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# MADE IN HAYWOOD

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Haywood County is home to a rich tapestry of makers. Their products range from fine craftsmanship and beautiful aesthetics to functional wares and unique gifts.

Those featured in Made in Haywood have diverse products and backgrounds. But they share a common theme — whether it's a small business, cottage industry or solo crafter with a garage workshop. They have harnessed their creative energy to forge a livelihood.

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# Crafting a trail to economic vitality

**BY LILLY KNOEPP**
***NC Local***

Craft is not just art, it's the cultural heritage of a region, said Anna Fariello, curator of the Blue Ridge Craft Trail.

Fariello traces the evolution of WNC craft tradition back 100 years, when craft flourished during the "golden years" of Appalachian craft revival.

Iconic institutions included the John Campbell Folk School (1925), the Penland School of Craft (1929) and the Southern Highland Craft Guild (1930).

"Those three which give us the foundation for why craft is such a hugely important field in Western North Carolina," said Fariello, who has written books about local craft history such as Qualla Arts and Crafts.

A revival of craft as a gateway to tourism began percolating in the 1990s, with the creation of Handmade in America and the region's first craft trail.

Fariello pointed to Becky Anderson as a leader in this movement to craft.

Anderson worked for the Asheville Chamber of Commerce at the time, and she remembered trying to crack the code on a new industry for the region.

"Tourism was just beginning to emerge as maybe an economic solution to some of the projects that were falling, i.e. agriculture and the loss of tobacco," said Anderson.



**A CUT ABOVE —** Mike Ayers, a chainsaw carver in Maggie Valley, draws inspiration for his pieces from the wildlife of the Smokies. Ayers is among more than two dozen Haywood artists featured on the Blue Ridge Craft Trail.

Manufacturing, centered primarily on furniture and textiles, had once been another economic driver in the region, she said.

"I grew up in Canton so I was very used to Papertown USA and that kind of thing, but what could bring more people to the area? We had the Smokies. We had the Parkway. What else and what could people do for a longer period of time?" she asked.

She said they realized that Appalachian culture and craft could bring the region together for a new economic strategy.

With a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust, the chamber spent a year meeting with local leaders across 20 counties in the region to figure out how to bring more tourism into the rural communities.

"We wanted to get rid of the stereotypes of Li'l Abner and Snuffy Smith and the movie Deliverance and the Beverly Hillbillies and all that. It was time for that to go," Anderson said. "Tourism became the thing that could keep us all together."

The craft community also wanted to know how to better sell their work beyond craft shows, she said.

"So we said, let's reverse the system and bring the visitor to you," Anderson said.

The effort became Handmade in America, first managed by Anderson, who created the original Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina to steer visitors to hundreds of craft studios, galleries, schools, and more across the mountains.

The first edition of the trail book was published in 1996. Over the next six years, three more editions were published, and 1.7 million copies of the guide books were sold.

The federal designation of Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in 2003 later gave rise to the Blue Ridge Music Trail in 2013 and Blue Ridge Craft Trail in 2017.

The cultural assets are what draw people to an area, so their identification is critical, Fariello said.

"The craft trails help not only identify them but it helps visitors connect with local artists and galleries," she said.

Tourism has long since become the economic powerhouse of the region. The Western Arts Agencies of North Carolina estimated that in 2024 the creative economy generated more than $1 billion in earnings and over $3.1 billion in sales across the region.

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*A longer version of this story was originally published by NC Local, a nonprofit newsroom delivering public service journalism about statewide issues.*



**RED HOT —** Rachel David, a blacksmith, sculptor, designer and maker with Red Metal blacksmithing, pounds out a creation in her Waynesville studio, which is included on the Blue Ridge Craft Trail.

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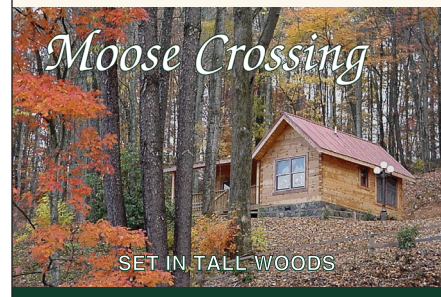

*l: Heidi Bleacher, Devil Jug, felt, 2026;*
*r: Kate Clayton "Granny" Donaldson, Cow Blanket, c. 1930*

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# Haywood Arts Council lands $1 million donation to secure downtown Waynesville building

**BY SYDNEY SHANKMAN**

The Haywood Arts Council is growing — from 640 square feet to 17,000 square feet — thanks to an anonymous donation of $1 million.

The donation funded the purchase of 196 N. Main Street in downtown Waynesville, where Sassafrass on Main was formerly located until its closure earlier this year. The three-story building will be turned into a new arts center featuring gallery space, classrooms and more, something Tonya Harwood, executive director of the arts council, has been envisioning for years.

"There was a need for exhibit space — big exhibit space," Harwood said. "We're gonna have more than we know what to do with, and it's such a good feeling."

Harwood had been on the hunt for new location for a while, as the gallery space they currently rent is woefully undersized. The arts council has 170 artist members, many of whom would like space to display their wares for sale — from oil paintings and watercolors to jewelry, ceramics, textiles and more.

When the Sassafras building was put up for sale, Harwood knew it was out of their budget but decided to see the property anyway. And then she got a text.

"Lo and behold, this anonymous donor texts me and said, 'Hey, before you go meet with that realtor, give me a call. She was on speakerphone with her husband, and she says, 'We think you need to make a cash offer on the Sassafras building,'" Harwood said.

While the donation covered the purchase of the building, the arts council still needs to fund repairs and renovations before it can move into the space — and pay for overhead that will come with operating the gargantuan space.



**FOR THE ARTISTS —** Executive director of the Haywood County Arts Council, Tonya Harwood, stands in their current gallery space. The new arts center will allow more artists to display and sell their work.

The arts council is launching the "Elevate the Arts" campaign and starting a "Friends of the Arts Council" to encourage donations. The arts council will also rely on donations to ensure that artists who display their work in the gallery get a fair commission when their work sells.

Continuing the creativity

But it's not just their footprint on Main Street the arts council wants to grow — it's the arts as a whole. The arts center will draw in new artists, keep existing ones and put Haywood County front and center in the Western North Carolina art scene.

"We're more than just an organization now. We're a hub for art," said Tom Bastek, development committee chair of the arts council.

The arts center will feature a main exhibit hall and two auxiliary galleries. This extra room will allow the arts council to display art not just from members, but traveling art shows. Bastek believes breaking into traveling art displays is the key to growing Haywood's presence in the WNC arts community.

"Now we've got a real legitimate space that we could put up some traveling exhibits. It's going to grow the arts community. I think we can become a cornerstone of this, and who knows where that goes," he said.

The arts council's plans don't stop at more galleries — they have three stories and 17,000 square feet, so there's even more to come. Harwood envisions partnering with other arts and culture organizations — like space to hold poetry readings by the Smoky Mountain Writers Group.

"I'm really hoping that we can grow and incorporate more different types of art forms than we've been able to in the past due to our size limit," Harwood said.

There are also plans for a second-hand art store, artists' studios, classroom, a lending library and more.

"I think the more we can get everything in one place, the better it's going to be," Bastek said.

The arts center is just the beginning for the Haywood County Arts Council. It seems the building has unlocked new potential for both the arts council and all of Haywood County.

"Awareness is such a huge part of growth. If we just make people more aware of what's out there in the world, I think art does just fine. And the nice thing is, we already have a reputation in West North Carolina for being an artsy place, so yeah, let's be more artsy," Bastek said.



**DEVELOPING THE ARTS —** Tonya Harwood, executive director of the Haywood County Arts Council, stands in front of their new building in downtown Waynesville. The council was able to purchase the building thanks to a $1 million donation.

# A salamander scavenger hunt is coming to downtown Waynesville

A Waynesville-based artist will soon get to work crafting seven unique salamander sculptures for a new public art project on Waynesville's Main Street.

The sculptures will become part of an interactive salamander scavenger hunt, creating a fun and unique experience for residents and visitors alike. Each salamander's species, unique facts, and name will be incorporated into the scavenger hunt poem.

"We are very excited about promoting the unique wildlife that call WNC home, with the added benefit of bringing locals and visitors to downtown," said Waynesville Public Art Commission Chair, George Kenney.

Artist Derek Rhodarmer of Waynesville will design, fabricate, and install the seven small-scale salamander sculptures throughout downtown Waynesville.T his project will be completed in fall 2026.

Following the unanimous approval of the project, town council sponsored the first salamander in the scavenger hunt — an Eastern Hellbender they named "Dolly," after the late Dolly Parton. Sponsorships start at $1,000 and include naming rights to the salamanders.

The National Park Service was instrumental in providing educational guidance and selecting species that accurately reflect the Great Smoky Mountains — which has the moniker of "Salamander Capital of the World." Smokies Life will donate prizes to those who discover all seven salamanders. Prizes include park patches, stickers, and a copy of the book "So Many Salamanders" by Diane Lang to the first 250 participants.



**SCAVENGER HUNT —** A prototype of the Jordan's Salamander by Derek Rhodarmer. The sculptures will become part of an interactive public art scavenger hunt in downtown Waynesville.

Rhodarmer is a native of Haywood County and holds an MFA degree from the University of Pennsylvania. After stints in Philadelphia, Vermont, New York, Atlanta and Raleigh, Rhodarmer returned to Haywood County and is an art instructor at A-B Tech.

*For more information on the Waynesville Public Art Commission, visit waynesvillepublicart.org.*


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# New trail to connect bountiful Haywood craft and history

**BY CAROL VIAU**

An initiative is underway to develop a Haywood County Craft & History Trail that will position Haywood County as cultural hub for craft, history and Appalachian lifeways.

"The trail will connect the county's museums, galleries, historic sites, artist studios, theaters, public art, festivals, cultural organizations, and heritage destinations into a unified visitor experience," said Jerry Jackson, Shelton House Museum board chair.

The Haywood Tourism Development Authority awarded a grant to The Shelton House–Museum of North Carolina Craft and History to kickstart the project.

"A lot of people come to Haywood County for the mountains, but they don't realize how deep our craft culture runs," said Harwood. "This trail helps them see that art and craftsmanship are really woven into who we are as a community. It gives visitors a fuller picture of Haywood County and why creativity mattered here for generations."

Jackson hopes to enlist stakeholders across Haywood County's network of nonprofits catering to the arts, galleries, museums, historic sites, festivals and more under one banner.

"Putting forward that packed combination, we can say, 'wow, look at all we have here,'" said Jackson. "The success of this project depends on collaboration. Together, we can create a stronger cultural tourism economy while preserving and sharing the heritage that defines Haywood County."

The first step is amassing a database of listings. Those will then be presented in a Haywood County Craft & History Trail brochure. The creation of a website will follow. The TDA grant won't fully cover the cost of the initiative, so funding will be raised through sponsorships from participants — which will get branded signage and materials to display.

The project goes far beyond just handing people a directory, however.

"Our craft heritage isn't stuck in the past — it's alive and evolving today," said Tonya Harwood, director of the Haywood County Arts Council. "The trail gives us a way to show where these traditions started, put a spotlight on the talented artisans making work right now, and inspire the next generation of makers."

Organizations interested in participating in the Haywood County Craft & History Trail can contact the Shelton House to learn about partnership opportunities. Email info@shelton-house.org.





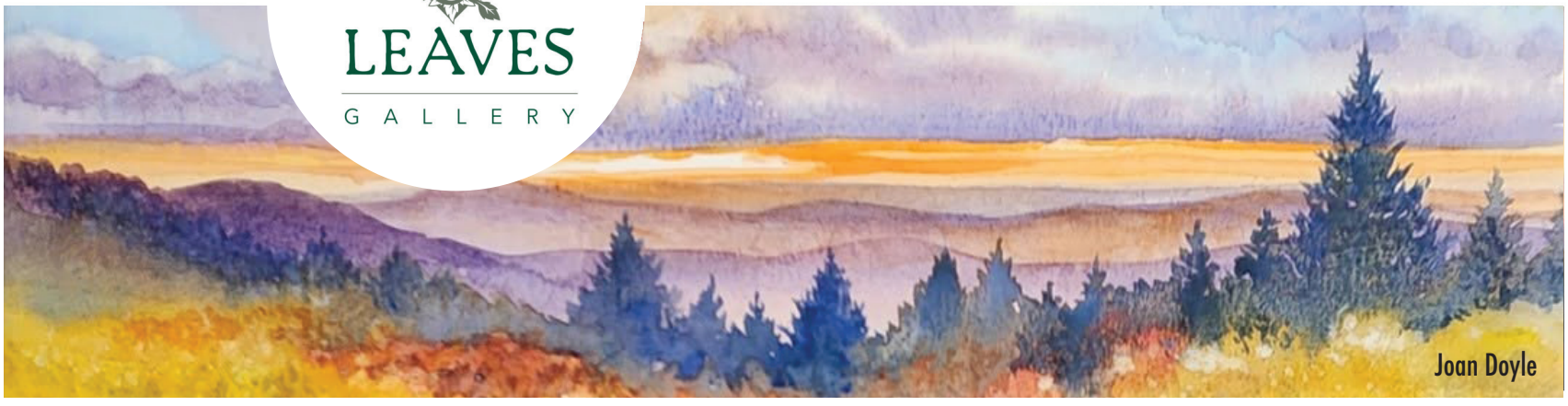








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