

**Ashe County Cheese Plant:** Established in 1931, the plant located in the heart of downtown remains a big draw for West Jefferson and offers daily tours of the cheese-making operation as well as a retail gift shop.



The Ashe County Cheese Plant resides in West Jefferson.

**Ashe Arts Center:** Dedicated in 1938, this is the only WPA building in West Jefferson and is the center of the arts in town. Its gallery features nine changing art exhibits a year including the regionally juried "Best of the Blue Ridge" and the popular Tree Fest each Christmas. The center is also the site for concerts and programs in music, literature and drama.

**St. Mary's Episcopal Church:** Together with the nearby Church of the Holy Communion, these two century-old carpenter gothic buildings are known as the Churches of the Frescoes. St. Mary's features three of artist Ben Long's frescoes, "Mary Great with Child," "The Mystery of Faith" and "John the Baptist."

**Ashe County Public Library:** Enlarged to more than 27,000 square feet in 2009 at a cost of more than \$3 million, raised through public and private sources. The Library and Arts Council sponsor "On the Same Page,"

Ashe County's annual literary festival which draws nationally known authors and attendees from throughout the Southeast.

**Arts District:** Featuring more than a dozen galleries of local crafts and works of art, the Arts District is setting for the Arts Council's popular gallery crawls on



summer evenings. Fourteen murals, depicting scenes of the area's past and natural beauty,

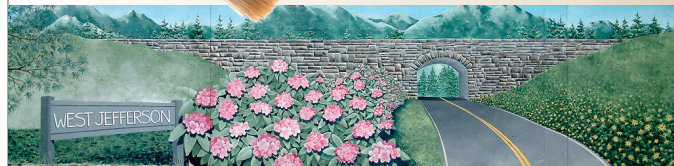
*Thanks to the West Jefferson Arts District - Public displays of art abound. Train and overpass photo by Kim Hadley.*



splash downtown in vibrant colors. The former Thomasville Furniture plant, now refurbished with shops and condominiums,



features one of the largest collections of public art in the region.



**Bowie Seagraves Park and Backstreet Park:** West Jefferson has made significant investments in the two parks near the center of town over the last decade. Bowie Seagraves Park features picnic shelters, a baseball field, basketball court, tennis courts, horseshoe pits and playground. Backstreet Park was established in 2007 and is a venue for summer concerts and other community celebrations.

*Enjoy a summer concert at Backstreet Park in West Jefferson.*

*Photo By Kim Hadley*



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SMALL TOWN  
REVITALIZATION PROGRAM

# WEST JEFFERSON

MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS AND MURALS

*Bring Arts to Life*

Established  
1915

WEST JEFFERSON  
at a Glance

Population (July, 2009):  
1,212  
(+ 5% since 2000)

Median Age:  
43.0 years

Median Household  
Income (2008):  
\$28,474

Median House/Condo  
Value (2008):  
\$145,952

Cost of Living Index (Dec. 2009):  
82.2  
(U.S. average is 100)

Zip Code: 28694



Ask those who love West Jefferson what makes it a special place and you'll hear the reasons behind the town's successes: the fields of Christmas trees dotting the surrounding hillsides, the mountain hospitality and resilient attitude among her residents, an active and creative arts community, the railroad and its legacy, the cane sugar used to sweeten the soda at West Jefferson Dr Pepper and the squeaky cheese curds produced at Ashe County Cheese Plant.



*Downtown West Jefferson bustles with an outdoor farmers market where local farmers and artisans go to sell their produce and handmade crafts. Photo by Kim Hadley*

Or maybe it has something to do with the fresh mountain air, says town manager Brantley Price.

Stroll down Jefferson Avenue to discover what's important to this small mountain town nestled into the mountains of northwest North Carolina. New art galleries, restaurants and retail shops stand shoulder to shoulder with businesses that have nurtured generations of families.

Price can't recall a time when downtown West Jefferson wasn't a hub of commerce and activity. The community's resilience and its people are part of what makes this town so unique. While other small towns have either grown into cities



*An aerial photo of West Jefferson. Photo by Kim Hadley*

or simply faded away, West Jefferson has remained the small town that is quintessential Americana. It's a feeling of home that makes tourists want to visit and visitors want to stay.

West Jefferson got off to a roaring start almost from the first day. A 1916 railroad shipping guide heralded the newly minted town's dozen stores, banks, flour mill, manufacturing plants, new wagon factory and brick

schoolhouse. While the railroad pulled out in the 1970s, the county maintained its rural character with small family farms dotting the picturesque Appalachian landscape.

### Revitalization and Renaissance

In the 1990s, manufacturing began to decline and traditional farming that had sustained the community began to ebb. In contrast, West Jefferson's reputation as an artist haven and tourist destination was growing while Christmas tree farming was fast becoming a cornerstone of the economy.

In 1998 a revitalization group was formed in downtown and one of the first tangible projects was the creation of public murals. Today, the murals – now 14 in all – have become a key draw for downtown and the revitalization group has matured to become the West Jefferson Community Partnership. It includes voices from key stakeholders: the West Jefferson Business Association, the Town of West Jefferson, the Ashe County Arts Council, the Ashe County Library, the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce, the Ashe County Farmers' Market, the West Jefferson Tourism Development Authority and the Christmas in July Festival committee.

Shortly after the town's largest employer shuttered the doors to its plant in the heart of downtown in 2001, Handmade in America hosted a three-day design charrette which resulted in a blue print for many of the enhancements that have taken place here over the last decade. "We started seeing how all the entities involved needed

*"We have something to offer everybody, and once people come here and see what we have, they just keep coming back."*

– Stephen Shoemaker, West Jefferson native, artist, and Town Alderman



input," says Carol Dodson, of the West Jefferson TDA.

The results of working together (more than 7,000 volunteer hours have been logged) have been impressive for West Jefferson over the last decade: 55 new businesses, creation of more than 330 new jobs and a total investment of nearly \$6 million.

### Natural Beauty Enhanced by Plan and Events

Price says one of the community's biggest drawing cards is the fresh air and the mountain landscape. The federally recognized New River flows just on the outskirts of town and majestic Mount Jefferson, which stands sentry over the town, are celebrated natural landmarks. A key component of the Town Revitalization Plan is



*Artist Stephen Shoemaker puts the finishing touches to a painting in his downtown West Jefferson studio.*

its ongoing work on a streetscape to create more open spaces and pedestrian-friendly pathways. More than \$100,000 has been invested in Bowie Seagraves Park and the smaller Backstreet Park was established in 2007. In 2010, a pathway was added to provide a pedestrian connection between Backstreet Park and the newly expanded 27,000-square-foot Ashe County Public Library.

Preserving and promoting the community's rural farming

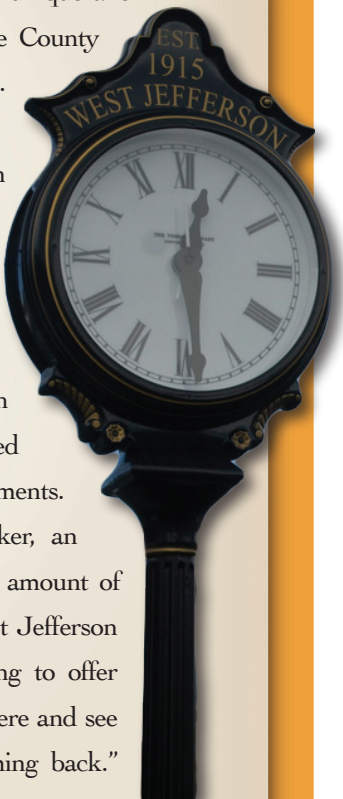
heritage is also a stalwart part of West Jefferson's success. The Christmas in July Festival, which marks its 25th year in 2011, celebrates the region's Christmas tree industry – one of the largest in the United States. The Ashe County Cheese Plant, established in 1931, remains a vibrant fixture in the downtown community. An open-air Farmer's Market is bustling on Saturdays from early spring to early winter with local farmers, artisans, residents and seasonal shoppers. All items are home grown and handmade in Ashe County!

### Distinctive Arts District

Walking down Jefferson Avenue in West Jefferson, it's impossible to ignore the arts and crafts which celebrate the community's heritage and fuel a significant part of its economy. "It really has made us unique and is a key to our success," says Ashe County Arts Council director Jane Lonon.

The town has also embraced public arts projects, not only with the murals but also the "Arts on Fire" project featuring six painted fire hydrants and "Locomotion Trail," a walking trail loop through downtown with five sculptural art plaques embedded in the sidewalk at 1/5 mile increments.

Town native Stephen Shoemaker, an artist and town alderman, says the amount of talent showcased in downtown West Jefferson is phenomenal. "We have something to offer everybody, and once people come here and see what we have, they just keep coming back."



### Accomplishments: West Jefferson renewal since 1998

#### Public Areas & Facilities

- Established the West Jefferson Historic District and placed it on the National Register of Historic Places;
- Replaced the playground and added lighting and pedestrian enhancements to Bowie Seagraves Park
- Developed master storm water management plan; established Backstreet Park, which serves as venue for summer evening concerts

- Farmer's Market venue enhanced with restrooms, electricity and enclosures

- Constructed a screening wall which now showcases the area's history
- Created additional downtown parking, new sidewalks, landscaping and lighting
- New town clock installed on Jefferson Avenue

#### Building Renovations:

A total of 45 buildings have been renovated and 49 building facades have been refurbished.

#### Investments:

In private funding, \$5,444,116; in public money, \$231,130

#### Volunteer Time & Jobs Created:

More than 7,000 volunteer hours invested in West Jefferson and a net of 335 new jobs created

#### For further information:

Contact the Town of West Jefferson, phone # 336-246-3551 website – [www.townofwj.com](http://www.townofwj.com), or email: [admin@townofwj.com](mailto:admin@townofwj.com)