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**Cover Story:** *The Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board is a nonprofit, membership-based sales and marketing organization tasked with the challenge of letting everyone — both near and far — know about all the fun and exciting things to see and do in Montgomery County and to entice them to check it out for themselves.*



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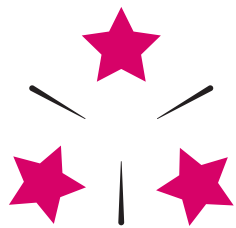


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Edward Harris, VP of Marketing & Communications and Mike Bowman, President & CEO.



# VALLEY FORGE

## TOURISM & CONVENTION BOARD

By Dawn Wivell

Montgomery County, PA — with more than 800,000 residents and 487 square miles — is the third largest county in the Commonwealth. The county boasts 11 major historical sites, including the Valley Forge National Historical Park; 54 golf courses (presenting 300,000 yards of golf); 90 miles of trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding; 150 wedding venues, comprising more than two million square feet of space; more than 500 restaurants, with chefs who are skilled in every culinary tradition across all flavor profiles; nightlife, including the Valley Forge Casino Resort; and adventure, which includes two zip line courses and both indoor and outdoor skydiving.



**A Creative  
& Innovative  
Marketing  
Approach**





## A Dynamic Duo

The team at the Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board (VFTCB) is tasked with the challenge of letting everyone — both near and far — know about all the fun and exciting things to see and do in Montgomery County and to entice them to check it out for themselves. About two years ago, VFTCB rebranded itself and brought on the dynamic duo of Mike Bowman, President and CEO, and Edward Harris, VP of Marketing & Communications. Bowman, who was on the VFTCB board for three years, comes from the hospitality industry, and Harris comes from a little online retail company you may have heard of — EBay.

Harris says, "Mike's hospitality background has been a refreshing way to look at tourism." And, Bowman says, "Having someone like Ed has been great. He's been exposed to Fortune 500 companies, so we really get that business savvy. We've been able to blend and balance the business side with accomplishing goals and objectives creatively to take this organization to another level."

Together, they've brought in some excellent talent and a creative and innovative approach to marketing. Bowman explains, "We've strategically aligned sub-brands under our brand that take the position of various economic blocks for Montgomery County. Weddings are an example, because Montgomery County does so many weddings. We know that we're the best county in Pennsylvania to have a wedding at because of all the rich history, the trails, the hotels, shopping, and the more than 600 restaurants. So, we say, 'Come in for an extra night. Come in Thursday instead of Friday.' We're a destination. We market to that, and we've shown great growth in attracting weddings to the county."

## VFTCB's Current Sub-Brands



**Montco 360** ([www.MontCo360.net](http://www.MontCo360.net)) is a partnership with Google Street View to give website users a 360-degree view of Montgomery County's attractions, historic sites, hotels, restaurants, and shops. You can access MontCo 360 wherever you are — on your laptop, your tablet, your phone, or your desktop computer. "In the tourism world, when you're thinking of going to a different destination, you want to see it," Harris says. Bowman adds, "I believe we're the only organization marketing for a county that's really taken it to the level it's at with Google. Our partnership with Google has been incredible, and it's continuously growing."

**VFSports** ([www.valleyforge.org/sports/](http://www.valleyforge.org/sports/)) is a sales and marketing organization within VFTCB that is committed to ensuring that youth, collegiate, and adult sports-related events held in Montgomery County are a success — on and off the field. With a website devoted to sports, you can find information about sports facilities, hotels, and upcoming events. You can even download an app — the Valley Forge Sports Playbook — that helps you plan your stay and get the most out of your visit.

**Destination Montco Golf** ([www.valleyforge.org/golf/](http://www.valleyforge.org/golf/)) includes a golf-centric website and social media component that is designed to attract golfers to Montgomery County's 54 golf courses — some of the most historic, scenic, and challenging holes in the nation. The website includes information about both public and private courses, hotels (there's a hotel within three miles of every golf course), and golf course dining.

(Continued on page 8)

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**COVER STORY**

*(Continued from page 7)*

**Montgomery County Weddings** (<http://www.valleyforge.org/weddings-celebrations/>) is a website dedicated to couples getting married in Montgomery County. Visitors can find free planning assistance and information about wedding venues and vendors in Montgomery County.

**Crave Montco** ([www.cravemontco.com](http://www.cravemontco.com)) delves into dining opportunities throughout Montgomery County, including a magazine, a blog featuring different restaurants or types of foods, and special offers.

**Patriot Trails** ([www.valleyforge.org/revolution/](http://www.valleyforge.org/revolution/)) allows you to follow in the footsteps of George Washington on web-based itineraries that take you on a journey from Valley Forge National Historical Park to historic sites throughout Montgomery County. The website features details about battlefields, historic homes, and side trips; information about restaurants and hotels; and history lessons on Washington and other key players in America's epic struggle for independence.

**The Valley Forge Revolutionary 5-Mile Run** (<http://www.valleyforge.org/revolutionary-run>), held in the spring, is a unique challenge for runners of all skill levels. Runners trek the five-mile, USTAF-certified course that traverses the scenic Valley Forge National Historical Park. The event also includes a three-mile walk and a 1.776 km Young Patriots Run for kids ages 6-14. All proceeds from the event benefit the Valley Forge National Historical Park.

**Montco Shopping** is VFTCB's newest sub-brand. Montgomery County has five major malls (including the world-renowned King of Prussia Mall, which welcomes 22 million visitors per year) and more than 140 shopping centers and main streets throughout the county. Bowman says, "This is something really special because we know we have the best shopping in the entire northeast, and shopping is not only the malls but also the small town shopping. It's the outlets, the Skippacks, the Amblers, and the Pottstowns. When you look at shopping as a whole, we own it. We're the best. So we're marketing it like never before."

*(Continued on page 10)*

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COVER STORY

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**Creative and Innovative Communication**

Bowman says, "We're always looking for ways to communicate with people in creative and innovative ways." They're always asking, "How can we get people talking about Montgomery County, getting excited about it, and connecting emotionally on social media?"

Recently, the VFTCB team created #PokeMontco in response to the latest Pokemon craze, with the goal of attracting more millennials to the area who may not be aware of all the fun and exciting things to do in Montgomery County. Their website touts, "As Pokémon Go sweeps through the Philadelphia area, the Valley Forge team has been searching Montgomery County (and beyond!) for the inside scoop on where to catch 'em all. Be sure to share your best catches and tout your gym victories on your road to becoming a Pokémon master by using #PokeMontco." With over 70 Pokéstops and 20 Gyms, any self-respecting PokéMontco Trainer should plan a trip to Valley Forge Park.

During the NCAA tournaments, the VFTCB held a contest in which people could vote for their favorite pizza shop. They used brackets to track the contest's progress, and Bowman says that people loved it.

The VFTCB just completed a #MarriedInMontco Instagram Contest. From May 17 'till June 30, 2016, couples could share their Montgomery County, PA wedding on Instagram using the hashtag

MarriedInMontco to be entered to win a grand prize: a romantic ride for two with the United States Hot Air Balloon Team and dinner at The Capital Grille. One winner was picked at random.

The VFTCB was also very involved with the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia in July and was very happy with the results. Twenty-one delegations stayed at 10 Montgomery County hotels. Bowman says, "The marketing team did a great job. Delegates loved it. Our parks saw a spike in tourism. There was so much energy tied to the convention." Bowman says that delegates chose to stay in Montgomery County because of the lower rates, the size of their delegations, and because they were excited about the shopping and other activities available to them.

**About the Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board**

The Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board is a growing nonprofit, membership-based sales and marketing organization with 450 members. Membership increased 28 percent over the past year alone. Their mission statement is "With our partners, we are dedicated to inspire visitors every day to discover and explore what we are proud to know as a truly special place." They promote all things tourism by promoting the area, and they strive to stimulate the economy in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

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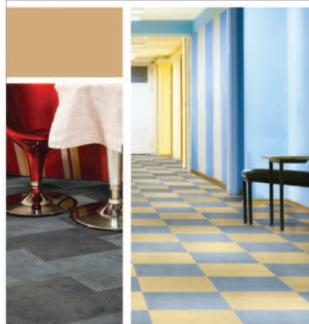
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## COVER STORY

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The organization is funded in part by the two percent hotel tax, so Bowman says their largest driver is to push occupancy and other events. He adds, "The ultimate goal economically would be shop, dine, and stay... stay, dine, and shop, and oh by the way if you want to play a round of golf or hike our trails or see one of our other great attractions, we have it all."

While the marketing focus is on what Bowman calls the "North East Backyard" (DC, MD, Delaware, NJ, NY, and PA), the VFTCB team is looking everywhere for individuals and groups who are interested in visiting Montgomery County. Recently, they ran a campaign in the UK for golf because they found a strong dominance of people from the UK coming into Montgomery and surrounding areas to golf.

The VFTCB tracks it all, and what they've found is that people want something to do, they want to be outside, and the number one reason that people visit their website is that they're looking for something to do. Bowman says there are two things that he repeatedly reminds his team: 1) time is of the essence for people, and 2) people are looking for a value proposition. He says, "When you look at Montgomery County, parking is free just about everywhere, and to get here is pretty easy. Look at the roadways that lead to Montco and then look at the proximity to the Philadelphia airport, Northern NJ, NY, the turnpike. All roads lead to Montco."

Bowman shares, "Our organization continuously has so much to talk about and market because Montgomery County has so much more for people to do. Whether it's tourist driven, business, family, or just over-all exciting things to do. We have it all!" He adds, "I come to work every day saying, 'Wow! We need to get that out there. We

need to let people know how much we have to do here in Montgomery County.'" He adds, "And we have a lot of fun doing it. You've got to have an environment that brings the team together. Lots of laughter and lots of energy. I love my job!"

And, it appears that this dynamic team is succeeding. Check out these stats from FY2016 (ended in June 2016)!

The VFTCB Website:

- 1.4 million page views on ValleyForge.org, up 69 percent from the previous year (850,800 page views).
- 515,000 visitors on ValleyForge.org, up 71% from the previous year (301,000).

And the momentum has continued into the current fiscal year. In July 2016, the website had its best month to date with over 100,000 visitors (up 102 percent over July 2015) and 239,000 page views (up 74 percent over July 2015).

And, remember that largest driver — "to push occupancy"? Check out these "Room Night" stats from FY2016:

- 104,040 Total Room Nights (up 10 percent year over last year)
- 49,551 Sports Room Nights (up 23 percent Year over last year)
- 1,245 Wedding Room Nights (up 86 percent Year over last year) — This is a new target market segment for the VFTCB; they hired a Wedding Sales Manager in August 2015.

Yup... It's pretty safe to say that the team at the Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board is achieving their mission "to inspire visitors every day to discover and explore what we are proud to know as a truly special place." Check out their website — [valleyforge.org](http://valleyforge.org) — to see everything going on in Montgomery County!

[www.valleyforge.org](http://www.valleyforge.org)