

FUTURE N.C. — A WORKPLACE REVOLUTION

10 WHO EXCELLED IN 2020 • HUGH MCCOLL JR.'S SECOND CHAPTER • N.C.'S TOP DOCTORS

# BUSINESS

## NORTH CAROLINA

A photograph of two women, Phyllis Manning and Julie Linder, sitting on the floor with several dogs. Phyllis is on the left, wearing a dark blue sweatshirt and khaki pants, holding a Papillon dog. Julie is on the right, wearing a blue button-down shirt and dark pants, holding two small dogs. In front of them are a large dachshund, a small white dog, and a golden retriever. The background is a bright green wall with a colorful abstract painting of a dog's head.

### Rooting for the underdogs

Phyllis Manning and Julie Linder of Greenville's Barking Buddies overcame pandemic struggles to rank among our **Small Businesses of the Year.**

DECEMBER 2020

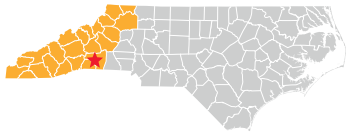
Price: \$3.95 [businessnc.com](http://businessnc.com)



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## +TALKING POINTS



## RUTHERFORDTON

4,087

ESTIMATED POPULATION  
IN 2019

1787

TOWN FOUNDED, NINE  
YEARS AFTER FORMATION OF  
RUTHERFORD COUNTYRUTHERFORDTON  
ACADEMYFIRST STATE-CHARTERED  
SCHOOL IN 1806BECHTLER  
FAMILYHANDLED MORE GOLD THAN  
U.S. MINTS IN PHILADELPHIA  
AND CHARLOTTE IN THE 1830s

1,940

RUTHERFORD COUNTY MEN  
WHO FOUGHT FOR THE  
CONFEDERACY

100-PLUS

STRUCTURES WITH NATIONAL  
REGISTER OF HISTORIC  
PLACE STATUSBETSY  
BRANTLEYACTRESS GREW UP IN  
RUTHERFORDTON. SHE  
APPEARED AS THE MOTHER  
IN *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*.

## GOLDEN APPEAL

It's not easy to say, but Rutherfordton is easy to like for those seeking a distinctive foothills small town.



BY BRYAN MIMS

**T**he name “Rutherfordton” doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue. Among natives and newcomers alike, Rutherfordton comes out as “Ruff”ton” or “Rolph”ton” or “Rudder4ton” or “Rullerfourton.” These alternate spellings appear on a T-shirt for sale at town hall or on the town website, where the name has yet another spelling: [rutherfordtown.com](http://rutherfordtown.com).

Rutherford Town was the original name given to the community when founded in 1787, springing from Griffith Rutherford, a general in the Revolutionary War. The General Assembly designated it as the seat of government for Rutherford County, the first county created in western North Carolina after the Declaration of Independence was signed. When state legislators chose the site for a courthouse, the town was a cluster of farms along a wagon road and creek. Located on a main route at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Rutherford Town was the most important commercial center in sparsely populated western North Carolina for several decades.

The town, eventually condensed into one word, logged several firsts for western North Carolina: first post office, first school, first newspaper. Snug in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, this town of roughly 4,100 people is making a name for itself as a place where down-home meets tattoos and Thai food and Greek Revival meets industrial chic and coffeehouse cool.

New Creation Tattoo and Piercing and Central Street Electric Tattoo show how the town is repurposing. The shops opened downtown in 2019 in brick buildings that had long sat vacant. Just a few years earlier, tattoo artists were seen as more of a taboo. But in January 2019, the town council allowed tattoo parlors and body-piercing studios, prompting Billy Hardin to open New Creation, which has the feel of a doctor’s office, with modern decor and clean-cut staff.





▲ *More than 150 homes and buildings dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries reflect Rutherfordton's history as a pioneering N.C. town. It is the Rutherford County seat, though neighboring Forest City has a larger population.*

"It [took] five months of town hall meetings to whittle what it was going to mean to have tattooing in downtown Rutherfordton," says Hardin, 44, who grew up in the town. "Once we got open, they saw it wasn't the nightmares of tattooing from the '50s and '60s where you had motorcycle gangs and drug dealers."

Town Manager Doug Barrick says the tattoo shops show a willingness to entertain nontraditional business concepts to keep the central business district dynamic. "The [town] council has been very pro smart business ideas," he says. "When presented with a good idea from a business sense, the council has been open to not just large industrial growth but promoting small business growth, too."

As for industry, Rutherfordton is home to the national headquarters of Trelleborg Engineered Coated Fabrics, a Swedish company that employs 250 people making polymer-coated materials. The Timken Co., a North Canton, Ohio-based firm that makes industrial bearings, has about 240 employees.

Small businesses add avant-garde fizz to the area's sensibilities. In 2015, Yellow Sun Brewing opened in a dormant warehouse next to the Rutherfordton Police Department. It's as well-known for its "unique artisanal pizza" as it is for its craft pale ales and porters. A recent Facebook post noted: "This week at Yellow Sun: Italian sausage, ricotta, spinach, Calabrian chilis, roasted onions, mozzarella and red sauce. Try it with a little hot honey!"

A block away on Washington Street, the Copper Penny Grill serves up mahi fish tacos, parmesan crusted chicken and cocktails inside a building where the town used to house its trash trucks and motor graders. Across the street, The Firehouse Inn bed and breakfast is located inside a 1925 building that once served as the town hall and fire station.

"Both the old residents and new residents have a vision that they are retaining the historical significance and at the same time being very progressive," says Clark Poole, director of the

Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce. "Being able to assimilate people with different concepts and cultures coming to us, combined with the depth of heritage that we have, is an exercise in creativity."

### Blazing new trails

Poole says the coronavirus pandemic has urban dwellers reexamining life and considering moves to places with more elbow room. "We have inquiries from people everywhere, not just because of COVID, but because of the accessibility [to] many areas of culture in [a] very close proximity, as well as our own thing."



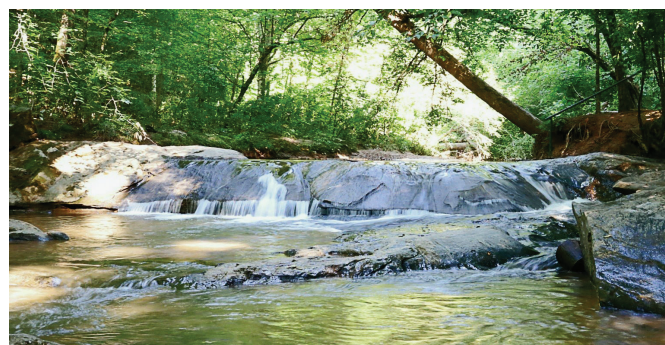
▲ *More than 500,000 have visited the town's KidSenses museum, which is expanding its space by nearly 50% in 2021.*

He's referring to Rutherfordton's proximity to Asheville, an hour's drive northwest, and Charlotte, about 90 minutes east. Rutherfordton's "own thing" includes an 11,000-square-foot children's museum called KidSenses, which opened in 2004 inside a building that once housed a car dealership. While closed temporarily due to the pandemic, it features more than a dozen interactive exhibits designed for children as old as 11. An





▲ *Bed and breakfasts and outdoor adventures attract visitors to Rutherfordton. It developed as an important commercial center because of its location on a main 18th-century path.*



addition called The Factory, tailored to students between the ages of 11 and 16, is scheduled to open in 2021. “To have that resource for families in a town of 4,000 people, it just blows my mind,” Barrick says.

With the area’s abundance of woods, hills and rock-strewn creeks, there are plenty of ways to spend time outdoors. In 2015, the town opened the Purple Martin Greenway trail, which is about 4.5 miles long and weaves along Cleghorn Creek. It leads to Kiwanis Park, a four-acre green space that links the Purple Martin trail to the Thermal Belt Rail Trail, an old railroad bed repurposed for foot and bike traffic. It meanders 13.5 miles through the county. Poole says locals have told their leadership where to invest. “It’s not housing,” he says. “It’s recreation and outdoor activity.”

### A rich history

As the town has evolved over the years, so has its slogan. For a good while, it was “Small Town Friendly.” Town boosters recently shifted to “A Minted Original,” a nod to a defining moment in Rutherfordton’s history. Back in the 1830s, years before the California Gold Rush, North Carolina was home to one of America’s first gold rushes.

In 1830, German immigrant Christopher Bechtler opened a store making watches in Philadelphia. When he learned of gold discoveries in North Carolina, he moved to Rutherfordton and opened a private mint that produced the first \$1 gold coin in America. Through the 1830s and 1840s, the mint stamped more than \$2.25 million in gold coinage. The site of the Bechtler mint is now a park just north of town along U.S. 221, and the Bechtler home on West Sixth Street is open for tours.

People still dig for new opportunities in Rutherfordton. At Small Town Coffee Roasters, located in the old First National Bank building, owner Monte Vega is the product of a crazy dream. His late father, Cuban immigrant Enrique Vega, closed his blacksmith

shop near Durham in 2012 and began driving to Ecuador. In Guatemala, he passed people on the side of the road roasting and selling coffee. He smelled an opportunity. “He called me up and said, ‘What do you think about starting a coffee roasting business?’” Monte Vega says. “And I said, ‘Yeah, I’m on board. Let’s do it.’”

In October 2014, father and son opened their coffee shop. They chose Rutherfordton because the younger Vega’s wife has family in the area, and its small-town setting proved ideal. The older Vega died of a heart attack in 2018. “Fortunately, the place has kind of turned into a magnet for good energy,” Vega says. “It really allows me to connect with folks.”

The nearby Main Street Market features its own fresh-start story. The deli, with sandwiches named “Oinker,” “Gobbler” and “Oink Moo Cluck,” is a go-to spot for lunch. It also features a wine bar called Bread & Wine that often offers live music in the evening.

After a career in insurance and restaurants, Rob Burbank decided to become his own boss. He and his wife, Beth, opened the market in October 2019. They moved from Charlotte and have bought into their adopted town’s vision. As a member of a booster group called Rutherford Town Rising, he thought, what better way to invest in Main Street than to wine-and-dine it? “If you’re serious about being a part of downtown, be a part of downtown,” he says between making sandwiches. “It’s what we did. It’s been a blast.”

He’s found a new purpose, preserving something old while planting something new. That’s how Rutherfordton rolls. ■



Bryan Mims is a writer and reporter at WRAL-TV in Raleigh.