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During the year 2000, we're making our way around Virginia, 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 fifth stop, we'll be...

## Down Home in Clifton

This hidden treasure tucked away in a corner of Fairfax County is a friendly town with a tangible sense of history.



(Author Nan Netherton, working with the Clifton Betterment Association in 1980, penned a book which she titled *Clifton: Brigadoon in Virginia*.)

A few have thought perhaps it was one of those mythical places that only appears on earth for a short time, every hundred years. One thing is certain — Clifton *does* exist and looks much as it did 100 years ago.

### A Hidden Treasure

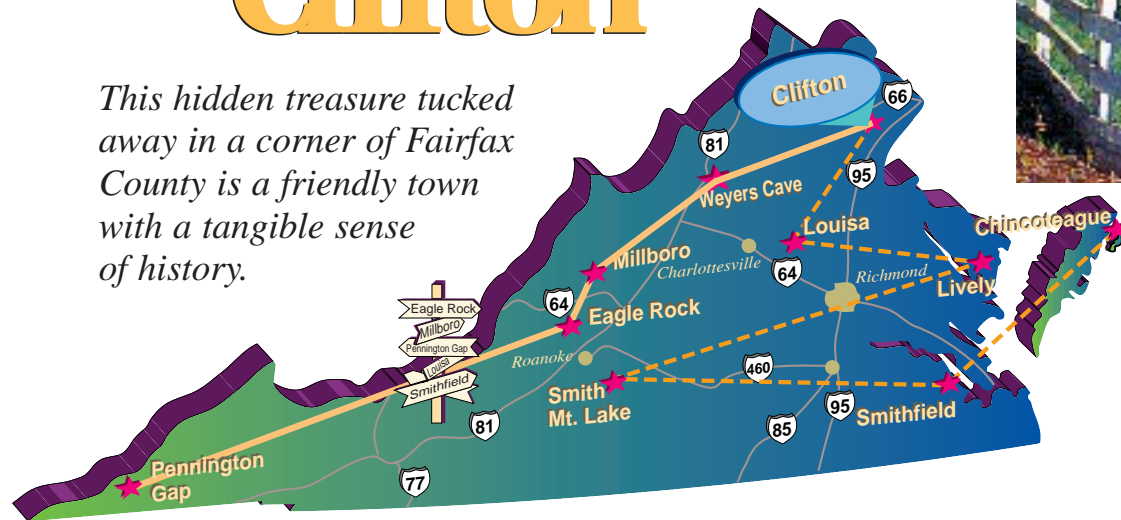
That is the way most townspeople, leading their customary lives, would like it to remain — a hidden treasure of a friendly town with a tangible sense of history.

The streets are narrow, the railroad cuts through the town, and it is surrounded by fields and forest.

The main street features a church, a general store, two antique shops, two restaurants and a bevy of historic homes dating to 1771. The town was originally known as Devereux Station, but in 1868, its name was changed to Clifton Station, and later to just Clifton. The name is believed to have been chosen by a northern settler, after Clifton Springs, NY, a popular resort at the time.

The community of one quarter of a square mile in size is surrounded on the outskirts by larger

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Mayor **Jim Chesley** is clear about what he likes best about his adopted Clifton home of nearly 25 years. "It really is the people and the quiet and peaceful community."

Tucked away in a corner of Fairfax County, the sleepy little community is the epitome of an American small town.

Affectionately dubbed the "Brigadoon" of Virginia, the tiny village of 200 residents is elusive to most who travel through the county. Clifton seems to have been forgotten by the relentless march of time and the encroachment of development.

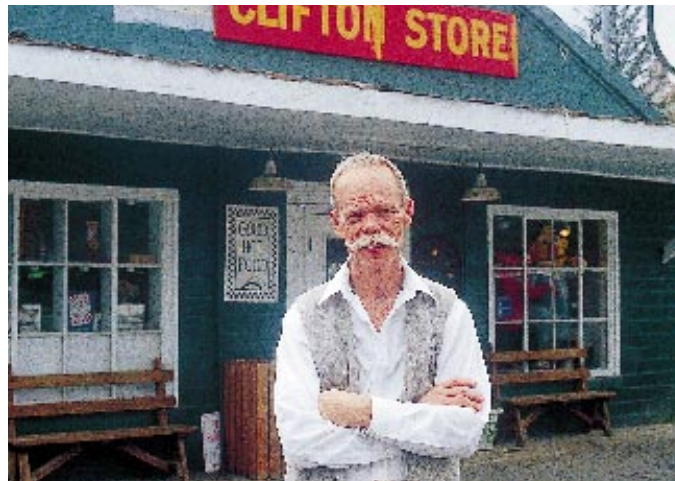
Historic markers dot the landscape in front of churches, homes and businesses around Clifton, bearing witness to a community dedicated to preserving its past.







BENNIE SCARTON PHOTOS



Horse farms are a familiar scene (left) on the rural outskirts of Clifton. Mayor Jim Chesley (center) steps down from the restored caboose he sometimes uses as his office. Tom McNamara (right) and his wife Judy own the Clifton General Store.



Jeannie Lapowski, who sells art, collectibles and gifts in her Clifton shop, says "I love being where the pace is slow."

homes of more modern architectural design.

Yet, the close-knit community works hard to ensure the preservation of its natural charm and turn-of-the-century appearance. Clifton was declared a National Historic District by the U.S. Department of Interior in 1984.

"Living in Clifton makes you feel like you are in another world. While steeped in history, we had many firsts, such as being the initial community to have electricity with the coming of the Bull Run Power Company in 1925, and the first high school with students coming by train from other parts of Fairfax County," Chesley says.

With the arrival of the rural electrification movement, the power company merged (around 1940) with Prince William Electric Cooperative. It later became the Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative in Manassas, which still serves the community.

### Rich in History

The area is rich in history. George Washington and Lord Fairfax rode together there in hunts, and the town emerged as a strategic center in the Civil War because of its rail lines. It is less than 12 miles from Manassas

National Battlefield Park, where two of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War were fought.

After the war, Clifton became a country retreat for the rich of Washington, DC. U.S. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Ulysses Grant and Chester A. Arthur are reported to have taken refuge in the Clifton Hotel, restored 13 years ago as a restaurant after years of being dormant.

Many of the older homes in the town that were built a century or more ago have been updated and restored to reflect the lifestyles of today's families.

With the help of an architect, **Tom and Judy McNamara** renovated a house built in 1895 to make it suitable for a family of six.

Tom says he and his wife chose to live in the community "because it met our criteria of a small town with Victorian homes." The couple loved Clifton and were bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, so they began the search for a local business to purchase.

**Heart and Hand Restaurant** (left) and **Antiques of Clifton** are representative of the many small businesses that call Clifton home.

Judy forged the way by opening up a floral shop, and soon thereafter an opportunity came up to purchase the Clifton General Store. Now Judy has her floral business in part of the building, and Tom runs the store.

### Community Camaraderie

Besides the obvious reasons — ambiance, slower pace of life — the McNamaras and other families like them stay in a small town like Clifton because of the camaraderie among townspeo-

ple. There is no mail delivery in the town — the residents come to the town's post office for their mail and to catch up on the current news. Surrounding areas have adopted the Clifton zip code to pick up on the enchantment of the town.





**Ruth Johnson Mahoney**, who spent 61 of her years in Clifton before moving to Manassas 15 years ago, says her fondest memories of the town are “swimming in Pope’s Head Creek, which runs through the town, and watching blacksmith Andre Kidwell shoe the horses.

“We would also sit on top of the hill and watch the employees go in and out of the Soap Stone Mill. We were not allowed to go near the mill because of the heavy equipment. The railroad played a big part in our lives. The folks in town who worked in Washington, DC, were able to commute on the trains. Our mail was also brought into town on the railroad mail cars and then delivered to the post office in a wheelbarrow. I remember Virginia Carper coming from Manassas to our home by train to give us piano lessons.”

Mahoney says she also recalls the carnivals that came to the village.

“That was a big event for us. There was always a Ferris wheel and sometimes elephants. My brother and a friend carried water for the animals and got a free pass to the carnival,” she recalls.

**Anna Sprouse**, 77, who was a clerk and assistant postmaster at the Clifton Post Office for 50 years before retiring in 1992, says the best part of her job was “the wonderful relationship I had with not only the townspeople, but with visitors coming into our community.”

### Some Distinguished Guests

One of her favorite visitors was actress Helen Hayes, who frequently came to the village to visit with her nephew and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Ruell Fugett. Another was for-

mer First Lady Nancy Reagan, who enjoyed having lunch with Sprouse at the Heart in Hand restaurant, converted from the former Buckley Store built in 1900.

Boasting to offer “everything from a pin to a plow,” the store was a major factor for encouraging the future growth of the town.

Jeff Arch, who was the screen writer for *Sleepless in Seattle*, did his writing for the movie while a resident of Clifton.

The Clifton Betterment Association has set up a walking tour of the community with 33 stops. Most of the homes and businesses have a historical marker in front of them, telling their history.

They range from the Primitive Baptist Church, which was built in 1869 by former slaves and their children, to the Clifton Community Hall, which was constructed in 1995 and is the newest public building in

## If You Go...

A visit to historic Clifton, established in 1869 and incorporated in 1902, should include 33 stops on the **Clifton Walking Tour**, a brochure of which has been printed by the Clifton Betterment Association.

Most of the places have historic markers telling a little about their history. They include the **Beckwith House**, also known as the Homestead, which dates back to 1771 and is Clifton’s oldest remaining structure; the **Mayhugh Tavern**, built in 1870, was owned and operated by Gustie “Grandpap” Mayhugh, who strove to run an “orderly and genteel bar;” the **Clifton Baptist Church**, which dates back to 1876 and has a gabled roof, high-spired steeple, and gothic arched windows; and the **Hetzel House**, named for Susan Riviere Hetzel (1846-1908), who was the organizer of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

If you are hungry, be sure to stop by the **Heart In Hand Restaurant** (703-830-4111) or the **Heritage Inn Restaurant** (703-266-1623), both renowned throughout the area for their superb meals.

Visiting the **Clifton General Store** is worth the trip to Clifton. Nostalgia for a bygone era is evident — customers sit outside eating lunch, the slate board beside the door tells the weather forecast

and the coffee flavor of the day, and the Clifton Nosy Neighbor Board behind the register highlights current events in the town. It is open every day of the year and sells everything from household items to freshly grilled bacon cheeseburgers — and you can even get some free advice from the cook, Tom McNamara.



Jennifer Coombs arranges a display at her store, **Tiger Lilly**, one of several quaint shops on Chapel Rd.

The town has several major events during the year. Since 1968, the single most ambitious Clifton Betterment Association activity is the annual **Clifton Day**, a town-wide festival held each year on the second Sunday of October. The day is an opportunity for townspeople to become better acquainted as they work together, and for the town’s civic organizations to raise funds for their various causes. As many as 20,000 visitors can enjoy the day in the village, which is filled with hundreds of antique dealers, artists, craftsmen and their wares. **The Virginia Railway Express** runs trains from

both directions, bringing in passengers throughout the day.

The Clifton Community Woman’s Club sponsors a yearly **Spring Home Tour**, and in the first week in December a **Christmas Candlelight Home Tour** is conducted.

In June, a **5K Caboose Run** is hosted by the Betterment Association. It draws upwards of 1,000 runners and the proceeds are donated to a local charity. A restored caboose rests on the site of the former depot.

The Clifton Lions Club sponsors a yearly benefit **Pancake Day at the Hermitage Inn**, giving residents and visitors an opportunity for a good meal while getting an inside view of the historic restored structure.

There are several quaint gift shops located on Chapel Road, as well as the **Clifton Saddlery** (703-830-7200) which supplies apparel and gift items for the horse owners whose stables surround the town.

**The Clifton Community Hall** hosts the meeting of the Town Council every first Tuesday of the month. The meeting hall, decorated with four seasonal murals of the town done by Lee Ruck, is available for rent for group functions and receptions. With its abundance of churches, first-class restaurants, floral shops, parks and the community center, Mayor Jim Chesley says the town is an ideal place to host a wedding. ■

town. The building houses the fire department and rescue squad, and has a large meeting room for town functions.

**Jeannie Lopacinski** is typical of the new merchants who have set up shop in a small complex on Chapel Road in the town.

“I had been looking for a spot to open a business to sell art, collectibles and gifts, and one day I drove through Clifton. I saw a sign for a shop to rent and moved in immediately. I love being here where the pace is slow. While we are a little off the beaten path, people do find us,” she says.

The location of business and residential buildings encourages the residents and visitors to safely stroll the tree-lined streets after shopping or dining.

Gorgeous backyard gardens and fountains adorn many of the houses that are surrounded by white picket fences, creating a feeling of yesteryear that is still found throughout the town. ■