



Photos by Josh Tilggs

# LOTS TO SEE AND DO IN HAGERSTOWN AND WASHINGTON COUNTY

by Bonnie Williamson

Hagerstown and Washington County are all of Maryland in miniature because there is so much to see. That's the way Dan Spedden, president of the Visit Hagerstown - Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau, describes the area.

The CVB is a destination marketing organization that promotes the area in order to attract visitors, business travelers, conventions and bus tours.

Spedden says the county is known for its rich history.

The most visited attractions in 2014 were Antietam National Battlefield, C&O Canal, Greenbrier State Park, South Mountain State Park, and the Western Maryland Rail.

Antietam was the bloodiest one-day battle in American history. 23,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or missing after twelve hours of savage

combat on September 17, 1862. The Battle of Antietam ended the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia's first invasion into the North and led to Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

The South Mountain State Battlefield is the site of the first major Civil War battle to take place in Maryland. Fought on September 14, 1862, the Battle of South Mountain was a critical turning point in the American Civil War.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, abbreviated as the C&O Canal and occasionally called the "Grand Old Ditch," operated from 1831 until 1924 along the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Maryland. The canal's principal cargo was coal from the Allegheny Mountains.

Greenbrier State Park is a multi-use park, providing many kinds of recreation. The Appalachian Trail passes near the park. The 42-acre man-made lake and beach draw many visitors who enjoy swimming, canoeing, hiking, picnicking, interpretive programs and nature study. Located in the Appalachian Mountains, this state park offers many recreational opportunities.

"We are located in the crossroads of the Civil War. We're the home to South Mountain State Battlefield, Antietam National Battlefield, and the July 1863 Battle of Hagerstown. But Washington County also has a rich cultural scene. Hagerstown's Arts and Entertainment District is home to the Maryland Theatre, which offers year-round performances and events, including Maryland Symphony Orchestra concerts. Hagerstown is also home to the Western Maryland Blues Fest. The Washington County



President, Dan Spedden; Director of Marketing and Digital Communications, Betsy De Vore; Director of Sales, Audrey Vargason; Director of Operations/Membership, Jolene Thomas

Museum of Fine Arts, located in scenic City Park, boasts an outstanding permanent collection with an active schedule of exhibitions, concerts, lectures, films, and special events for all ages," Spedden says.

There are also national and state parks, professional auto racing at two venues, river and trail outfitters, skiing and professional baseball, the Suns.

"We offer fairs, festivals, and events. We are also a convenient and inviting stop over for travelers moving north and south on Interstate 81," Spedden says.

He continues, "We had the annual Taste of the Valley Food and Wine Festival at the Washington County Agricultural Education Center in June. It was very well attended. Dozens of local restaurants and more than 20 area wineries participated."

Also at the Ag Center, on Oct. 3 will be the Quad State Beer Fest. In October 2014, the event helped raise \$6,000 for local charities. Dozens of local restaurants, artists, crafters and businesses were on hand. Fifty different craft beers were available for sampling.

Other events and festivals include the Leitersburg BBQ Festival in April held at Ruritan Community Park; Augustoberfest in August held in

downtown Hagerstown and includes Bavarian food and beer and live music; Fairgrounds Country Fest in September at the Hagerstown Fairgrounds Park where nationally known country musicians meet up-and-coming artists for a full day of live music; the Hispanic Festival in September at the Hagerstown

**"So no matter what your interests may be, you don't have to travel far for a good time."**

Fairgrounds, which includes music, food, entertainment, soccer and kids' activities; the Alsatia Mummer's Parade in late October; one of Hagerstown's oldest annual events, and one of the largest nighttime parades on the East Coast, costumed mummers lead the procession in downtown Hagerstown; and the Trains of Christmas from November through January at the Hagerstown Roundhouse Museum.

Spedden says this year is the 150th anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. It has special significance for the area. Gathland State Park, near Burkittsville, was once the mountain home of George Alfred Townsend, a Civil

War journalist, who wrote, *The Life, Crimes and Capture of John Wilkes Booth*.

"Visitors can see Townsend's estate and visit the museum in the park," Spedden says. "It's also the 35th anniversary of the Suns baseball team."

Spedden says the CVB is utilizing more and more digital marketing.

"We will have a robust digital marketing platform with our new website that will launch within a few weeks. We're retargeting ads, engaging in content marketing, and utilizing search engines optimization," he says.

"We want to help our visitors in any way we can," he adds. "If they're stuck on the road, we'll connect them with the assistance they need. We also provide extensive support services to groups such as Travel Packets that contain our Visitor Guide, coupons, and other items that help visitors enjoy their stay. We attract groups by attending trade shows for meeting planners and tour operators and pitch ideas on great conventions space and tour itineraries. Once they book, we are their 'area concierge' and make every effort to be their most valued resource during the planning and execution phases of their group visit."



Spedden says by increasing the number of visitors of all types, the economic development within the county increases, too.

The CVB produces literature and information about lodging, dining, attractions, events, museums, arts, culture, history and recreation. Other services include insider tips, top ten attraction and activity lists, blogs, photos, forums, great deals, season-specific and activity suggestions.

"We strive to give visitors an easy to plan, and excellent visit while they're here," Spedden says. "We have 46 lodging properties, which are the backbone of the tourism industry; they include hotels, motels, campgrounds, bed and breakfasts and guest house operations. Our lodging inventory includes approximately 2,200 rooms. Visitors also spend money at restaurants, attractions, gas, ATM's - almost every business is affected in some way by visitors."

For meetings and conferences, Spedden says the county has have the largest meeting and conference center (Hager Hall at the Clarion Hotel) in Western Maryland, as well as 'campuses' of hotels that work together to host large groups. Bowman hospitality owns three hotels in one campus: a Homewood Suites by Hilton, a Holiday Inn Express and a Ramada Plaza. There is also a Marriott campus, owned by Plamondon Hospitality, with a SpringHill Suites and a Courtyard.

"We provide itineraries, escort notes, referrals for step on guides, and more for bus groups. We will also gather rates from the hotels on their behalf. We are a one-stop shop for planners of all group travel," Spedden says.

The CVB is a private, nonprofit organization, not a part of county government.

"We are a stand-alone organization, not a government entity. That allows us to be a lot more active in the community. That's a big deal," Spedden says.

So no matter what your interests may be, you don't have to travel far for good time.

For more information, go the website at [www.VISITHAGERSTOWN.com](http://www.VISITHAGERSTOWN.com).

