

Down on the Corner

A stroll through the University's neighborhood

BY COY BAREFOOT

Even in its earliest days, the University of Virginia was much more than just a school. Removed and separate from nearby Charlottesville, the college became a village unto itself known as "University, Virginia." An entire community grew up within and around the precincts of the institution, offering its own railroad depot, post office, barbershops, markets and restaurants. The commercial hub of that community—the downtown of the village of University, Virginia—has always been the area known as "the Corner."

Once literally just a corner where the main road to Charlottesville met the entrance to the University Grounds, this district has expanded to become five city blocks of around-the-clock activity. It is the home of bookstores, restaurants and bars, convenience stores, pool halls, live music venues, coffee shops, clothing stores, private residences, and more. A succession of merchants, professors, townspeople and of course students has lived and worked together in this community for almost two centuries.

Despite a devastating fire in 1895, the Academical Village and the Lawn have changed little over the years. The scene offers a magnificent timelessness that stirs the spirit.

But amble down the hill to the Corner for an altogether different experience. Here time plunges on: buildings rise and fall, businesses come and go, and once familiar faces are replaced by new characters and fresh scenes. Here at the Corner, we learn that history is written as much in brick and stone as it is in words.

Great chapters in the Corner story have already closed: Chancellor's Drugstore, the University Cafeteria, the Cavalier, Van Lear's Billiard Parlor, Page's Florist, Anderson Brothers Bookstore, Spicer Brothers Cleaners and the University Diner. Unforgettable characters have passed: bookstore owner Billy Williams, panhandler Tim Murphy, barber Milton

Via, rooming house owner Eliza Page, and restaurateur and war hero Gus Heilman. Yet some great chapters continue to be written in places like Mincer's, Heartwood Books, the College Inn, Freeman-Victorius, the White Spot and the Virginian. And countless stories remain to be created in the hustle and bustle at the Corner.

For the University of Virginia, the Corner is that seam of life that has always connected town with gown. Nearly 200 years have passed since Thomas Jefferson walked across an empty field and staked off what would become the University of Virginia. His ambitious Academical Village has evolved into something of an Academical City with tens of thousands of students, faculty and staff.

The community around the University has changed as well. Once a sparse collection of manor homes and wood-framed cottages on dirt roadbeds, it is today an academic neighborhood in one of the country's most desirable small cities. University, Virginia, scarcely resembles its former self.

The U.Va. Corner may not be the primary shopping district it once was, having been outpaced by development on Route 29 and elsewhere. It may even have become something of a "food court," where coffee shops and restaurants have replaced clothing stores and beauty salons. But the Corner has lost none of its charm.

Just what this new century holds for the Corner and the University is uncertain, but it seems inevitable that new generations will discover the joy of strolling down to the Corner on a warm afternoon and the magic of the Lawn in the evening. "Perhaps a new era will come to the Corner," a student observed prophetically in 1944. "Happy students will again throng the Corner and perhaps the new places which spring up along the road at the gate of Mr. Jefferson's Academical Village will come in time to mean as much to them as did our old haunts where we made so many friends and passed so many never-to-be-forgotten evenings."

Or, as another student wrote in the 1915 edition of *Corks and Curls*: "I have loafed as only a student can loaf, on my way across the Lawn to the last session at the Corner. The twilight drifting down seems to shadow my own spirit, and under the guarding darkness of the great trees each column stands mystically white and seemingly vigilant like an ever-understanding spirit come back from some far-off shore to stand sentinel over precincts made sacred by the trials and escapades of student days."

Dunnington Residence

Francis Perry Dunnington became part of the University community in 1867, when he joined the first-year class. He went on to become a professor and lived for many years with his family in this stately, vine-covered home at the corner of University Avenue and Chancellor Street. Affectionately known as "Old Dunny" by his students, he died in 1944, at which time the home became an apartment house for students.



Stevens-Shepherd Company, at the Corner 1920-1965

Charles Elmo "Mo" Stevens and William Shepherd relocated their men's clothing store from downtown Charlottesville to the Corner in 1920. In early 1942, the business was moved again to this building at the corner of University and Elliewood Avenues. Generations of U.Va. students purchased their coats and ties here. Richmond-based department store Miller & Rhoads later bought Stevens-Shepherd and moved the business out to the Barracks Road Shopping Center in 1965.



Mo Stevens



Mincer's, 1948-present

Mincer's Humidor first opened in a cramped store off a Corner alleyway in July of 1948. In the summer of 1954 Robert Mincer relocated his pipe shop to this prime location. The *Cavalier Daily* commented, "Mincer's Pipe Shop will carry on the tradition of affording students a place to read magazines, buy tickets for all University functions, read the ball scores, sip a Coke, and carry on informal bull sessions." Mincer's has since transitioned from pipes and tobacco to t-shirts and sportswear.



Mincer's, 1954. Top right: Robert Mincer Jr. (Com '58) and son Mark (Com '85) in 2007.



Bank building, 1960: The Dunnington residence, a popular apartment house for students, was razed to make way for this commercial building. Originally the home of the Peoples National Bank when it was erected in 1960, the building has since been the site of a succession of various banks.

"Shops Under the Ash, 1973: Following the demolition of Matilda Kelly's boardinghouse on Elliewood Avenue, developers created these retail spaces named for a giant ash tree that once stood nearby. Lucky Seven, a local convenience store (now Cohn's on the Corner) occupied the left storefront. The right storefront was originally a fast-food restaurant called The Caravan ("Home of the Humpburger"), then a Burger King and a Kinko's Copy Shop. Bodo's Bagels finally opened its much-anticipated Corner location here in June 2005. The once-mighty ash tree was removed that summer as well.

1601 University Avenue, 1927: The Colonnade Grill, boasting the University community's first "barbecue machine," originally occupied the ground floor of this building. Rooms were available for rent to students upstairs. In 1930 the Grill was succeeded by another eatery named Yanks, a painted advertisement for which is still partially visible on the building's west side. Yanks was replaced by Frank Higgins' University Cash and Carry. The building later housed a string of clothing stores: Stevens-Shepherd's in 1942, Ed Michtom's in 1965 and Arnette's in 1976. It became a Starbucks' Coffee Shop in 1998.

Elliewood Avenue: Named for long-time Charlottesville resident Ellie Wood Page, who grew up on this street. For most of its history Elliewood was the home of boarding, rooming and apartment houses that catered to U.Va. students and young faculty members. Beginning in the 1960s, retail stores and restaurants began to take over those private residences. The transformation gained speed in the 1970s and was complete by the early '80s.

Hildreth Building, 1923: Named for its developer, this building's 16 rooms on the second and third floors were known as the Kenmore Apartments (dubbed "the Kenmore Kennels" by students). For most of its history, the first floor housed two separate storefronts including an A&P Grocery, Cassell's Shoe Store, J. Cullen Wiant's Corner Shop, Collin's Menswear, Mincer's and, for nearly 30 years beginning in 1960, the right-side berth was the home of U.Va. alumnus and former tennis coach Carl "Red" Rohmann's (Col '35) University Sports Shop.

Ellie Wood Page and her mother, Eliza Mason Page, circa 1900.

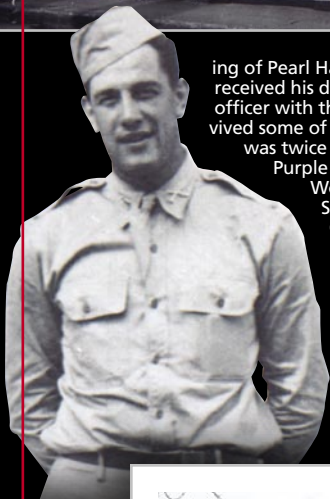
Mrs. E.M. Page closed her boardinghouse in 1954. Her daughter, Ellie, went on to teach generations of Charlottesville children how to ride and care for horses. Ellie passed away in 1986 at the age of 92.





The Virginian, 1923-present
When it first opened in the early 1920s, the Virginian was popular for its soda fountain, root beer, and goose liver sandwiches. It fast became one of the Corner's rowdiest nightspots when Prohibition laws were repealed in the mid-1930s. For roughly the first 30 years of the 20th century, tradition forbade first-year men from hanging out at the Corner. The most prized spots on soda fountain stools and on benches at the Corner were reserved for fourth-year "Corner Kings." But all that started to change around 1930 when bold first-years made the Virginian their own.

The University Cafeteria, 1942-1983
For more than 40 years the "Uni-Caf" attracted throngs of students, faculty members, hospital workers and townspeople with its delicious food, especially the Southern fried chicken and spoon bread. Long lines stretching out the door and up the sidewalk became common, especially on Sundays. Restaurateur Cleveland Webber oversaw the Uni-Caf from its beginning until competition forced the business to close its doors in 1983. A string of restaurants and nightspots have since occupied the space including Sophie's, Armand's Chicago Pizzeria, Crazy Charlie's Pub, The Greenskeeper, and now Jaberwoke.



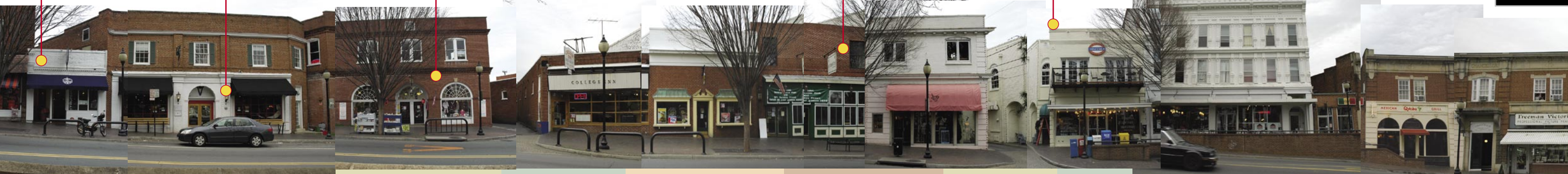
ing of Pearl Harbor, Heilman (pictured left) received his draft notice. During service as an officer with the 45th Infantry Division, he survived some of the worst battles of the war and was twice wounded in France—earning the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, the World War II Victory Medal, the Silver Star and the Bronze Star. Lt. Col. Heilman returned to Charlottesville after the war, married, started a family, and enjoyed a career in banking. He passed away in 1996 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

The Cavalier, 1928-1944
During its heyday, the Cavalier was the premier watering hole for University students. Born as a soda fountain and diner during Prohibition, the Cavalier is best remembered as a lively nightspot under the ownership of Gus Heilman (Col '52), Carlton Van Lear and Ernlly Estes throughout the '30s and early '40s. Two days before the bomb-

The Kitch Inn, 1922-1955
A portable dining car spruced up with a log cabin façade, the Kitch Inn—with its steak dinners and waffle specialties—was far and away the most popular late-night haunt among U.Va. students in the 1920s. In 1925 the Kitch Inn expanded to include the small building next door. At this new Kitch Inn Annex, students could sign up for three meals a day for \$35 a month. In 1928 the original Kitch Inn dining car was dismantled and reestablished on Rugby Road. By 1930 the Annex had become known as the Old Kitch Inn. Under a succession of owners—George "Froggy" Dillard, Arthur and John Costan, Charlie Norcross and Fred Dove—it remained popular into the 1950s.



The University Billiard Parlor, 1904-1972
A venerable Corner institution, the University Billiard Parlor was founded by former Marine and boxing coach John Sterling LaRowe in 1904. The most celebrated and successful boxing coach in collegiate history, LaRowe went on to lead the Cavaliers to a series of triumphant conference championships before his death in 1940. LaRowe relocated his popular pool hall to this expansive annex behind the new Sheppe Building in 1926 and later sold the business to long-time Corner merchant Carlton Van Lear (shown in the photo above [left] with Richard "Lightning" Goree). Van Lear was compelled to close the billiard parlor in 1972. "Students stopped going there," one long-time Corner merchant said. "It was motorcycle gangs and troublemakers. It got to be a dangerous place. Van had no choice. It was time to close it down."



The Virginian, 1923: Erected as part of the Hildreth Building, the Virginian Restaurant celebrates its 84th anniversary in the summer of 2007, making it Charlottesville's oldest restaurant. Jesse Jones Barbershop, located in the basement, served generations of U.Va. students. Thousands of alumni will recall barber George Milton Via who worked there from 1946 until his retirement in 1990. Mr. Via passed away in March 1999.

1517 University Avenue, 1920: In an effort to fight sprawl near the University, students and faculty vigorously but unsuccessfully opposed construction of this building when it was proposed following World War I. One student observed, "The pleasant and harmonious view that greets one on looking up the Avenue from the Corner will be impaired forever." The building included student apartments upstairs and two storefronts below. Boardinghouse owner Eliza Page opened Mrs. Page's Open Door Tea Room in the left side and Stevens-Shepherd clothing store was the first tenant on the right. In 1943 developers removed the wall between the two shops and created a wide-open space that became the home of the University Cafeteria.

Minor Court Building, 1928: In the '20s-era building boom at the Corner, apartments and stores were erected in the front yards of 19th-century homes. This building—which originally housed the venerable Cavalier diner on the left and Jameson's Book Shop on the right—was built directly onto the front of the one-time home of the Minor family. When the Cavalier closed in 1944, Jameson's razed the wall separating the two shops to create "the super college store" complete with textbooks, school supplies, sporting goods and a 16-foot soda fountain. That same space later housed Lloyd's Rexall Drugstore in 1957 and the Student Bookstore in 1994. In the basement of this building in the 1930s was Mel Bishop's University Bowling Alley, complete with six duckpin lanes.

1511 University Avenue, 1932: Originally home to a succession of clothing stores (Ben Kirk's, Stetson D, Kirk and Kirk, Pologruto's and even a Keller & George jewelry store), this location is most renowned as the home of the College Inn Restaurant. Founded in the summer of 1952 by brothers Elliott and Joseph Hyman of Eljo's fame, the College Inn has been a Corner favorite for 55 years.

1509 University Avenue: Built as a restaurant in the early 1930s, this site is perhaps best remembered as the original home of Eljo's, one of Virginia's most successful clothing stores. A combination of the first names of the founding brothers, Elliott and Joseph Hyman, Eljo's opened in July 1950 with sale prices on Repp ties and Bass Weejun shoes. Eljo's stayed in this spot until a new home was built on Elliewood Avenue in the summer of 1985 (on a land that had previously been a parking lot and, before that, the site of Eliza Page's boardinghouse). That same year the Hyman brothers retired to Florida and left the business in the capable hands of Myles Thurston. After 56 years on the Corner, Eljo's relocated to the Millmont Shops near Barracks Road Shopping Center in 2006. The building currently houses the Tropical Smoothie Cafe.

1505 University Avenue, 1955: In 1955 restaurateur Fred Dove replaced his Old Kitch Inn diner (see above) with a new building and rechristened the business Fred's Horseshoe Bar. In 1959 James Sprouse opened Jim's Restaurant here. Then in 1970 Chuck Davis, Al Bonnewell and G. Robert Jones created Poe's Nightclub at this location, one of the most memorable nightspots in the history of the Corner. With red velvet wallpaper, dim "Spanish dungeon lights" and a stuffed raven, Poe's offered 35 imported beers and live music in the basement. In October 1973 Poe's hosted its first "Memory Bank" party with oldies music on reel-to-reel tapes blaring from loudspeakers. In 1979 new owners renovated the building, creating a second-floor game room and a third-floor disco. Poe's closed in 1982 and was replaced by Macado's restaurant, which lasted until 1997. It has been the home of O'Neill's Irish Pub since 1999.

University Grocery Building, 1925: Partners Harry Robinson and J. Henry Irving unveiled the University Grocery at the Corner following World War I. They relocated to this deluxe new building in 1925, complete with the I&R Apartments upstairs. New owners later downsized the grocery to become the University Market and reopened it in the nearby Sheppe Building. A succession of shops have since occupied this site, including the University Bookstore, Fifth Avenue Cards and Gifts, Barr-ee Station catalog outlet and now Finch clothing store.

The W.H. Sheppe Building, 1925: Dr. William Harrison Sheppe opened his University Drugstore and soda fountain in this new building in 1925. When pharmacist George Durrer later bought the business and relocated a few miles west on Ivy Road, this site became the home of the new University Market. The market closed in 1974 and two years later U.Va. alum John Crafaik (Col '67) unveiled Littlejohn's New York Delicatessen, which has been serving up sandwiches around the clock ever since.

The Anderson Brothers Building, 1891: The Corner's flagship high-rise was built by brothers John and Richard Dabney Anderson, who first started working on the Corner in the 1870s. Grandson John "Billy" Williams went to work at the bookstore in 1940. Williams sold the business to Follett's, a national college bookstore chain, in 1988. After 112 years at the U.Va. Corner, Anderson Brothers was no more. The building is now the home of Plan 9 Records.

The Chancellor Building, 1914: Dr. Sam Chancellor (who lived up the hill near the street that still bears his name) built this building to house his drugstore and soda fountain in 1914. The new Chancellor Building had room for two other ground-level shops and apartments upstairs. Beginning about 1940 the middle berth has been home to Paul Victorius' rare prints and framing shop—owned and operated by his former manager Richard Freeman since 1970.



Bonus Web Content
For additional photographs and a look at the Corner's early history, visit www.uvamagazine.org

The White Spot, 1953-present

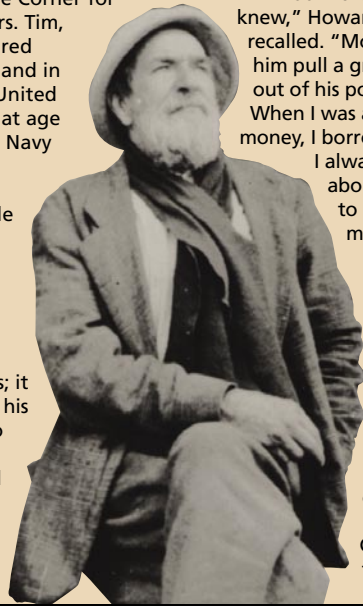
In the late 1940s, the owners of the University Beauty Salon relocated their shop to a different storefront. They pulled out the big chairs and took them along. One of those chairs left a round impression on the floor. When Corner newsstand owner Paul Dunsmore got into the restaurant business in 1953 in the old beauty salon location, he filled in that circle on the floor with white paint: the White Spot diner was born. The specialty of the house in the early days was a hot dog with melted cheese and bacon. But since about 1960 the White Spot has been known for its "Gusburger"—reportedly named for a local physician, Gus Egor, who requested the item—a cheeseburger topped with a fried egg. Night manager and cook Henry Rhodes (below, second from left) was the most familiar face at the Spot from the early '60s until his retirement nearly 30 years later.



Shoot Me Out, Larson!

A self-described "professor of bumology," Tim Murphy handled at the Corner for nearly 20 years. Tim, whose real name was Fred Morris, was born in Ireland in 1869 and came to the United States with his parents at age 3. He served in the U.S. Navy during the Spanish-American War and moved to Charlottesville in 1906. After working as a gardener and handyman, Tim began collecting change at the Corner in 1926.

Tim was not homeless; it was even rumored that his son-in-law drove him to "work" each day at the Corner, where he called everyone "Larson." His regular post was the concrete bench outside Stevens-Shepherd's.



Because he refused to share his turf with other panhandlers, Tim was credited by University students with keeping "riffraff" off the Corner.

"Tim had more money than anyone I knew," Howard Goodwin (Col '42) recalled. "More than once I saw him pull a great big roll of money out of his pocket. He was loaded. When I was a student and I needed money, I borrowed it from Tim. And I always paid it back at about 50 percent interest to let him know just how much I appreciated it."

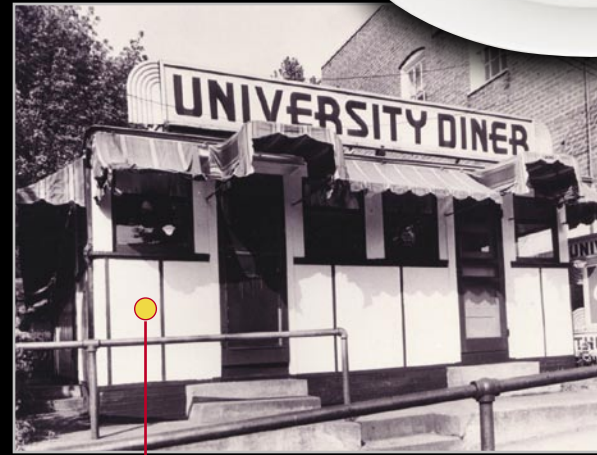
Fred "Tim Murphy" Morris died of pneumonia at the University Hospital on July 31, 1943. He was 73. *College Topics* eulogized, "Tim Murphy joins the list of University traditions that have passed on, a colorful character indeed, one which the Corner will never be the same without."

The University Diner, c.1930-1985

The "UD" as it was known to students, was nothing more than a train dining car with a short counter and a few stools when it opened around 1930. One-time UD waitress Alma Shiflett and her family ran the popular Corner eatery 24 hours a day, seven days a week for more than 40 years. The Grillswith, the Corner's most famous dessert, was made popular at the University Diner beginning in the early 1960s.



The Grillswith

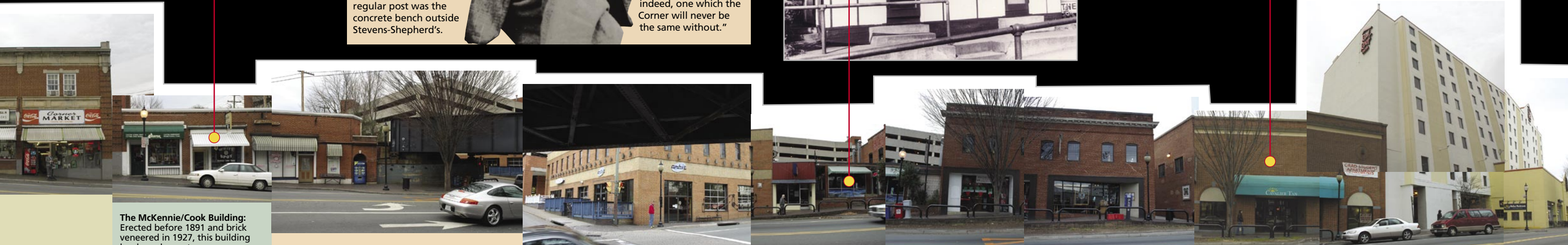


The University Theatre, 1938-1990

The University Movie Theatre opened in the fall of 1938 with a showing of the '34 release *Crime Without Passion* starring Claude Rains. It operated successfully for more than 50 years. The first organized civil rights demonstration at the University took place here on Wednesday night, March 1, 1961. The protest was led by Virginius Thornton (pictured below), the first African-American graduate student in the College of Arts & Sciences, and supported by biology professor Al Burnett, other faculty members and their wives, and a dedicated group of white and black U.Va. students. Thornton and other students met at the theater that evening, where he was refused a ticket. Unlike movie theaters downtown, the University Theatre had no balcony and thus no place where African Americans could sit separate from whites, as stipulated by Virginia state law. A petition, boycott and three-day picket ensued, in which Thornton carried a sign that read "I am an American, a Virginian, ADMIT ME!" Thanks to the courage of students like Thornton and many others as well as faculty members and townspeople, the integration of the Corner's movie theater, restaurants and barbershops took the better part of a decade but was complete by 1970.



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The McKennie/Cook Building: Erected before 1891 and brick veneered in 1927, this building has been home to numerous barbershops and beauty salons, dry cleaning businesses, specialty retail stores and restaurants, foremost among them being the White Spot diner.

Fourteenth Street: Page's Florist operated here along the railroad tracks for nearly 100 years before closing in 1975. The 14th Street Mall, with space for seven different businesses, opened on the site two years later. Among the first businesses in the Mall were Terry Coll's Rising Sun Bakery, which didn't close until 20 years later, and Richard Hewitt's TJ's Pub, which later became the site of Jim and Linda Roland's St. Maarten Café in 1985. A year later, in December 1986, the 14th Street Garage opened across the street, bringing much-needed parking and a host of new ground-level stores.

The Coukos Building, 1972: Steve and Diane Coukos erected this building on the corner of 14th St. and University Avenue, formerly the site of Abernathy's Texaco gas station. A number of restaurants and bars popular with students have since occupied the structure, including the Mousetrap (1973-83) and El Greco's (1983-92) on the first floor, and the Garrett Restaurant and Public House (1979-1995) on the second floor. Most of the building is now home to Orbit Billiards, which opened in September 1996.

1300 block of University Avenue: Numerous restaurants and shops in this block have catered to students since the last quarter of the 19th century. Foremost among them have been Johnson's Confectionery (1895) which became the site of the University Movie Theatre in 1938; the CK Restaurant (1954-1991); Pete and Alice Stratos's Chili Shoppe, which closed in the late '80s; and the University Diner, which was open around the clock from about 1930 until 1985.

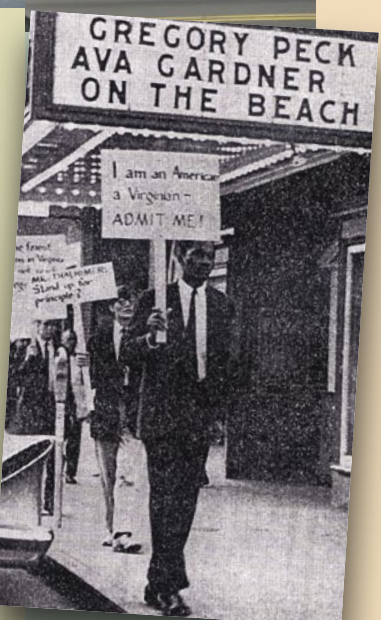
Why the Corner?

It was around 1900 that students began calling the collection of shops at the University's entrance gates "the Corner." The area had previously been described as "at the entrance gate," "at the railroad crossing," or "down by the post office." But "the Corner" caught on with students at the time and has endured for well over 100 years.

Why "the Corner"? At the turn of the 20th century, the area literally was a corner, the place where the "Long Walk" entrance to the U.Va. Grounds and up to the Rotunda met the main road to



town, then called University Street (now University Avenue and West Main Street). Buildings to the west toward Elliewood Avenue were referred to as being "above the Corner" and the commercial district across the railroad tracks to the east was described as being "below the Corner." But over the next four decades, the entire five blocks came to be known as "the Corner."



Virginius Thornton pickets in front of the University Theatre in March 1961.

Hotel building, 1967: Built as a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge and Restaurant, this became a Red Roof Inn in 1996. U.Va. alumnus Bradley Peyton had operated a car dealership on this site for nearly 20 years beginning in 1947. Before that, this land had been home to a variety of businesses including a gas station, a dry cleaning business and a miniature golf course.

About the Author
Coy Barefoot's (Grad '97) book, *The Corner: A History of Student Life at the University of Virginia*, won the 2003 Nalle Prize for Outstanding History. Barefoot's books also include *Thomas Jefferson on Leadership: Executive Lessons from His Life and Letters*.



The Gusburger



Despite warning lights and a siren, the low-hanging train trestle that crosses University Avenue near 14th Street continues to be the bane of many a hapless truck driver.