PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for HISTORIC DISTRICTS

Purpose of Evaluation
Please use the following space to explain briefly why you are seeking an evaluation of this property.

The Town of Pennington Gap is seeking historical evaluation of its commercial district in order to promote and facilitate ongoing revitalization efforts.

Are you interested in applying for State and/or Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits?  Yes _____ No ____
Are you interested in receiving more information about DHR’s easement program?  Yes _____ No ____

1. General Information
   District name(s):  Bluefield Commercial Historic District
   DHR File Number:  143-5083
   Main Streets:  S. College Ave. (Rt. 102); Tazewell Ave.; Spring St.; Spruce St.; Virginia Ave.
   City or Town:  Town of Bluefield

   Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located:  Tazewell County

2. Physical Aspects
   Acreage:  Approximately 8.0
   Setting (choose only one of the following):
     Urban _____ Suburban _____ Town ____ Village _____ Hamlet _____ Rural _____

   Briefly describe the district’s overall setting, including any notable landscape features:

   Two-thirds of a mile from the Mercer County/West Virginia line, the relatively small commercial district occupies a relatively flat area of about eight acres centered on Virginia Avenue (Rt. 19/460) which functions as Main Street, S. College Avenue (Rt. 102) and Spring Street one block to the south of, and running parallel to Virginia Ave. The elevation of the district is approximately 2,400 ft. above sea level. Bluefield has been called “Virginia’s Tallest Town” and is allegedly the highest-elevation town west of Colorado. About 25 of the resources in within the new proposed boundary were surveyed in 2000 or earlier.

3. Architectural/Physical Description
   Architectural Style(s):  Late 19th century revival styles; Beaux Arts-style; 20th century commercial styles; Classical Revival, Colonial Revival; International Style

   If any individual properties within the district were designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here:  

   If any builders or developers are known, please list here:  

   Date(s) of construction (can be approximate):  ca. 1890 – ca. 1970

   Are there any known threats to this district?  Some buildings are vacant and/or neglected
Bluefield is a small town in Tazewell County, Virginia, located along the Bluestone River and US Highway 460; the downtown area alongside the railroad. A small group of (approximately 25-30) buildings in downtown Bluefield, Virginia appears to be eligible as a historic district for listing in the National Register. The commercial row on the north side of Virginia Ave. includes several well-intact, adjoined contributing resources. Bounded by S. College Avenue (Rt. 102) to the west (except for a former bank on the southwest corner of S. College St. and Virginia Ave.), Graham Street to the north, and Spruce Street to the east, the district also includes a few diverse resources on the south side of Spring Street. The boundary is potentially subject to minor change based on future survey, but the current proposed boundary encompasses approximately eight acres.

The district embodies only commercial resources, although it is surrounded by residential properties and a number of churches. The buildings are twentieth-century vernacular one- and two-story brick structures, most with flat roofs concealed behind parapets, and storefronts with large plate-glass windows. Several of the buildings have been vacant for months or years, a few of which have been neglected to the point of deterioration.

Among the most notable buildings in the district is the three-story Harmon Lodge #222 A.F. and A.M. Masonic Lodge 143-5006, now New Graham Pharmacy on the first floor, at the northeast corner of Virginia Ave. and College St., which anchors the northwest corner of the district. It is referred to in the 2000 survey as “one of Tazewell County's finest buildings related to the social or commercial themes” and noted for its “expensive and carefully executed brickwork”. These distinctions were repeated verbatim in reference to the Bank of Graham building 143-5005 which opened in 1890, on the southwest corner of Virginia Ave. and Spruce Street, adjacent to the Post Office on the south side of Virginia Avenue. Now occupied by Four Seasons Home Medicine, the bank building is described in the 2000 survey as “one of the county’s most important buildings from the period…a two-story, Beaux Arts-style bank with rock-faced ashlar first floor and basement; seven-course American-bond second floor with stone and plaster ornament (the stone lintels are joined to form a belt course); on the second floor the one-over-one sash windows are set in four bays divided by stone pilasters and surmounted by rectangular panels containing classical cartouches… A brick one-story wing to the west side dates from the mid-twentieth century, while a drive-through window was added to the east side in ca. 1970.”

The very well-preserved, one-story hip-roofed Bluefield Main Post Office 143-5080 on the south side of Virginia Avenue is of a clever and very possibly unique design combining various Colonial Revival motifs rendered mostly in brick. A 1983 Postal Service Buildings Survey initially praised the building’s design: “This postal facility exemplifies the masterful work performed by the Treasury Department in creating a functional facility with lasting quality and artistic design”. Yet, in the same paragraph the surveyor unjustly diminished the building’s significance: “It, nevertheless, is a member of a group of numerous smaller postal facilities that were built under the supervision of the Treasury Department during the New Deal Era of the Roosevelt administration. To imply partiality of this facility as a nominee to the National Register would underscore similar treatment for the numerous other similar, if not better, designed postal facilities that were built during the same era throughout the Commonwealth. No particular events or persons of historical significance have ever been associated with this property.” Now that 40 years has passed since the survey, the building should be acknowledged as an underappreciated gem among Southwest Virginia’s surviving architectural public works of the New Deal Era.

Across from the post office, on the north side of Virginia Ave. is a row of five adjoined two-story brick commercial-style buildings probably dating to the 1910s and 1920s. While the storefronts have been altered, the second stories are very well preserved with exposed, unpainted brick facades and parapets. Adjoining these buildings to the west are a number of similar buildings with more-diminished historic character; but
fortunately many of the modifications appear to be reversible. Most, if not all retain sufficient integrity to convey significance in the history of the town’s commerce.

Across Virginia Ave, from the Masonic Lodge is another notable bank building, the two-story brick and stone First National Bank [143-5003] “an unusually fine example of an early twentieth-century Classical Revival bank, with the full [Ionic] order and solid masonry walls conveying the security of the institution it housed.” No longer a bank or active business location, the c. 1925 building is neglected and approaching the point of advanced deterioration.

Sited along Spring St., around the intersection of Spring and Spruce streets, are five or six well-preserved, one-story, flat-roofed brick commercial buildings, most with steel sash windows, that contribute to the significance of the district.

Among the most recently built contributing buildings in the district is the Dairy Queen on the south side of Spring Street, near Virginia Avenue. The Dairy Queen and a small, one-story neighboring building to the west are similar in materials and construction and appear to have been built in the 1960s.

4. District History and Significance

A small group of (approximately 25-30) buildings in downtown Bluefield, Virginia appears to be eligible as a historic district for listing in the National Register. A larger Graham (Bluefield) Historic District (143-5072) that included some houses and churches surrounding the commercial district, as well as a few resources that have been lost over the 21-year interim, was evaluated as locally significant under Criteria A (Transportation; Commerce) and C (Architecture) and found eligible by the DHR evaluation committee on May 31, 2001. The 2022 boundary, potentially subject to minimal change based on future survey efforts, omits all churches and residences, as well as vacant lots where possible. About 25 of the resources within the new proposed boundary were surveyed in 2000-2001 or earlier. The 2000-2001 survey was conducted in cooperation with the Tazewell County and the Tazewell Historical Society, with the assistance of other organizations and individuals. The project was funded by State Cost Share Survey and Planning Funds administered by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and its Roanoke (now Western) Regional Preservation Office.

As an important commercial and financial center for the surrounding area from the date of its charter as Graham, Virginia in c. 1884 to the present, the proposed Bluefield Commercial Historic District appears to be eligible at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Commerce, and Criterion C in the area of Architecture. The proposed period of significance, while subject to change based on future findings, spans from ca. 1890, the construction date of the oldest known surviving building, through c. 1970 to encompass construction of the greatest number of eligible buildings.

Historical Background

Tazewell County's historic settlement patterns were heavily influenced by its mountainous terrain, namely a series of generally east-west ridges. Initial settlement occurred in the narrow valleys with fertile limestone soil. Towns like Graham (now Bluefield) and Richlands served growing populations in the nearby Pocahontas coalfields as supply centers and rail depots as well as commercial, financial and industrial hubs.

The Town of Graham, chartered in 1884 at the junction of the Flat Top and Clinch Valley railroads, was renamed Bluefield in 1923 and served effectively as a distribution center for the coalfields in the region. In 1890 the town had a population of 1,021. By 1900, the population had grown only modestly to 1,554; yet the influx of over 500 residents over ten years represents sizable growth for the period. Bluefield’s population reached its height around 1980, when it had nearly 6,000 residents. It had grown quickly in the 1910s and 1920s to reach almost 4,000 in 1930. Since 2000, the population has remained around 5,000, (92.30% White, 4.86% African American, <3% other). [US Census]
According to the 2001 Tazewell County Survey Report written by architect Gibson Worsham, the town site was owned by the sons of Thomas Graham, who had surveyed for the railroad. The family began the Graham Furnace and a Hotel Graham that stood on a hill near the present Logan Street School” (which is outside of the proposed commercial historic district).

According to a historical narrative about Bluefield, Virginia and neighboring Bluefield, West Virginia found online (edited here for brevity):

In 1885, several small mining companies amassing to exploit 400,000 acres of bituminous coal reserves grouped together to form the coalfields' largest landowner, the Philadelphia-based Flat-Top Coal Land Association. The N&W bought the association and reorganized it as the Pocahontas Coal and Coke Company.

As the availability and fame of high-quality Pocahontas bituminous coal increased, economic forces took over. Coal operators and their employees settled dozens of towns in southern West Virginia, and in the next few years, as coal demand swelled, some of them amassed fortunes. The countryside was soon sprinkled with tipples, coke ovens, houses for workers, company stores and churches. In the four decades before the Crash of 1929 and subsequent Depression, these coal towns flourished.

After coal was discovered and a railroad to the Pocahontas Coalfields built, the community's name was changed to Graham to honor Col. Thomas Graham, a Philadelphia capitalist whose family figured prominently in the town's founding. The Town of Graham was chartered in 1884. The Norfolk and Western Railroad chose Bluefield, West Virginia instead of Graham as its new regional headquarters and main docking yards for the Pocahontas region. As a result, Bluefield, West Virginia grew at a much faster rate than did Graham.

Beneath the land lay the largest and richest deposit of bituminous coal in the world. The first seam was rediscovered in nearby Pocahontas, Virginia, prompting the Norfolk and Western Railway to build new lines to the western coalfields. The coal seam had been mentioned much earlier in Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, but it was not mined until 1890.

Around that time, coal mines were developed in the area around Harman, Bluefield, War, and Pocahontas, an area that became known as the Pocahontas Coal Fields, from which coal supported the Industrial Revolution in the United States. The development of the coal and coke industry in this area created a boom in the local and national economy, and attracted immigrant European workers and African Americans from the Deep South in search of work to the mountain coalfields. During the World Wars I and II, coal from this area supplied the navies of the United States and United Kingdom.

Graham operated under that name until a referendum on June 10, 1924, voted to change its name to Bluefield, Virginia. The name change was celebrated in a mock marriage ceremony held in the city park between officials of Bluefield, Virginia, and Bluefield, West Virginia.

Graham continued to hope for development as a major city in the region; it tried to attract a steel refining industry alongside the railyards. The Great Depression of the 1930s caused development in the region to come to a halt. The current Bluefield did not start to expand beyond the downtown area until the 1950s, when it annexed the small town of West Graham, Virginia to the west. It also began to develop land in the more open rural foothills to the south of the city.

As the largest town in Tazewell County, Virginia, Bluefield has expanded since the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium. After a series of devastating floods in the early 21st century, the town has relocated its town council chambers and police department from the flood-prone...
historic downtown area to the southernmost point in the city at the foot of East River Mountain. [Wikipedia, “Bluefield, Virginia” and “Bluefield, West Virginia”]

A written history published by the Tazewell County Bicentennial Committee offers its own version:

Bluefield, Virginia dates to the early 1860's, when its first post office was Pin Hook. Shortly before 1883, Pin Hook changed to Harman to honor Colonel E. H. Harman, a Confederate war hero. In 1884, Thomas Graham came from Philadelphia to survey for the Norfolk and Western Railroad. Graham purchased a tract of land, laid out a street system, and in his honor the post office became Graham, Virginia.

In a 1924 general election, a majority of sixty-four votes changed the name to Bluefield, the name becoming official on July 12, 1924. To commemorate the event, the wedding of a Virginian to a West Virginian symbolized the unity of the two Bluefields. This ceremony, held at the state line, had an estimated 15,000 witnesses and the governors of Virginia and West Virginia.

Bluefield had an electric car line that connected Graham with the West Virginia side. Appalachian Power Company began construction in 1914 and in 1916 completed the line to Princeton, West Virginia. Run by Tri City Traction Company, the trolley cars stopped on November 22, 1937. Bus lines replaced them.

Some of Graham’s historic structures include the Graham House, the Masonic building and the Lutheran Church. The hotel Graham House, built in 1898, stood in the center of Graham. Still standing is the 1895 Masonic building where New Graham Pharmacy operates on the first floor. Dudley Memorial Mortuary stands on the site of the Lutheran Church. Associated with the church was the Wartburgh Lutheran Seminary, established by J. P. Greever.

Bluefield’s churches share the town’s early history. The Tabernacle Church began in 1885, procuring its land in December 1897; Graham Christian Church, built first in 1891, then moved to Virginia Avenue in 1921; St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, founded in 1892, constructed its first building in 1910; and Graham Presbyterian Church organized July 1887 and built in 1888. When it organized in 1900, Memorial Baptist Church began as Graham Baptist, moving into a church donated by First Baptist Church in Bluefield, West Virginia, in 1907. First Methodist Church began in 1880, relocated in 1888, suffered a destructive fire in 1855, rebuilt in 1896, and completed yet another building in 1925. Bethel United Methodist Church, begun in 1883, completed its final structure in 1977; in 1908 Virginia Avenue Methodist Church organized, constructed its first church in 1916, and built the present church in 1951.

Norfolk and Western Railroad stimulated commercial growth. Near the station located behind the Bluefield Monument Company, the Eclipse Milling Company ground wheat and corn until the 1930’s. In 1891, the Clinch Valley News listed Graham’s new businesses, including Graham Furnace Company, Virginia Lumber Company, the Flour Mill, Graham Publishing Company, and the Graham Land and Investment Company. The railroad era ended on April 4, 1959, when the last passenger train steamed into Norton carrying over 1,000 passengers, 250 of who boarded at Bluefield.

5. Property Ownership (Check as many categories as apply):
   Private: ___x___ Public\Local ___x___ Public\State _____ Public\Federal _____

6. Applicant/Sponsor (Individual and/or organization sponsoring preparation of the PIF, with contact information. For more than one sponsor, please list each below or on an additional sheet.)
Applicant Information (Individual completing form if other than legal owner of property)
name/title: __________ Mike Pulice________
organization: __________ Virginia Dept. of Historic Resources, Western Regional Office________
street & number: __________ 962 Kime Ln________
city or town: __________ Salem ______ state: __VA__  zip code: __24153____
e-mail: __________ michael.pulice@dhr.virginia.gov________ telephone: __________ 540-387-5443____

7. Notification
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