



The water wheel at the Cyrus McCormick Farm, where the first practical reaper was built.



Raphine, Virginia

Looking back while leaping forward at a crossroads of history and technology.

From Exit 205 off I-81 just north of Lexington, Virginia, a short drive west leads to Raphine, a bucolic community in Rockbridge County far removed from jarring interstate traffic.

At the eastern end of Raphine Road is Walnut Grove, the family farm-turned-museum of Cyrus McCormick (1809-1884), inventor of the mechanical grain reaper. The combine harvester's predecessor, the mechanical reaper changed the face of agriculture and later became part of International Harvester Corporation.

Lesser known is the story of James Edward Allen Gibbs (1829-1902), who patented the first chain-stitch single-thread sewing machine in 1857. Gibbs bought a farm where Raphine is now located, calling his home Raphine Hall (from the Greek word *raphis*, meaning "needle" or "to sew") and giving right-of-way through his property in 1883 to the B & O Railroad while donating land for a train depot. Wilcox & Gibbs sewing machines were manufactured in America until 1948; the company closed in 1973.

The depot and railroad are long gone, but Raphine Post Office, Raphine Volunteer Fire Department and City National Bank anchor the village.

Several now-shuttered old buildings that once housed various enterprises stand like silent sentinels near the post office. Nearby, Victorian-style homes with lush manicured lawns dot the village.

The Bank of Raphine was founded in 1906 and its name remains etched in stone near the roofline, although a succession of banks have called the building home. Since 2013, the building has housed City National Bank, where a vintage vault manufactured by Ohio's Mosler Safe Company (1874-2001) behind interior teller windows is a distinctive feature.

"We found maintenance tickets inside the vault dating to 1915," says banker Deborah Poole.

Seasonal employee Austin Tomlin, 20, works in other City National locations but says Raphine is "my favorite branch." Poole adds, "You can't ask for better customers — you feel the atmosphere of home here."

There was a short stretch when the building sat empty. Layne King, 73, owner of King's Auto and president of Raphine Volunteer Fire Department, found a bank to occupy the building.

"I have the original bank vault in my shop," Layne says. "A Chevrolet dealership that went out of business in 1959 was in

the old part of the fire department building [adjacent to the bank]."

Today, 35 volunteers staff Raphine Fire Department, says chief Bruce Brooks, 34. Organized in 1948, the department is 100-percent volunteer staffed, serving Raphine and a half-dozen nearby communities. Brooks notes, "My granddad Forest Brooks was one of the founders. We do [fundraisers] nearly every month and hold a carnival every June."

Since 1883, Raphine Post Office has been a community focal point. In the early days, a rural carrier used a horse-drawn cart to deliver mail to about 75 people; a 20-mile route took all day. Two rural routes now deliver mail to 887 homes; there are 87 post office boxes.

"A lot of people come in the mornings; they talk to each other and catch up on all the news," says Barbara Brooks, postmaster since 2014.

Charles "the Colonel" Sandridge, 82, a former dairy farmer, was a Raphine mail carrier for 33 years. Married 60 years to wife Helen, he recalls delivering one elderly lady's mail: "She hollered at me and said 'I'm still in bed.' She had run out of oil and had no heat. I fixed her a bowl of chicken soup and called her brother. I looked after her."



Peaceful,
Friendly,
Community-
Oriented



Clockwise from top left: City National Bank; Deborah Poole; Austin Tomlin; Jane Rouse; Barbara Brooks.

Son Mike Sandridge, who farms a 200-acre beef cattle ranch and is a BARC Electric Cooperative director, says, “He went above and beyond ... today if a mail carrier did that, he wouldn’t have a job very long.”

He adds, “I remember my grandparents went every Saturday to buy sugar, flour and coffee. Everything else they raised themselves, and they lived into their 90s.”

No matter who you talk to, the same words keep popping up about Raphine: peaceful, friendly, community-oriented. Newcomers John and Karen Siegfried purchased Raphine’s historic Wade’s Mill (circa 1746) and five acres of land in July 2016, after an area friend told them about the mill. In December 2016, they purchased 55 acres that includes the dam for the mill, “so now the dam is back with the mill.” After spending years overseas, they wanted to return to America.

Son Zack is a University of Virginia freshman; Karen, 58, ran a business school at England’s Cambridge University; and John, 60, worked in oil, gas and tech industries. He spent four months learning mill operation, noting, “Even though houses are spread far apart, I’ve probably had dinner at everyone’s house. You’d

have to mess up pretty badly not to be welcomed [here]. I don’t feel like a come-here.”

He offers mill tours; sells Wade’s Mill flour, cornmeal, grits and a variety of grain mixes at the mill store; and sells commercially to restaurants and food stores. He’s looking forward to hosting the mill’s 22nd Apple Butter Festival Oct. 21-22.

Another community fixture is Rockbridge Vineyard, which produces 8,500 cases of wine annually. Founded in 1989 by Shep and Jane Rouse, son Parke works with the business; daughter Elizabeth has painted art for wine labels; and daughter Katie is studying enology (fermentation chemistry) at UC Davis.

“We sell 22 different kinds of wine. Our big award-winner is our Riesling. We received a double gold medal in an international wine competition against 8,000 wines from around the world,” Jane says. “What makes it work is willingness to work really, really hard.”

Daniel and Fawn Shear and their family moved to Raphine in 2016, buying a farm they dubbed Seasons’ Yield in January 2017. Both Wheaton College graduates,

Daniel did military tours in Afghanistan before transitioning to the National Guard in 2016. He’s an Augusta County Fire and Rescue firefighter.

“My dad was career Navy and retired to Raphine; we visited and fell in love with the Valley,” Daniel explains. “We moved eight times before I went to college, so the stability and family nature of farming was the biggest appeal [of life here].”

Fawn, a former teacher, is homeschooling Tirzah and Thaddaeus (baby Finneus is the newest addition). The family sells weaned piglets, and works January through March to render maple syrup at Daniel’s parents’ property, which is sold under Seasons’ Yield label. They grow seasonal produce, have bee hives and 75 laying hens producing eggs sold via a self-serve operation on the property.

“Our mission is to provide the highest-quality food products for our family and the community, all centered on stewardship of the land,” Daniel says.

Sheep and cattle graze serenely on Raphine Road, a world away from Raphine’s White’s Travel Center, owned since 2010 by Bobby Berkstresser. With



Faces of the Raphine Community



Clockwise from top left: Wade's Mill; John Siegfried; Bobby Berkstresser; Linda Helmick; Fawn and Daniel Shear with baby Finneus, son Thaddaeus and daughter Tirzah at home at Seasons' Yield Farm; Grains milled by Wade's Mill.



275 employees and sprawling over more than 80 acres, White's is passed by 54,000 vehicles a day, including 20,000 trucks.

Berkstresser, 67, grew up in nearby Vesuvius and dreamed of owning White's. Originally built in 1969, Berkstresser has transformed it into a mega-complex. White's features over 700 paved tractor-trailer parking spots, 200 auto parking spaces, six restaurants, shops and amenities for truckers like a 32-seat movie theater, showers, laundromat, 24-hour truck service, barber shop, drivers' gym and even a coin-operated dog wash.

Berkstresser, who describes himself as "a tool and die maker by trade," got into the towing/road repair business after leaving a job at Westinghouse. He has owned Lee-Hi Travel Plaza in Lexington since 1981 and also owns a McDonald's/BP operation in Fairfield; his operations employ 430 people. He and wife Sue have three grown children, all of whom work in his businesses.

"I grew up pretty simply. I never dreamed I would have these opportunities," he explains. "We want to be cleaner, give better service and hire the best people — when you do that, opportunities will come."

He marvels at the peaceful landscape

nearby, adding, "What's neat is that here we are in Raphine, Virginia, and we have the biggest travel center on the East Coast."

In addition to manicured lawns and tasteful landscaping, White's includes The Medicine Shoppe, the country's first pharmacy to be located in a travel center. In July 2012, Dr. John "Rob" Marsh with Middlebrook's Raphine Medical Associates opened an office at White's where truckers can walk in for acute illness or injury, have physicals or get drug tests. Marsh, married with four children and a former physician with the elite Delta Force, was wounded and survived the firefight involving U.S. forces in Somalia made famous by the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*. Local patients describe him as "caring and compassionate."

"We see eight to 10 truckers a day," says office manager Helmick, who has been with Dr. Marsh 20 years and has worked at the White's location since it opened. "We see about 25 local patients a day. The truckers are so thankful we're here. Sometimes they need care and can't get home to a family doctor or they don't have a family doctor."

Mike Keyser, CEO of BARC Electric Cooperative in Millboro, says Raphine "is like a microcosm of our entire service territory." BARC, which serves Bath,

Alleghany, Rockbridge, Augusta and Highland counties, is making a Phase I \$20-million investment to provide broadband fiber-optic internet to homes and businesses, plus phone and cable TV service, beginning in Raphine and Rockbridge County.

"Our electric facilities need it [broadband], so why not do it for customers at the same time? If we don't do this, who will?" Keyser notes.

Keyser says customer density per mile of line translates to high upfront costs, noting that "for-profit" companies see it as "not worth the investment."

"It parallels the 1930s rise of [member-owned] co-ops, when for-profit utilities cherry-picked densely populated areas and rural areas [were left out]," he says. "The feeling of bringing [broadband] to homes will be as close as I can get to what it felt like in the '30s to bring electricity to homes for the first time."

In a place historically linked with innovation, locals are excited about the coming broadband service. As Mike Sandridge says, "It will give kids the same technology urban areas have ... hopefully it will open up jobs [here] so they can come back home after college and get good-paying jobs in their own communities." ■