

# THE VILLAGES at Staunton

by  
Phil Audibert

Photos courtesy of Miller & Associates

Designed by Jefferson scholar, Thomas Blackburn, Building 31 is destined to become part of a 90,000 square foot luxury hotel and spa complex at The Villages at Staunton. (Photo by Phil Audibert)



“It’s the opposite of sprawl,” says Robin Miller of the Richmond-based development company Miller and Associates. He says this as he hunkers over a birds-eye view of a hugely ambitious project that will probably take most of the rest of his working life to complete. It is the Villages at Staunton, a development project involving the rehabilitation of a dozen architecturally and historically significant buildings on 80 park-like acres just two blocks away from a national award winning downtown. This man has his work cut out for him.

But when it is completed, perhaps in 10 years (*we’re ahead of schedule*) Staunton will have, instead of an abandoned relic, a mixed-use village of retail shops, businesses, offices, restaurants and residences for as many as 400 to 500 people. And not one acre of farmland or open space will have been sacrificed -- not one.

It’s called *new urbanism*. Miller explains, “Basically new urbanism is old urbanism. It’s what you already have in downtown Staunton: beautiful, walkable, livable retail shops on the first level, and on the second and third level you have apartments and condominiums. The idea is to minimize the use of the automobile and have a walkable community where people can live, work and play without having to get in their car and drive somewhere.”

The fact that this project is saving a collection of buildings that were designed and built by Jefferson scholar and carpenter, Thomas Blackburn, also contributes to its appeal. “We’re not tearing down these buildings, which is extremely expensive, using all the heavy equipment and gas and diesel fuel. And then you have to lug it to a dump somewhere, again spending a lot of energy to get it there; and then filling up a dump,” continues Miller. “So we’re recycling these buildings, which is extremely green.”

It all started when Miller was driving his usual weekend five-hour commute from



A bird's eye view of the Villages at Staunton. The structures in the top center of the drawing show the existing campus of historic buildings that were once Western State Hospital. The two clusters of buildings in the bottom center of the drawing are new construction, slated to be built over the next ten years or so.

Richmond to Kingsport, Tennessee. On this particular day, he decided to forego fast food and drive into Staunton, a city that he had never taken the trouble to explore. "I saw Staunton and fell in love with it. I said, 'My God, this is an incredible city!'"

That was six years ago. "It was very impressive then, but it has made incredible strides in the last six years in

their economic development and emphasis on historic rehabilitation. So in driving by I saw this beautiful campus of old buildings that at the time were vacant, chain link fence all around it, and started doing some inquiry."

#### Hospital No More

It turned out it was the site of the

original Western State Hospital, which moved to newer, smaller digs in the 1970's when governments realized that the mentally handicapped were not ill and should be mainstreamed into their communities, not institutionalized. The buildings and grounds then became a minimum security prison before being abandoned completely.

The City of Staunton invited

Miller and Associates, along with five other developers, to submit a development proposal. Miller won. And after helping Staunton buy the site from the state for a dollar, “We took title from the city based on a very long and detailed agreement, where we have certain milestones that we have to meet or the property reverts back to the City of Staunton.”

Saving, rehabilitating and converting historic buildings into condos, offices and retail businesses is not new to Robin Miller, who has an extensive background in engineering and public administration. “I love old buildings,” he shrugs like someone who can’t help himself. “For 32 years I’ve been saving old buildings. That’s my passion, and I hope that we can also do it in an economically profitable measure.”

The campus is on the National Register for Historic Places and is listed with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. “This project would not be possible at all without the state historic tax credits. It would be impossible,” says Miller with a note of finality.

Strolling through the old Administration Building (1828) with its incredible central spiral staircase that winds heavenward to a rooftop cupola, it’s easy to see how this project is so worthwhile from a preservationist’s point of view. But it’s going to take a lot of hard work and money. “This is going to be a very difficult project, just because of the age of the buildings and the fact that all of the infrastructure has to be replaced,” says Miller adding, “What we end up with is basically a historic shell in some of these buildings because they’re in such bad shape.”

That was the case with the Bindery. In fact, they almost lost it. Today, the Bindery has been painstakingly restored into 19 airy, sunlit mid to high-end condos ranging in size from 1,200 to 3,000 square feet, and selling in the \$300-850,000 range. Already, two of these condos have been sold; another half dozen are under contingency contract.



A Bindery building condo interior

All 19 condos in the Bindery building feature restored original windows, moldings, doors, floors, beams and staircases wherever possible.  
(Photos on bottom right)

Robin Miller of Miller and Associates with the recently completed Bindery Building in the background

(All photos by Phil Audibert)





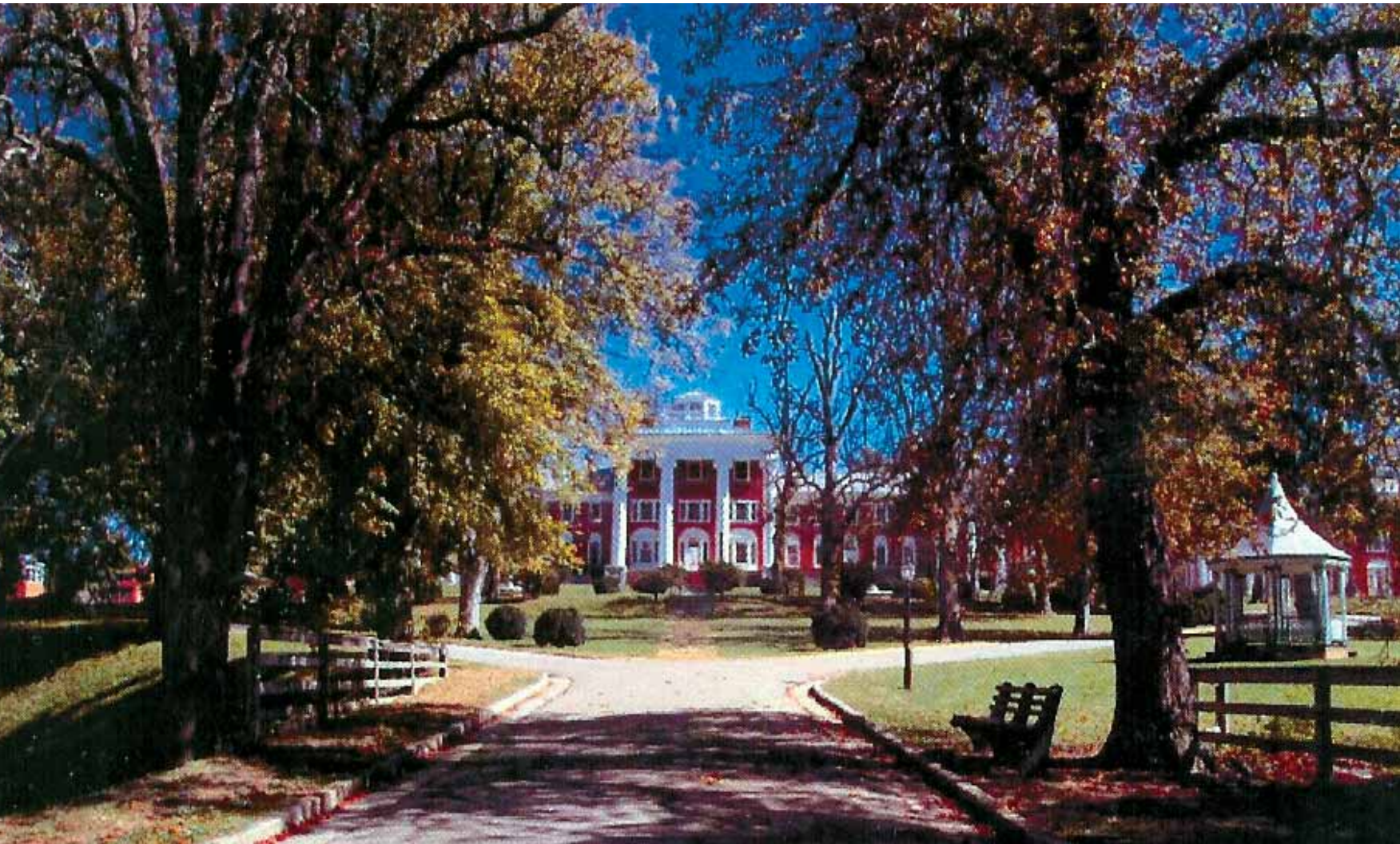
West Village is part of stage two in the overall plan at the Villages at Staunton.

**The Administration Building is the focal point of the historic campus. With its magnificent central spiral staircase, it will play the lead role in a luxury hotel complex at the Villages at Staunton.**

It's interesting to note that the folks who have bought these condos are from Northern Virginia and New Orleans. They fit in perfectly with the project's target market, basically baby boomers who want a second home or empty nesters who want to downsize and get out of the rat race. "We view downtown Staunton as our primary amenity package," continues Miller as he ticks off the list of restaurants, theatres and retail shops within walking distance. "So we think that this is going to be extremely attractive to baby boomers, initially as a second home and ultimately their retirement home where they choose to spend most of their time." Can Staunton absorb all this? "I've estimated from the very beginning that 75% of our buyers will come from more than 25 miles away."

### **Development Stages**

The Villages at Staunton will be developed in five stages. Stage One involves the historic campus which



includes the completed Bindery building. The Administration Building, the Chapel and what was known as Building 31 will become an as yet unnamed 90,000 square foot luxury hotel and spa complex comparable to the Greenbriar. Also included in Stage One is a 1930s era building that they hope to convert into medical offices. Stage Two involves the renovation of four historic residences and the construction of four more architecturally compatible new houses.

The project is not entirely about fixing up old historic structures; there's plenty of new construction too. Stage Three is a whole new village with a new zoning classification called Traditional Neighborhood Development. Miller says it allows for "higher density, pedestrian friendly, smaller setbacks, bring the buildings up to the road with parking in the rear so you're seeing the architecture and not looking at a bunch of parking lots."

Miller hopes The Villages at Staunton will attract a high-tech business that's just itching to move away from the bustle of Northern Virginia. "I'd love somebody to come take the entire building. Then, if they've got their office there, they'll need a place to live. They'll either move into the Bindery or one of my houses, or we'll build something new."

And herein lies the inspiration for Stage Four which calls for smaller more affordable residences, perhaps even some rental units. "We want to have a mix of incomes here, so they're not all going to be in the \$400,000 range," points out Miller. "The key to making this work is flexibility. We don't know where the market's going to be five years from now or ten years from now. So, we have to have the flexibility, and we were able to negotiate that with the City of Staunton."

In front of the magnificent Greek revival brick and columned buildings sits a gazebo, nestled among the towering hardwoods. The spacious lawn slopes down to a peaceful brook. Miller and Associates has



**19th century Western State Hospital architect, Thomas Blackburn believed that peaceful surroundings would help heal the sick of mind and body.**

placed this idyllic setting in permanent conservation easement. "That will be a common area that all the residents who live here can enjoy," says Miller. "If they want to walk down and sit by the creek and just have a picnic, it's available."

Bordering this park is a historic wrought iron fence along the sidewalk of Richmond Road and Greenville Avenue. But its purpose, back at the turn of the last century, was not to keep inmates in, but to keep picnickers out. That's how attractive architect Thomas Blackburn made this place, all part of his vision that pleasing surroundings will help cure the sick. That same fence stands to this day, but it will probably not deter the droves of people who

will want to live, work and play at the Villages of Staunton.

For information on The Village at Staunton, contact Monroe Properties at (804) 344-0032

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Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs ever since he was 16. Recently, he won several first-place awards from the Virginia Press Association. His wife Susie is a skilled photographer in her own right. Together they divide their time between dogs, horses, vintage cars, land preservation, gourmet cooking, and following the Keswick foxhunt on foot.