

Virginia Department of Historic Resources PIF Resource Information Sheet

This information sheet is designed to provide the Virginia Department of Historic Resources with the necessary data to be able to evaluate the significance of the proposed district for possible listing in the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. This is not a formal nomination, but a necessary step in determining whether or not the district could be considered eligible for listing. Please take the time to fill in as many fields as possible. A greater number of completed fields will result in a more timely and accurate assessment. Staff assistance is available to answer any questions you have in regards to this form.

General Property Information	For Staff Use Only DHR ID #: 101-5002
District Name(s): <u>Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District</u>	
District or Selected Building Date(s): 1900-1968 <input type="checkbox"/> Circa <input type="checkbox"/> Pre <input type="checkbox"/> Post Open to the Public? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	
Main District Streets and/or Routes: <u>Wood Avenue (US Route 58 Alternate), East Fifth Street (US Route 23), East Fourth Street, Shawnee Avenue</u> Town: <u>Big Stone Gap</u> Zip: <u>24219</u>	
County or Ind. City: <u>Wise County</u> USGS Quad(s): <u>Big Stone Gap</u>	

Physical Character of General Surroundings	
Acreage: <u>10.5</u> Setting (choose one): <input type="checkbox"/> City <input type="checkbox"/> Urban <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Town <input type="checkbox"/> Suburban <input type="checkbox"/> Rural <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation Corridor	
Site Description Notes/Notable Landscape Features/Streetscapes: The Town of Big Stone Gap is located in Wise County, Virginia. It is the largest incorporated town in Wise County in both population and land area. Nestled in the Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia, the name "Big Stone Gap" refers to the valley in Stone Mountain between Big Stone Gap and Appalachia. Wood Avenue, the main thoroughfare, aligns with this gap. The Powell River meanders northeast to southwest along the north edge of town. The South Fork of the Powell River flows east to west along the south edge of town before converging with the Powell River. The Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District is positioned at the junction of Wood Avenue (US Route 58 Alternate) and East 5 th Street (US Route 23). Although steep landforms surround the town, the terrain within the district is generally level. The district comprises about four blocks of commercial properties laid out in a grid pattern. The boundaries include all known properties that contribute to the historic commercial core of the town. The buildings in the district are sited at grade, with no setbacks, along concrete sidewalks. Southwest of the commercial district is a residential historic district that has been determined potentially eligible (101-0057).	
Ownership Categories: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public-Local <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public-State <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public-Federal	

General District Information	
What were the historical uses of the resources within the proposed district? Examples include: Dwelling, Store, Barn, etc... <u>Store, Office, Theater, Post Office, Pharmacy, Service Station, Bus Station, Auto Dealership</u>	
What are the current uses? (if other than the historical use)	<u>Store, Restaurant, Post Office, Visitor Center, Service Station</u>
Architectural styles or elements of buildings within the proposed district:	<u>Italian Renaissance Revival, Main Street Commercial Style, Moderne, Colonial Revival</u>
Architects, builders, or original owners of buildings within the proposed district:	<u>Milton Paul Robelot; James Knox Taylor</u>
Are there any known threats to this district?	<u>alterations, demolition</u>

General Description of District: (Please describe building patterns, types, features, and the general architectural quality of the proposed district. Include prominent materials and noteworthy building details within the district and a general setting and/or streetscape description.)

The Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District comprises approximately four blocks of commercial properties laid out in a grid pattern. Wood Avenue (US Route 58 Alternate) is the main artery through the district, running northeast to southwest. Cross streets include East Fifth Street (US Route 23), East Fourth Street, and East Third Street. Shawnee Avenue bounds the district to the north and Clinton Avenue bounds the district to the south.

The Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District includes approximately twenty-seven contributing commercial buildings out of approximately thirty-seven total buildings. The contributing buildings date between 1900 and 1960. The buildings are generally of brick or concrete block construction and are one, two, or three stories tall. The earliest buildings date to the turn of the twentieth century and reflect a palette of hybrid commercial styles. Common detailing includes corbelled brick, decorative pressed metal cornices, and cut stone accents.

An early example vernacular commercial construction is the c. 1900 Nickels Building (513 Wood Avenue), which is thought to be the earliest extant building in the district. Historically a general merchandise store, the two-story building stands on a stone foundation and includes two first floor storefronts and a central door, which provides access to the second floor. The east storefront remains minimally altered, retaining paneled wood bulkheads and wood-frame display windows and transoms. Thin columns on piers flank the recessed central entrance with double-leaf doors. The upper façade features corbelled brickwork and an arched window in the central bay at the attic level. Although the window openings are reduced in size, cut stone lintels and sills continue to define the original openings.

The Minor Building and Slemper Federal Building are two of the more architecturally sophisticated buildings in the district, referencing eclectic styles popular during the period. The 1908 Minor Building (301 Wood Avenue) is a 2 ½ story, Colonial Revival-style office building that was built as the headquarters for the Stonega Coke & Coal Company, which later became the Westmoreland Coal Company. The building is named for J.A.L. Minor, an employee of the Virginia Coal & Iron Company, who came to Big Stone Gap in 1895 to develop coke ovens. The cream-colored, common-bond brick building features a jerkinhead roof with eave returns and a modillioned cornice. Gable dormers project above the roof. The sizeable building is five bays wide and fourteen bays deep. Tuscan columns on cut stone piers support the cut stone lintel of the pedimented entrance portico. Inscribed in the concrete tympanum is “1908 Minor Block.”

The Slemper Federal Building (322 Wood Avenue), built in 1912-13 as a United States Post Office and Courthouse, is an imposing example of the Italian Renaissance Revival style situated on the town’s main thoroughfare. The impressive stone building is seven bays long and three stories tall. The ground floor features rusticated stone with horizontal bands and voussoirs over its arched windows. The upper floors feature smooth stone facing with quoins. A Tuscan portico covers three central entrance bays. James Knox Taylor was the Supervising Architect of the United States Department of the Treasury at the time the project began. The project was completed in 1913. The building was individually listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 (101-0004).

From the 1920s through the 1960s, commercial buildings in the district became simpler in both form and articulation. Buildings dating to the 1920s and 1930s tend to incorporate some patterned brickwork on their facades, while later buildings were relatively non-distinct, often with unadorned brick walls. Examples of this minimalist style include the Earle Theater (1949), Mutual Pharmacy (1951), 313 Wood Avenue (Riley’s Coffee Shop – 1950s), and 315 Wood Avenue (Mikes – 1950s). One exception is the 1940s Art Deco design of the ABC store on East Fourth Street. This one-story building is faced with cast-concrete panels and fluted end pilasters in the standard design for ABC stores in Virginia.

As the automobile became the preferred mode of transportation for many in the 1920s, the district came to include a number of buildings related to automobile sales and service. Lonesome Pine Motors (504 Shawnee Avenue) and Stonega Garage (320 Shawnee Avenue) were built in the 1920s. Both buildings are brick with terracotta coping along their parapets. Stonega Garage is architecturally distinctive with a stepped parapet, recessed brick panels, and corbelled brick cornice. The porte-cochere on the front elevation features square brick piers with concrete caps, crenellated parapet walls, and a cast-concrete, dentil block cornice.

In 1940, the Tri-State Coach Bus Terminal was built on East Fifth Street. The Moderne-style building features smooth, rounded surfaces and glass block windows. The two-story building is significant for its size and modern design. Robert Edens operated the bus station for the Tri-State Coach Company. The Liberty Café historically occupied the curved section at the south end of the bus station.

The building at 306 Wood Avenue, currently occupied by Big Stone Gap Visitor's Center, was built c. 1950 as a Gulf Service Station. This service station shows the influence of the Modernist Movement on gas station forms, with its large glass display windows, exposed steel frame, flat roofs, and canopies. The flat oblong box features two projecting canopies, resting on metal poles, which extend over the display and sales room to two detached islands with gas pumps. The large glass display windows of the sales room are canted at an angle. Adjacent to the sales room are two service bays. A tall pylon sign extends above the otherwise flat roof. Milton Paul Robelot, an architect based in Kingsport, Tennessee, most likely designed the building. According to *The Virginia Architects, 1835-1955*, Robelot designed a Super Service Station in Big Stone Gap in 1950.

The Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District, with its collection of early to mid-twentieth century commercial buildings, continues convey its historic and architectural significance as the commercial center of the emerging coal and iron-ore industries in Wise County. The buildings retain the visual qualities necessary to meet the National Register eligibility requirements regarding historic integrity. As with most evolved commercial areas over one hundred years old, there are some instances storefront remodeling, replacement doors and windows, and use of contemporary cladding materials. Even with these changes, the resources continue to convey their historic functions, as well as the design values and construction methods that reflect the time and place in which they were built. The non-contributing resources include buildings that date after the period of significance, as well as several buildings covered by false fronts that no longer retain the visual quality necessary to convey historic or architectural significance.

Significance Statement: Briefly note any significant events, personages, and/or families associated with the proposed district. It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or genealogies to this form. Please list all sources of information. Normally, only information contained on this form is forwarded to the State Review Board.

The Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District in Wise County, Virginia, is eligible under Criterion A in the areas of Commerce and Community Planning. The district comprises the historic business center of the Town of Big Stone Gap, a boomtown that flourished from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century as the center of the emerging coal and iron-ore industries in Wise County. The Big Stone Gap Improvement Company laid out the town according to a plan in the 1880s, setting it apart from other mountain towns that developed in a more haphazard manner. The Stonega Coke and Coal Company, a pioneer in coal production in Southwest Virginia and the largest producer in its territory, built its headquarters in Big Stone Gap in 1908, further elevating the prominence of the town. Coal continued to be the major local industry throughout the mid-twentieth century, stimulating additional commercial development in town to support the growing industry and its employees. The historic district is also eligible under Criterion C for its architecture, which ranges from architecturally significant individual buildings, such as the 1912 Slemper Federal Building, to vernacular commercial buildings constructed from 1900 to the mid-twentieth century, which are collectively significant. The Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District is eligible at the local level of significance for a period of significance extending from 1900, the date of the earliest extant building, to 1968, encompassing the fifty-year mark for districts where significant activities continued into the more recent past.

Historical Background

The vast natural resources of Southwest Virginia led to the development of Big Stone Gap in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The first European settlers discovered the wealth of coal, iron, and timber in the region during an exploratory expedition in 1748-59. The explorers called the area “Big Stone Gap” as it was located in the gap between the Stone Mountains. Initially, the difficulty of the swampy and rocky terrain, as well as the prevalence of Native American conflict in the area, deterred settlers from permanently inhabiting the Gap. Over the next century, settlers slowly started to build houses, farm the land, and form a small community that came to be known as Three Forks, named for the three tributaries of the Powell River converged nearby.¹ By the late 1870s, three farming families owned most of the land in the area: the Gilleys, Hortons, and Flanarys. Outsiders had little interest in mining the town’s vast reserves of iron and coal until General J.D. Imboden presented the untapped potential of the area to coal men in Pittsburgh during the winter of 1879-1880, touting the area as the potential “Pittsburgh of the South”. The announcement of the coming of the South Atlantic & Ohio Railroad inspired northern businessmen to invest in the region. In 1880, as an agent for the Tinsalia Coal and Iron Company, Imboden purchased an immense amount of acreage in Wise County for less than one dollar per acre.²

In 1882, the town was chartered as Mineral City and Elkanah Gilley became the first mayor and postmaster³. By 1890, the town had returned to its original name, Big Stone Gap. Investors in the town soon recognized the need for developers to live near their investments to further the town’s progress. General Rufus Ayers, one of these “in residence” developers, played a formative role in the growth and development of Big Stone Gap. A successful lawyer and land speculator, Ayers joined with other capitalists to form the Virginia Coal and Iron Company in 1881. The Virginia Coal and Iron Company was the first organized coal company in Wise County. Ayers served as its director from 1893 to 1910. Ayers also chartered the South Atlantic & Ohio Railroad Company to lay tracks to the Gap. Ayers organized and presided over the Big Stone Gap Improvement Company, which helped build the town according to a gridiron plan. This planned approach differed from the informal way most other mountain towns developed. Land speculators rushed to Big Stone Gap to purchase lots at skyrocketing prices at auctions organized by the Big Stone Gap Improvement Company. Ayers and the other early developers were optimistic about the burgeoning town, envisioning streetlights, parkland, a water works, an interstate railroad tunnel, wild game preserve, and 300-room hotel.⁴

The town prospered from 1888-1891 as the coal business boomed. Businesses, including two hotels (the Central and the Intermont), a mercantile, blacksmith, and a jeweler, sprung up along Wood Avenue and East Fifth Street to support the growing population and wealth in the area. The hotels were packed with men flocking to Big Stone Gap to participate in the land auctions. In 1891, the first South Atlantic & Ohio Railroad passenger train from Bristol arrived in Wise County.⁵ However, most railroad tracks were laid to transport coal out of the region and did not provide passenger service to Big Stone Gap.

¹ Wise County Historical Society, 28

² Ewing, 8-9

³ Wise County Historical Society, 28

⁴ Ewing, 9

⁵ Ewing, 16-20

Rufus Ayers developed the Dummy Line, a one-mile track that transported people and freight from the center of town to two nearby railroad depots within the town. The track ran along Wood Avenue and East Fifth Street. The car resembled a trolley and children rode it to and from school.⁶ In 1919, it ceased running, the tracks were removed, and the street paved.⁷

A nation-wide economic depression ended the first coal boom in 1892. Many of the lots the local developers platted were never developed and over-speculation was a pervasive problem. Another blow to the economy occurred as many English capitalists ceased investing in the region's railroads, iron furnaces, and other enterprises. This caused many northern speculators to withdraw their financial support as the railroads established Norton—a community about 10 miles east—instead of Big Stone Gap, as their terminus.⁸ The early developers' grand plans for the interstate railroad tunnel, wild game preserve, and 300-room hotel were never realized.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the town's economy somewhat rebounded and a smaller economic boom occurred. The coal, timber, and iron industries capitalized on the abundance of natural resources in the area. During this time of economic success, the downtown business district expanded as well, particularly around Wood Avenue and East Fifth Street, where both the Hotel Eugene and Goodloe Brothers Store were constructed⁹. New developers, such as Ted Wentz and J. K. Taggart arrived in the area to usher in this new period of prosperity. Wentz was the general manager and Taggart the superintendent of the Virginia Coal and Iron Company. In March 1896, the company opened its first mines and coke ovens in Stonega. Many European immigrants and displaced African American workers migrated to the coal camps of the purported "Pittsburgh of the South" by train to work in the mining, timber, and railroad trades. According to the 1900 census and marriage records, these laborers formed the foundation of Big Stone Gap's economy.

In 1902, a major shift occurred in the coal industry with the incorporation of the Stonega Coke and Coal Company. The company acquired the mine and coke oven operations created by the Virginia Coal and Company. Stonega also absorbed both the Keokeex Consolidated Coke Company and the Imboden Coal and Coke Company. The Stonega Coke and Coal Company became the most significant founder of company towns in Southwest Virginia. New coal camps sprang up in Osaka in 1902, Roda in 1903, and Arno in 1908.¹⁰ In 1908, the Minor Building (301 Wood Avenue) was constructed in Big Stone Gap as the headquarters of the Stonega Coke and Coal Company. The building's third floor housed the Stonega Coke and Coal chemical and engineering departments while the first and second floors were used as office space.¹¹ Executives, secretaries, engineers, and bookkeepers all worked in the building. Stonega spent vast sums of money to develop its properties in order to supply the coal demand caused by Reconstruction and World War I.

In 1908, a fire destroyed almost an entire block of buildings along Wood Avenue and East Fifth Street. The Hotel Eugene, the J.W. Kelly Building, and the Goodloe Brothers Buildings were all lost in the flames. The Ayers Building (404 Wood Avenue) was the only building on the block to survive. Several new buildings were constructed in the wake of the fire and new businesses were opened. The Monte Vista Hotel was built in 1909 to replace the Hotel Eugene. In 1912, the Big Stone Gap Post Office and Courthouse (322 Wood Avenue) was constructed, signaling the growing significance of the town. Upon its completion, the town court and post offices were relocated to the building from the Ayers Building. Around 1915, the federal court moved out of Big Stone Gap, however, the post office remained.¹² The downtown continued to grow through the 1920s, with new businesses emerging to support the local coal industry.

Big Stone Gap did not escape the financial pressures of the Great Depression. The banks failed, developers' investments vanished, many laborers lost their jobs, and the second coal boom ended¹³. A second period of downtown growth began in the 1940s and continued through the 1960s. In 1940, the Tri-State Coach Bus Station was constructed on East Fifth Street. Several new commercial establishments, such as the Mutual Pharmacy, were also built on Wood Avenue during this period. During the 1950s, however, the mechanization of the coal industry left many miners out of work and the coal camps were quickly vacated¹⁴. In 1964, Stonega Coke and Coal Company merged with Westmoreland Coal Company under the leadership of E.B. Leisenring Jr. Westmoreland Coal, established in Pennsylvania in 1854, is the oldest surviving coal company in the nation¹⁵. Even after the merger, the coal company continued to expand in Big Stone Gap, constructing a large addition to the

⁶ Mefford, 31

⁷ Ewing, 47

⁸ Ibid, 9

⁹ Ibid, 25-26

¹⁰ Worsham

¹¹ Ewing, 46

¹² Ibid, 43-45

¹³ Ibid, 9

¹⁴ "Coal Camps of Early Southwest Virginia"

¹⁵ Gannaway

Minor Building in 1970, called the Luke Building. They also remodeled the adjacent Trail Theater in the 1980s for company use. In 1994, Westmoreland declared bankruptcy and shut down operations in the eastern region, choosing to focus on western strip mines¹⁶. The company shut down its Virginia division, closing its Big Stone Gap office complex on Wood Avenue. An estimated \$25 million in annual payroll was lost and many jobs at ancillary local businesses were threatened.¹⁷ The legacy of the once burgeoning Wise County coal industry lives on in Big Stone Gap, even as the town tries to reinvent itself in the twenty-first century.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Lester

Photo Key

- Photo 1 of 14: Wood Avenue, 200 Block, view SW
- Photo 2 of 14: Wood Avenue, 300 Block, view NE
- Photo 3 of 14: Minor Building, 301 Wood Avenue
- Photo 4 of 14: Gulf Service Station, 306 Wood Avenue
- Photo 5 of 14: Wood Avenue, Federal Building & 400 Block, view NE
- Photo 6 of 14: Wood Avenue, 400 Block, view SE
- Photo 7 of 14: Intersection of Wood Avenue & East Fifth Street, view SW
- Photo 8 of 14: Wood Avenue, 500 Block, view west
- Photo 9 of 14: East Fifth Street, view west
- Photo 10 of 14: Lonesome Pine Motor Company, 504 Shawnee Avenue
- Photo 11 of 14: Shawnee Avenue, view NE
- Photo 12 of 14: East Fifth Street, view SE
- Photo 13 of 14: Tri-State Coach Bus Terminal, 20 East Fifth Street
- Photo 14 of 14: ABC Store, East Fourth Street

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Sponsor (Individual and/or organization, with contact information. For more than one sponsor, please use a separate sheet.)

Mr. <input type="checkbox"/> Ms. <input type="checkbox"/>	Town of Big Stone Gap		
	(Name)		
505 East Fifth Street South	Big Stone Gap	VA	24219
(Address)	(City)	(State)	(Zip Code)
slawson@bigstonegap.org		(276) 523-0115	
(Email Address)		(Daytime telephone including area code)	

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

Contact person: Stephen Lawson (Town Manager)

Daytime Telephone: (276) 523-1115

Applicant Information (Individual completing form)

Mr. <input type="checkbox"/> Mrs. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Katie Gutshall		
Ms. <input type="checkbox"/> Miss <input type="checkbox"/>	(Name)	Hill Studio	
		(Firm)	
120 Campbell Avenue SW	Roanoke	VA	24011
(Address)	(City)	(State)	(Zip Code)
kgutshall@hillstudio.com		(540) 342-5263	
(Email Address)		(Daytime telephone including area code)	
Applicant's Signature: <i>K. Gutshall</i>		Date: 2/1/18	

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 local County Administrator or City Manager.

Mr. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Mrs. <input type="checkbox"/> Dr. <input type="checkbox"/>	Stephen Lawson		
Miss <input type="checkbox"/> Ms. <input type="checkbox"/> Hon. <input type="checkbox"/>	(Name)	Town Manager	
		(Position)	
Town of Big Stone Gap	505 East Fifth Street South		
(Locality)	(Address)		
Big Stone Gap	VA	24219	(276) 523-0115
(City)	(State)	(Zip Code)	(Daytime telephone including area code)


Please use the following space to explain why you are seeking an evaluation of this district.

The Town of Big Stone Gap would like to pursue listing the Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District on the state and national registers to recognize the history and significance of the town's historic commercial core.

Would you be interested in the State and/or the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits? Yes No
 Would you be interested in the easement program? Yes No

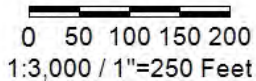


Legend

-  Big Stone Gap Downtown Historic District PIF (101-5002)



Feet





Title:

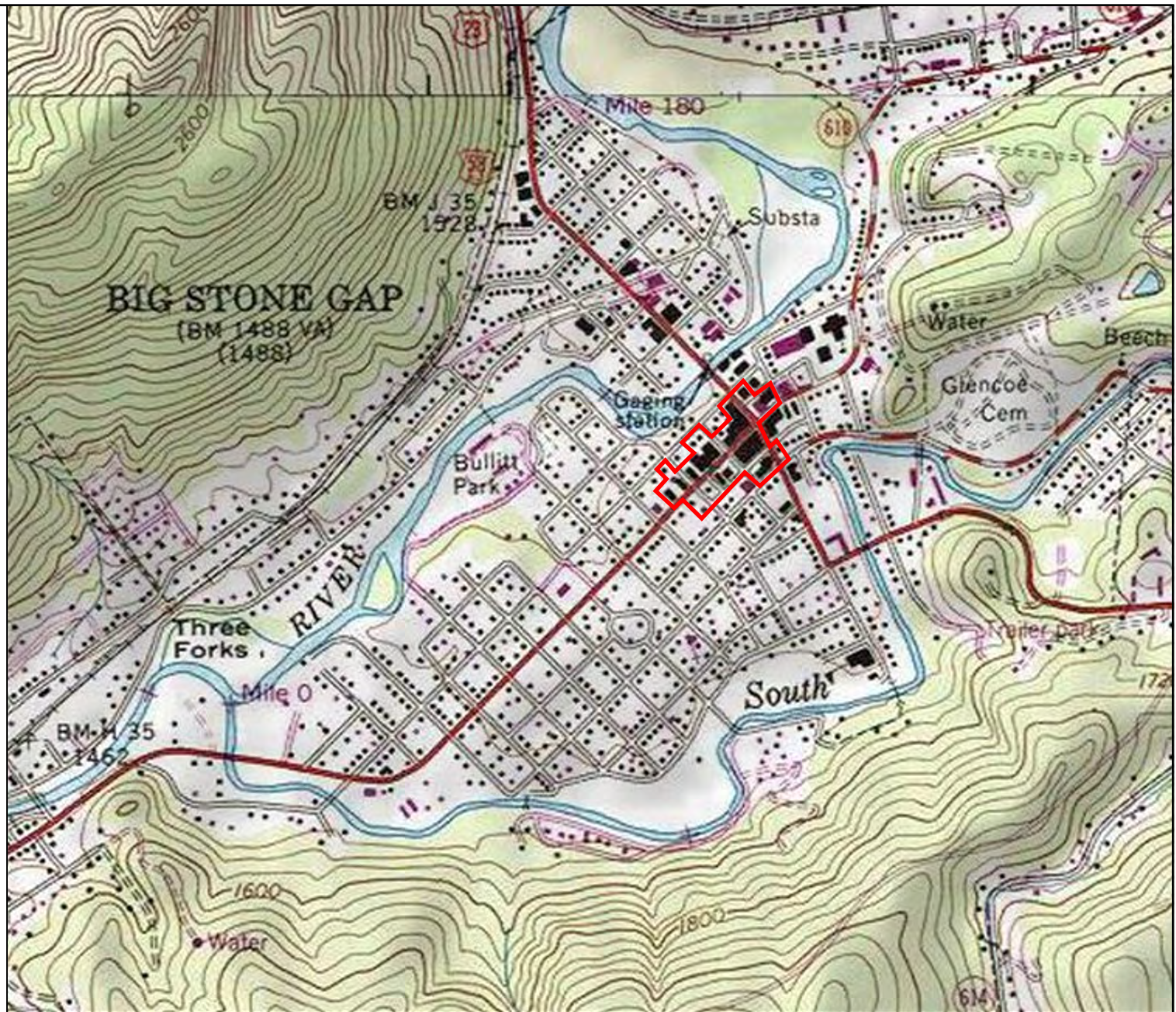
Date: 1/18/2018

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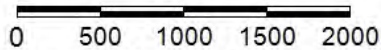
Notice if AE sites: Locations of archaeological sites may be sensitive the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and Code of Virginia §2.2-3705.7 (10). Release of precise locations may threaten archaeological sites and historic resources.

Legend

-  Big Stone Gap Downtown
-  Historic District PIF (101-5002)



Feet



1:18,056 / 1"=1,505 Feet

Title:

Date: 2/1/2018

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