Again in the year 2005, 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 second stop, we’ll be ...

In 1982 when author Ralph Emmett Fall wrote Hidden Village, a history of Port Royal, Virginia, he observed, “Most travelers along the highways pass by Port Royal … [it] has been a village incognito, physically hidden from view.”

Nearing town, a yellow-roofed Horne’s Restaurant appears. As the town limits come into view, a smattering of buildings and small businesses dots the horizon along Main Street/Route 301. But much of the actual town, including historic homes dating to the 1700s on a grid of streets parallel to the highway, remains hidden from travelers’ views.

Settled in 1652, Port Royal, nestled along the banks of the Rappahannock River in Caroline County, is about 50 miles north of Richmond. Once a bustling colonial river port, today the sleepy community of 204 people may be on the cusp of change.

According to Calvin Taylor, chairman of the Caroline County Board of Supervisors whose district includes Port Royal, among the changes is Haymount, a planned mixed-use community under development less than 10 miles from Port Royal. Haymount encompasses 1,600 acres and will add 4,000 homes to the area.

“Quite a few of the people in town have lived there 20-plus years, and there are not a lot of new people within the town limits. But as Haymount comes on line, you’ll see new people come … the biggest challenge is maintaining the rural character, and at the same time providing the services citizens need,” Taylor says.

Cleopatra Coleman believes “reclaiming and preserving” the town’s historic heritage is Port Royal’s biggest challenge. The first presi-
dent of Historic Port Royal, Inc., Coleman, a retired teacher and social worker and Caroline native, is an energetic ambassador for town history. She and her husband live in the Bowie House, a riverfront frame home built in 1740.

Coleman points out to a visitor some of the town’s treasures. They include Fox Tavern (1759), where George Washington lodged overnight in 1760. The Brockenbrough-Peyton House, one of the town’s earliest mansions, is where John Wilkes Booth stopped April 24, 1865, 10 days after he assassinated President Abraham Lincoln, before seeking refuge at nearby Garrett Farm, where he was killed by pursuing Union soldiers two days later.

“Life in Port Royal is returning to my roots. I have a passion for history, and this is a historic place. So it’s a good match,” Coleman explains.

“History is not all beautiful and positive,” she adds, acknowledging the fact that African-Americans who went before her endured slavery. “I can take a certain pride because my people, though under the tongue and the lash, built a lot of this [history].”

Historic Port Royal, Inc., volunteers have erected historical signage throughout the town, acquired several historic properties, and reprinted Fall’s *Hidden Village* book, among other accomplishments.
One of the town’s unique structures sits on Route 301 next to its owner, Union Bank & Trust. Old Port Royal School, a one-room schoolhouse for black children in the days of segregation, operated from 1924-1959. 

Volunteers restored the building, and in May and October, the school hosts a “living history” program for schoolchildren. “One teacher taught seven grades in that schoolhouse … I teach the class as children would have been taught in those years,” Coleman explains.

Mamie Dickerson, 92, a Caroline native, moved to Port Royal in 1929 when she married. Dickerson says her children attended the one-room schoolhouse. “The teacher, Hortense Rich, taught several grades … everything was different then. We had outdoor toilets and pumped water from the well,” she recalls. “To give my kids a bath, I had to heat water on an old wood-burning cook stove and pour it in the tub. My kids studied by lamp-light. There were no streetlights; you took a lantern to go outside [at night]. I think we got electricity around 1940. It was a hard life … I wonder sometimes how we made it.”

Herb Posner, Port Royal’s mayor, originally from New Jersey, says he ended up in Port Royal in 1976 almost by accident. After years as a sales representative, his plans to move to the Caribbean were interrupted when his father became ill. While tending to his boat, moored in Deltaville, he met a plant nursery owner and wound up buying his excess inventory. The owner suggested Port Royal might be a good place to sell plants. Posner rented an empty store, bought a house in town, married, and settled into Port Royal life. “It was a big adjustment at first,” he says. “But I spent two years aboard ship in the Coast Guard, so I’m adaptable. We have a good mix of people here and people get along with each other. “We don’t have any room for expansion in town, although we have open land near the town,” Posner says of future development. “The business district is on both sides of 301 and zoning is for light commercial, so I imagine the town will stay pretty much the way it is. We have few resources here in terms of doctors or shopping, and our closest grocery stores are in Bowling Green or across the river in King George.”

As mayor, he says the town is working to improve its water system, fueled by two active wells, and is upgrading street lighting.

Caroline natives Lisa Burch and her mother, Joyce Carter, a 14-year catering veteran, own The Tavern of Port Royal, the only restaurant within town limits. Housed in a historic house on Main Street/301, the duo bought the vacant circa-1852 building and spent over $100,000 renovating it before opening in 2002. Dishes are artfully presented at The Tavern of Port Royal, such as this entree of fried oysters, sweet potatoes, cole slaw, and bread. Owner Lisa Burch (inset) says, “We make everything from scratch.”
“With so much development coming our way, I’m concerned the historical charm of Port Royal will fade,” Burch admits. “But it will be better, business-wise. I hope they [newcomers] will appreciate our unique character.”

She adds, “I know my neighbors and I look out my [upstairs] window and see the river.

“The catering business has exceeded our expectations. The restaurant is challenging — I work 100-110 hours a week — but it has kicked off really well.”

**Tommy Morse**, co-owner of Horne’s Restaurant & Gift Shop for 15 years, says the majority of his customers are travelers, although he has some locals who are “regulars.”

“One guy eats here three times a day,” he notes.

With milkshakes created by antique multi-mixers, booths and fountain-style dining, and an eclectic gift shop, Horne’s is something of a time capsule with its own colorful history. The original Mr. Horne sold candy to Stuckey’s, a chain of eateries famous in the South; when Stuckey’s opted to make their own candy, Horne opened his own chain. But with the construction of I-95 and similar superhighways, customer traffic declined and Horne’s ceased to exist as a chain. But some Horne’s locations, like Port Royal’s, remain open under independent ownership.

“We’ve survived because of our location. We have people who have been coming here for years,” Morse says.

Morse says many are attracted to the restaurant’s nostalgic theme, while others enjoy browsing the gift shop. Open seven days a week, 24 hours a day, Horne’s also sells gasoline and diesel fuel, and employs 35 people.

**Jessie Wheeler** is a maintenance man for Horne’s who says he has worked there since 1967. A long-time resident, he describes Port Royal as a nice, close-knit community.

“There are people who have lived here for generations. You still have a lot of farming and logging in the area,” Wheeler says.

An exterior view of Port Royal’s only place of lodging, Edmont Bed & Breakfast.

When asked what has kept him here, he replies, “I don’t like the city.”


“I love to cook and I love to entertain,” Carpenter says of the decision to open Edmont. “We’re pleased with our first year in business, and we’ve met some very interesting people.”

Mid-Atlantic Laboratories, a firm providing environmental water testing, located its eight-employee lab in Port Royal about five years ago. Executive director **Dwight Storke, Ph.D.**, says a large vacant building that could accommodate lab machinery and a town that “worked very nicely with us” combined to cement the move. Formerly with The National Park Service, Storke also pastors the town’s Memorial Baptist Church.

“We weren’t encumbered by the strict [business] regulations you find in cities,” Storke says of business life in Port Royal. He describes his congregation as “close-knit folks who really care about each other.”

“It’s such a pristine area [here] … it needs some upkeep, but it has so many little jewels,” he observes.

With a waterfront location only 30 minutes from Fredericksburg and surrounded by encroaching development, Port Royal seems destined for change. But as Burch says, “The upside of [coming] development is people will find out about us.”

Coleman says, “You’ve got to have some change. A community is a living, thriving thing. I think this town can be energized by newcomers who bring in fresh outlooks and resources. I’m optimistic about the future of Port Royal.”