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Hidden Gems

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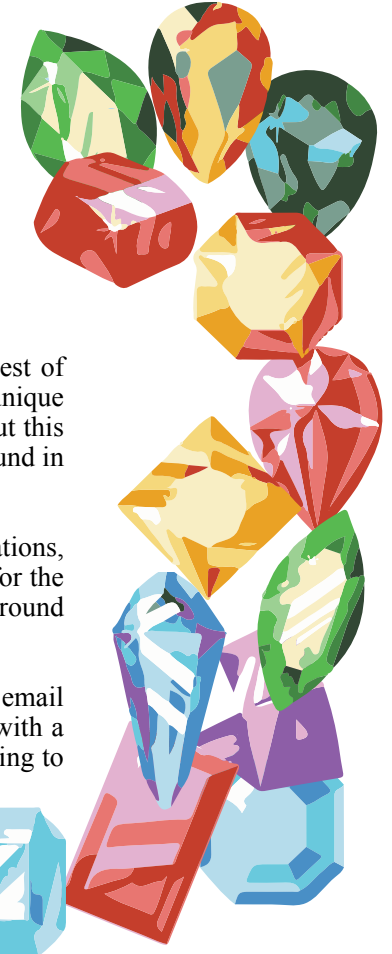
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Finley's General Store



Hidden Gems



Smithfield and the surrounding area is a treasure chest of locally owned businesses. Each of these places has unique decor and items for sale or display. Scattered throughout this section are hidden gems that highlight a unique item found in each of these businesses.

We encourage you to shop local and visit these locations, most of which can be found on Main Street, to search for the hidden gems. While you're at it, take time to look around some more. You may find your next treasure.

Find and identify the location of all nine items and email your answers to news@smithfieldtimes.com. Readers with a full slate of correct answers will be entered into a drawing to win a gift card. The drawing will be held April 24.

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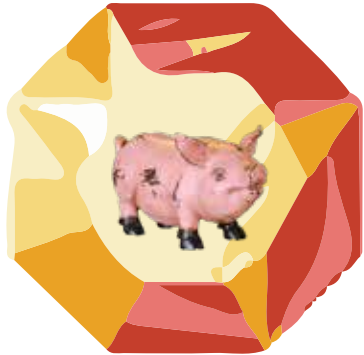
Generations on the dance floor

BY STEPHEN FALESKI
STAFF WRITER

Leslie McGinn has taught generations of dancers since opening Southside Ballet in 1980.

Meredith Parks, who in 2012 purchased the studio from McGinn, is one of them.

Parks took her first dance class with McGinn in 1982, at age 3. By the time Parks had graduated from high school, she was taking over 20 hours of dance classes per week with her mentor turned co-teacher.



“I loved everything about it,” Parks said.

Parks went on to graduate from Radford University with a degree in dance, and perform professionally for two seasons as a dancer in “The Lost Colony,” an outdoor symphonic drama first staged in 1937 that holds the record as the nation’s longest-running. She was living and teaching in South Carolina, where she’d performed with The Charleston Ballet Theatre during its 2001 and 2002 seasons, when she received a call from McGinn asking if she’d be interested in moving back to Smithfield to take over running Southside.

“I felt like it was ready for a young person to take over,” said McGinn, whose dance credentials include performing at age 16 as a member of the Eglevsky Ballet Company in New York under famed Russian-born dancer André Eglevsky.

Since Parks took over, “we’ve kept the same feeling of the studio,

of a classical training,” said Parks, though the business has moved and grown over the decades.

When McGinn started the studio with 25 to 30 students per year, it was located off Battery Park Road on land Smithfield Self Storage now occupies. Southside later moved to Nike Park in Carrollton and, after Parks took over, to South Church Street in the former Sesroh tack shop.

Enrollment has more than bounced back since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Southside has grown to over 100 students ranging from ages 3 to 76.

The building includes three studios, where Parks, McGinn and three other instructors teach ballet, tap, jazz, lyrical, point and acrobatic arts.

“The dance education industry took a hard hit from COVID,” Parks said. “For a lot of the kids after COVID, dance was the only thing they had to come to that was normal. At least here they were able



Meredith Parks demonstrates a dance to a student. (Elly Condit photo)

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to be together even if we were dancing in the parking lot.”

“We had to do one recital outside,” McGinn recalls.

In December, Parks partnered with Lauren Babb, who runs Footnotes School of Dance just over a mile from Southside, to put on a joint production of *The Nutcracker* at the Peebles Theatre in Newport News. Parks and Babb are both former students of McGinn.

“We grew up dancing together,” Parks said.

Parks and Babb are planning to reprise the joint *Nutcracker* performance.

“We’re already planning for next year; the girls keep asking when are *Nutcracker* auditions,” Parks said.

This year, *The Nutcracker* performance will be at the Suffolk Center for Cultural Arts. Auditions start in May.

Outside of her dance career, Parks can be found at Trinity United Methodist Church, where she’s employed as its communications and preschool director. She’s also a parent herself.

“My life revolves around little people,” Parks said.

McGinn has, for the past 23 years, used her home to foster cats and kittens for the Isle of Wight County Humane Society.

Over the past year, she’s taken in 24 and adopted out 18. In previous years she’s taken in as many as 40.

“I’m trying to cut back,” McGinn said.

All but three of the cats she has currently are what she calls “unadoptable.”

“We keep them forever if they don’t get adopted; we don’t euthanize,” McGinn said.



Meredith Parks, middle, with students following a performance. (Elly Condit photo)



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Gerald Gwaltney helped usher IW into computer era

BY STEPHEN FALESKI
STAFF WRITER

Gerald Gwaltney, the longest still-serving commissioner of the revenue in the state, took an interest in politics at an early age.

His earliest memories include watching the results of the 1968 presidential election – in which Republican Richard Nixon defeated Democrat Hubert Humphrey – as the results came in live on the nightly news with longtime CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite.

“I always held the belief that Thomas Jefferson helped to design how government was to work to help people and to protect those less fortunate,” said Gwaltney, who in January reached his 40th year as Isle of Wight County’s commissioner of the revenue. Next year, he’ll tie the record set by Charlie E. Davis, who held the role for 41 years from 1914 to 1955.

As commissioner, a constitutional officer elected to a four-year term, he’s responsible for assessing the tax value of property and administering tax programs mandated by the state and county. In addition to assessing the value of homes, cars and machinery, the commissioner’s office issues business licenses, receives Virginia individual and estimated income, meals and lodging taxes.

At age 23, he entered the 1979 election against incumbent commissioner H.W. Love, who’d held the role for seven years. Gwaltney, who’d received his bachelor’s degree in political science

from Randolph-Macon College the prior year and lacked bookkeeping experience save for an accounting course he’d taken at what is now Christopher Newport University, pulled off an upset victory with 62% of the vote after campaigning to make the commissioner’s office more efficient and courteous, according to The Smithfield Times’ archives.

Since then, he’s been reelected every four years save for a gap from 2002 to 2006, during which he served as Virginia’s deputy tax commissioner under then-Gov. Mark Warner.

“What makes this position so interesting is that you can never predict what your day will entail,” Gwaltney said. “I stop whatever I am doing when a taxpayer comes to the office or calls needing assistance. The taxpayer is our top priority.”

In 1980, Gwaltney spearheaded an effort to usher the commissioner’s office into the computer era.

According to the Times’ archives, Isle of Wight’s Board of Supervisors in June of that year approved the computerization of personal property records at Gwaltney’s urging after learning the data entry could be performed at Paul D. Camp Community College at no additional cost beyond the \$10,000 Isle of Wight was paying annually to lease a computer at the college’s Franklin campus that was at the time shared by Isle of Wight and Southampton counties’ school systems.

“Technology has driven so much change over the years,” Gwaltney said. “When I first came to the courthouse, there were no fax machines, cell phones or computers. There was only one copy machine at the courthouse. To make copy, you went to the County Administrator’s office and stood in line to make a copy. To make a long-distance phone call, we gave our switch board operator the number we wanted to call and the operator made the call and then told us when the party was on the line. It’s just amazing how much change has occurred during this time – and the change has been good.”



Gerald Gwaltney, Isle of Wight County’s longest still-serving elected official. In photo at right, Gwaltney files his qualifying papers in the spring of 1979 to run in the Democratic primary for Isle of Wight commissioner of the revenue. Sheriff B.F. Dixon, left in the photo, filed his reelection qualifying papers that day under the watchful eye of Grace Keen, who chaired the local Democratic Committee. Gwaltney, at age 23, won every precinct and received 63% of votes cast. He’s been elected 11 more times. If he serves through this coming August, he will be the longest-serving elected county official in Isle of Wight’s 390-year history. (submitted photos)



Author proud of Smithfield roots

BY BRANDY CENTOLANZA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

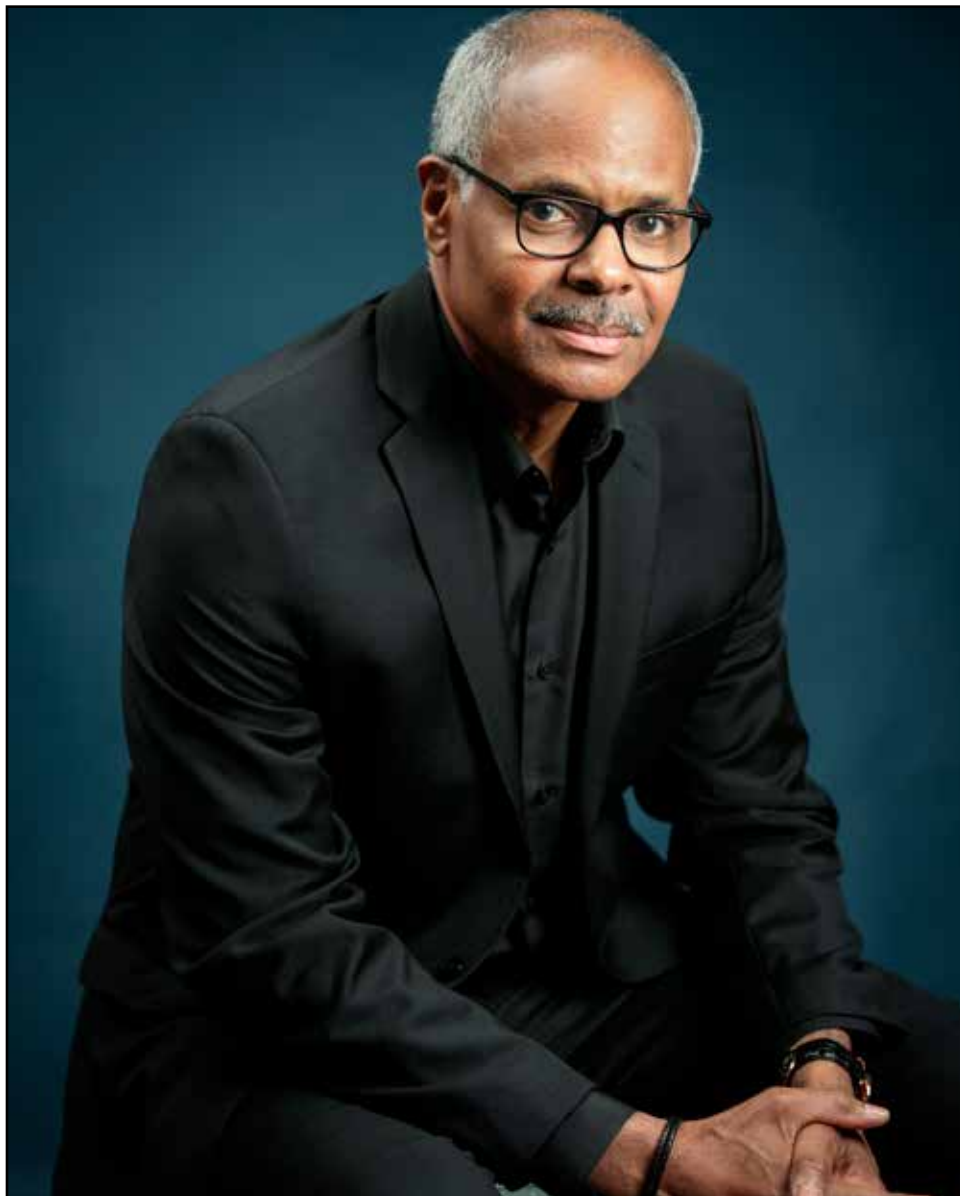
The latest book from Smithfield native Jeffrey Blount has hit the shelves.

"*Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way*," Blount's fourth novel, was released Jan. 16. The book's main character, James Henry Ferguson, is an African American billionaire who falls from grace and escapes to the rural town of Ham,

Mississippi. There, he moves next door to a poverty-stricken neighborhood known as "Around the Way," where he uncovers a secret and attempts to save the neighborhood and redeem himself in the process.

Blount said he came up with the idea for the book in part from discussions he had with his father during the COVID-19 pandemic about the act of kindness.

"It's about seeing fellow human beings



Jeffrey Blount





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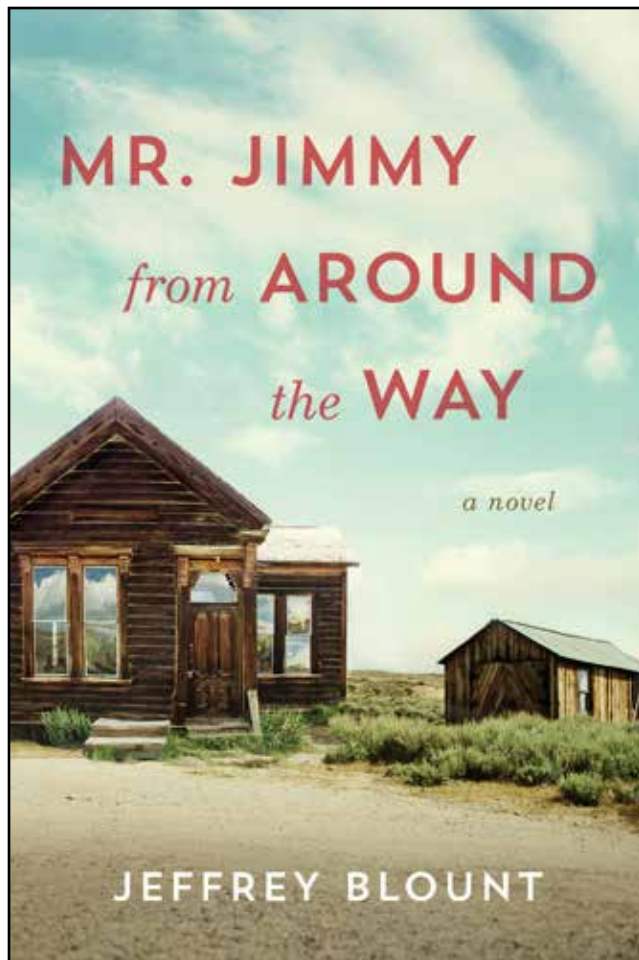
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and knowing when they are in need, and our duty to help others in need,” Blount said. “We lift ourselves up when we lift others up. That’s what I want readers to take away from this story.”

Blount first became interested in writing in high school. After he penned a letter to the editor of The Smithfield Times, then-Managing Editor John Edwards hired him as a cub reporter. Blount recently reconnected with a professor he had during his freshman year at Virginia Commonwealth University who he said also had an influence on his career as a writer.

“She really believed in me as well,” he said.

Blount, who now lives in Washington, D.C., worked for more than three decades as a television director at NBC News and contributed to several print publications, including The Washington Post, before becoming a full-time author. His previous books include *The Emancipation of Evan Walls*, *Hating Heidi Foster*, and *Almost Snow White*. He said he gets inspiration from everyday life, describing himself as very attuned to specific moments in his day that could be worth writing about at some point.

“I’ve carried around some stories for many years,” he said. “I have so many ideas. I don’t know how I will get to them all.”

He will start his next book later this spring following a book tour for “*Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way*.”

“I really enjoy writing,” he said. “I find it a peaceful and comforting way to spend my time.”

“*Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way*” is available on Amazon, at Barnes & Noble and other book retail outlets. His book tour includes a stop at VCU in Richmond

on Feb. 27.

Blount is grateful for his upbringing in Smithfield and how it’s had an impact on his writing.

“The people really look out for each other in Smithfield,” he said. “I hope the people of my hometown will read ‘*Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way*’ and after finishing the book continue to practice the activism of kindness and continue to look out for each other. Muhammad Ali said it best: ‘The service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth.’”

For more information on Jeffrey Blount and his new book, visit www.jeffreyblount.com.



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From honey to mead

BY STEPHEN FALESKI
STAFF WRITER

In June, Ed Schweiger can frequently be found in a metal outbuilding on his family's farm using an electric heated knife to scrape beeswax from hive partitions into a rectangular metal tub.

From there, the wax travels into a large vat, where spinning motion transforms it into honey.

Beekeepers in Isle of Wight County are only able to extract honey from their hives twice a year – once in June after the bees pollinate flowering trees in the spring, and again in early September after the bees pollinate goldenrod, cotton and soybean crops during the summer.

Once extracted, the honey is put through a strainer, which leaves this pollen inter-mixed with the honey but extracts what Schweiger calls “bee parts.” After that, it's ready for bottling, though not all of it will be sold as pure honey.

Schweiger and his wife, Jane, are partners in G&S Apiary with a neighbor, Gary Gosdzinski. A portion of the honey they extract goes toward the couple's other home-based business, Serendipity Meadworks, which also does business as Breezy Hill Meadworks.

“The reason for the name change is so we can ship out of state,” Jane said. “We can currently ship mead to 41 states.”

To sell across state lines, the Schweigers had to brand their business under a trademark name, and a winemaker in Texas had already trademarked Serendipity.



Several of the owners of Breezy Hill Meadworks with the iconic silo. From left, Ed Schweiger, Jane Schweiger, Duane Eby, Chris Johns and Gary Gosdzinski. (Jen Jaqua/The Smithfield Times)

Mead, a mixture of water, honey and fermented yeast, is thought to be one of the oldest known alcoholic beverages ever made. It's referenced in the epic poem “Beowulf” and Neolithic jars dating to 6000 to 5000 B.C. containing remnants of a mead-like substance have been found in China. It was once the beverage of choice in medieval times and remains popular in eastern European countries like Poland and among home-brew enthusiasts like the Schweigers.

Ed's journey into home-brewing began in 1978, two years after Congress passed legislation legalizing the production of home-brew and home winemaking in all states except Alabama and Mississippi. That was when the first home-brew shop in Ed's hometown, Louisville, Kentucky, opened. He spent that summer brewing various batches of kit beers, culminating with brewing the beer for his class graduation party from the University of Kentucky four years later.

After graduation, Ed moved to Newport News to start a career working on nuclear

reactors intended for submarines and aircraft carriers. There, he met another home-brew enthusiast who was also an avid fan of “Beowulf” and “Lord of the Rings” author J.R.R. Tolkien, who urged Ed to try his hand at mead. In 2004, Ed and Jane built a log cabin on farmland they'd acquired in 1995 just outside Smithfield and soon after began beekeeping.

“Being a farm meadery, we produce our own honey,” Ed said.

Breezy Hill now has 10 partners, including the Schweigers. Bobby Higgins, a former partner known to the couple as “Grandpa” despite not being related to either, died in March 2019.

“He did the plumbing for the building in return for 1% of the business,” Ed said.

He's also the namesake for “Grandpa's Wild Orange,” a variety of mead Serendipity makes from wildflower honey from Florida. Breezy Hill released its first commercially available bottled mead in 2019.

Most of the others, like the

Schweigers, are local to Smithfield and Isle of Wight County. They include Bob Wright, Adrienne and Chris Johns, Sam Sayampanathan, Jesse Pangrac, Mike Kohlman, Duane Eby and Gosdzinski.

Brewing mead takes about nine to 10 weeks of fermentation, with about 300 pounds of honey needed to make 100 gallons, Ed said. Getting all the needed state and federal licenses also took time — about 1-1/2 years.

Currently, Serendipity sells 15 varieties of mead on-site in a showroom located inside the same outbuilding where the mead is made.

“We are constantly growing,” Jane said.

The couple recently renovated the outbuilding to include a tasting room, which opened in October.

Editor's note: *This story is reprinted and updated from one that appeared in the June 24, 2020, edition of The Smithfield Times.*

Linda Boles rediscovers songwriting

BY STEPHEN FALESKI
STAFF WRITER

Linda Boles, a retired teacher-turned-songwriter who moved to Smithfield last fall, is rediscovering the music industry after a decades-long hiatus.

She was born into a family of bluegrass musicians.

“My brother and I performed together from the time we were little,” Boles said.

When her brother, Danny, joined the Marine Corps and went off to fight in the Vietnam War, Boles took up guitar and started singing in coffeehouses. When Danny came home in the early 1970s, he formed a band – Black River Circus – with Boles as lead singer. During the band’s tour across Navy clubs in Hampton Roads, Boles met and married the band’s bass player, James.

Boles, who grew up in the Methodist faith, wrote her first song, “The Missionary,” in 1982 after James died suddenly of a heart attack.

“He had the heart of a missionary,” Boles said.

Boles’ life took a different direction when she accepted a position teaching music at Norfolk Public Schools, followed by positions in Portsmouth and Chesapeake. She retired in 2017 after a cumulative 42 years as an educator.

“I was content to be retired and I was fine, and I really forgot about all the songs that the Lord had given me,” Boles said. “I wasn’t thinking about that at all, not for years.”

Boles said she was working in her garden last February when she found the inspiration to dust off her lyrics and find a producer to record and share her music with the world.

“The Lord just spoke to

me,” Boles said.

In December, working with United Kingdom-based producer Andy Baker of Homegrown Worship, she released her debut single, “Unborn.”

It’s essentially an anti-abortion anthem, one Boles intends to capture the perspective of an unborn child. “I’m unborn, but I’m alive; I am real, and I can feel. I want to live. I want to give my life to you,” goes the chorus.

It’s an admittedly controversial topic, one that’s become even more polarizing since the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2022 decision to overturn the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade abortion-rights case spurred a wave of state-level anti-abortion laws. An Ohio woman, according to Associated Press reporting, was charged last year with abuse of a corpse in connection with a miscarriage, though a grand jury declined to indict her. Another woman from Texas petitioned for – but was denied – an abortion by the state’s Supreme Court, and later traveled out of state for the procedure, after her fetus was diagnosed with a fatal condition that also threatened her future fertility.

“We hear a lot about women’s rights but we don’t often hear about the voice of the unborn child,” said Boles. “The child doesn’t really have a voice.”

Boles wrote “Unborn” in 1982, 40 years before the 2022 case, shortly after writing “The Missionary.” She describes her lyrics as “positive and uplifting.” They don’t mention the word “abortion.”

“There’s no pointing of fingers; there’s no judgment, you know, about the pro-choice camp, there’s none of that,” Boles said. “It’s just the child having an opportunity to have a voice.”

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now involved in producing music has been challenging for Boles.

“In the beginning I had no knowledge of Facebook or streaming, nothing,” she said.

When she went to her pastor last year with her idea to dust off and produce the songs she’d written decades ago, he suggested she take to social media. She now has a Facebook page and YouTube channel.

“Unborn” is available on Apple Music, Spotify and other streaming services. Boles plans to release “The Missionary” this month. She’s also still writing. She wrote a new song, “Long Before I Start,” this past spring.



Linda Boles sits at her piano in her Smithfield home. (Stephen Faleski/The Smithfield Times)



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Finley's brings country life to Carrollton

BY STEPHEN FALESKI
STAFF WRITER

There's only one place to buy "Route 17 Traffic Jam."

The blend of fruit preserves, sold exclusively at Finley's General Store, is named for the store's location off the four-lane highway through Carrollton that frequently backs up during rush hour.

Cheryl Finley Ketcham, who managed the Smithfield Farmers Market for seven years, began operating her store out of a converted house on Main Street in 2017 with the goal of providing a venue for vendors during the winter and on week-days when the seasonal outdoor market wasn't operating. Charlie Smith, a banjo player she'd met during her time managing the farmers market, could frequently be found playing on the front porch of Finleys during the store's three-year tenure in downtown Smithfield.

"He was such a blessing to me and to people who would join him on the front porch and listen to him play and tell stories," Ketcham said. "My own father died at age 56 from cancer, so I adopted Charlie as my second father."

When Smith died in 2019, also of cancer, "I was heartbroken, but I was so



Cheryl Finley Ketcham shows off a corner of her store designed as a general store. This corner features Jam, dry mixes, nuts and other snacks. (Jen Jaqua/The Smithfield Times)

glad I could focus on getting the new location ready," Ketcham said. "I'm not sure I could have continued doing business on Main Street without Charlie – he was such a big part of my life there."

That same year, Finleys relocated to its current location at the corner of Route 17 and Sugar Hill Road.

"The building was most recently a cigarette store," Ketcham said. "The owner had closed and moved to Egypt, and the building was quite unattractive and still filled with cigarette displays and garbage. But it was a sturdy, block building in a great location, and I could see its potential."

After a three-month renovation, which included adding a metal roof with cupolas, tearing out the low-hung ceiling and replacing it with metal and old wood salvaged from a building in Waverly 36

miles away, "it all came together to create the old-fashioned country store look I desired," Ketcham said.

The store now has more than 20 vendors. Some sell peanuts. Some sell honey. Some sell wreaths. There's also jams, salsa, hot sauces, pickles, barbecue sauces, fudge, candy by the pound, gifts, jewelry and clothing.

"Some customers have remarked that we are like 'Cracker Barrel on steroids,'" Ketcham said.

The larger space has also allowed Ketcham to hire employees to mind the store in her absence. Since last May, she's made four trips to Havana, Cuba, with the Texas-based relief organization Proclaim Cuba.

Ketcham's next business goal is to renovate a detached smokehouse that came with the former tobacco store. It

still bears the word "cigarettes" painted on its street-facing side, though the barn never housed tobacco. It was built to age salt-cured country hams.

"I would love to have the word "Carrollton" painted on the outside, so it can become known as the Carrollton Barn and be a community landmark," Ketcham said.

Her plans for the barn include either an office or coffee shop.

"I am sad that Charlie was never able to see my new store," Ketcham said. "He would have loved playing banjo on the front porch and seeing how much busier the new location is. He would have had so many people to tell stories to. Thankfully, his daughter, Holly, and I have remained close."



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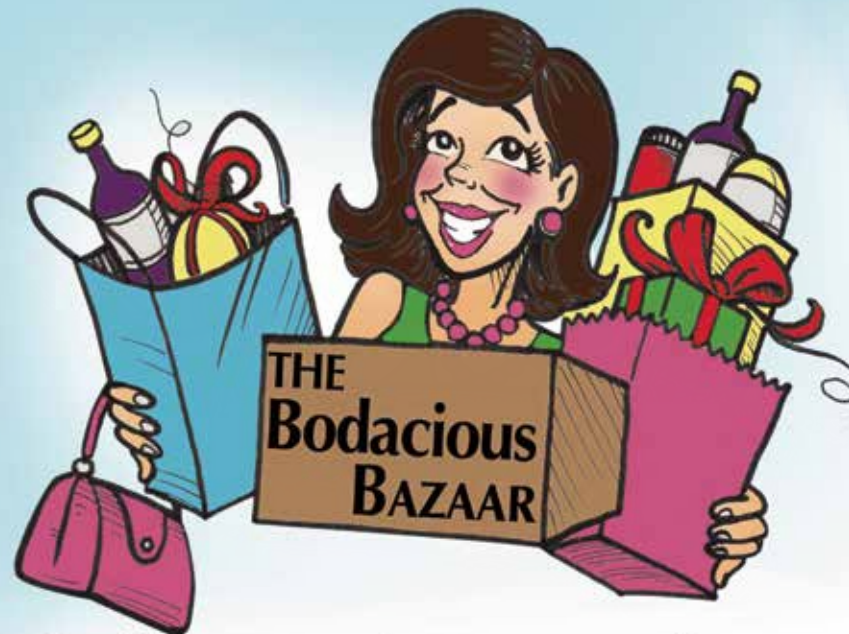


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