of taxes overcame the rivalry between the two. In 1923, a coalition of citizens from each community petitioned the State Legislature for permission to hold a referendum on the question. The State Legislature granted permission for a referendum to be held in August.

However, not all citizens of Basic City were in favor of the move. Dr. R. S. Griffith, an ex-mayor of Basic City expressed his opposition: *"If Waynesboro is in a position to not only help Basic but put her on the map, remember please Basic is thirty-five years old and Waynesboro is more than one hundred and thirty-five. Leave Basic alone and before she is half of one hundred and thirty-five years of age, she will be on [the] 'BIG MAP'."*



As a way of easing the consolidation, the Waynesboro town council approved an ordinance proposing that in the event the referendum passed "the newly consolidated community be called *Wayne-Basic*". When Waynesboro Mayor M. H. Hudgins presented the new name to

Basic City officials and interested citizens, the idea was rejected in an emotional furor. It was finally agreed to canvas 300 voters from each town, asking for a name for the new community. The suggestions ranged from *Waynapolis* to *Baseboro* to *Spark Plug* (a reference to a popular comic strip of the time.). The majority of the citizens polled chose *Waynesboro-Basic*.

The August 7, 1923 referendum passed by a wider margin in Waynesboro than in Basic City. Interestingly, approximately the same number of voters in each community voted against the measure.

Within months a group of Waynesboro citizens headed by two local attorneys declared the hyphenated name “cumbersome and unaesthetic [sic].” Although most Basic City voters believed the issue of a name had been settled before the referendum, the Waynesboro group appealed to the state legislature through its Committee on Counties, Cities and Towns. That committee agreed that *Waynesboro-Basic* was an inappropriate name for the consolidated town. The State Legislature accepted the recommendation of the Committee and approved *Waynesboro* as the name of the newly consolidated town. In 1924, *Basic City* passed into history.



This building still exists and sits at the foot of Wenonah Hill.



New Bank, about 1895, was located on Fourth St. and Bayard Ave. in Basic City. This building still stands west of the N&W Railway and is now used as a residence.



50210 South River, View from the Ford, Basic City, Va.



Waynesboro Historical Commission
2005

Cathy Lang
Joseph E. Morse
Judith Walden
Constance Paradiso
Clair F. Myers
Ellie Woosley
Kerford Brooks
R.Allen Brahin
Jerry Layman
William Alexander

