



An example of the town's historic homes is the 18th-Century Hartley House, which once functioned as a stagecoach stop and post office. Facing page: Batesburg-Leesville has become broadly renowned for its barbecue eateries. Jackie Hite (top) serves up a Friday feast. Across town, Sara R. Shealy, who with her late husband founded Shealy's Bar-B-Que House, discusses dining logistics with her son Tommy, the present-day owner. Both restaurants developed burgeoning clienteles by word of mouth and draw customers from miles away.

TOWN in a SWEET SPOT

Since the merger of the “twin cities” of Batesburg and Leesville, civic leaders are discovering a new world of development potential.

By Rosie O'Rear

There's a lot to be thankful for in Batesburg-Leesville these days. The merger of the two towns is a success, growth is coming, inspired leaders are at the helm and visitors flock in regularly for a fix of great barbecue.

Then there's the annual Poultry Festival. The brainchild of the Leesville Merchants Association, the event—now in its 18th year—draws thousands to downtown Leesville every spring.

Another Batesburg-Leesville plus is its sweet spot geographically. The twin towns are close enough to boom town Lexington for folks to enjoy shopping and recreational amenities there, yet far enough away from the congestion to maintain solitude at home.

Community leaders hope to attract more business to Batesburg-Leesville, population 5,500. They emphasize their town is only nine miles from Interstate 20 and



Leesville developed into a college town, Riley says, when the English and Classical Institute opened in 1881 and became Leesville College in 1890. Meanwhile, Batesburg, two miles away, was becoming a commercial and banking center. Both towns benefited from rail service and eventually morphed into lumber centers.

Riley says the idea that the two towns would do better economically if they pooled their resources began in 1921. Local businessmen on a hiatus in Alabama decided to consolidate the towns' high schools into one. Today, Batesburg and Leesville are a united town. While a few hold-outs lament the 1992 merger, most view it as key to the town's future.

"We are Batesburg-Leesville. We are not Batesburg and Leesville," insists 84-year-old Sara Bruner, long-time editor and publisher of the town's *Twin City*

equidistant to Columbia and Augusta. Saluda, Newberry and Aiken are short drives away.

Batesburg and Leesville were once two towns serving different constituencies, observes town historian Louise Riley. "When I read

old letters, I get the impression Batesburg identified more with Augusta, and Leesville with Columbia." Both towns were incorporated in the 1870s while farmers in the area prospered, raising cotton, corn, peanuts and grain.



Mayor and restaurateur Jim Wiszowaty strives to “run the town as a business.” Right: Tutor Cora Lester consults with student Lameka Stevenson at B-L High. Right: Another fine period house today functions as the Milton Shealy Funeral Home.

News. Happily, the younger generation has little memory of a divided municipality, adds Jerry McSwain, president and chief operating officer of the Batesburg-Leesville Chamber of Commerce. Unlike some members of older generations, “these kids don’t have a Hatfield-McCoy image of their town,” he says. “They think of it as one town.”

Not that anyone should rest on their laurels. More work is needed to make the merger a success. David Williams, who chairs the steering committee for the Chamber of Commerce’s Master Plan and serves on Town Council, contends a top priority should be helping Batesburg fill its empty buildings. He says an example of what can be done is a former drug-store in a once derelict downtown building he recently bought and renovated. The building looked so inviting when it was finished that Williams’ wife Anna opened a café and ice cream store there.

“I wanted to make a statement,” Williams says. “The reason



we’ve been successful with this project is Wiz’s big support.”

“Wiz” is Batesburg-Leesville’s larger-than-life mayor. According to some, the town hasn’t been the same since Jim Wiszowaty blew in 15 years ago. A son of Polish and Italian parents who grew up in Chicago, Wiszowaty brought new energy, residents say.

“The man has a heart of gold,” McSwain says of Wiszowaty, who runs Wiz’s Eatery, a family-style restaurant strategically positioned between the two towns. “He’s a very intelligent businessman.”

“He’s instrumental in getting things done,” adds Town Manager Joan Taylor. “If he sees something that needs to be done, he’s going to do it. He’s a people person.”

Into his last year of a four-year term, Wiszowaty did the unthinkable for a politician: increased town water and sewer fees and raised taxes. So far, he has lived to tell about it, but he’s coy about whether he’ll run again. “You have to be willing to make unpopular decisions,” he explains.

“I’m trying to run the town as a business.”

Wiszowaty advises any constituent with a beef to drop by his restaurant for a chat. Many do. “I won’t let something stew,” he says.

He supports the Chamber’s Master Plan, which outlines what needs be done during the next 20 years to make sure Batesburg-Leesville continues its march toward unity and prosperity. “That Master Plan excites me, though I know it’ll be time-consuming and there’s little money out there,” he says. The plan’s first objective was erecting good directional signage. The current project is building a grand walking promenade that eventually will connect the two towns. A later project will connect schools, parks and libraries with paths. A brick sidewalk already has been started at City Hall; it will continue in opposite directions toward Batesburg and Leesville.

Another goal is attracting businesses and industries by developing a 177-acre industrial park on the east side of town. So far, the



park is only acreage set aside; that could change if Lexington County assists by building roads and installing water and sewer lines.

The plan's most ambitious goal is perhaps the hardest to implement: making sure the town keeps its village atmosphere as it seeks to grow in population and influence. Watching the explosive growth happening a few miles east in Lexington, town leaders deduce Batesburg-Leesville is next.

"The Master Plan tries to control the growth," Williams says. "We don't want to be overrun. The Master Plan was set into place to maintain a semblance of a small town without getting overly commercialized helter-skelter. We have beautiful plantation homes here that are over 100 years old."

Signs that growth already is happening are new homes going up in Summerland, the town's first subdivision, and retail chain stores along U.S. 1 between the two former towns. Batesburg-Leesville comprises a healthy mix

of family businesses, chains, factories, peach growers and large-scale poultry operations. Brent Shealy represents the third generation to run Economy Furniture, selling furniture, appliances and rugs. His grandfather J.A. Shealy started the business in 1939.

Close by, Tommy Shealy (not related to Brent) runs Shealy's Bar-B-Q House, one of the town's popular barbecue restaurants. He took over from his parents in 1994. Open every day except Wednesdays and Sundays, cafeteria-style Shealy's seats 350, has 100 employees and regularly turns 75 pigs per week into spicy mustard-sauce-infused pork. Townspeople happily debate which serves the best barbecue: Shealy's or nearby Hite's Bar-B-Que.

In Batesburg, across the street from the café recently started by Williams is Mae's, a women's clothing store that has stood the test of time. Mae Buzhardt started the business in 1963. She won the 2004 South Carolina Small Business Person of the Year award from

the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce. Buzhardt's customers range from 18 to 100 and think nothing of traveling distances to be outfitted at her stores (she also has a store in Lexington).

While community leaders are focused on bringing in new jobs, they are also proud of the stability provided by Union Switch and Signal, which makes railroad parts and employs 330 workers; J.B. Martin, a producer of high-end velvets; and the area's booming poultry industry. Amick Farms, which produces 4 million pounds of fresh poultry each week, employs 1,200 at its Batesburg location. Columbia Farms, another huge poultry operation, soon will open a \$12.5-million feed mill in adjoining Saluda County, where Gentry's Poultry Company, Inc., also operates.

The Leesville Merchants Association in 1987 started a festival to spotlight the area's thriving poultry industry. "We wanted to do something to promote the community and honor our Number One



industry,” says Leesville Merchants Association treasurer Brent

Shealy. Run by volunteers and sponsored by the major poultry companies, the festival this year will take place May 13–14 in Leesville. “Entertainment is free and there’s plenty of it,” Shealy brags. One stage may be featuring a nationally known group such as The Tams or The Drifters while a local choral group might be performing on another. The streets are

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closed off for dancing. There’s a fireworks display, chicken-calling and chicken-cooking contests, a sand castle-building contest, pig racing and tons of food, including barbecue chicken.

Food and craft vendors pay entry fees, which enables the association to give several scholarships to high school students and a special \$1,000 scholarship for a student at Clemson University majoring in poultry science. Shealy estimates the two-day festival attracts 100,000–150,000 visitors to the town.

Public schools often function as the lifeblood of a small town. Leaders say this is especially so in Batesburg-Leesville. Its small, dynamic school district consists of a high school, middle school, elementary school, primary school and Lifelong Learning Center.

Councilman Todd O’Dell says he and his wife specifically chose to return to his wife’s hometown so their two children could benefit from small, community-minded schools. O’Dell is especially enthusiastic about Dr. William Gummerston, Lexington County School District Three’s new superintendent, whose top priority is reading. “He’s already initiated a program where volunteers go to schools and read to children,” O’Dell says.

Indicative of community support for schools and the arts, voters passed a referendum approving funds for a Fine Arts Center at the high school. Opened in 2000, the center has 1,000 seats, working stage and orchestra pit. Dale Burkett, accompanist for the high school chorus, says the spacious building is the perfect setting for community-sponsored arts and entertainment.

Retired teacher Cora Lester, 72, recently was elected to the school board. The only African-American on the board, Lester says she hopes to inspire more



Batesburg-Leesville’s annual Poultry Festival features a zany parade and a bustle of activity. Opposite page: Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Jerry McSwain (seated) confers with Mark A. DeLoache, 2005 chamber chairman, and Gloria Brockman, executive secretary.

black parents to get involved in the schools.

The essence of Batesburg-Leesville is a close-knit community of caring people, McSwain asserts. “This is the finest town I’ve ever lived in. Everybody cares about one another. When I was in the hospital I got cards from all over the place—from people I didn’t even know.”

Town Manager Taylor agrees. “We’re a small community. We like to help people. When there are problems, we tend to come together. We can work side-by-side with anybody.” ❖

Rosie O’Rear covered Drayton Hall’s Revolutionary War activities in the winter Sandlapper. She lives in Georgetown.

The Batesburg Business Association will hold its first Flower Festival April 2, 9 a.m.–3 p.m., at Batesburg Town Park on Wilson Street. Gardeners will conduct seminars; seasonal flowers and bulbs will be for sale. For more information, call Lois Black at (803) 532-4819.

The town’s 18th annual Poultry Festival is scheduled May 13–14; it will be held on Main Street from U.S. 1 to Haynes Auditorium. For more information, call Batesburg-Leesville Town Hall, (803) 532-4601.

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