

# WHAT MAKES ROANOKE, ROANOKE?

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AS THE STAR CITY GROWS  
INTO ITS NEWEST PHASE, A  
LOOK AT WHAT IS CENTRAL  
TO THE PLACE IT IS.

**ROANOKE TODAY BASKS IN THE GOLDEN LIGHT OF A CITY ON THE RISE. MILLENNIALS ARE MOVING TO TOWN. HIP SCOOTER COMPANIES VIE FOR THE CHANCE TO PARK BRIGHT TWO-WHEELERS IN HIGH-DENSITY SPOTS. NEW RESTAURANTS OPEN AMID A FLURRY OF INSTAGRAM LOVE.**

It wasn't always like this, of course. Those who've spent more than a few years in a 240\_\_\_-zip code pinch themselves a little with each "Top Town" and "Best Destination" Roanoke receives.

But every Colorado license plate spotted on a downtown street, every sporting event that sets its starting line here, every stand-up paddle board shoehorned into an area garage, seems to show this city has turned a page.

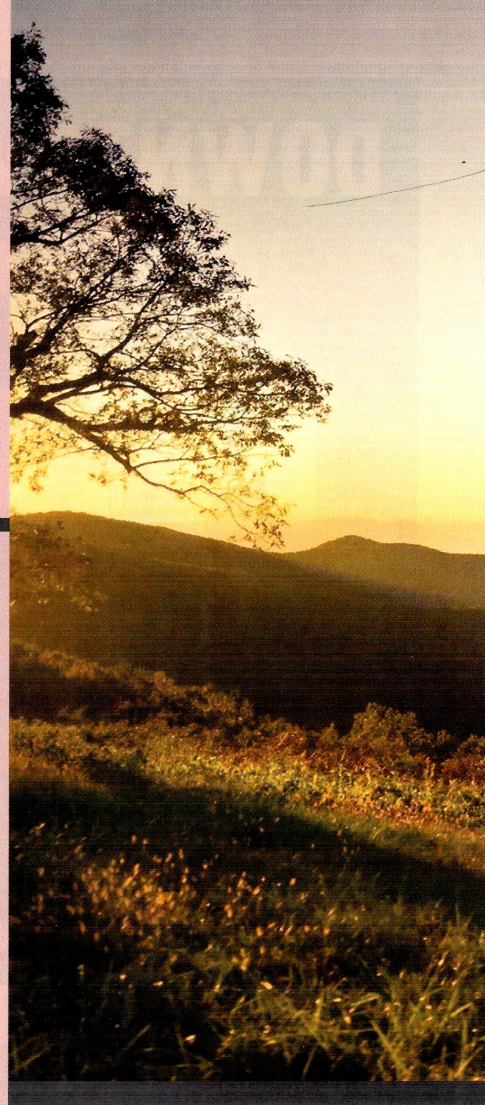
It wouldn't be the first time Roanoke reinvented itself. From Native American trading post, to railroad boomtown, to struggling mountain city that had lost its way, the Star City has written many chapters.

Which makes us wonder: Is there some defining essence within all these iterations? Are there certain characteristics that create Roanoke's heart and soul?

Douglas Jackson, Roanoke's Arts and Culture Coordinator and the founder of Book City Roanoke, a website, podcast and series of book clubs, describes Roanoke as "a place that kind of grabs hold of you and doesn't let go."

But what, exactly, is our "there there," in the words of Gertrude Stein? As Big Lick gave way to the Magic City which became the Capital of the Blue Ridge, what stayed on? What carried through?

In short: What is it that makes Roanoke, Roanoke?



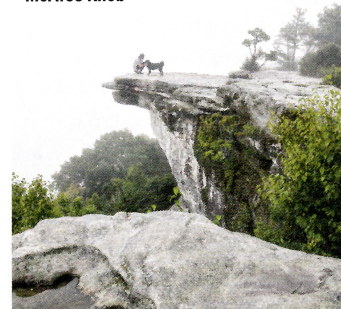
JULIANE PANICHE-JACOB





Blue Ridge Parkway

McAfee Knob



# THE MOUNTAINS

Standing at the outlook atop Mill Mountain, below the most visible symbol of the city — an 88.5-foot neon star — a spectator sees peaks and ridges in every direction. Each cliff carries names and people and histories and traditions embedded in its rock and dirt.

Read, Tinker, Brushy, McAfee, Catawba. These mountains are guide posts. The authors of stunning views. The homes of a plethora of plants and birds and insects and wildlife. They also serve as geographic limits, curbing a community's inclination to sprawl.

The gaps between the risings are the reason Roanoke came to be — traders first ventured into the valley, then railroad tycoons, then all the businesses and neighborhoods that grew up to serve them.

"There's always been lots of ideas and goods and services that have been traded here," says Sam Rasoul, representative for the 11th District in Virginia's House of Delegates. "We're something of an intersection here."

Today, it's the peaks themselves that are the currency: the Appalachian Trail, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the mountain biking at Carvins Cove. Though the mountains have stood for centuries, it wasn't until 2009 that Roanoke began actively rebranding itself as an outdoor destination.

"You know, maybe 15 years ago, I remember people trying to figure out how Roanoke could be the next Asheville or the next Chattanooga," Rasoul remembers. "Then people stopped saying that and started owning our own identity. We realized we have our own uniqueness."

Roanoke's mountains are what visually set us apart from other places. They are our playground. They've become how we define ourselves and how we pay the bills.

Without them, Roanoke would be another place entirely.



# THE PEOPLE

If the mountains are central to Roanoke's identity, so are its people, the descendants of those first traders and pioneers and entrepreneurs — and all the newcomers who have chosen to settle here since.

Roanokers have a reputation for being across-the-board friendly. This is how Mim Young, a graphic designer and civic volunteer, puts it: Roanokers “say hello, hold open doors and if you lose your wallet, they will return it. Nine times out of ten, your money will still be inside.”

City Council member Michelle Davis agrees. “We’re less jaded,” she says, than people who live in colder climates or bigger cities. “Everybody seems excited to share here. We feel like we all have a stake in building this community.”

But Davis, who grew up in Roanoke County then lived in Ann Arbor, Mich., New York City and Chicago before returning in her mid-20s, says there’s more to residents than a warm smile. There’s a key quality to what makes Roanokers Roanokers — determination.

“People here have an attitude: We’re just going to keep working hard until it gets better,” she says. “It’s that genuine desire to see things get better that creates the impetus for continued hard work despite not seeing results for years on end. [They say]: we’re going to do whatever it takes for as long as it takes.”

Sometimes it feels a little circular. Roanoke’s people are easy to know and committed to improving their home because they feel a passionate connection to it.

“When you love where you are, it makes a lot of things great in your life,” says Young.



## THE DIVERSITY

From the Lebanese and Greek immigrants who arrived with Roanoke’s railroad tracks to the Vietnamese and Filipino communities who landed here in the ’70s, to the African and Middle Eastern refugee communities of today, Roanoke has a history of embracing new arrivals from around the world.

With organizations like Local Colors, Roanoke not only allows immigrants to plant roots here, they celebrate them. In 2019, Roanoke was one of 14 communities nationwide selected for a Gateways for Growth award, which provided research and funding to help cities welcome newcomers.

“People are pleasantly surprised by that diversity,” says Rasoul, the oldest of four children whose parents immigrated from Palestine in the 1970s, and the first Muslim state legislator elected in Virginia history.

“I, personally, have always felt accepted here,” Rasoul says. Even today with the issue of immigration more discordant than it has been in decades, Rasoul says: “You don’t tend to see some of the more divisive rhetoric here in the Valley.”

But if Roanoke has an Achilles heel, it is the ongoing effects of its segregated past. Particularly painful is the legacy of urban renewal, where, in the 1960s and ’70s, the city destroyed African-American neighborhoods, communities, histories. The loss — and loss of trust — still resonates today.

“We have to make sure that low-income areas and areas of need are advocated for,” says Xavier Duckett, a William Fleming High School graduate who played football for and earned a Master’s in Counseling from Old Dominion University. He returned to Roanoke in 2016 and now runs a nonprofit, The Humble Hustle Company, that provides opportunities for African-American youth. “We need transportation, grocery stores and grants to be more equally distributed.”

That inequality is keeping Roanoke from becoming an even more vibrant place to live, he says.

“Roanoke is still segregated. That makes it harder to feel the different cultures. Everything is kind of split up in different quadrants,” Duckett says. “There’s a lot to do but you have to be extremely open to finding things.”



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## NOT TOO BIG, NOT TOO SMALL

One of Roanoke's most distinctive traits is its Goldilocks size. The city is big enough to boast a decent night life, healthy economy and vibrant artistic community, but small enough that residents can afford to raise a family or start a business. Roanokers almost never sit in traffic. Any resident can speak up and be heard.

Council Member Davis remembers returning to Roanoke and founding a boutique bicycle company with her then-husband Aaron Dykstra. At the time, she thought of the city as a stop along the way to someplace bigger. But that changed.

"The thing that really impressed me was that we, as small business owners, were able to join in on really important conversations," she says. "That is why I stayed."

Duckett has a similar story. Though, at 28, the pull to move to a big city is strong, he has found his influence in Roanoke belies his age and experience.

"I feel like I've been able to walk in my purpose here," he says. "I've been able to set the city on fire with different ways of doing things, creating events, creating opportunities for kids."

For many Roanokers, the low cost of living, the ease of getting around and the chance to rub elbows with leaders creates a space for them to pursue their dreams.

"We're small enough that we can make things happen from the ground up," says Young, who started the Roanoke Art Mural Project and became the muse behind dozens of murals in Roanoke. "It's up to the people of Roanoke to make things better."

## CAN ROANOKE STAY ROANOKE?

Roanoke is sure to evolve again. Will it hold onto its mountain-loving, hard-working, diverse, small-city essence?

"I hope we don't forget what makes us special," says Rasoul. "That balance, the pace, what we have to offer families. I hope we're making sure to protect that as we continue to prosper."

Davis says it will take vision and restraint and even more hard work to preserve the best of Roanoke in coming decades.

"I think you're going to see a lot more change in the next 10 years," she says. "Growth creates momentum and that momentum just keeps going. As we get more people, that change happens even more quickly."

But Book City's Jackson is optimistic. He sees community conversations as key to making sure all Roanoke's residents feel positive about its direction. "Maybe we can do something different than in other places."

Most of all, Jackson says he is looking forward to witnessing whatever the future holds.

"Oh my gosh! I want to see what happens next in Roanoke." ☆