

Everybody  
knows  
everybody.



## GROTTOES: The Town that Caves Helped Build

**G**rottoes, an incorporated town within Augusta and Rockingham county borders, is a town that caves helped build.



US 340 and SR 256 intersect in Grottoes.

About 15 miles from bustling Harrisonburg along the South River in the Shenandoah Valley, Grottoes (pop: 2,800) is home to Grand Caverns, originally known as Weyer's Cave, America's oldest continuously operating show cave, attracting over 50,000 visitors

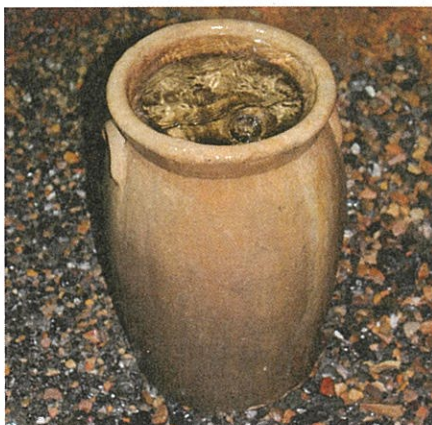
annually. In 1804, trapper Bernard Weyer stumbled upon the limestone cave's entrance while retrieving a trap and the cave opened for public tours in 1806.

Jedediah Hotchkiss, Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson's mapmaker, started buying up area land (originally known

as Liola, then Shendun) and founded The Grottoes Company in 1888. Hotchkiss traveled through the area during the Civil War and envisioned Shendun, an alternate pronunciation of Shenandoah, as a large metropolis and personally laid out the town. By 1889 Weyers Cave had gained



Grand Caverns Park Sign.



Water fills an earthen pot from ceiling drips in the caverns.



Ashley Collier, tourism and parks director, oversees Grand Caverns.



worldwide fame, and the Shenandoah Valley Railroad snaked through the area, providing transportation for area ore and coal industries.

As Hotchkiss attracted investors with his hopes for the town, Shendun enjoyed a brief boom period as lots were sold for home construction and businesses began. But things started slowing. The Grottoes Company began laying off employees and Hotchkiss resigned as Grottoes Company president. By 1893, America was mired in depression and Grottoes Company was bankrupt. In 1912, Shendun's name was changed to Grottoes, a word meaning caves.

The caverns endured, with eight different private owners overseeing cave operations until 2009, when the town of Grottoes took over Grand Caverns.

"Grand Caverns is one of three caves on Cave Hill: Madison Cave is on private property, there's Grand Caverns and Fountain Cave, discovered in 1835," explains Ashley Collier, Grottoes' tourism and parks director.

Fountain Cave, a commercial cave that had not been opened to the public for almost 100 years, started offering "wild adventure" cave tours in 2013.

"The previous park director worked hard to get Fountain Cave open for scheduled two-hour guided tours that have been very well-received," Collier says. "No other caves in Virginia do adventure tours."

Fountain Cave has not been modernized for commercial tours. There are no lights, gravel or paved walkways. Guests must "suit up" with helmets, headlights, knee pads and gloves. Visitors can opt for a true caving experience (strenuous climbing and

crawling) or can use a rugged 1800s pathway.

There's no denying Grand Caverns' impact on Grottoes. Long-time resident Jeanne Kirby, Grottoes Volunteer Fire Department historian and a former Grand Caverns tour guide, jokes, "If you live here long enough, you'll end up being a tour guide there."

"Town people see the caverns as a plus, because it brings people to the community," Kirby adds. "Grand Caverns was the first place in the area that had electricity ... a mill upstream had a turbine that generated electricity for the cave."

By the 1930s, Duplan Textiles was established just outside of Grottoes, where women worked during World War II making parachutes. In 1948 a central water system was installed in town and the volunteer fire department was organized that same year. In 1956 Reynolds Metals Company opened a plastic-wrap division across from the caverns; today the former plant is home to Pactiv, which manufactures and distributes food service and food-packaging products.

Kirby became involved with Grottoes Volunteer Fire Department when she married husband David, noting, "His grandparents were some of the fire department's founding members." There are six paid firefighters and more than 75 volunteer firefighters.

Kirby calls the volunteer firefighters "the most dedicated bunch of people I have ever met in my life," adding, "we still have active firefighters in their 50s, we have a lot of

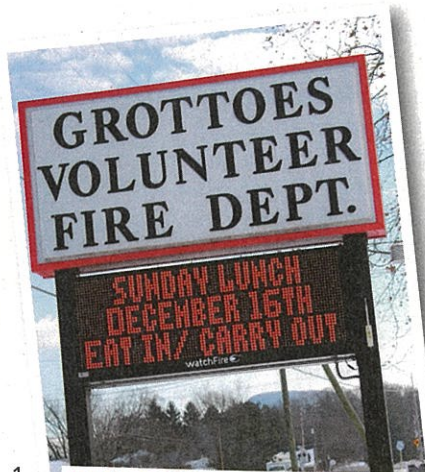
second-generation volunteers and a huge staff of teenagers."

Some of the teenagers come out of Massanutten Technical Center's Fire & Rescue Program, a two-year program where students are encouraged to join a local fire department or rescue squad. The fire program is part of the technical education center serving Harrisonburg and



Visitors begin their Grand Caverns tour at this office, which includes a gift shop.





1.



2.



3.



4.



5.

1. Grottoes Volunteer Fire Department is a community hub. 2. Fire department historian Jeanne Kirby. 3. Fire displays at Grottoes Fire Department Museum. 4. Shops on 340 specializes in toys, collectibles and DVDs. 5. Ben Brown is an Augusta County firefighter who also volunteers at Grottoes Volunteer Fire Department. 6. Town of Grottoes offices are housed in a former 1925 school building. 7. Christa Hall, administrative assistant for the town of Grottoes. 8. Mountain View Park, a local favorite, includes river frontage and mountain views.



6.



7.



8.

Rockingham County Public Schools. Kirby says Grottoes Volunteer Fire Department has the reputation of turning out most professional firefighters in the Shenandoah Valley.

"We have excellent training, so younger kids come here and train. Some stay with us as volunteers and some become professional firefighters," Kirby explains.

In addition to training rooms, there are event areas, a commercial-quality kitchen, a distinctive yellow fire truck fleet and an impressive gym where firefighters keep in shape. In 2012 the department opened a fire department museum onsite, complete with memorabilia, vintage uniforms and a 1920s-era chemical hand cart that provided firefighters high-pressure water to battle fires.

Grottoes Rescue Squad, formed in 1967, is also a volunteer-based organization, providing rescue and EMT services. Paid fire department personnel assist them. The squad provides both basic and advanced emergency medical care.

Nathan Garrison, town manager and a Grottoes native, calls the fire department "a major player" in the community, not only with fire safety but as a social hub.

"The fire department is the place to be ... they are constantly having get-togethers and lawn parties," Garrison explains.

Grottoes Town Hall is housed in a former 1925 elementary school building. Administrative assistant Christa Hall moved to the area from Harrisonburg and has worked there more than 11 years.

"Everybody knows everybody ... when I first came here I remember thinking, how do they know all that?" Hall says with a laugh. "My husband is from the Hinton area and he wanted country life. I liked the city, so Grottoes was a good compromise. Everybody is so friendly here."

There are eight churches within Grottoes' town limits, plus more on the outskirts of town. Grottoes United Methodist Church and Mt. Moriah Methodist Church are among the oldest town churches. The town's Park Avenue includes 1800s-era homes, some undergoing renovation and some totally renovated. Some locals use the local convenience store as a gathering spot, perching on outside ledges in front of store windows, weather permitting.

The park area at Grand Caverns offers hiking trails, picnic shelters, fishing on the trout-stocked South River and a public swimming pool open Memorial Day through Labor Day. Mountain View Park includes pavilions, ballfields and river access. The misty Blue Ridge Mountains and Skyline Drive can be seen from the park.



Troy Davis opened Shops on 340 in 2013 near Grottoes Pharmacy. The business sells eclectic items from 50 vendors, including collectibles, toys, DVDs, books, video games and furniture. Davis specializes in "Star Wars" and "GI Joe" collectibles.

"Mainly our customers are locals, but our popular 1980s toys also attract people from out of the area looking for specific items," Davis explains. "People like the '80s toys, video games and media in general."

High Laurel Inn is Grottoes' only bed-and-breakfast inn. Owners James and Helen Madison have operated the inn, adjoining Shenandoah National Park, since 2005. Two spacious 20-by-20-foot guest suites with sitting areas, gas-log stoves, stocked refrigerators and private decks offering mountain views are in a renovated barn steps from the Madisons' main home. James, who grew up near Williamsburg and moved to Grottoes in 1991, says he was drawn to the area because he loved the mountains.

"Reynolds was the big employer when I moved here. Now people commute to the Walmart Distribution Center in Mt. Crawford, Coors Brewery or Merck Pharmaceutical in Elkton or James Madison University in Harrisonburg," James says. "There are good-hearted people here who will do anything for you."

About the couple's bed-and-breakfast venture he notes, "You meet people from all over the world."

Down the road in a strip mall is another popular local spot, Wood Fired Oven, an

Italian restaurant featuring fresh, homemade food with Mediterranean flair. The restaurant opened in 2003. After husband George passed away in 2016, his widow Maria Toscano continued his vision.

"We have a lot of regular customers," Toscano says. "I just decided he [her husband] would have wanted me to keep the restaurant open. Our pizza, shish kabob and special New York steaks are very popular here and we're very busy on the weekends."

She adds, "I like small towns ... it's quiet here and the community helped when my husband passed away."

Waitress Kimberly Myers, who moved from Elkton to Grottoes last year, admits, "I'm not much of a city person. I love little towns. People are polite and respectful here, and I feel safe walking my dog down the road at night."

Back at Grand Caverns, tour guide Matthew Puerta points out one of the cave's over 200 Civil War soldier signatures (both Union and Confederate): an 1864 signature of W.W. Miles, a captain in the 14th Pennsylvania Calvary. The 1804 signature of the cave's discoverer, Bernard Weyer, is nearby.

Over 2,000 signatures from previous visitors dot cave walls, harkening back to the 1800s when visitors enjoyed "grand illuminations" and parties by candlelight as they squeezed through narrow passages to admire cavern wonders. One area, dubbed "The Grand Ballroom," hosted many such soirees.

Puerta points out a rusty metal ladder left behind (visitors brought ladders with them to climb to different levels) while commenting on the cave's shields, large, flat disc-like formations attached to walls and ceilings. Most caves have few of these formations; Grand Caverns has 250.

In August 2011, when a 5.8-magnitude earthquake hit Central Virginia, two tour groups were enjoying tours. Puerta says he was told "the entire cave shook and people described a sound like a freight train." The caverns were closed for inspections following the event, but all was well.

As impressive as Grand Caverns are, Kirby says, "The caverns bring people here but we are more than Grand Caverns. We value community, churches, education and old values."

"It sounds corny, but people treat each other with respect and kindness here." ■

1. James Madison and wife Helen run Grottoes' only bed and breakfast, High Laurel Inn. 2. Wood Fired Oven owner Maria Toscano has kept the popular eatery going since the 2016 death of husband George. 3. Wood Fired Oven is a Grottoes favorite. 4. Kimberly Myers, a waitress at Wood Fired Oven, says she loves little towns like Grottoes. 5. Signature of Bernard Weyer, who discovered the caverns. 6. This old metal portable ladder was used by visitors to ascend to different cave levels in the 1800s. 7. Tour guide Matthew Puerta, at Grand Caverns.

