

Brownfields

Success Story

The Reinvention of Martinsville, VA

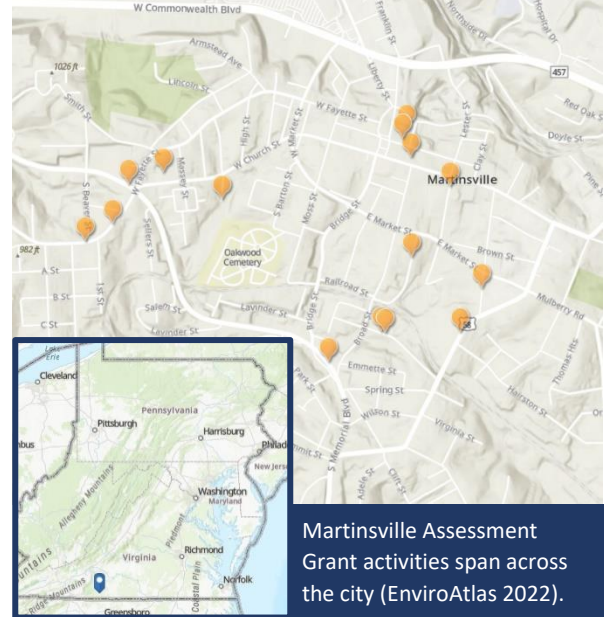
Since its foundation in 1791, the City of Martinsville has had a history rich in various booming industrial markets and economic resilience. Triumphs and downfalls of previous community investments from tobacco growing and trading, to textiles and furniture production, have challenged the city to adapt to economic conditions and has left the city to wonder what the next chapter in their history will be.

Beginning at its establishment and lasting nearly 150 years, Martinsville and the surrounding Henry County maintained successful markets through the growing and trade of tobacco until the 20th century when tobacco monopolies forced closures of local business owners. This closure opened doors for what would be a 100-year focus on textile and furniture production. At their peak, companies, including Bassett, American Furniture of Martinsville, Stanley and Hooker, and Dupont, employed a collective workforce of over 20,000 residents. During the 1960s, the Martinsville area produced nearly 60% of the world's sweatshirts!

While bringing considerable prosperity and opportunities to the area during operation, the closure of the manufacturing plants left the city with high unemployment and a disproportionate number of residents living in poverty. The industrial footprint left on the city also includes numerous abandoned and underutilized properties throughout the city with unknown community health and environmental threats.

Starting a New Chapter for the City

Through the EPA Brownfield Grant Program, the city has made sizeable strides in "reinventing itself yet again." Finishing its second Brownfield Assessment Grant in September 2022, the city has been able to complete 12 Phase I Environmental Site Assessments (ESA) and eight Phase II ESAs to identify formerly unknown contaminants on Martinsville properties and prepare them for cleanup and revitalization. Properties assessed under this grant have been prioritized in underserved neighborhoods especially those surrounding the area with abandoned manufacturing facilities with known environmental concerns. Just within a few months, the city of Martinsville has been able to unveil multiple land revitalization accomplishments, three of which are highlighted below.



Martinsville Assessment Grant activities span across the city (EnviroAtlas 2022).

EPA Grant Recipient:
City of Martinsville, VA

Grant Type
Community-wide Assessment

Example Site Former Uses

1. Remains of Furniture Manufacturing Plant
2. Emptied Electricity Substation
3. Dilapidated Commercial and Residential Space

Example Site Current/Future Uses

1. 55-Unit Senior Housing Project
2. Grid Connected Battery Storage
3. Updated Commercial/Office Space and Residential Housing



The past location of the Aaron Street Furniture Plant and future site of a 55-unit senior living facility.



The Maple Street Substation battery storage facility providing 10 MW of power storage for the city's grid.

“Brownfield grant funding was essential in moving these projects from simply the discussion stage to implementation.”

—Leon E. Towarnicki,
City Manager,
City of Martinsville



The Chief Tassel building opening in 2022 offering eight commercial office spaces and 18 apartments.

American of Martinsville Furniture Plant

The once booming American of Martinsville Furniture Plant on Aaron Street was one of many abandoned facilities causing environmental health concerns in the city. This brownfield was reduced to a contaminated site with brick, rubble, and tangled steel after a massive fire in 2014. A Brownfield grant enabled the City to leverage funds to demolish the burn debris and clean the site. The city now has an agreement with a development group to build an approximate \$10M to \$12M, 55-unit senior living apartment complex at the location. The City Manager Leon Towarnicki remarks, “This project would not have happened without the grant. The developer was able to leverage site cleanup work to obtain various tax credits and incentives that were essential for the project’s financing.” Plans for construction have been submitted and approved, permits are being secured, and site work is expected to begin.

Maple Street Substation

The Maple Street Substation supplied power to American of Martinsville Furniture Plant on Aaron Street until another part of the plant caught fire in 1995. The substation was then emptied and remained vacant until recently when the city partnered with American Electric Power (AEP) for a battery storage project. Through the EPA Brownfield Grant, the city identified minimal contamination for remediation. The city and AEP installed large battery banks with 10 MW of storage within the substation, where it was connected to the City’s grid. These batteries can provide an hour and a half of energy to 12,000 homes in one charge. The batteries charge during off peak times when electricity is cheaper, and potentially coming from renewable energy sources. The energy stored can then be opened to the grid during peak hours to reduce energy costs for the residents (\$3-6 million in a decade!) and potentially reduce the town’s carbon footprint. The substation is fully operational as of June 9th, 2022.

Chief Tassel Building

The 1929 Chief Tassel Building, a past pillar of uptown Martinsville, was formerly occupied by professional offices and later used for housing. More recently the building fell into disrepair, with no usage other than sporadic low-income housing. The site was donated to the City’s Landbank in 2018 and entered a redevelopment agreement with Waukeshaw Development, which specializes in adaptive reuse and historic tax credit sites similar to the Chief Tassel Building. Working through the Brownfields Community-Wide Assessment Grant, the site underwent a Phase I ESA and received assistance from the Virginia Brownfields Restoration and Economic Redevelopment Assistance Fund (VBAF) for lead and asbestos abatement services. The revitalized building celebrated its opening with a ribbon cutting ceremony on April 29th, 2022, to offer eight commercial office spaces and 18 apartments to the community.

The City of Martinsville looks to continue this era of new growth with the help of another awarded Brownfield Assessment Grant for FY2022.

For more information:
Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact:
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