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Shenandoah County, VA: The South Begins Here

by MALERIE YOLEN-COHEN *on* APRIL 27, 2016

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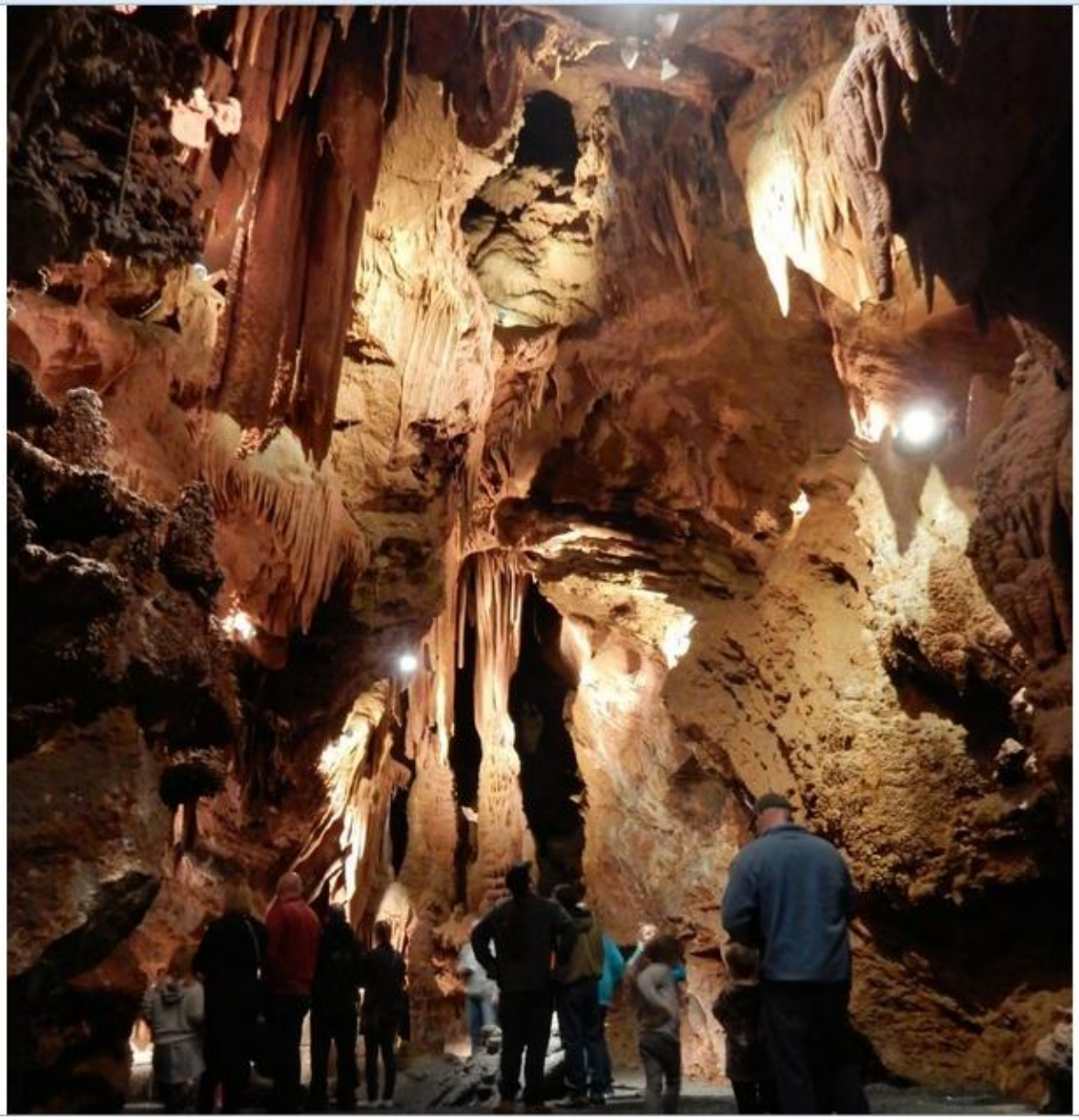
WHY GO: True South begins here. Cross over into Shenandoah County, Virginia, and you'll feel it right away, especially as you drive its 30 miles from north to south through **Strasburg, Woodstock, Edinburg, New Market** – all linked together on US 11 – where you'll still find Confederate flags flying from front porches. In the 1800's, this was the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy," torched by Union General, Philip Sheridan, during the Civil War. Destroying every last sprig of wheat, stalk of corn and storage barn, the raid succeeded in cutting off Confederate food supplies.

Though in some quarters resentment remains, “The Burning Raid,” is generally relegated to the history books. The Shenandoah Valley is once again verdant and beautiful. There are caverns to explore, Rose Bowl floats to ogle, superb potato chips to munch, and, surprisingly, a growing number of passionate artisans and crafts-people who are more than happy to welcome you into their studio-homes. The Getaway Mavens tells you how to get the best out of this region through its history, food and art. Read on....

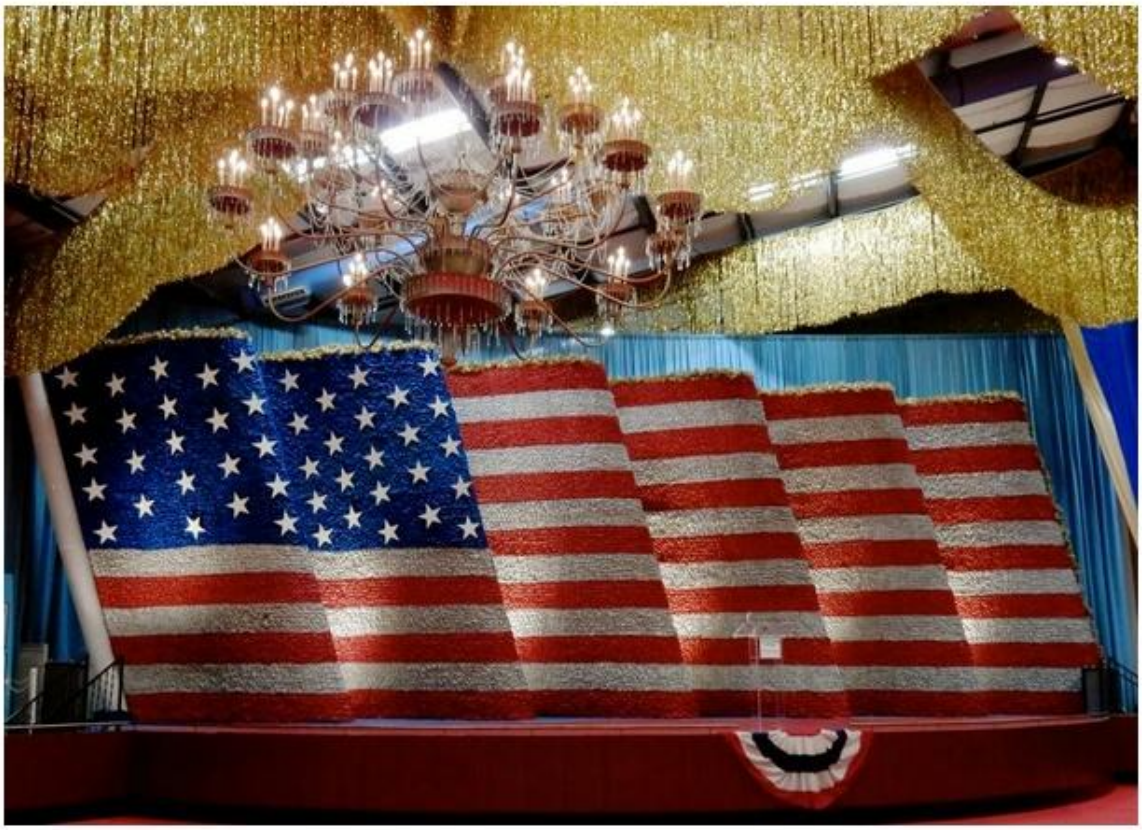
Things to Do in Shenandoah County VA

TOUR: **Shenandoah Caverns** and **Main Street of Yesteryear**, Quicksburg. Descend 60 feet into the only cavern in Virginia with elevator service to a wondrous subterranean world. This is the most formation-rich cave I've ever seen: throughout 17 rooms – this one-hour one mile tour will expose you to some of the best of them. Opened in 1922, Shenandoah Caverns has employed most of the surrounding population (within a 15-mile radius) at one time or another.



There are visual delights around every bend; the multi-colored lit Grotto of the Gods, Cathedral Hall (most popular for weddings), Diamond Cascade glittering with calcium crystals, the "Capital Dome," and let's not forget the bacon. In 1964, National Geographic proclaimed Shenandoah Caverns to have some of the most realistic bacon formations on earth.

Access **Main Street of Yesteryear** from the Cavern gift shop. This collection of electrified, dynamic department store window displays from the 40's and 50's are in mint condition and still thrill. Circus scenes, Nutcracker reproductions, Cinderella at the Ball – you can stare for hours at these animatronic scenes. *Open daily 9-5 (until 6pm in summer). $24 for Caverns, Main St. and American Celebration entrance.*



TOUR: **American Celebration on Parade,** Quicksburg. You'll find this homage to Rose Bowl and Presidential Inauguration floats in a humongous warehouse just down the hill from the Shenandoah Caverns. Opened in 2000, this Technicolor extravaganza of a museum showcases over 20 full-sized parade floats created by Hargrove, Inc, a company that originated with a horse-drawn float for Truman's 1949 Inaugural Parade.

You can't miss the 47 ft wide, 20 ft. tall glittery woman used for the Miss America Pageant, the Rose Parade and Philly's Thanksgiving Day Parade, the 60 ft. long American Flag that appeared in both Reagan's and Obama's Inaugural shindigs, and the 100-ft. long train built for Clinton's inauguration. Hargrove still creates these movable pieces of art for events all over the country. *Open in season only, $24 adults for Main St. and this museum.*

VISIT: Strasburg Museum, Strasburg. You might first dismiss this museum as a dusky place with a lot of old dusty stuff, but resist the urge and plan at least an hour here. You'll see some amazing things. Inside a former steam pottery factory in use until 1913 (steam engines turned the potters' wheels), and a railroad station until the 50's, it was turned into a museum in 1970 after Strasburg citizens delved into attics, barns and closets to create exhibits you see now. Black history, Native American History, Civil War, German heritage, farming – you'll find it all here. Representing two sides of a conflict and then Unification, Confederate and Union Flags hang alongside the American Flag from a soaring 40-foot ceiling.

If you have only 30 minutes, be sure to see three things:

Two intact Colonial Era German bibles: A 1773 bible owned by founder of Strasburg, Peter Stover, and a larger one, printed in 1739, owned by the Miller Family. The 1739 bible was nearly destroyed during a Native American raid when many of the Millers were massacred and the book set afire, saved only by the weight and blood of a dead cat tossed on its cover. The last of the Millers donated it to the museum.

Pottery room. Strasburg was so famous for its pottery it was nicknamed "Pot Town" and this museum is repository for what is considered the best public display of Strasburg Pottery in the same place where said pottery was made. A thriving industry in the 1800's, most clayware companies in Strasburg turned out utilitarian ceramic food storage vessels. By the turn of last century, glass bottles and tin cans had effectively put pottery companies out of business.

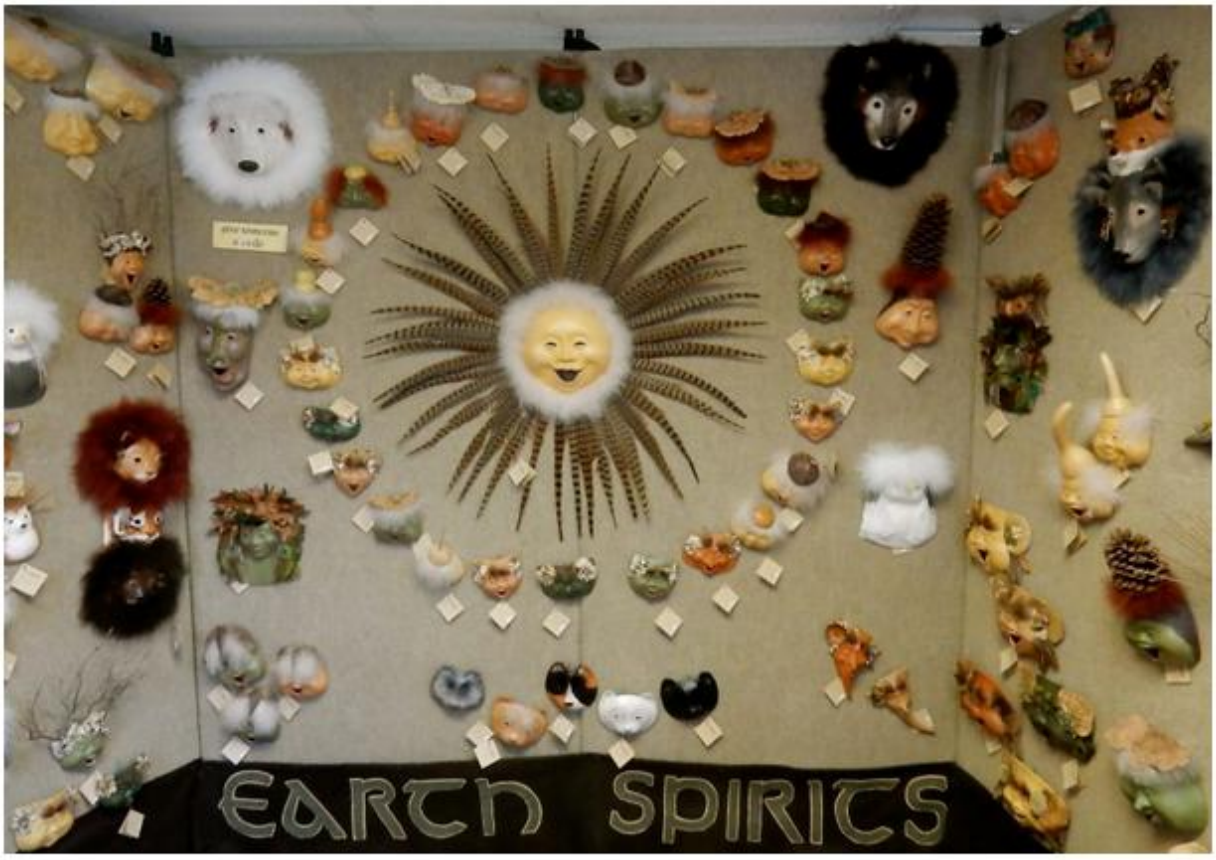
John Schreiner's Golden Age of Rail Model Train Set. Out back in a restored railroad car, you'll find a version of September 21, 1939 writ small. Constructed in great detail by model-train set wizard, Schreiner, this multi-media diorama incorporates the Arthur Godfrey radio broadcast from that day, Gone with the Wind playing at a tiny drive-in-theater, a passenger train with interior lights, four smokestacks pumping out steam, night scenes with neon lights and stars in the sky, a very believable sunrise, and so much more.

Schreiner's latest project involved photoshopping 300 images to use as backdrop for his 55 ft by 5 ft creation, which pulls the whole incredible scene together. If you have just a few minutes to spare – make a beeline to this dynamic historical wonder. *Open May-October daily 10-4, $3 adults $.50 kids.*

VISIT: Artist Studios on the O Shenandoah County Artisan Trail. There are now over 70 artists on the Trail, but stopping in at the studios of the following few is a start, and brings you to some that are most involved in community events. This is a fantastic way to discover back roads and small hamlets, and of course, fantastic people.

Kary Haun Pottery, **Woodstock**. Haun's painting-like glazes are distinctive works of art. She works "slow and steady," concentrating, for example, on the shape of geranium blooms, or woodland scenes. Most popular for wedding gifts are her one-of-a-kind pour-over coffee brew pots ($190), a unique and lovely version of the standard Melitta, that recipients will want to keep on display.

Clive Turner, Teacher/Painter, Lebanon Church. Turner comes by his artistic talents naturally. His father and brother are artists (both attended Rhode Island School of Design in Turner's home-town of Providence), though Clive took a more circuitous route. He's worked on large-scale murals and small canvases, but his true love is teaching seniors and youngsters how to "see" with both their eyes and imagination. "If I can change their thinking for one day, I got 'em."



Liz Hollingsworth Earth Spirit Masks, Middletown. Liz was "a nurse with a pottery habit," and turned that habit into a full-time occupation. Her masks, creatures and imps, with mostly happy or surprised expressions, are created from natural objects that she finds on walks in the woods (or are sent by friends from all over the world). Earth Spirits Studio is a wonderfully enchanted place.

Susie Wilburn, **Laughing Orange Studio**, **Tom's Brook**. One look at the bright orange/yellow house and you'll know how the pottery studio got its name (which happens to be the name of the Sherman Williams paint color). Though known for her diminutive fairy garden décor – mini fairy ponds, tables, leaf-seating, toadstools – Wilburn's fantastical platters and bowls are stunning museum-worthy pieces.

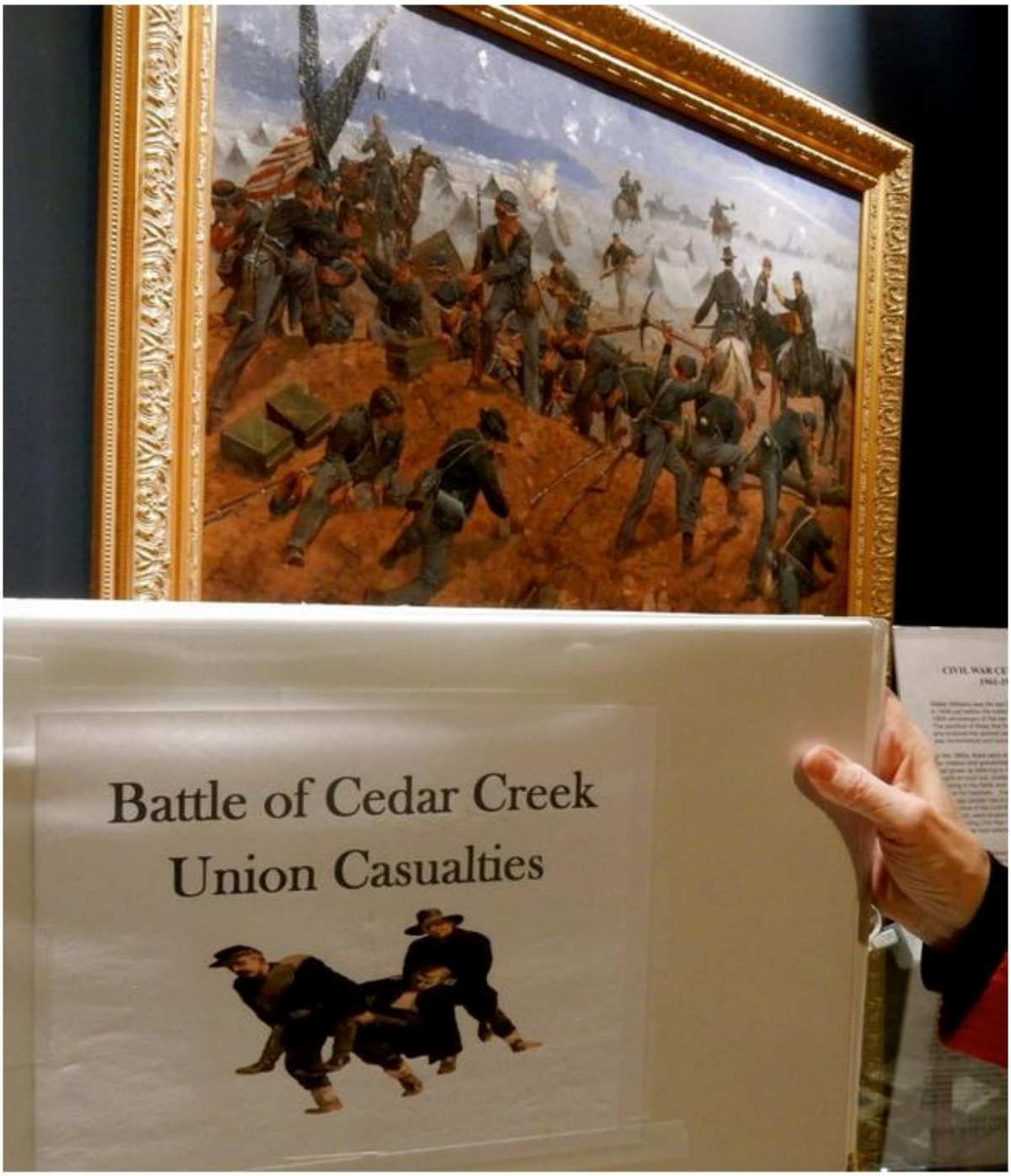
Chickadees Pottery Gallery, **New Market**. You can still see 1898 graffiti in this pre-civil war jailhouse turned art gallery. Watch hand-thrown pottery being made in the back and then pick up a piece.

TOUR: Posey Thisisit Llama Farm, Toms Brook. Llamas manage to look regal and adorable at the same time, with their dignified stares and impossibly long eye lashes. Joyce Hall (nicknamed "Posey") keeps 31 llamas on this farm open to the public; among them the attention-seeking "Mocha Man" who greets you coming up the drive, "Butterscotch Mink" who loves a deep tissue massage on his back, rolling his eyes in satisfaction, and Easter Bunny, who demonstrates a "Llama Kiss" with a quickly eaten mouth-to-mouth-co-joined carrot.

These animals are so docile, they are brought to nursing homes as therapy animals and so engaging, you'll want to plan a stop to break up a hectic day. *Call for an appointment – (540) 436–3517.*

VISIT: Route 11 Potato Chips, Mt. Jackson. It's the South's version of Cape Cod Chips – and comes in all kinds of flavors (e.g Old Bay). Come into the factory to see 100 pounds of potatoes sliced in 42 seconds, then fried in 300 degree sunflower oil. Chips are inspected and "bad ones" – with holes, green etc. – are pulled out and fed to local cattle. Lucky cows. *Open Mondays – Saturdays, 9am-5pm, free.*

STOP: Woodstock Courthouse Museum and Visitors Center, Woodstock. A symbol of Shenandoah, this is the oldest working courthouse west of the Blue Ridge. Until 2012, trials were still held here, but local citizens wanted this historic building opened to the public. On this spot is also where, in January 1776, Pastor John Peter Muhlenberg had his Patrick Henry moment. Ending his sermon with, 'There is a time to preach and a time to fight. This is the time to fight," Muhlenberg threw off his frock to reveal his Continental Army uniform. The current building has stood here since 1795, and was a prison for both Union and Confederate soldiers whose graffiti you can still see on the walls. *Thurs – Sat. 11-4, free.*


Battle of Cedar Creek
Union Casualties

TOUR: Belle Grove Plantation, Middletown. A "witness house" during the Civil War, The Battle of Cedar Creek was fought in part across the street from this distinctive 1797 limestone home, quarried from the still-operating open-pit mine down the road. Owned by Isaac Hite and his wife Nelly (James Madison's sister), the 7500-acre gristmill, sawmill, livestock and whisky-making plantation kept 101 slaves at its peak. (Copper Fox Distillery now makes a 1797 Belle Grove Whiskey using the same recipe as Hite's).

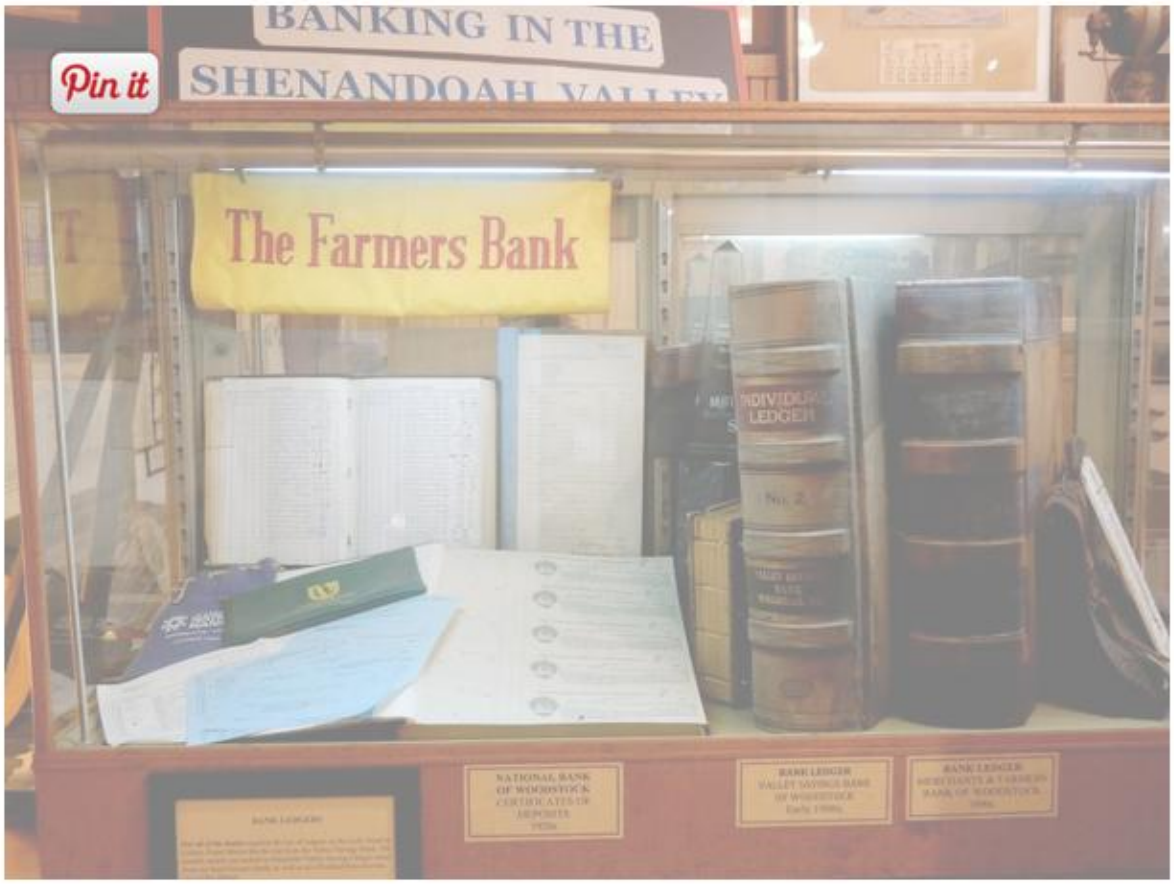
Thirteen ft. ceilings are more Antebellum than Colonial – very high for the era – and have been restored to original bright colors. Nellie died in 1803, and Isaac remarried Ann Morey who bore him ten children in 14 years, necessitating the addition of another wing. A 45-minute tour will take you through the house, out onto the front porch where you can see indentations from Civil War bullets on one of the columns and cannonball holes on the limestone façade, and then into the original children's bedroom where, during the Civil War, General Stephen Ramseur died surrounded by his best West Point friends, General George Custer, and Captain Henry A. DuPont. A photo of that scene is posted on the wall. *Open Mid-March – Dec. Mon-Sat 10-4, Sundays in summer 1-5. $12 adults, $6 children.*

TOUR: [Battle Of Cedar Creek](#) National Park, Strasburg. A Confederate victory at dawn and a Union victory by early evening, October 19, 1864 was one hell of a whirlwind day during the Civil War. Marching at night, the greatly outnumbered Confederate unit stealthy snuck around the unaware Union camp, surrounding them on three flanks by 5am – pushing them north to Middletown. General Sheridan heard the cannon fire as he rode south from Winchester, and quickened his pace to rally his troops (later commemorated as "Sheridan's Ride") who rose to the occasion with a Union victory by 5pm.

The 6th Regiment Volunteer Vermont Infantry sustained the greatest loss- out of 164 men, 110 were killed or wounded. Visitors from that State often want to see the Vermont Monument sculpted from Vermont granite that honors them. The Battle was fought over a ten-mile range, and there's lots to see on both public and private land, including the location of the bridge where the Confederate Army crossed at 3am.

Covering 3,700 acres, this somewhat confusing site is not your typical National Park. For starters, it's managed by 6 entities, and is still improving with signage and mission. And the Contact Visitor's Center is located in a strip shopping center. But do stop there first. You'll get an overview of the Battle and can pick up a free audio tour – or, if you'd like, arrange for a 2-hour car caravan or step-on tour led by Park Rangers. *Open daily 9-4:30, free, fee for tours.*

VISIT/TASTE: Swover Creek Farms, Edinburg. Who knew this little obscure place could hold so many surprises. A "Century Farm," – meaning it's been in business at least 100 years – Swover Creek has moved into beer-making as a "Farm Brewery" (yes, that's a thing). The farm grows its own hops and utilizes homegrown ingredients in the making of its Dirty Blonde, Red Clay (my favorite), IPA and other small-batch brews. Walk into this unassuming building to find a pretty tasting room and bar shelves lined with local-potter-fashioned mugs, representing 130 members of the *Swover Creek Brewery Mug Club*. Even more amazing – house-made sausages, served snug inside pretzel rolls, are the best I've ever had. No surprise that they recently took 1st Prize for Sausage in 2015 Virginia Living Magazine. What's next for Swover Creek? They are putting the finishing touches on two outdoor brick ovens for authentic pizza. Stay tuned.



TOUR: **Shenandoah Valley Cultural Heritage Museum @ Edinburg Mill**. This is one of the few mills to survive "The Burning" though some scorched timbers are still visible. A 40-minute documentary about Sheridan's torching of the Shenandoah Valley shows here four times a day, which is reason enough to stop by, though you may also want to wander through this somewhat slapdash trove of local artifacts, donated by Edinburg residents. Most notable is an extensive collection of Red Cross memorabilia, and a display of the First Civilian Conservation Corp's (CCC) camp in America – Camp Roosevelt – established in 1932 just nine miles from here. *Open Mon-Sat 10-5, Sun 12-5, $3.*

VISIT: Virginia Museum of the Civil War, New Market Battlefield. Every Civil War battlefield has its own dramatic story. This one involves kids. The Battle of New Market was the first time in history that 257 cadets, ages 15-21 from Virginia Military Institute, were called up as Confederate reinforcements in the face of the encroaching Union Army. They marched 85 miles in five days, and fought on an open field so muddy from rain, it sucked the shoes right off their feet (subsequently called "The Field of Lost Shoes").

The Southern victory came at great cost. Ten cadets were killed and 47 wounded on May 15, 1864, and along with a stained glass wall by Israeli artist, Ami Shamir, depicting the battle, the museum houses uniforms, body armor and copies of letters that the cadets sent home. Those letters, imploring parents "not to be uneasy" about the upcoming battle, are the most heartrending of all. *Open daily 9-5, free.*

TOUR: Smith Creek Heritage Farm, New Market. Tommy and Georgie Wright are not spring chickens, but they felt compelled to haul six trucks worth of old farm tools from Tennessee to this old drafty barn atop a lonely New Market hill, so they can share information about how farming was done in the days before engines and electricity.

From a rusty scythe ("first tool used during Jesus' time") to Barrel Butter Churners, shovels, pitchforks, plows, rakes, and Tommy's great-grandfather's Civil War trunk and saddle, hearing the older couple's commentary is half the fun. Off a gravel road, this is a bit tough to find – compounded by the fact that there is no website or online presence. *Open April-Nov. 15, Thurs-Sat 1-5 or by appointment. Call 540-333-3955.*

Where to Eat in Shenandoah County VA

EAT: Cristina's Cafe, Strasburg. It's a hippy-dippy, folksy, music venue, art gallery, craft shop, bar, farm-to-table Mexican restaurant all rolled into one, and by many accounts the best place to eat in the county. Sit beneath ceramic fish tiles ($15) and oil paintings ($400) displayed on walls, listen to Starry Starry Night and other Boomer tunes (on open-mic night), and munch on toothsome burritos ($12.95), or Half Quesadilla and ½ Salad ($9.95) and the like, while sipping on Sangria ($7).

EAT: Swover Creek Farms. (See above). Stop in for a fresh-brewed beer and one of the best Sweet Italian Sausages on the planet.

EAT: Woodstock Garden Café @ Fort Valley Nursery, Woodstock. Set inside a lifestyle nursery/garden center, this little salad spot is perfect for lunch. And you know the greens are fresh-picked.

EAT/DRINK: **Woodstock Brewhouse,** **Woodstock**. Belly up to the curved poured concrete bar in the repurposed Casey Jones Work-Clothes factory (which manufactured Wrangler jeans). Eight guys – all with other careers – got together to open this brewhouse in 2015 because "there was no place like this to go. So we created it." You can sit overlooking fermenting tanks or on chairs from several baseball stadiums around the country – and a green stool from Fenway's Green Monster! Pub-grub, like Flatbread pizzas ($5-$9) hits the spot, washed down with Brite Blonde, Tipsy Squirrel (nut brown ale), 7-Bender (referencing the Shenandoah River), Crow's Provender IPA or other fresh brews.

Where to Stay in Shenandoah County VA

STAY: **A.C. Stickley B&B, Strasburg**. A Maven-Favorite, this lovely Victorian B&B on a hill deserves its own review – HERE.