

A lovely college town, and much, much more

By [Lynne Billings](#), Weddings Editor

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MARS HILL - Mars Hill is a college town in a mountain setting about 18 miles north of downtown Asheville. Mars Hill College is the oldest institution of higher education on its original site in Western North Carolina. The town grew around the college, and the college remains an integral part of the town.

The college was founded in 1856 as the French Broad Institute and was named Mars Hill College in 1858. The school was a two-year college until the 1960s, when it became a senior college in 1963 with its first four-year graduates in 1967.

To get to Mars Hill from downtown Asheville, follow Interstate 240 west to Highway 19-23 north and Highway 19-23 north to exit 11. From exit 11, follow Highway 213 west to the town of Mars Hill.

For more information about real estate in Mars Hill, call Ginny Lentz at 689-9898.

For more information about Mars Hill College, visit www.mhc.edu.

For more information about the town of Mars Hill, visit www.landofsky.org/marshall and www.madisoncounty-nc.com.

For more information about real estate in the Asheville area and Western North Carolina, visit www.CITIZEN-TIMES.com.

have for decades been working to serve the community by preparing people for work and also enhancing the cultural and educational life of the community," Lunsford said.

Projects students work with in the community include Habitat for Humanity and volunteering in local schools as tutors. The college offers a variety of cultural attractions and sporting events to the surrounding town and community.

Lunsford himself first came to Mars Hill in 1965 as a freshman at the college, where he earned a degree in elementary education with a minor in political science. He has advanced degrees from



photo: [John Fletcher](#)
Main Street in Mars Hill is busy on a weekday afternoon.

According to its mission statement, "Mars Hill College, an academic community rooted in the Christian faith, challenges and equips students to pursue intellectual, spiritual, and personal growth through an education that is grounded in a rigorous study of the liberal arts, connected with the world of work, and committed to character development, to service, and to responsible citizenship in the community, the region, and the world."

Fifty-five-year-old Dan Lunsford, who recently was named president at Mars Hill College after serving as interim president since January 2002, said, "we find opportunities for young people to be involved in practical application of the education they receive in the classroom.

"We have a strong commitment to character development and service in the local community, the broader region and, ultimately, the world," Lunsford said.

Mars Hill College has a traditional program for college-age students and a program called Adult ACCESS for adults, with 930 students in the traditional and 350 in the ACCESS program as of fall 2002. The college offers five degrees and 29 majors.

"One major component that I like to emphasize is that we

the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill. He returned to Mars Hill in October 1998 to take a faculty/administrator position at the college.

"I certainly enjoy the rural setting and the small town experiences. That's attractive and appealing to me," Lunsford said. He said he likes being at the college with its rural and small-town aspects, cultural opportunities and positive work experience in beautiful mountain surroundings.

Improved transportation and communication technology have brought increased diversity in demographics that has helped change the community in a positive way, Lunsford said.

What the town offers

Darhyl Boone, 48, has served for 22 years as town manager for the town of Mars Hill, population about 1,764, according to the 2000 census. John Chandler is mayor of the town.

Town services include usual amenities, water, sewer, sanitation and recycling pick-ups. The town has a 14-acre recreation park at 690 Park Drive, with a swimming pool, playground, a ball field for softball and soccer, tennis courts, an outdoor basketball court, picnic tables, and a picnic shelter where there are lots of gatherings.

One of the things that makes Mars Hill so livable is the campus of Mars Hill College in the middle of town, Boone said. Gabriel's Creek Trail on the Mars Hill College campus is a hiking trail at Ponder Practice Fields; the trail is sponsored by the college and the town as a joint effort, he said.

"In Mars Hill, you're out in the country and 18 miles from Asheville," Boone said. "You can get to Asheville in 20 minutes and to Johnson City, Tenn., in 50 minutes." Mars Hill is about 20 minutes from Hot Springs, and Marshall, the county seat, is about 10 minutes away.

"It's a slower pace of living here. People like that," Boone said. "We're not as stressed out as other parts of the world."

"I've lived in this area almost all my life," he said. He and his wife Jean have two sons, ages 24 and 22.

"One of the things I really like about the area is the beauty of this area, the mountains and the scenery. Also, the people of this area are great people. . They are friendly, helpful and caring. They help each other in times of trouble," Boone said. Local beautification

Evelyn Underwood has served on the community development committee since its beginning in the mid-1970s. "We organized . and began working for Mars Hill. We set two goals, to build a public library and the beautification of Mars Hill," Underwood said. The library opened in the early 1980s, she said.

Among its many projects, "we put out about 100 red geraniums along Main Street and other kinds of flowers in the flower beds. Every year we've tried to add something. Last year we put out 1,200 tulips along the highway leading into Mars Hill. This year we added another bed of about 700 tulips," she said.

The committee has planted trees, including two different kinds of cherry trees.

"This year . we are going to make big planters in the middle of the highway leading to the campus. The planters will be for shrubbery or flowers, and they will provide a safety zone for people crossing the street," she said.

"This summer and looking ahead we are re-doing an area along Main Street," she said. "It was planted about 20 years ago. We have a landscape artist who is planning it for us. There will be some trees, some shrubbery and flowers."

The residents, business owners, and employees help with planting, watering and fertilizing the flowers, shrubs and trees, she said.

"We began doing something and that encouraged others who said 'I will do this' and our citizens make their homes as beautiful as they can," she said. "I couldn't find a better place to live than Mars Hill. . I love Mars Hill."

Underwood came to Mars Hill in 1944 to teach at Mars Hill College, where she taught history for 36 years and served as chairman of the history department for 16 years. After she retired, she taught for 20 more years in the program for senior citizens at the college, "one of the most enjoyable things I've ever done," she said.

Janet Murray, 50, works part-time at the desk at the Mars Hill Public Library, a branch of the Madison County Libraries, and she is director and teacher at Mars Hill United Methodist Church Preschool.

"My father taught at Mars Hill College, so we moved here when I was in third grade. I grew up in Mars Hill and went to Mars Hill College," Janet Murray said. She lived away from Mars Hill for several years, and she and her husband, Bruce, returned in 1983, she said, "so my husband could go in business with his dad at French Broad Chevrolet. Our families were both here."

"It's just wonderful when you know everybody. It's a slower pace than other cities. I feel the children are safe here," she said. The Murrays have three children, ages 22, 20 and 18 now. "I love the mountains. . It's beautiful."

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