

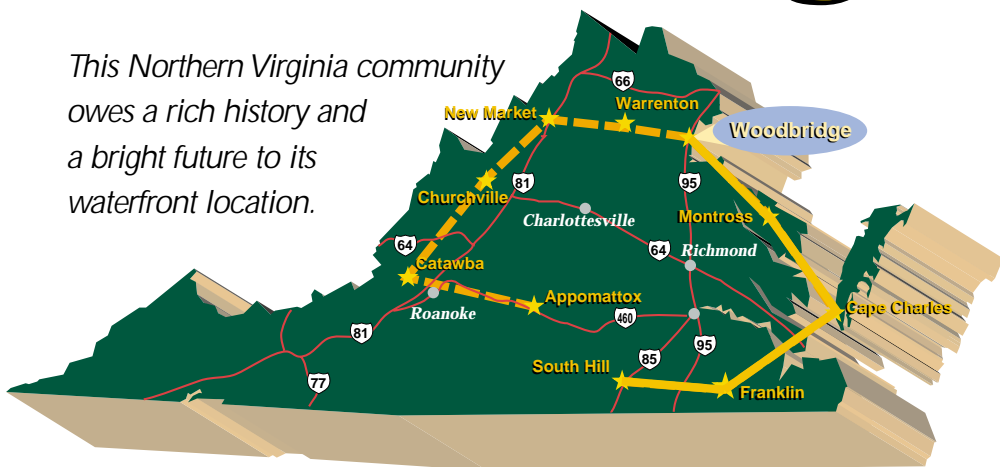
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Peter J. Fakoury,
Contributing Writer

During the year 2001, 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 Woodbridge

This Northern Virginia community owes a rich history and a bright future to its waterfront location.



The greenish waters of Neabsco Creek gently lap against the creosoted timbers of an old barge. Her steel skin rusted away, her frame now supports the decks and upward structures of the Pilot House, one of Woodbridge's last remaining independently owned restaurants.

The Pilot House is a local landmark in Woodbridge. A 130-foot-long ship with a facade like a paddlewheel steamer, the

restaurant has served fresh seafood to local patrons and visitors for more than three decades.

"For years we were one of the prime spots in Northern Virginia," says Pilot House owner **Michael Hill**. "People would say, 'I want to take you to a place that you'll never find on your own.' Now all the restaurants around here are chains, and the ones that are local and small are struggling to survive."



Fishing is serious business at Leesylvania State Park. Several nationally televised bass tournaments are held there each year.



Pilot House Restaurant owner Michael Hill is a lifelong Woodbridge resident. His father built the restaurant in 1970. It is a local landmark, and one of Woodbridge's last remaining independently owned restaurants.

In a way the Pilot House stands for a past Woodbridge that is fighting to keep up with its future. Woodbridge is a community with two distinct facets — a colorful history and unique natural beauty on one side, a modern, fast-paced existence on the other.

Leesylvania State Park offers a half-mile of sandy Potomac River Beach for fun and frolic.



DWIGHT PYLE PHOTO, COURTESY OF PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY/MANASSAS CONFERENCE AND VISITORS BUREAU

PETER FAKOURY PHOTO



PHOTO COURTESY OF PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY/MANASSAS CONFERENCE AND VISITORS BUREAU



PETER FAKOURY PHOTO

Potomac Mills is one of Woodbridge's most prominent landmarks. The huge outlet mall has more than 220 outlet stores.

To the visitor just passing through, it would be easy to miss the old (and perhaps the real) Woodbridge. To many people Woodbridge is Potomac Mills, the gargantuan outlet mall situated along I-95. A mecca for bargain shoppers, it and its surrounding retail sprawl followed a wave of residential growth that started in the 1960s. Like many localities around the Washington, DC, area, Woodbridge has become a bedroom community for commuters who ride the tide of traffic each morning in search of work.

Woodbridge is more of a place than a town. Its unincorporated boundaries are not well defined. It is Prince William County's eastern edge, a 10-square-mile area roughly marked by I-95 to the west and the Potomac

River to the east. Its northern boundary is the Occoquan River, which separates Prince William County from its northern neighbor, Fairfax County. To the south of Woodbridge lie the small towns of Dumfries and Quantico.

It is impossible to separate Woodbridge's past from the Potomac River. The English explorer Captain John Smith sailed into the area in 1608, shortly after the settlement of Jamestown. By trading with the Native Americans there, he was able to secure enough food to help sustain his settlement.

The area was settled in 1653, mostly by wealthy plantation owners. Some of them became Virginia's most prominent families. George Mason's grandfather owned the

The Potomac River offers some spectacular views from Freestone Point, now part of Leesylvania State Park.

northernmost 500 acres of what is now Woodbridge. The Mason family operated a ferry across the Occoquan River that in 1795 was replaced by a wooden toll bridge. Mason's plantation later became known as "Woodbridge."

Farther south along the river was Leesylvania, the home of General Robert E. Lee's grandparents, and the birthplace of his father. The tobacco-producing plantation was situated on Freestone Point, a peninsula of land sandwiched between Neabsco Creek and Powell's Creek.

Not far from Freestone Point sits the Pilot House Restaurant. It is a lasting tribute to a part of history Michael Hill remembers well. Hill's father, J. Carl Hill, bought Freestone Point in 1955 with plans of building the largest waterfront resort area south of Atlantic City. He built swimming pools and amusements, and had plans for a 600-room hotel. But it was gambling that was to produce most of the revenue.

In the 1950s, gambling was illegal in Virginia. So was liquor. But Carl Hill ingeniously took advantage of the fact that all of the Potomac River is considered part of Maryland. So he built a pier out into the river and anchored a 200-foot cruise ship at its end for use as a floating nightclub and gambling spot. Virginia residents who wanted to play the slot machines had only to step onto the pier to be in Maryland territory, where liquor and gambling were permitted.

Freestone Point opened in grand fashion



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEESYLVANIA STATE PARK VISITORS CENTER

For two years during the late 1950s, Freestone Point was a popular resort area and gambling spot. The S.S. Freestone and its slot machines were the main attraction.

in 1957. But it was so close to Washington, DC, that it drew a lot of attention. Some of it was unfavorable.

"Some people said, 'this is a gambling syndicate, the devil's work,'" laughs Michael Hill. "So the governors of Maryland and Virginia got together and got the Maryland legislature to pass a law that said you had to be able to walk from Maryland shores in order to have slot machines."

The new law wiped out Carl Hill's resort in a hurry. It closed after only two short years of operation. Hill later sold Freestone Point to the American Hawaiian Steamship Company, which planned to use the land for an oil port. That never happened. The land became deserted and wild again, and remained that way for several decades.

When Freestone Point closed, the Hills prospered in other ways. Carl Hill opened a crab house on the Maryland side of the river and installed the slot machines there. He provided boat transportation across the river for Virginia residents who wanted to gamble. In 1970 he opened the Pilot House Restaurant.

Something for Everyone

Much of Woodbridge today revolves around the Route 1 corridor, which parallels I-95. It is home to countless strip malls, car dealerships and fast-food restaurants. But scattered along the five-mile stretch of four-lane highway are some interesting antique stores, like Featherstone Square Antique Mall, which claims to be the largest antique mall in Virginia.

Just across the Occoquan River, situated

high on a hill above Route 1, sits another piece of old Woodbridge, the Lazy Susan Dinner Theatre. It is one of the oldest professional dinner theaters in the Washington, DC, area. In continuous operation since 1974, the family-owned theater offers a plentiful Pennsylvania Dutch-style buffet and four productions a year.

Like the Pilot House, the Lazy Susan has found it a challenge to remain profitable in an area where people have so many options for spending their money.

"We're very careful about how we run this place," says **Karol Kaldenbach**, who has managed the theater for the past 21 years. "We watch our overhead, and we try to keep our shows family-oriented."

A scene from the Lazy Susan Dinner Theatre's past production of *Big River*.

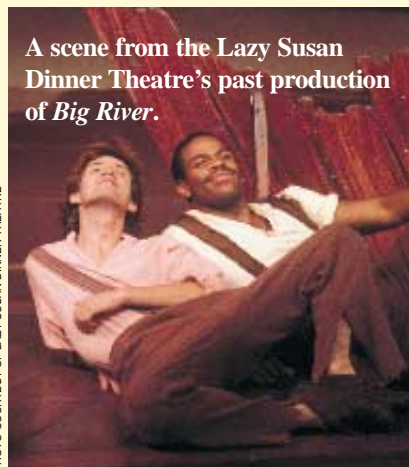
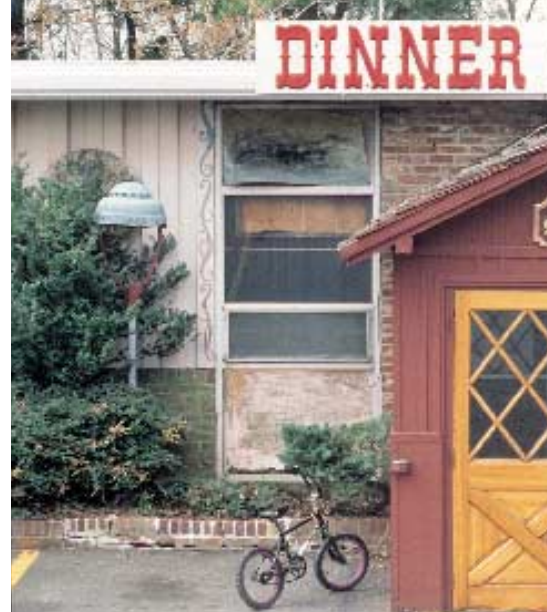


PHOTO COURTESY OF LAZY SUSAN DINNER THEATRE

If You Go...



The formula works. The Lazy Susan has a loyal local patronage. Like many other artistic endeavors, passion is the other key ingredient in the Lazy Susan's success. There is a palpable sense of excitement when you enter the theater, which just opened *Big River*, the musical adventures of Huckleberry Finn. With a smile, Kaldenbach says it's one of her favorite productions.

Waterfront recreation is perhaps the crown jewel of Woodbridge leisure life. Nowhere is that more obvious than at Leesylvania State Park. The 512-acre park, which opened in 1992, represents the next chapter in the history of Freestone Point. American Hawaiian Steamship owner Daniel Ludwig donated half the value of the land as a tax write-off, paving the way for the creation of the most heavily visited day-use park in the Virginia state park system.

Leesylvania State Park features some of the best public boating ramps and facilities

Discover the natural beauty of the Potomac River front at **Leesylvania State Park**. Plenty of activities for the entire family. For the naturalist, there is hiking, canoeing and bird watching. Sportsmen and water enthusiasts will find the boating and fishing activities endless. History lovers can wander through the plantation grounds of Revolutionary War hero "Lighthorse" Harry Lee, the father of General Robert E. Lee, or learn about **Freestone Point**, the gambling resort of the 1950s (703-670-0372).

A fairly new waterfront attraction, the **Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge** offers a stunning view of Virginia's coastal wetlands. Once a high-tech government facility used during the '60s and '70s for "Star Wars" defense research, today the land



PETER FAKOURY PHOTO

The Lazy Susan Dinner Theatre has been in continuous operation since 1974, serving a hearty meal and some tasty theater to loyal locals and visitors.

on the Potomac. It boasts a half mile of beach, six miles of hiking trails, group camping, pavilions, a handicapped-accessible fishing pier (at the site of the old gambling ship pier), and plenty for history buffs. The site of the old Lee house is worth the hike, as is the walk to a Civil War battery perched high on a river bluff. The wildlife also is spectacular.

"You'll see eagles sometimes, and herons, ducks and beavers," says **Brendon Hanafin**, assistant park manager. "It's a wild place in Woodbridge — one of the last remaining places."

Hanafin is particularly proud of the park's new visitor's center, completed two years ago. It offers wildlife-related multi-media and hands-on learning opportunities for chil-

is home to many species of waterfowl and other wetlands wildlife. Tours by appointment only (703-690-1297).

Golfers may want to check out the **Ospreys at Belmont Bay**, a new championship 18-hole golf course. Starting high on a bluff overlooking the Occoquan River, the course gently descends to the river, with hills, wetlands and ponds (703-497-1384).

Shoppers will enjoy browsing the antique shops along Route 1. The largest is **Featherstone Square Antique Mall**. Billed as the largest antique mall in the state, it offers more than 100,000 square feet of space and over 200 dealers (703-491-9099).

Another popular shopping spot is **Potomac Mills**, a mega-mall with more than 220 brand-name outlet stores and 25 eateries (800-VA-MILLS).

DWIGHT PYLE PHOTO, COURTESY OF PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY/MANASSAS CONFERENCE AND VISITORS BUREAU



Golfers enjoy a round at the Ospreys at Belmont Bay, a new championship golf course overlooking the Occoquan River.

dren and adults. A museum retraces the history of Freestone Point from its colonization through the days of the gambling ship.

But Hanafin says what most people like best about the park is its beauty. From upland forests to coastal plains, the park offers an interesting assortment of gorgeous Virginia topography. It's also a haven for water sport enthusiasts, and has some of the best bass fishing on the Potomac River.

The River Is the Future

At a cozy table overlooking Neabsco Creek, Pilot House owner Michael Hill wonders about the future of Woodbridge. He believes he can remain successful as long as he continues to offer the best seafood and

service he can. He says the big chain restaurants can't compete with him there. He'll continue to serve his regular customers, some of whom have been coming to the Pilot House for 30 years, as well as those who are discovering his place for the first time.

Genes are in Hill's favor. He clearly inherited his father's optimistic entrepreneurialism.

Hill believes that as in past colonial days, the river will be a big part of Woodbridge's future. Its mostly undeveloped river front is turning out to be a gold mine for developers.

At the north end of Woodbridge, not far from the site of the old wooden toll bridge, is Belmont Bay, a community of upscale homes springing up on the banks of the Occoquan River. Plans are big for this area. A modern commuter railroad station already has been constructed, as has the Ospreys at Belmont Bay, a championship golf course. Development will eventually include a convention center.

Further south, in the Cherry Hill area of Woodbridge, plans are moving forward for another upscale waterfront development.

But the Woodbridge waterfront has a simpler meaning to Michael Hill — it is home. He has lived or worked on Neabsco Creek since he was three years old.

"Most of the people in Woodbridge don't know anything about the waterfront," he says. "Most of them are here for five years and then they leave. It's a very transient area. There are a handful of us who have been here a long time. Most came here and didn't plan on staying. They just liked it so much they never left." ■

The Hylton Chapel Christian Events Center, which seats 4,000 people, hosts large Christian events, and attracts some of the best Christian music talent and speakers (www.hyltonchapel.org).

For quaint, waterside dining, the **Pilot House Restaurant** offers a casual, friendly atmosphere and plenty of good seafood. From the dining room, the view of Neabsco Creek and the Pilot House Marina is an eye-pleaser. Nautical decor inside and out. Open every night but Monday (703-221-1010).

Through July 8, the **Lazy Susan Dinner Theatre** presents *Big River*, the musical adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Plentiful Pennsylvania Dutch-style food, cozy dining, and first-class theater. Open every night but Monday (703-550-7384). ■