

The appearance of the old downtown district in history-minded Lexington is undergoing a dramatic transformation these days, thanks to a remarkable program of cooperative effort launched by businessmen, governments and private organizations. And it's beginning to pay off—in real money as well as in heightened civic pride and awareness of the area's extraordinary heritage.

To be sure, Lexington has always had a keen sense of its own historic character, prompted largely by its association with men of first-order importance in America's development—"Big Foot" Wallace, Sam Houston, Cyrus McCormick, Lee, Jackson. And

the instinct for preservation has always been strong among civic leaders in what the New York Post characterized in 1897 as "the Athens of the South." But until recent years efforts were sporadic and uncoordinated, usually mounted when specific crises arose: the state's decision in 1934 to tear down John Jordan's picturesque covered bridge across the North River (toll in 1810: "Man on horse, 6¼ cents; sheep or hog, ½ cent..."), the demolition of the rundown but nostalgia-provoking "Old Blue" Hotel, landmark and home to students and tourists for many years, in 1947. Not often were the ad-hoc preservationists successful.

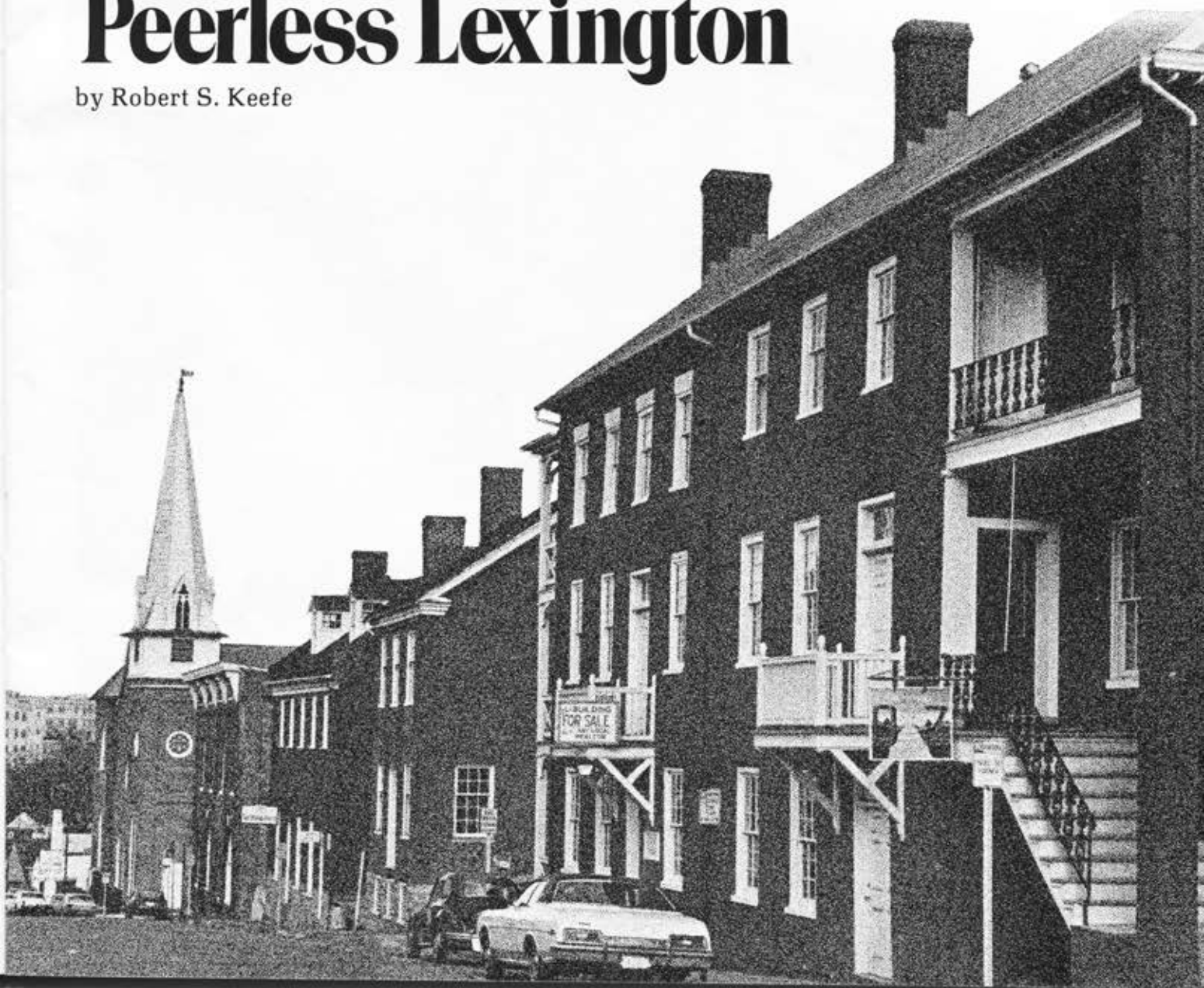
It was in the mid-1960s that historic preservation began coming into its own in Lexington, that a general concern surfaced not just for keeping old structures from being destroyed but rather for taking an active, positive role in restoring them to their old attractiveness and charm—and to their old economic vitality.

The turning point came in 1966 with the establishment of the Historic Lexington Foundation, an outgrowth of the local chapter of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA). One too many historic structures in the city had been threatened—in this case, the splendid Barclay House on Lee Avenue, built 130

The Renaissance of Peerless Lexington

by Robert S. Keefe

Lower Main Street, looking north: Central Hotel, Jacob M. Ruff House, John Ruff House, Sheridan's Stable, First Baptist Church, VMI in background.



years before by Jordan and his partner Samuel Darst and today a prime example of the Classical Revival architecture in which Jordan and Darst specialized. The Barclay House had been purchased by the national office of Kappa Alpha Order, then (and now) located in Atlanta. Plans were announced to raze the house and erect a one-story headquarters building on the land. Concerned Lexingtonians, moving principally through the APVA, fought the proposed destruction of the fine old residence vigorously, but the only weapon at their command was intangible: pressure. In the case of the Barclay House, intense pressure worked, and after considerable negotiation KA abandoned its plan on the condition that a buyer could be found from whom KA could recover its investment. Five months later, Col. and Mrs. C. C. Tutwiler Jr., leaders themselves in the preservation movement in Lexington, purchased the Barclay House (renaming it Beaumont) and engaged the noted preservation architect J. Everette Fauber of Lynchburg to preside over its restoration.

It was a close call, and it drove home the point that development of a more effective way of guarding Lexington's architectural heritage was imperative. After-the-fact attempts at persuading those uninterested in preservation could hardly be counted on to work very often.

Gradually the idea emerged to create a non-profit organization which would purchase historic properties, perhaps restore them, then immediately resell them—with perpetually binding deed restrictions pertaining to the appearance of the buildings. Similar plans had worked in Savannah, Charleston and Richmond—but could such an approach be successful in a tiny city such as Lexington?

The Historic Lexington Foundation (HLF) was chartered Sept. 26, 1966, organized initially by a committee of a foresighted Chamber of Commerce and nurtured by the Rockbridge APVA chapter. Already, the HLF had its work cut out for it: the well-known Alexander-Withrow House, built in 1789 and thought to be one of just three structures in town to survive the disastrous "Great Fire" of 1796, was in new danger of being lost. The building had long been tied up in miles of estate-related legal red tape, and was deteriorating rapidly—as were many old structures on so-called lower Main Street. The historic worth of the Alexander-Withrow House made its preservation crucial: its design was distinctively striking, and various embellishments over the years had added new interest to it; it had been one of Lexington's first stores, the first post office



The Alexander-Withrow House, built 1789. Note diamond brick patterns.

and the first bank; it had been a doctor's office, a haberdashery, a meat market and a school.

At last, the court ordered the building to be put up for sealed-bid sale, and the foundation found itself in business. It borrowed the purchase cost, \$18,000, mostly from United Virginia Bank/Rockbridge, which has taken a keen interest in preservation efforts in Lexington since the "renaissance" began. It kept its own resources, about \$15,000 at the time (representing donations from throughout the United States: Lexington has many friends), as working capital for the restoration of the exterior. HLF engaged Thomas W. S. Craven of Charlottesville, another distinguished preservation architect, and undertook repair and restoration work on the

roof, brickwork, porch, garden and even the gate.

In April, 1971, the circle was completed. Carlson Thomas of Lexington, intensely conscious of the city's historic buildings and their potential, bought the house from HLF—the deed included, of course, perpetual restrictions against exterior modifications—and began interior restoration. It was a monumental task, the result of the lack of attention to which the building had been subjected for too many years.

Thomas' perseverance has paid off. A shoe store continues to thrive at street level, and the upper floors have been turned into five majestic guest suites, individually designed and richly furnished with antique and reproduction furniture, original oils and

exquisite appointments. Rates are surprisingly modest; Thomas does not advertise the Alexander-Withrow House, relying instead on word-of-mouth among those who have stayed there and its growing local reputation. Many visitors to Washington and Lee University and Virginia Military Institute stay at Alexander-Withrow now; reservations are to be had by mail. It represents a dramatic achievement—from a dilapidated home for pigeons five years ago to Lexington's most distinctive guest home—and one from which HLF derives that special kind of pride reserved for first accomplishments.

HLF turned its attention next across Main Street, to the Central Hotel, the main portion of which was constructed (according to inference from tax and insurance records) in 1809. In the 20th Century the hotel had acquired a more-or-less unsavory reputation; its popularity was primarily

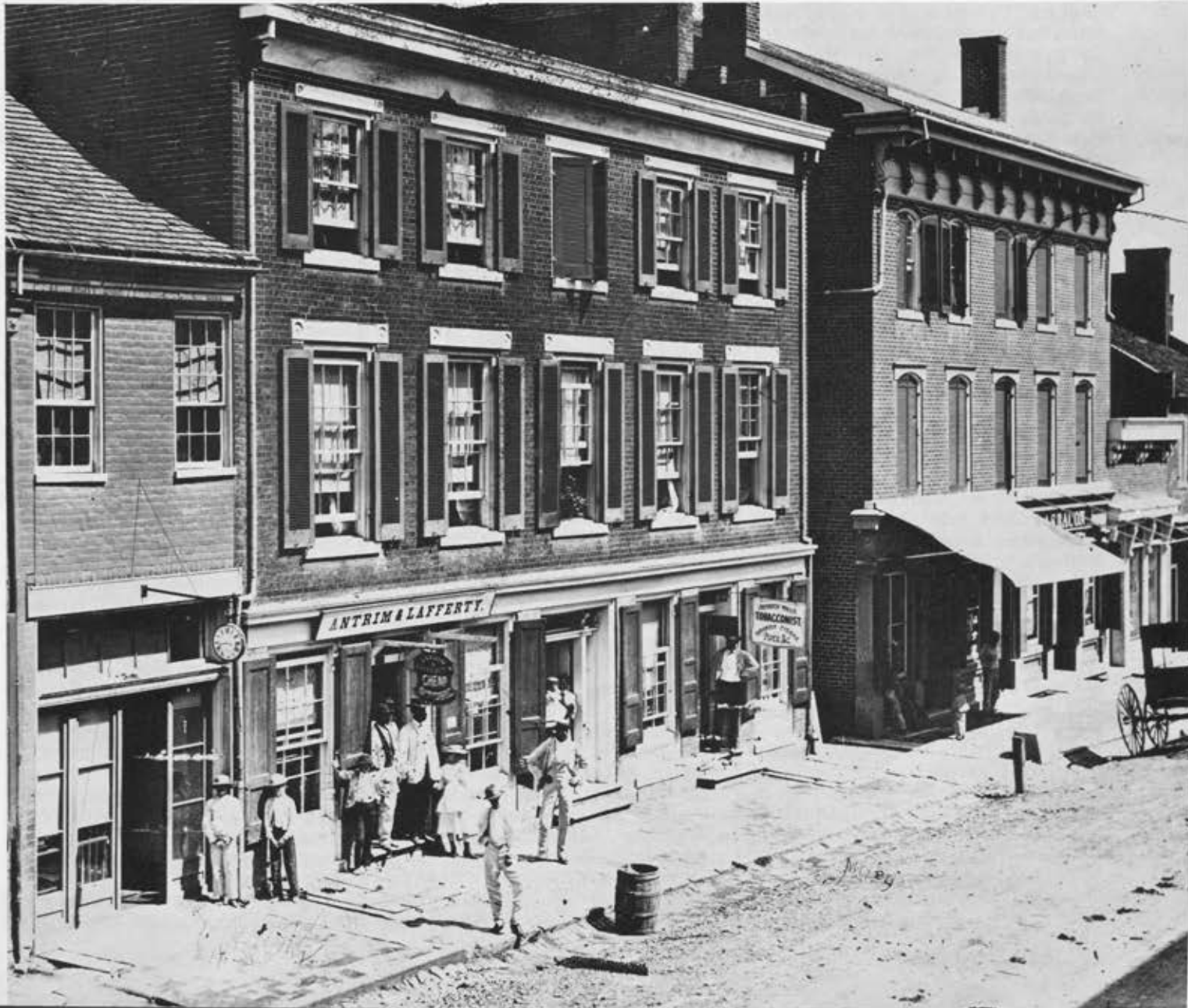
among VMI cadets and W&L students, and to have called it a "hotel" at all was to deal in euphemism. A fire in 1963 virtually destroyed the roof and damaged the upper floors extensively; the "hotel" never reopened, due perhaps as much to changing mores as to the inconvenience of having to rebuild. By 1971, when the Historic Lexington Foundation acquired the property, the upper floors were in such bad condition that employes of the contractor HLF had hired to execute the exterior restoration refused to enter it until exterminators had been called. Today, however, the Central Lunch (known to its student habitues as the Liquid Lunch, or just The 'Quid) continues to operate on the street level of the restored hotel. And not long ago one section of it was purchased by a 1973 Washington and Lee graduate, Conway W. Hunter III, who intends to use it in the way so many buildings on lower Main Street were once used: as a shop

and residence.

A fund-raising drive in 1970 with a \$25,000 goal brought in more than \$30,000, much of it contributed by men and women scattered throughout the United States, but with that extraordinary affection for Lexington that is typical of those who have spent some time in it. HLF had also begun to receive professional recognition for its work—first a small but significant grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, then the first Mary Mason Anderson William award from the APVA for outstanding preservation work. Thus solidly established, HLF acquired the old house just down the street from the hotel, the so-called Jacob M. Ruff House, also built in the first quarter of the 19th century. Close by, John Ruff (father of Jacob) had established a highly successful hat factory, specializing in both "wool hats" for everyday wear (\$1.50) and "fine hats" at \$5, once even creating a mas-

Antrim and Lafferty's Cheap Store on South Main is typical of Lexington buildings c. 1870.

Miley Collection



terpiece of extravagance with feathers that sold for \$14.75. (Cash was not always at hand, and Ruff's ledger shows payment accepted in the form of "two muskrat skins," "two lottery tickets," "4½ lbs. Tallow," "one load of straw" and so forth. Ruff's terms were easy; one gentleman named Brownney was given 15 months to pay for one wool hat and one fine one.)

As had become its pattern, HLF undertook exterior restoration work, engaging Everette Fauber of Lynchburg again, who had completed work on the Barclay House (and had been retained by Washington and Lee as preservation architect for its \$1 million Historic Front Campus restoration project). Things began to click. An agreement was signed in December, 1972, eight months after HLF purchased the house, under which Lexington realtor G. Otis Mead III would purchase it as soon as exterior work could be completed (it will be finished this spring). Meanwhile, Mead engaged Fauber to develop the interior of the Ruff House into offices for his real estate business. And in February, 1973, HLF was awarded a matching grant of \$12,500 through the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, representing Lexington's share of preservation funds appropriated by the U.S. Interior Department.

The Dold House was next—on the northeast corner of Main and Washington Streets, across from the Alexander-Withrow House. The Dold House was built in 1820 by Jordan and Darst and enlarged in 1826; Darst had acquired it in 1830 and sold it to Samuel Dold, who used it as a residence and place of business. The Dold House was the emporium for the first four decades of this century of H. O. Dold, "the student's friend—who needs no advertising," as his advertisements had it; H. O. Dold who was indeed faithfully patronized by every W&L and VMI man, and who was the first old friend they'd look up when they returned to town as alumni; H. O. Dold, who had been convicted of violating the Volstead Act because he routinely sold whole cases of lemon extract (of exceeding proof) to fraternity men during Prohibition. After the death of Dold's widow in 1944, the building passed to the Mary Custis Lee chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who sold it nine years



Porches on north wing of Central Hotel (left) and rear of Jacob M. Ruff House.

later to Lexington's Stonewall Jackson Hospital. In recent years it housed a pharmacy and the offices of two physicians; in April, 1973, it was sold to the Historic Lexington Foundation which immediately resold it—with perpetual deed restrictions, of course—to the three occupants.

Credit the Historic Lexington Foundation, then, with the Alexander-Withrow House, the Central Hotel, the Jacob Ruff House and the Dold House; five years ago three of the four were largely vacant, but now all four are, or will be shortly, productive for their owners and, through new tax revenues, to Lexington. And when the transfer of the Ruff House is complete and a buyer found for the remaining portion of the Central Hotel, HLF's revolving capital fund will itself be restored; the foundation is already looking at other buildings in the area which need similar attention.

The foundation doesn't aspire to become developer of a Williamsburg West. Old Lexington reflects a wide range of building styles, and there is hardly a house or shop that has not been added to or otherwise modified since originally built. Sometimes the changes have been incongruous. But HLF's mission, says M. W. Paxton Jr., its president, is "simply to stabilize Lexington's diverse historic architecture"—not to turn the city into a museum, but rather to guarantee the tradition of its character and appearance, and not incidentally to encourage private business to restore them to economic vitality as well.

With assets considerably in excess of \$100,000 (though \$50,000 is in borrowed money), its prospects—and

therefore Lexington's are bright.

HLF is the most active, comprehensive preservation group in Lexington; it draws support from the broad range of men and women in the city and elsewhere who believe deeply that its physical heritage is irreplaceable and must be permitted to endure equally with the spiritual. HLF is enthusiastic and aggressive; it undertakes its projects only after exhaustive research, and with painstaking care and attention to detail.

But HLF is not alone. The local governments of Rockbridge County and, especially, Lexington have recognized—partly at HLF's prodding—that preservation works to the real and permanent benefit of the entire community. Both Washington and Lee and Virginia Military Institute—the one 225 years old, the other 135—have always guarded their heritage vigorously, and both are approaching it now with renewed zeal. More and more, businessmen are excited about preservation—and about the profits it can bring.

Washington Street, which intersects Main at the Alexander-Withrow and Dold Houses, was not in much better shape than lower Main in the mid-1960s. With the new interest in the appearance of the city's old buildings, however, Rockbridge County undertook a substantial face-lifting on its office buildings on the south side of Washington, and there is discussion of applying a substantial portion of the county's revenue-sharing funds to a restoration and modernization of the 80-year-old Court House.

Lexington, for its part, has embarked on an ambitious capital improvement



From this remodeling rubble in Sheridan's Livery Stable will emerge a 16-shop "old style" mall.

program which includes major efforts at enhancing the attractiveness of the historic business district (at the north edge of which, confusing local terminology notwithstanding, "lower" Main Street lies). With the cooperation of Veeco, utility lines will be buried; a grant from HLF to the city Planning Commission enabled the city to engage architect Craven as a consultant on the question of new street lights. In January Lexington's City Council gave preliminary approval to a rustic brown post with an unusual and quaint lamp atop.

The city and HLF cooperate in a variety of other ways: HLF was the prime mover behind the 1971 adoption of a strict set of zoning standards for the historic downtown district. In 1973 the "historic zone" was extended to include the entire business area of Lexington. Under the code, no changes in the exterior appearance of buildings in the area—not even installation of window air-conditioning units—can be made until the Planning Commission has decided the modifications are appropriate to the character of the area.

In another instance, when it became necessary for the city to replace a section of sidewalk on lower Main Street, HLF chipped in the extra cost of laying a brick walk in a herringbone pattern, reminiscent of the old sculptured-brick walks still in use in several residential areas of the city.

Lexington, which has never done as much in an active way as it might to encourage "tourism," has also lately embarked on a large-scale program to attract visitors. Emphasizing both the natural beauty of the surrounding area and its extraordinary association with

the national development and heritage, the city created in 1973 a Visitor Relations Bureau. Its director is Richard R. Fletcher, a board member of HLF and director of the Rockbridge Historical Society, and the department's headquarters are, naturally enough, in an historical old home on Washington Street—the Campbell House, built about 1810.

Lexington's mayor, Charles F. Phillips Jr., explains the new emphasis on enhancing the city's appearance and emphasizing its history as "a recognition of the simple fact that the real future of Lexington lies in the economic viability of the downtown area"—and that to preserve its character is to assure its commercial success. "Preservation," he says, "is simply good business."

United Virginia Bank/Rockbridge—which provided financing for the Alexander-Withrow renovation and for the restoration of Sheridan's Livery Stable—applied to the City Council late in 1973 for an easement to permit remodeling of the exterior of its downtown main office by adding a brick facade (over the existing marble front), to reflect the character of the district.

One of the most ambitious private restoration projects was recently initiated by a partnership formed among Carlson Thomas, the owner of the Alexander-Withrow House; Charles L. Harer, a CPA; and Thomas C. Bradshaw II, a Lexington photographer. (Thomas and Harer were partners on an earlier private restoration—of the John Ruff residence immediately north of HLF's Jacob M. Ruff House. Harer's offices and a village crafts shop are

now located in it.) Thomas, Harer and Bradshaw purchased yet another of the decaying, vacant old buildings on lower Main Street, the 87-year-old Sheridan's Livery Stable, and are converting it into an indoor shopping mall called "Old Main Street." Each shop inside—there will be 16 on the main level, nine or ten on the basement level, and (farther in the future) four on the second story—will be individually designed in any of a number of period styles: Victorian, mid-19th Century American, and such. The shops will open onto wide walkways crisscrossing through the building, each named for one of Old Lexington's principal streets. There will even be a Court House Square with a fountain and benches. The partners are acquiring authentic old windows, doors and cornices of countless varieties and vintages from all over Virginia; when they're done (this summer), Thomas says, "it will be like a stage set." There has already been considerable interest in the shops, though "Old Main Street" is still in the early stages of design and construction (Thomas, a contractor, is doing the work himself).

Why is Carlson Thomas, a private citizen, so deeply involved in Lexington restoration? His concern is that the answer might sound "too corny." Put it this way, he says: he just loves "old things"—old cars, old furniture, old buildings. Not to mention the pretty weighty satisfaction, he adds, in taking a decaying, useless building with no visible potential and developing it into something with a proud sense of history and character—and something, too, that will show before long a profit as handsome as its new face. □