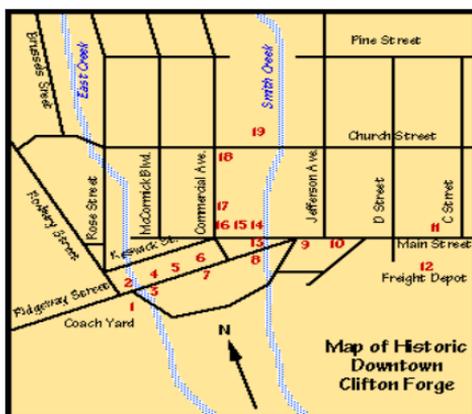


# A Walking Tour of Historic Clifton Forge, Virginia

CLIFTON FORGE MAIN STREET INC.  
501 E. RIDGEWAY STREET  
CLIFTON FORGE, VA 24422



Clifton Forge is the only town by that name in the United States. The town occupies the terraces and sloped on the north side of the Jackson River three miles north of where it merges with the Cowpasture River to form the historic James, which runs the length of our state.

During the nineteenth century, the Kanawha Valley Turnpike passed along the north side of the Jackson River here. The area was known as Williamson, named after an early landowner. By 1857 the Virginia Central Railroad had extended its track from Staunton to Jackson River Station. After the Civil War, the railroad expanded west to connect with the Covington and Ohio Railroad. In 1868 the two lines merged to form the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. When the Richmond and Alleghany Railroad was completed in 1882, the town boomed – its fate for the next 100 years tied to the railroad industry.

The name of Clifton Forge came from the charcoal furnace and iron forge operating in nearby Rainbow Rock Gap (or Iron Gate Gorge). W. L. Alexander was operating the forge there and named it “Clifton” after his father’s estate in Rockbridge County. The town incorporated that name in 1884, two years after the C&O Railroad named its new depot at the east end of the town “Clifton Forge”.

The company then consolidated its various shop facilities about one mile west of the depot. The area in between was developed into the town’s new commercial district. There were two streams to bridge and gullies to cross, but the town’s growth followed the railroad. This area around the C&O Shops became known as West Clifton. The two little towns finally incorporated in 1906. Today’s visitor finds the beginning of the tour at the west end of the Ridgeway Street at the railroad station.

### 1 The C&O Railroad Office Building (1906) is a two-story frame



weatherboard structure with a hip roof, pediment dormers and decorative windows. A large bracketed bay window faces the tracks. You can see the impressive building of the C&O Shops, and envision the busy days of the 1920’s when a hundred trains a

day came across these tracks. Atop a hill in West Clifton stood the Gladys Inn, a famous hotel.

2. Across the street from the C&O Railroad Office Building is the **W. W. Pendleton Building** (1898) topped off with an elaborate milled wood parapet. G. F. Barber, a mail order



architect from Knoxville, designed this building. It is now the home of the C&O Historical Society. Looking east on Ridgeway Street, you will see an almost interrupted view of an early twentieth-century commercial streetscape. There are two and three story structures with elaborate cornices, decorated window openings and a variety of building materials.



3. The triangular shaped building (**Virginia Taxi**), on the corner, covered with “brick” siding, was owned at the turn of the century by the successful African-American businessman E. F. Scott. He sold produce and operated a restaurant from this location near the tracks, ran a hotel in the upper stories, and a barbershop next door. Both of these storefronts have attractive decorative transoms and milled wood trim with colored glass inserts. E. F. Scott’s nephew, George Washington “Babe” Scott, carved canes and animal figures and sold them at the station and gave some away to railroad men. The Allegheny Highlands Arts and Crafts Center did a show and a video about “Babe” Scott’s carvings. He is recognized as a true folk artist. Stop and admire the colored glass transom at 412 E. Ridgeway Street. The building has served many purposes.

4. The Ridge Theatre (1929) at **418 E. Ridgeway Street** was one of two continuously running theatres operating from the boom of the 1930’s until it closed in 1958. It is a Spanish Eclectic creation with a false metal balcony and mission style touches.



5. The building at **424 E. Ridgeway Street** has been repainted to highlight the delicate cornice molding. Inside is a tin ceiling. This was one of two buildings restored in cooperation with the Clifton Forge Main Street Program.



6. The building at **434 E. Ridgeway Street** has been restored close to its original 1900 appearance. It is unique with its rock faced concrete block and wrought-iron awning, which supports colored glass inserts.



7. The Allegheny Highlands Arts and Crafts Center, at **439 E. Ridgeway Street**, combines two buildings whose fronts are topped with elaborate decorative brickwork and a cast concrete cartouche. The Center offers juried regional arts and crafts and has a fine art gallery with exhibits changing monthly.



8. The Allegheny Building (1910) at **505-513 E. Ridgeway Street** is the largest building on the street. Its three story street façade has brick quoining acting as dividers, and a pressed-metal cornice. Shops occupied the first floor and railroad workers use to live in the upstairs apartments. A million-dollar renovation by the Allegheny Highlands Housing Alliance was completed in 1998.



9. At **515 Ridgeway Street** is a two-story, brick, shed roof building with parapet and pressed cornice, segmental-arched windows, aluminum storefronts with aluminum mansard and partial stone foundations evident to the rear. A two-story wedge-shaped rear brick wing bears signage for a dry goods store. Changes in the color of the brickwork on the front façade are evidence of a former (but not original) recess near the southwest corner. This building was built by Surber to house his meat market. S.S. Griffith, a commercial photographer had an upstairs studio during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The building also formerly contained a doctor's office and a millinery shop. This building is one restored in cooperation with the Clifton Forge Main Street Program.



10. The **Farrar Drug Store Building** at 535 Main Street is a fine example of a 1930 Art Deco building. Notice the molded concrete trim and bronze panels over the transom. Pharmacist Farrar offered the first lending library in the town. Here E. Ridgeway Street ends and joins with Main Street, which is the oldest part of Clifton Forge.





**11. The Clifton Forge Town Hall (1910)** is a neoclassical building whose finer Ionic details were damaged by fire in the 1940's. A major renovation of the exterior, completed in 1995, restored its original grace and dignity.

**12.** In the rail yard, on the south side of Main Street, is the C&O Railway Heritage Museum located within a former **C&O Freight Depot**. This brick building has corbelled gables and elaborate brickwork, which dates to the late nineteenth century. It is architecturally similar to the C&O Shops at the other end of town. On the wall are wooden plaques that name the merchants who received shipments.



**13.** Be sure to notice the interesting corner entrance and decorative trim at **622 Main Street (1907)**. The original tin ceilings inside are typical of the period. Stand near the fountain at the triangular corner of the Sona Bank Building. This was the busiest spot in town, for this was where the two wooden bridges crossing Smith Creek met, until one collapsed in 1899. Town Council spent \$20,000 to rebuild the bridge.

**14.** The Masonic Theatre (1905) located at **512 Main Street** was the oldest continuously operating theatre in Virginia until it closed in 1987. It is now operated by the Town of Clifton Forge as the Center for the Performing Arts. It is a three-story Beaux-Arts brick building with a plastered façade cove ceiling lobby an unaltered performance hall with stage and balcony. A furniture company operated from the basement of the theatre building, making use of the railroad spur adjacent to the building. The theatre was designed by the architectural firm of Frye and



Chesterman of Lynchburg, VA as was the building with the heavy pressed metal cornice next door at **508 Main Street**.



**15.** Carpenter-Moody Building (1892) located at **504 Main Street** is an example of the extensive use made of cast iron decoration that could be ordered direct from design books and delivered by rail.

**16.** The E. A. Snead Building, located at **500 Main Street**, is an example of a Clifton Forge success story. Built between 1892 and 1897, it was one of the largest home furnishings stores in western Virginia. “Deacon” Snead started out with a small cigar store and then expanded and became an influential town leader and politician. The first open elevator in Clifton Forge was installed in this building and is still in operation. A third floor was added later, which accounts for the difference in the brick colors.



**17.** On Commercial Avenue, just behind Snead’s is the **J. C. Carpenter Building** (1905), an elaborately decorated neoclassical structure. Its round-arched doors and windows are topped with cast concrete cartouches, and it has piers extending from the street to the top. It is thought that Frye and Chesterman designed this building also. The same firm also designed the large Clifton Forge Presbyterian Church (1907) at the corner of Church Street and Jefferson Avenue. Presumably the buff-colored brick they favored was shipped by rail from Lynchburg, VA to Clifton Forge.



**18.** The **Post Office** is the city’s most sophisticated building. It was designed by James Knox Taylor and built in 1909-1910. This is a Beaux-Arts design, capped by an octagonal rotunda and tile roof. The inside is quite elaborate with marble walls and molded plaster detailing. There are only eight such buildings in the United States.

