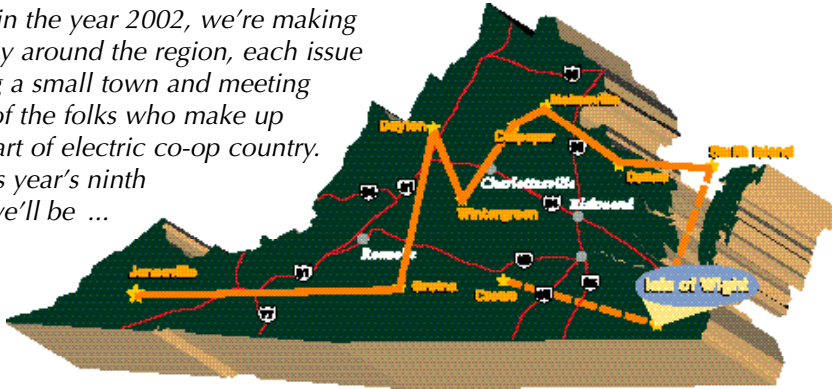


DOWN HOME SERIES

by Audrey Hingley,
Contributing Writer

Again in the year 2002, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's ninth stop, we'll be ...



Down Home in Isle of Wight Courthouse

... a lazy country crossroads,
with lots of character ...

Tiny Isle of Wight Courthouse is a “blip” on Virginia maps, smack in between the 319-square-mile county’s only two towns, Smithfield and Windsor.

Surrounded by pastoral farmland, the community’s center includes a sprawling courthouse complex and adjacent historic Boykin’s Tavern; across the road, there’s a tiny post office, church, Isle of Wight Academy, and The Courthouse Diner. Forty-five post office boxes provide a good indication of the community’s size relative to a 30,000 county population.

Lifelong resident **Frank Drewery**, who lives with wife **Eula Belle** and son **Artie** in a comfortable rancher nestled on 70 acres, explains, “I like the quiet atmosphere here — the more people you have, the more problems you have.”



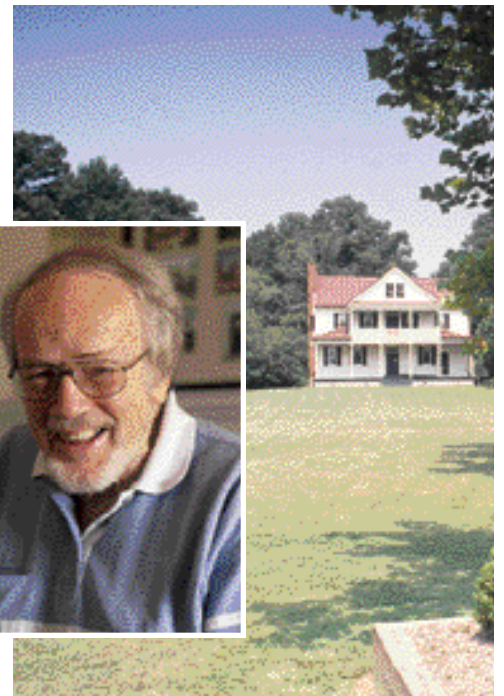
Longtime resident Frank Drewery, who grew up on a farm: “Everybody was poor but nobody knew it. On the farm we had the advantage over city people — we ate well.”

of Wight became one of eight original “shires” into which Virginia was divided. The original county courthouse (1750), which still stands, is in Smithfield.

“Courthouses had to be somewhat central

The World War II Army machine gunner/paratrooper veteran, retired after a 40-year insurance career, notes, “I’ve traveled a lot, but to me this is the best place in the world. You can make friends if you want to, if you don’t want to, people will leave you alone and respect your privacy. It’s friendly and laid-back.”

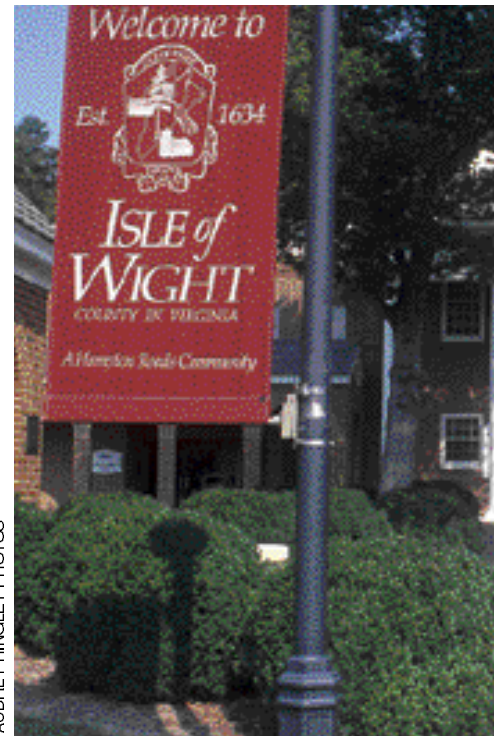
The county traces its beginnings back to 1608, when Captain John Smith crossed the James River in search of food for the starving Jamestown colony and met local Indians. In 1634, Isle



to people. The old Smithfield courthouse was a long way [seven miles away] to go at the time,” explains **Joe Ferguson**, president, Isle of Wight Historical Society. “People petitioned the government for a more central location.”

Major Francis Boykin, a Revolutionary War patriot/entrepreneur, offered a site for the new courthouse, creating “an enclave where he could make a nice living,” Ferguson says. Adjacent Boykin’s Tavern was conveniently located for meals, refreshment, and lodging. Boykin built the original courthouse building, which today houses the circuit court, and is a

AUDREY HINGLEY PHOTOS





The Isle of Wight courthouse complex is home to some of the oldest records in the nation.

genealogy buff's dream, housing some of the oldest records in the nation. (Records were buried there during the Revolutionary and Civil wars, allowing escape from fires and wars that destroyed many other early Virginia records.)

"It was a carnival on 'court days' — everybody who had business at the courthouse and those who wanted to see people came, it became a hangout. It's pretty sleepy



Dollie Stanfield (inset) serves up her famous lemon pound cake and other delicacies at The Courthouse Diner.



now but it has a long history as a gathering place," Ferguson says.

Sleepiness is part of the area's charm, along with country hospitality. **Dollie and Tom Stanfield**, who took over The Courthouse Diner seven years ago, serve residents, tourists, and 200-plus courthouse employees with a mixture of reasonable prices, down-home cooking, and homemade desserts like Dollie's famous lemon pound cake. A few years back, visitors from Isle of Wight, England, knocked on the diner's door, searching for a meal.

"It was past our hours, but I told them to come on in and I fixed them some food," Dollie recalls. "They enjoyed it here and said they hoped to come back. Later they sent me a teapot cozy from Isle of Wight, England."

Somehow one can't imagine the typical urban chain-run restaurant providing that level of after-hours service.

The Stanfields anticipate even more business via Historic Boykin's Tavern. Built as a



Postmaster Mary Cash says she likes the "steady pace" of the tiny post office, where "you know just about everybody."

1762 residence, the site alternated as tavern, private home, and rooming house. In 1913, Fred and Cora Wilson bought the house; Fred was the jailer and Cora cooked meals for inmates, as well as judges, lawyers, and boarders.

The late Katherine Boyd Wilson Walls, daughter of Fred and Cora, recalled in the book *Many Voices: An Oral History of Isle of Wight County, Virginia*, "Electricity came to the courthouse area in 1931. My father paid five dollars a month extra to help pay for the line. With the coming of electricity, running water and a bathroom soon followed."

Katherine Wells "Kathy" Mountjoy, a former nurse who works in Smithfield, lived at Boykin's Tavern from 1946-1963. Her father, George, was the postmaster for the post office located in a store he also ran. He later started G.F. Walls Insurance Agency in Smithfield, where Kathy and her brother **Fred Wells** now work.

"We moved in with Grandma because doctors gave her six months to live — my mother was a nurse — and she lived 28 more years!" Kathy explains, laughing. "It was a neat community hub — people so poor they



Historic Boykin's Tavern was restored and opened to the public in 2001. Inset is site manager Arthur LaBonte.



W. Douglas Caskey, Isle of Wight county administrator: “I think we have a good handle on controlling growth.”

Debbie Sivertson, administrative analyst for Isle of Wight County, says “We wanted the quality of life here — the cows, the deer, the cotton, the peanuts.”



Shawn A. Wrenn, secretary/human resources for Isle of Wight County, was lured back to the area by the “peace, serenity, and slower pace of living.”

Sarah Baughman, Virginia Cooperative Extension agent, says she’s concerned about the implications of the “peanut bill” on “the rich cultural history of the county.”



If You Go...

Boykin’s Tavern

(Hours: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thurs.-Sat;
1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sun.
(757) 365-9771 or 1-800-365-9771
Admission: Free (donations accepted)

The Courthouse Diner

Hours: 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri.
(757) 357-6309
Web site: www.courhousediner.com

Isle of Wight Courthouse

Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mon.-Fri.
(757) 357-3191
Admission: Free
The original courthouse is still in use and is a great source for genealogy.

Smithfield and Isle of Wight Convention & Visitors Bureau

(757) 357-5182 or 1-800-365-9339
Web site: www.smithfield-virginia.com
(information on area historic sites/ attractions, dining, lodging, etc.)

didn’t have running water sat next to judges [for meals]. Grandma provided meals for ‘court days,’ and the people waited to hear ‘Miss Cora’s’ dinner bell.”

The Walls family sold the property to the county, which used it for storage, in 1973. Over the years the building deteriorated, but individuals and the Isle of Wight Historical Society pushed to secure grants and raise money for a million-dollar-plus restoration. The site opened in January 2001.

A Rare Monument

“There aren’t many taverns from this period in existence anymore,” says site manager **Arthur LaBonte**. “Public buildings were uncommon in that period. People would congregate here for meetings, food and drink, and lodging. Courthouse complexes and taverns served as gathering places for auctions, fairs, and picnics.”

The restored tavern includes a ladies’ parlor, the main tavern area, tavern-keepers’ bedroom, private dining room, and two front rooms housing a gift shop and artifacts displays. No original pieces survive, but furnishings are period pieces typically found in taverns of the era. LaBonte says future plans include obtaining funding for additional restoration, as well as replicating the site’s 1745-1959 gristmill and sawmill.

Everyone agrees that controlling growth is the area’s biggest challenge. But **W. Douglas**

Caskey, county administrator, says, “I think we have a good handle on controlling growth.”

Caskey notes there are five “development service districts” for the county; by focusing on these districts, he predicts 80 percent of the county will remain open space.

“Quality of life is a significant issue. We also have to grow in a managed manner that doesn’t outstrip services,” he says.

Two Fortune 500 companies (pork giant Smithfield Foods Inc. and International Paper) provide a sound employment base, Caskey says, adding that the county has “an active economic



Individuals and the Isle of Wight Historical Society pushed to secure grants and raise money for a million-dollar-plus restoration. The restored tavern is furnished with period pieces typically found in taverns of the era.





Joe Ferguson lives on 86 acres with his wife and son. He hopes people can resist the temptation to sell off farms for development in Isle of Wight.

development department.” The new Richard T. Holland Commerce Park is anchored by a 500,000-square-foot Cost Plus distribution center.

“Boykin’s Tavern also gives us the ability to draw tourist traffic to the central part of the county. Between the history and architecture in Smithfield and now Boykin’s Tavern, tourism is growing,” Caskey says.

Nearly 15,000 people work in the county or farm or commute to Hampton Roads-area employers. A recently passed federal farm bill has many concerned; according to Virginia Cooperative Extension agent **Sarah Baughman**, the bill changes the way the government handles quotas for peanuts, a prime crop for the county’s 190 farms.



Kathy Wells Mountjoy and her brother, Fred Wells, lived at Boykin’s Tavern for many years. Although the area remains rural, Mountjoy says, “We’re beginning to be rushed in Isle of Wight.”

“It will have tremendous impact, but we don’t know yet what that impact will be,” she admits.

Joe Ferguson, a state food inspector who lives on an 86-acre farm whose land he leases out, says he’s concerned the “peanut bill” (as it’s called locally) will tempt more farmers to sell their land for development.

“Except for administration, the [former] program didn’t take anything from the taxpayer; the new bill will drop the quota price lower than the production cost,” he insists. “We grow gourmet peanuts, but a lot of candy [manufacturers] buy peanuts to grind up and put in candy bars; they want cheaper peanuts from overseas. People are predicting a [land] rent price drop. Since many elderly people on family farms also supplement their income with farm rent, it could have a major impact.”

Keeping a Positive Outlook

But despite concerns about farming, growth, and development, people remain optimistic.

People like **Shawn Wrenn**, a Smithfield

native who moved to Norfolk during college, was lured back by “peace, serenity, and a slower pace of living.” Historical society member **Tom Finderson** believes that quality of life can be maintained.

“The county is referred to as a leader in controlled growth. I see them as someone to emulate, with ordinances to control growth and assure open space,” he says. “I think with the new Board of Supervisors, and the fact that open space is the attraction for new residents, they will succeed. I think Isle of Wight Courthouse will [stay as a] lazy country crossroads.” ■

