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): Pennington Gap Commercial Historic District
   DHR File Number: 281-5002
   Main Streets and/or Routes: Main Street, Morgan Avenue
   City or Town: Town of Pennington Gap
   Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located: Lee County

2. Physical Aspects

   Acreage: Approximately 10.0

   Setting (choose only one of the following):
   Urban _____ Suburban _____ Town x _____ Village _____ Hamlet _____ Rural _____

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

   The relatively small commercial district of about 10 acres is centered at junction of the 100 block of Main Street, the 100 blocks of east and west Morgan Avenue (Rt. 58 Alternate), and the 100 block of North Kentucky Street (Rt. 706), as well as an active railroad line running roughly north-south through the proposed district, at the center of the Town of Pennington Gap. The terrain is hilly but comes to a low point at the intersection of the three roads and railroad, within the district. The commercial buildings line the streets with minimal setback, along paved curbs and sidewalks with antique-style metal streetlights. Magnolia Street bounds the district to the southeast, Anderson Street to the northeast, Stanberry Street to the west, and the railroad line to the north, after passing through the district and taking a westerly turn. Sited along the North Fork of the Powell River and its tributary Cane Creek, Pennington Gap is surrounded by tall topographic landforms including Poor Valley Ridge to the north and rounded hills to the south. The elevation of the district is approximately 1,500 ft. above seal level.

3. Architectural/Physical Description
A small group of (approximately 25-30) buildings in downtown Pennington Gap appears to be eligible as a historic district for listing in the National Register. The Lee Theatre and commercial row across W. Morgan Ave. to the north of the theatre are some of the key contributing resources, along with those buildings on the east and west side of the 100 block of Main Street. The boundary is potentially subject to change based on future survey.

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.

The Lee Theater, on the south side of W. Morgan Avenue, at the center of the district, has a very well preserved brick exterior with a new (c. 2013) but authentic looking lighted marquee. Although heavily remodeled inside, the theatre remains an important contributing resource in the district, with significance in the area of Entertainment. The theater drew visitors to Pennington Gap for decades, and after a subsequent period of vacancy and neglect, was brought back to life circa 2013-2014 and once again serves as an entertainment venue and focal point for residents and visitors.

The narrow two-story brick commercial building anchoring the prominent northeast corner of the E. Morgan Avenue/N. Main St. intersection, now occupied by Charly’s Restaurant, has an awkward modern lateral addition on the east side; yet the original part of the building features an antique extruded-brick exterior with two-course brick segmental arches spanning the second-story window openings, intact corbeled brick brackets that likely supported a brick cornice just below the roofline, and 5:1 common (American) bond wall construction. Unfortunately, an added pent roof just below the second story partly obscures the first-story transom windows, which remain intact. Like many small-town buildings, a pitched roof has been added above the original flat roof, which further diminishes the historic character of this local landmark building. Removal of the pent roof and the pitched roof would restore the building closer to its historic appearance.

The Laningham-Graham Building at 41733 W. Morgan Avenue, a former hardware store built c. 1920s on the corner of Kentucky Street, is the most centrally located building in the district and one of the largest buildings. The two-story building is constructed of concrete block with a brick façade laid in 5:1 Flemish variant bond. On the first story are two plate-glass storefronts. The upper story has a row of small windows shaded by fabric awnings. Just above the awnings is a soldier-brick belt course running the width of the façade. A few feet above the belt course is a stone or cast-concrete sign tablet reading Laningham-Graham in capital letters. Like the building housing Charly’s Restaurant, this building also has an added raised pitched roof above the original roof and parapet, clad with vertical siding, and fitted with two louvered...
vents on the front (south) elevation. On the east side of the building is an adjoined contemporary commercial building (103 Main Street) with a wraparound plate-glass storefront.

The building at 213-221 Main Street, occupied by Davis Transmissions, is a well-preserved 1½-story flat-roofed brick building with two storefront bays and two garage bays with metal roll-top doors. Above the front bays are recessed flat brick panels, and above them an added or reconstructed brick parapet with metal coping. A one-story shed built of concrete block, with east-facing garage bays and a front parapet, was added to the east side of the building in the 1950s or 60s. Clearly the building was constructed for an automotive-related function, likely a dealership and service center.

The commercial block on the north side of W. Morgan Avenue, between Kentucky and Stanberry streets, is comprised of six adjoined, potentially contributing buildings, starting with the one-story service station at the east end of the block, with its neon-lighted historic B.F. Goodrich sign mounted on a pole near the intersection. To the west is a one-story brick building occupied by a floral shop, with an angled façade, large plate-glass storefront windows flanking a centered entrance sheltered by a fabric awning, and a stepped parapet above. The four other storefronts to the west are in two-story brick structures, three of which have added raised roofs. The first one is called the Robbins Building and west of it is the Creech-Robbins Building, according to stone sign tablets on the facades of both buildings. The building with the fourth storefront, at the west end of the block and the corner of Stanberry Street, now houses Bailey Robbins Furniture Co. The brick-veneered building has an added front-gabled upper story built of frame with vinyl siding.

The west side of the 100 block of Main Street has two of the best-preserved, character-defining buildings in the district, though both are currently vacant and neglected. The building at 133 Main St. is built of red brick, but has a yellow-brick-veneered façade with two recessed entrances surmounted by a continuous lighted transom (now covered with lattice), a six-bay second-story, and an added front-gable roof. The adjacent building at 149 Main St. retains a great deal of historic character, but requires intervention in a timely manner to be preserved. The building has a single storefront and recessed entrance with folding doors, sheltered by a flat awning; a lighted transom above the awning, a four bay second story with steel-sash windows, and a parapet featuring an ornate corbeled-brick drip cornice.

The opposite side of the street has a number of well-intact, adjoined one-story brick commercial buildings built in a curving row that follows the curve of Main Street. All of these buildings are topped with raised, pitched roofs clad in the front with vertical siding, and the first-story storefronts have each been minimally altered.

4. District History and Significance
A small group of (approximately 25-30) buildings in downtown Pennington Gap appears to be eligible as a historic district for listing in the National Register. The Lee Theatre and commercial row across W. Morgan Ave. to the north are some of the key contributing resources, along with those buildings on the east and west sides of the 100 block of Main Street. The boundary is potentially subject to change based on future survey efforts.

As an important commercial and entertainment center for the surrounding region from c. 1890 to the present, the proposed Pennington Gap Commercial Historic District appears to be eligible at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Commerce and Entertainment, and Criterion C in the area of Architecture. The proposed period of significance, while subject to change based on future findings, spans from the town's founding c. 1890 through c. 1970 to encompass construction of the greatest number of eligible buildings.

**Historical Background**

Pennington Gap (sometimes referred to simply as “Pennington”) was chartered and incorporated in 1891-1892. A post office with twice-a-week mail service had been established there by 1891. [Postal Route Maps Roeser 1891 and Von Haake 1895.] According to a state highway marker erected in 1941 (Pennington Gap, no. X-30): “The town is a mountain pass named for an early settler. The town came into existence with the extension of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, 1890…Standing on a shortcut highway [Route 421] to eastern Kentucky, it is a center for an extensive coal mining region.” The early settler is believed to have been Edward Pennington, who is said to have come to Lee County in 1790 and built his home two miles east of present-day Dryden, later married and moved to present-day Pennington Gap.

A December 1925 timetable for the railroad shows Pennington as a stop on the L&N’s Cumberland Valley Division’s 118-mile run between Norton, Virginia, and Corbin, Kentucky. Pennington was a breakfast stop for train No. 21, the overnight train from Louisville. The railroad was developed to help exploit the region’s rich bituminous coal reserves and the coke produced locally from the coal. Lee County had no rail connections whatsoever until 1886, when the Knoxville Louisville Cumberland Railroad was built.

Soon after the railroads were built, the region’s vast forests began to be harvested on a large scale and lumber companies began to thrive locally, shipping their products out by rail. Pennington Lumber Company was, or soon became a major employer in Pennington Gap. The August 3, 1907 issue of the periodical “American Lumberman” noted that the company, like other lumber companies in the region, was experiencing strong sales and growth, and “has begun construction of lumber sheds 60x120 feet at its plant in Pennington.”

Despite the logging and lumber activity, however, the economy of the region was based mainly on coal throughout the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century. Agriculture also contributed to the local and regional economies, but on a lower level than in many other parts of the country. Overall, non-agricultural industries were concentrated in the northern half of Lee County in the 1890s and early 1900s. The more arable southern region of Lee County, close to the Cumberland Gap, was more focused on agriculture. [Martha Grace Lowry Mize, The Lee County Story, https://www.theleecountystory.com/]

Burly tobacco was previously a major crop in Lee County, and some is still grown there today. Burly tobacco differed from the Brightleaf tobacco grown in Southside Virginia and adjacent areas of North Carolina in that Burly was air cured rather than flue cured. Small barns and sheds were built to hang tobacco leaves for slow air curing. Because of this tobacco legacy, the Town of Pennington Gap still holds its annual Tobacco Festival, a popular draw for visitors from surrounding areas.

Built in 1946 by the Laningham family, the Lee Theater replaced a previous theater than burned down along with Lee Motor Company. J. E. “Jim” Laningham, born ca. 1890, was a native of Pennington Gap who became a prominent businessman in the coal industry and in town, establishing several businesses and constructing “some of the town’s best buildings”, and who “helped in a big way to build three Methodist churches in Pennington Gap”. [“Orchids to Jim” Powell Valley News, Pennington Gap, 1946.]
Hundreds of people crowded the new Lee Theater the day it opened, May 26, 1946. According to the local newspaper,

They found all the anticipated, and more. One and all experienced a feeling of just pride in this new hometown theatre as the paraded beneath the 1500 hundred flickering lights and neon finishes [of] the marquee, walked down the carpeted aisles, took a look at the beautifully decorated walls, then seated themselves to gaze ahead at the large electrically equipped screen flashing back at them the wonderful scenes in ‘Love and Learn’ starring Jack Carson, Robert Hutton, and Martha Vickars. The new theatre is as it has been represented—a real asset to the town of Pennington Gap and one of the best show houses in Southwest Virginia. [“Large Numbers Attend Opening of Lee Theatre” Powell Valley News, Pennington Gap, May 29, 1946.]

A May, 1946 full-page advertisement in the Powell Valley News boasted of the theatre’s being acoustically treated for sound and air conditioned, and having fireproof construction, neon indirect lighting, R.C.A. sound, a roomy lobby, a large standee, a women’s lounge, three aisles, refrigeration [sic] drinking fountain, colored rest rooms, and 800 roller bearing seats. Typical of the times, the theatre was racially segregated originally. African Americans were confined to the balcony and to their own segregated restrooms. [Ron Carson, founder and chairman of the Appalachian African American Cultural Center, Pennington Gap, Letter regarding Lee Theatre historical evaluation, Jan 5, 2012.]

Pennington Gap has long been the most populous town in Lee County. Like many other Appalachian industrial towns, Pennington Gap’s population reached its height around 1950, when it had 2,090 residents. It had grown quickly from 940 in 1920 to 1,553 in 1940. Since 2000, the population has remained around 1,700.

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

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Rev. January 2018
6/27/2022
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.)

name/title: Keith Harless, Town Manager
organization: Town of Pennington Gap
street & number: 528 Industrial Dr.
city or town: Pennington Gap state: VA zip code: 24377
e-mail: keith.harless@townofpenningtongap.va.gov
telephone: (276) 546-1177

Applicant’s Signature: [Signature]
Date: 6-8-2022

**Signature required for processing all applications.**

In the event of organization sponsorship, you must provide the name and title of the appropriate contact person.

Contact person: Keith Harless
Daytime Telephone: (276) 546-1177

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

In some circumstances, it may be necessary for DHR to confer with or notify local officials of proposed listings of properties within their jurisdiction. In the following space, please provide the contact information for the Town Manager.

name/title: Keith Harless, Town Manager
locality: Town of Pennington Gap
street & number: 528 Industrial Dr.
city or town: Pennington Gap state: VA zip code: 24377
telephone: (276) 546-1177