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Elberon, Virginia

A sleepy crossroads community with a good quality of life.

Once a bustling destination in the center of Surry County, the unincorporated community of Elberon (pronounced El-Bron) is a sleepy crossroads on Virginia Highway 31.

At one time Elberon had multiple stores, a service station, a railroad depot and schoolhouse.

From 1886-1930, the Surry, Sussex and Southampton Railway ran a railroad line used by the Surry Lumber Company to haul logs along various stops, including Elberon. There was also a mail train that handled passenger service.

Today, one corner of this crossroads is agricultural farmland. On another corner is the now-closed Elberon Post Office, adjacent to a shuttered country store originally operated by O.J. Cockes. Across the highway is New Lebanon Christian Church, a white-frame structure dating to the 1880s. Known by some as "Cockes Church" because three brothers (Ollie V, Ottie J. and Otho M. Cockes) sang well and were active church members, today the church has less than 10 members and is only utilized for special services.

Elberon Supply occupies the other corner. Bobby and Nancy Thomas bought the former 1905 store in 2003, where they sell furniture, gift items and "cold drinks

and cakes." Retired from Newport News Shipbuilding after 42 years, Bobby, 80, is an Elberon native who remembers the store's bustling days.

"This was a general country store. We came here by horse and cart [when I was a child] for groceries and supplies," he recalls. "There were racks in back for [hanging] hams, and they sold overalls, shoes and fabric bolts. Local farmers brought peanuts [to sell]."

Sitting with wife Nancy, 78, Thomas flips through a scrapbook filled with articles about store history and old store ads. Married 62 years, the couple has three children, six grandchildren and six great-grandchildren; two children still live in the area.

Nancy says Elberon "was an amazing place to rear children." Although the couple says people "don't visit as much as they used to," Bobby lauds Elberon's "relaxing atmosphere and good people."

Modern Surry County is a 20-minute ferry ride from Jamestown and lies 50 miles southeast of Richmond and 50 miles northwest of Norfolk. The county (population: 6,544) has a rich history within its 279 square miles of land: In 1607 the Jamestown colony was perceived as a miniature London, because it lay on



Old Store and Post Office



Elberon Supply

Loyal
Small-Town
Neighbors



Jean
Stewart



Jamestown-
Scotland Ferry



Shirley
Cokes

both sides of the James River as London lies on the Thames River. The area of London south of the Thames is in the shire of Surrey, so settlements on the south side of the James were referred to as “over on the Surrey side.” When the county was chartered in 1652, it became Surry County.

The county’s largest employer is Dominion Energy’s Surry Nuclear Power Station. Most residents commute to jobs outside the area, although farming and forestry remain important parts of the local economy.

Elberon native Jean Savage Stewart, 77, who retired after 38 years with the Bank of Surry, volunteers with Surry County Historical Society and Museums Inc. The museum houses a large genealogy records collection and a restored 1925 ferry deckhouse. Stewart says O.J. Cokes (postmaster from 1902-1938) made application for a post office in 1901 with the name Elberon; once called “Cokes’ Crossing,” no one knows the origin of the Elberon name. Cokes’ daughter Marion Cokes Sowder was postmaster 1939-1978.

“It hasn’t changed a whole lot over the years. I consider it the garden spot of the world,” Stewart says. “I always said if you haven’t ever lived in Elberon, you didn’t know how good it was ... it’s just a quiet, peaceful farming community.”

Like many natives, Stewart laments the closing of Elberon’s post office, open from 1902-2010. Elberon’s original post office boxes are on display at the museum, thanks to Lois Babb Wyatt, who bought them at auction and donated them to the museum.

Wyatt notes, “The post office was the hub of the community, and it hasn’t been the same since they took it away.”

Wyatt’s mother Lillian Babb was Elberon postmistress from 1978-’88; Lois worked as a postal clerk and was “postmaster relief” for her mother’s successor, Betty Thomas, before the post office closed. Elberon kept its 23846 zip code and citizens still receive home-delivery service.

“There was not an ‘official’ closing; they just notified us that Elberon’s post office mail was being sent to Dendron; then they officially closed the Dendron Post Office. The remaining Elberon post office mail was sent to Wakefield, about 13 miles away one way,” Wyatt explains.

Wyatt, a part-time teacher at Classical Christian Homeschoolers of Surry, married to retiree Buddy Wyatt, recalls asking for a post office box number after years of listing her address as General Delivery, Elberon.

“The postmaster said ‘pick a number’ so I did,” she laughs. “I grew tired of people asking where General Delivery was.”

Wyatt loves the quiet of Elberon, noting, “You can have your privacy here, but if you need help, your neighbors will be there for you.”

Before there was an Elberon post office, the John Huber family moved to the area in 1900 from Pennsylvania, lured by cheap farmland. When their train stopped at what was then Cokes’ Crossing, horses and carts filled with people to help them move to their new home awaited them.

“It was only 35 years after the Civil War that my great-grandfather John Huber moved here, and here they were, helping these people from the north,” says Huber. “It made a real impression on them, how hospitable people were. Many neighbors had been in the Confederate Army.”

Retired from the USDA Farm Service Agency, Huber, 69, grew up in Wakefield and lives in Richmond, where he heads the Richmond Bicycling Association and leads group cycling trips in Elberon and Surry County.

“People on my bike rides remark about people waving at us. I tell them yes, we are friendly,” Huber notes.

Shirley Cokes, 84, was nicknamed “the watermelon lady” by the cyclists. She explains, “They come here to ride two or three times a year; our house is one of their rest stops. In the summer we serve them watermelon and cantaloupe.”



Cockes traveled around the world with her military husband, the late Elbert Cockes, and lives in Elberon. She has four children (two deceased), seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. An attractive, spunky woman, she says Elberon is “still a friendly, safe place to live. I made friends when I moved here and they’re still my friends.”

A new Elberon business is Hampton Roads Winery, owned by David and Diane Sheldon. David, an engineer, and Diane, a chemist, started making wine in their Massachusetts basement using wine kits. Soon they found themselves thinking about a winery as a post-retirement business.

“We looked at different places in North Carolina and Virginia before a Williamsburg realtor said, ‘Take a ferry ride to Surry and see what you think,’” Diane recalls.

They bought land near Bacon’s Castle and created Bacon’s Castle Vineyards. In 2012 they bought White Oak Farm in Elberon and began planting grapes in 2013. Owned by Harry Spratley from 1905-1932, the farm once raised thoroughbred horses to sell to wealthy New Yorkers. The Sheldons built a new winery and The Goat Tower, which has become a tourist attraction.

“We knew we wanted goats. When my husband found the first one was built in the 1800s at a winery in Portugal, he said ‘I want a goat tower.’ A local bricklayer did the brickwork,” Diane explains.

The 35-foot-tall circular tower includes doors with spiral steps around its exterior. Four doors at different levels lead to wooden platforms on each level. Goats go inside to get out of the heat in summer, sleeping on the top level at night.

“They like to climb,” Diane says.

A local group is also trying to educate and create awareness about African-American history. Terry Lewis of Elberon, a former Surry County administrator, is president of Surry County African-American Heritage Society, a nonprofit formed in 2003. Besides holding an annual summer “Family Reunion Festival” and “A Taste of Surry” event in the spring, the organization has placed heritage markers around the county. Before the Civil War, the county had the largest population of freemen in the country; many of these families trace their heritage to the 1600s, with land and cemeteries still owned by their descendants.

Lewis notes that Elberon is home to several predominantly black churches that began schools in the post-Civil War era.

“Cypress Baptist Church developed a school under church auspices, as did Mt.

Moriah A.M.E. Church. They were established with the assistance of Amelia Howard, an Episcopalian teacher from Philadelphia who worked with the Freedman’s Bureau who came to help provide education and establish churches,” Lewis explains. “The churches also provided training in other facets of life: what the welfare system might do today, in those days churches filled that need.”

Joe Jenkins, a retired city administrator, is also active in the African-American Heritage Society. His parents were county natives who moved to New Jersey “because they didn’t want to farm”; he and wife Louise moved to the Spring Grove area 11 years ago.

“Surry had a significant role in the development of this country and has some of the best-kept records in the country. What we are doing is making people aware of the importance of that history, and we also want to honor those people in the past,” he explains.

Lewis, a Blackstone native, recalls, “We have a good quality of life here, but people still need things and we need jobs for young people. We are a very rural community and we don’t have available to us things you might have available [in other communities] ... but we do have a sense of community, irrespective of race and color.” ■