

By Thomas R. Fletcher

Lewisburg

Tranquil mountain town in West Virginia combines history, abundant recreation, theater and fine dining

Rich historical perspectives and natural beauty are attributes often mentioned when describing Lewisburg, but to retirees who have moved here, there is much more than one would expect to find in such a small West Virginia mountain town.

"Everything is here, amenities one would expect only in a much larger metropolitan area. So much is available in this little town," says Dee Wiley, who retired to Lewisburg from Maryland a year ago with husband John. "I have real contentment and enjoyment."

Lewisburg, the seat of Greenbrier County in the southeastern part of the state, dates to 1782 when it was chartered. It's located in the heart of West Virginia's Greenbrier Valley formed by the Greenbrier River through the scenic Allegheny Mountains. With a population of about 3,600, it is a remote oasis from bustling East Coast city life. Yet it's adjacent to Interstate 64, which provides easy access to the metropolitan Washington, DC, area.

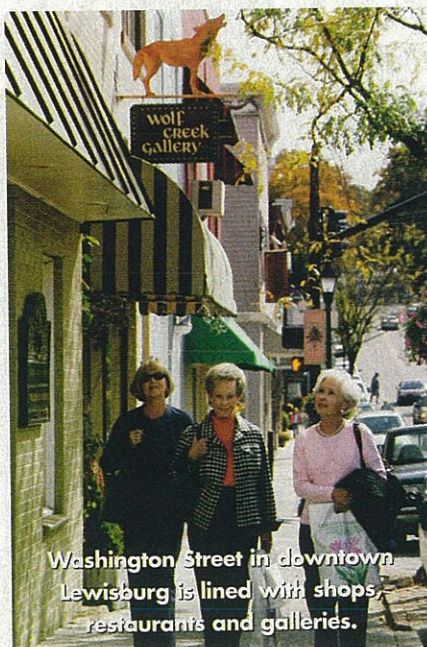
Named for Revolutionary War Gen. Andrew Lewis, the town has a 235-acre historic district recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The district encompasses more than 60 18th- and 19th-century buildings of historic and architectural significance. These include the General Lewis Inn, the North House Museum and the Old Stone Church. Built in 1820, the North House Museum houses the collection of the

Greenbrier County Historical Society.

Lewisburg also was named by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of its Dozen Distinctive Destinations for travelers in 2004. The Greenbrier Valley Theatre, a state-of-the-art facility downtown, and Carnegie Hall bring many cultural events to the area. The town center has fine shopping with specialty stores and galleries featuring crafts, quilts, books, gourmet food, contemporary art and antiques. Walking tours of the town are offered from the visitor center and city hall.

"I'm amazed at the availability and quality of the restaurants for such a small town," Dee Wiley says. "The Tavern 1785 and Food & Friends are two of our favorites, and they sit across the street from one another."

Dee and John retired to Lewisburg after nearly 40 years in the Rockville, MD, area. Dee is not alone in her assessment of



Washington Street in downtown Lewisburg is lined with shops, restaurants and galleries.

GREENBRIER COUNTY CVB

area restaurants. In covering three Greenbrier County restaurants in 2004 as part of its "Best of" series, the Food Network cited The Greenbrier, an acclaimed resort in nearby White Sulphur Springs, and the General Lewis Inn and Food & Friends. Lewisburg offers a variety of dining experiences from the elegant Tavern 1785 to chain establishments such as Applebee's.

The availability of affordable housing and the beauty of the area were primary factors that influenced Dee and John in their decision to make Lewisburg their retirement home. John, 70, stays busy with golf, church, the Masonic Lodge, the Elks and yard work. Dee, 62, is involved with the garden club and a bowling league and loves taking in cultural events at Carnegie Hall.

Dee is a self-confessed "city girl" who has fallen in love with the country ways of small-town West Virginia. That has a lot to do with the cultural options found in Lewisburg.

Carnegie Hall, originally built as part of the Greenbrier College for Women in 1902 as a gift from Andrew Carnegie, sponsors a performing arts series, art galleries and art and dance studios. Another place to catch live performances is the Greenbrier Valley Theatre, the only year-round professional live performance theater in West Virginia. The Greenbrier Bowling and Recreation Center in downtown Lewisburg offers billiards, bowling, a pro shop and on-site dining.

"We came from an area in Maryland where a drive was always involved, and traffic was always a consideration (to get to cultural events). Here, everything is so close and reasonably priced, the cultural events are a real plus," Dee says. "Shopping is another plus — there are several upscale shops where specialty items are to be found."

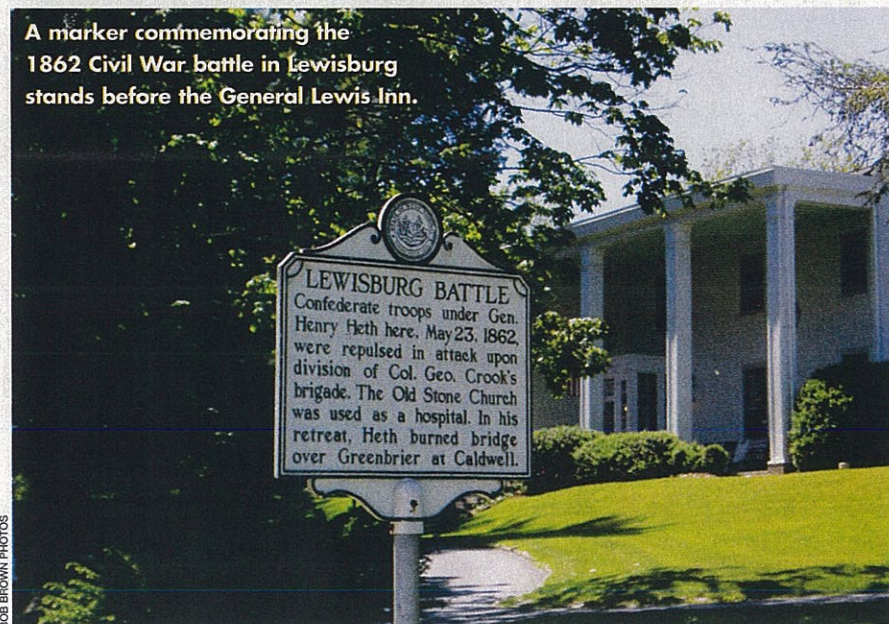
In addition to the cultural opportunities, which Dee says were a surprise in such a small town, she is enthusiastic about "the safety factor — being able to walk around with no worries." She loves "the kind gestures of community — like stepping into another time. There is a wonderful sense of community." John also appreciates "the availability of medical facilities — that's something very important to retirees."

Because John was originally from



Dee and John Wiley moved to Lewisburg from Maryland and find that the small town has many amenities of a larger metropolitan area, including top-quality restaurants.

A marker commemorating the 1862 Civil War battle in Lewisburg stands before the General Lewis Inn.



BOB BROWN PHOTOS

LEWISBURG, WEST VIRGINIA

Population: 3,589 in Lewisburg, 35,027 in Greenbrier County.

Location: Lewisburg is in the Allegheny Mountains in the southeastern part of the state close to the Virginia border. It's 112 miles east of Charleston, WV; 206 miles west of Richmond, VA; 254 miles north of Charlotte, NC; and 256 miles southwest of Washington, DC.

Climate: High Low

January 39 22

July 83 59

Average relative humidity: 70%

Rain: 45 inches annually

Snow: 46 inches annually

Cost of living: Below average. West Virginia ranks in the lowest third of states in cost of living.

Housing costs: The average three-bedroom home costs \$110,000-\$165,000. Most newer homes run \$160,000-\$450,000.

Sales tax: 5% on food, 6% on other purchases.

State income tax: For singles and married couples filing jointly, the tax is graduated from 3% on taxable income under \$10,000 to 6.5% plus \$2,775 on income above \$60,000.

Income tax exemptions: Under age 65, there is an exemption for federal and some West Virginia state pensions of up to \$2,000 per taxpayer and a full exemption for those in the state and local police, sheriffs and firefighter's pension system. Those age 65 and beyond may exempt up to \$8,000 in all income. Social Security benefits subject to federal tax are taxable.

Estate tax: None

Property tax: West Virginia counties tax both real and personal property, assessing them at 60% of market value. There are four classes of real and personal property. Class I is intangibles such as stocks, bonds and promissory notes and also livestock and farm machinery; the Lewisburg tax rate for Class I is \$.067375 per \$100 valuation. Class II includes all owner-occupied property used exclusively for residential purposes and farms; the Lewisburg tax rate for Class II property is \$1.3475 per \$100 valuation. Class III is all property outside municipalities that is not Class I or II property; Lewisburg has no tax for Class III property. Class IV property is all real and personal property within municipalities with the exception of Class I and II property; the

Lewisburg tax rate for Class IV property is \$2.6950 per \$100 valuation. A \$200,000 owner-occupied home would be assessed at \$120,000 and the annual tax would be about \$1,617.

Homestead exemption: Those age 65 and beyond or completely disabled are eligible when they have been a state resident for two years and lived on the property at least six months. The exemption is \$20,000 off the assessed value. There also is an income-related tax credit for seniors.

Personal property tax: See property tax information. Personal property tax applies to a variety of items, including vehicles and some stocks and bonds.

Religion: There are 20 local denominational and nondenominational places of worship in the area.

Education: Lewisburg is home to one of four major campuses of the New River Community and Technical College, offering associate degree programs and certification programs. Also in town, the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine provides education programs for primary osteopathic physicians for rural and underserved communities in West Virginia.

Transportation: Interstate 64 crosses Greenbrier County providing easy access to major cities. The Greenbrier Valley Airport at Lewisburg serves the region. Amtrak makes stops in White Sulphur Springs and Alderson. Greyhound Bus has limited drop-offs in Lewisburg.

Health care: The Greenbrier Valley Medical Center is a 122-bed acute care center with more than 90 physicians in 25 specialties. The Robert C. Byrd Clinic primary and specialty care center at the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine, with 75 full- and part-time employees, handles more than 48,000 patient visits a year. The Rainelle Medical Center serves western Greenbrier County. The Greenbrier Clinic located at The Greenbrier resort is a leading diagnostic clinic with 11 internal medicine specialists. The Greenbrier Physicians facility, located next to the Greenbrier Valley Medical Center, features advanced medical equipment, and the Greenbrier Valley Cancer Center offers advanced treatments.

Housing: Housing prices in Greenbrier County vary widely. In general, existing three-bedroom homes run \$110,000-

\$165,000 and newer homes run \$160,000-\$450,000. Antebellum and Victorian homes are frequently on the market at widely varying prices, depending on the condition of the home. **The Retreat**, (866) 303-8439, is a new 950-acre gated development about three miles outside Lewisburg



and three miles from The Greenbrier resort. The community will have a maximum of 165 home sites, all with security, city water, underground power lines, natural gas lines and high-speed fiber optics. There is a \$4 million clubhouse on top of the mountain. Currently, prices are \$140,000-\$480,000 per site.

The Greenbrier Sporting Club, (888) 741-8989, is a series of intimate development sites on The Greenbrier resort's 6,500-acre property. Prices start in the \$400,000s for home sites, which range from one-quarter of an acre to 10 acres.

Visitor lodging: There are 1,477 rooms in the area, including 638 hotel rooms, 802 rooms at The Greenbrier resort and 36 rooms at bed-and-breakfast inns. Average room prices are \$90 per night at hotels and \$105 per night at bed-and-breakfast inns. The historic General Lewis Inn has a restaurant and offers 25 rooms at \$125-\$145 a night, (888) 628-4454. The Greenbrier resort has rooms from \$389 April-October and \$292 November-January, (800) 453-4858. It will be closed January-April 2007.

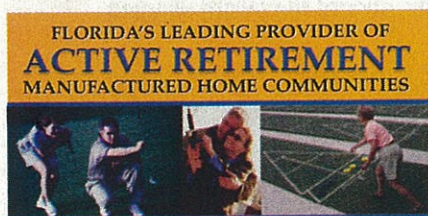
Information: Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureau (Where to Retire magazine), 540 N. Jefferson St., Box 17-Suite N, Lewisburg, WV 24901, (800) 833-2068 or www.greenbriervw.com.

(Greenbrier and Seneca) and two state parks (Watoga and Cass).

The Greenbrier River is the longest free-flowing river in the eastern United States. Greenbrier State Forest offers 5,130 acres for hiking, camping, hunting and swimming, and Beartown State Park is located 23 miles north of Lewisburg along U.S. Route 219, with a picnic area and 107 acres for exploration. Calvin Price State Forest, 30 miles north of Lewisburg along U.S. 219, features 9,482 acres for public hunting and fishing. The forest straddles the Greenbrier-Pocahontas county line and borders Watoga State Park.

Lake Sherwood Recreation Area has campsites, hiking trails and a 165-acre lake. Blue Bend Recreation Area and Monongahela National Forest offer more outdoor options. The Lost World Caverns is another nearby attraction. More than 75 percent of West Virginia is forested, making it third among the most-forested states.

The State Fair of West Virginia is an annual event each August in the nearby town of Fairlea. The fair always features a variety of events from live-



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A Civil War monument marks Lewisburg's Confederate history.

stock shows to horse-pulling contests, tractor pulls, harness racing and performances by major music stars.

The area's bountiful outdoor recreation was an attraction for Jack and Prudence Fox, who came to Lewisburg from Seattle, WA, nearly 12 years ago. Jack cross-country skis in the winter, runs year-round, kayaks and goes trout fishing at other times. "I'm 74 but most people take me for a much younger man. That's due to my active lifestyle," he says. He loves the combination of the area's accessibility and outdoor opportunities.

"Lewisburg has a unique charm with its history, culture and outdoor opportunities," Jack says. Jack's career in publishing had taken them all around

the United States, with a long stretch in the Boston area. They also spent a good deal of time in New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles over Jack's 37 years in the publishing industry. Prudence is originally from Rochester, MN. She met Jack while attending college in California, and they are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary this summer. Jack is originally from Rainelle in eastern Greenbrier County.

"Basically, we've lived everywhere, but I've always loved the Greenbrier Valley. I consider it an oasis. Like many others, I originally left to find employment," Jack says.

"I love the beauty of the town," agrees Prudence, 71. "Everyone takes



The 1796 Old Stone Church is the oldest church in continuous use west of the Allegheny Mountains, and its cemetery has headstones of the town's earliest settlers. Below: Well-kept historic homes line Lewisburg's Washington Street.

Greenbrier County, Dee had a familiarity with the area from visiting family and friends over the years. John worked in the Maryland school system before retirement, and Dee worked in customer service at Bloomingdale's. She had plenty of experience in deal-



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ing with people and says she has seen her share of "attitude."

"People here are not at all demanding, no matter their status. The rest of the country could take a lesson from Lewisburg on how to be nice," Dee says.

Greenbrier County offers John a wide selection of golf courses. The county boasts seven options, including three championship courses at The Greenbrier resort. Valley View Country Club features a nine-hole course and a restaurant. The Lewisburg Elks Country Club features an 18-hole course with dining, an outdoor pool and clubhouse. The Greenbrier Hills Golf Club features a nine-hole course, and Oakhurst Links rounds out the county courses.

The first organized golf in America was in Greenbrier County — in White

Sulphur Springs in 1884, the year the Oakhurst Links was organized. The original nine-hole course was restored in 1994. Here, golfers can have a unique experience using hickory-shafted clubs and "guttie" balls hit from sand tees. Replica equipment, like that used by those original golfers, is manufactured in St. Andrews, Scotland, exclusively for Oakhurst Links. Use of the equipment is included in the greens fee.

Other outdoor attractions in the area include the Greenbrier River Rail Trail extending 77 miles north from Caldwell in Greenbrier County to Cass in Pocahontas County. This multiuse trail offers hiking, biking and equestrian activities and is one of the nation's longest stretches of rail-trail. It crosses 35 bridges along the way, providing a connection between two state forests

pride in their place and that keeps the whole town looking beautiful. We have great neighbors and I feel safe. We're close to everything."

Prudence is involved in church activities, the garden club and her artistic outlet, painting. Jack has taken up some teaching and ministerial work after his retirement. "Lewisburg has presented me with an opportunity to put a capstone on my wanderlust," Jack says.

The Foxes love the tranquility of the valley, along with its other attributes.

Josephine and P.J. O'Brien are Greenbrier County natives who left the area because of work but returned for the love of place. P.J.'s job with CSX Corp. took them from Lewisburg in 1985 to Waycross, GA, then to Jacksonville, FL, and Richmond, VA, before their return to Lewisburg two years ago. The O'Briens had a fascination with travel and wanted to explore other areas but they always had a place in the Lewisburg area, where they owned a farm.

"We traveled with his work, but the beach life wore off. It was time to



Lewisburg's historic downtown has many 18th- and 19th-century buildings.

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come home," Josephine says. When they returned, they built a log cabin on the farm. They now enjoy the solitude and tranquility of nature while sitting by their pond or walking in the woods.

P.J. still does some consulting work for the railroad and in October 2005, Josephine opened a downtown Lewisburg specialty shop, The Very Thing. The shop carries antiques, collectibles, gifts and artwork. "I've found the people very supportive, gracious and giving, especially after opening my store," she says.

Josephine and P.J. stay busy visiting the flea markets (on Tuesdays and Saturdays at the state fairgrounds in Fairlea), auctions, family and friends, and traveling back to Waycross, GA, where their son, Greg, still lives, to visit their granddaughter, Taylor.

They were surprised by the traffic in Lewisburg. "The people don't change much, but there's a lot more traffic now. It's not really surprising when

you realize more people are finding out about what a great place to live Lewisburg is," Josephine says.

The U.S. Census Bureau ranks West Virginia as the sixth-fastest growing destination for buyers of second homes used for vacation, seasonal or recreational reasons. Price and proximity to major metropolitan areas are primary considerations. People returning to West Virginia represent the largest group of retirees moving to the state, but those numbers are changing as more people find the tranquility of the mountains and the desirable lifestyle available at a reasonable price.

"It really is almost heaven," Josephine says of Greenbrier Valley. "I love the fall and the change of seasons. It is a wonderful place to live." For his part, "I wanted to look at those beautiful mountains," P.J. says. **WR**

Thomas R. Fletcher is a writer and photographer in Cowan, WV.

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