

## DOWN HOME SERIES

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*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 third stop, we'll be...*

# Down Home in Cape Charles

*Watercolor sunsets, Victorian charm and friendly residents characterize this Eastern Shore community.*



DAVE TEMENS PHOTO



**Two local schooners make their way into the harbor at Cape Charles.**

**The sunset over the Chesapeake Bay from the Cape Charles fishing pier is a glorious sight to behold. There was a time many believed the sun had also set on the glory days of Cape Charles, back almost a half-century ago.**

So cozy is Cape Charles with the Chesapeake Bay that each day ends with watercolor sunsets. Whether viewed from its Victorian porches or beach-front pier, spectacular brush strokes of turquoise and pink paint sky and tide.

There was a time many believed the sun had also set on the glory days of Cape Charles, back almost a half-century ago. The railroad that built the town had bid farewell, the grand steamboats and ferries that once filled its harbor were only fond memories.

"Nothing ever happens in Cape Charles" became the pessimistic motto.

But even after decades of decline, the town had its faithful. And in recent years, life-long residents have joined forces with newcomers, or "come-heres" as they are affectionately called, to rebuild their community.

### Tracking History

When William L. Scott, a wealthy coal tycoon and congressman, shared his vision for a railroad on Virginia's Eastern Shore, none of the Pennsylvania Railroad officials were interested, except for one — Alexander J. Cassatt.

But one was all it took.



SCOTT NEVILLE PHOTO

Born into an affluent Pennsylvania family (his sister Mary Cassatt was the renowned Impressionist painter), the brilliant engineer so believed in the venture he resigned as senior vice-president of the railroad, and, with his partner Scott, forever changed the Eastern Shore.

Cassatt organized the New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk Railroad in 1882. By 1884 they had laid tracks from Pocomoke City, Maryland, south through the center of the Eastern Shore.

The NYP&N railroad would give birth to a bevy of villages and towns, but none so

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**Margaret Carlson, pictured here with her husband Charlie, remembers when the tiny 8- by 8-block town was bustling during the 1930s and '40s.**

grand as the planned Cape Charles "city" near the tip of the rural peninsula.

Here Cassatt dredged a small creek for a deep harbor and closed the watery 26-mile gap from the Eastern Shore to Norfolk in a most ingenious way: floating train barges.

With his unique design, 18 freight cars carried goods more efficiently since it wasn't necessary to unload the train cars' wares onto ships, then reload them back onto trains again.

Throughout the elegant age of travel with steamboats and ferries and the romance of the rails, Cape Charles thrived as the connecting point for both commerce and people heading to northern cities.

**Margaret Carlson**, 80, who grew up in Cape Charles and owns Charmar's Antiques with her husband **Charlie**, remembers the tiny 8- by 8-block town during the 1930s and '40s.

"It was bustling, everything was busy," she recalls fondly. "You had to wait for everything from getting your hair cut to getting on the ferries."

In 1950, the vital town took its first blow when the car ferry operation moved further south to Kiptopeke. Three years later, the last of the passenger steamboats, the *Elisha Lee*, left Cape Charles, never to return.

Before the decade closed out, the whistle of the passenger train could be heard no more. It was now the age of the automobile.

The completion of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, connecting the Eastern

Shore to the mainland in 1964, was not the cure for the town's ills. Travel and time continued to pass Cape Charles by.

### Down but Not Out

When **Chris Bannon** came to Cape Charles 13 years ago to open Seagate, the first bed-and-breakfast inn here, he saw what many others saw — a forgotten town. But unlike others, he also recognized its nostalgic appeal.

"It's Americana, like stepping back in time to the 1950s," says Bannon, who restored a rundown welfare house back to its 1912 Victorian splendor. "The town looked

**Colleagues were skeptical when Kim Starr decided to open a real estate office in Cape Charles. She wanted to raise her daughter Katie in the small, friendly town.**

tired, but was architecturally spectacular with tree-lined streets."

Some town residents doubted he would succeed, but Bannon did, and later was joined by four more B&Bs, each flourishing in the small bayside town.

Even a scant five years ago, **Kim Starr** heard more than a few snickers when she decided to open a real estate office, Chesapeake Properties, in Cape Charles, wanting to raise her daughter Katie in the friendly small town.

"Most Eastern Shore realtors considered it a no-man's land," says Starr, who started



EASTERN SHORE NEWS FILE PHOTO



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**When Chris Bannon came to Cape Charles 13 years ago to open Seagate, a bed-and-breakfast inn, he recognized its nostalgic appeal.**



**Rayfield's Pharmacy serves down-home cooking seven days a week. The old-fashioned soda fountain at this corner drugstore is straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting.**

blanks that were once unfillable in the Cape Charles downtown. They include a gourmet cookie mix manufacturer, three new eateries, and a bookstore.

"There is no question that the Bay Creek Development and its plans for two championship golf courses are playing a big part in the town's revitalization," says Cape Charles native and mayor, **Alex Parry**. "Coupled with the Sustainable Technologies Industrial Park and the incen-

the business before the Bay Creek development was yet a player. "But I grew up in another shore town — Cape May, New Jersey — before the lovely Victorian homes there were restored. I knew Cape Charles had the potential, and I knew others would see it, too."

Those others often saw the town for the first time while staying at local B&Bs, and, succumbing to its small-town charms, moved here, fixing up homes and small businesses, says Starr.

"It was the B&Bs that really started the town's renaissance," says Starr. "And we also owe a debt to those who kept the pilot light on during the town's dark times."

Carlson says there has always been a stubborn determination among natives here to hang on.

"Cape Charles people never give up — never," she says. "We know the town is coming back, not the way it was, but in a different way."

### A New Day Dawns

So remarkable is the town's ongoing transformation, that a walk down any street reveals row upon row of homes finally receiving the TLC that they have long deserved.

Verandas are returning to the one-sided main street, better to view the town's former life — the railroad and the harbor — that still captivates today.

Here, the Eastern Shore Railroad, a short-line freight operation with spunky bay blue engines, works from the town, and many a train barge can be seen silhouetted on the horizon.

At the harbor, watermen bring in the day's catch, passing a visiting tall ship.

Juxtaposed with the restoration of stately houses and quaint cottages are the mainstay corner drugstore and hardware store, joined by a variety of shops working to fill in the

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SCOTT NEVILLE PHOTO

## If You Go...

**S**outhern hospitality is served at all of the bayside town's B&Bs. Each has its own distinct personality, from **Sea Gate Bed and Breakfast** (757-331-2206; [www.bbhost.com/seagate](http://www.bbhost.com/seagate)), to **Chesapeake Charm** (757-331-2676; [www.chesapeakecharm.bnb.com](http://www.chesapeakecharm.bnb.com)).

Dining has expanded in the downtown area. Straight from a Norman Rockwell painting is the old-fashioned soda fountain at **Rayfield's Pharmacy**, serving down-home cooking seven days a week (757-331-1212).

New Southern cuisine is featured at the comfortably elegant **Bay Leaf Café**. Call 757-331-4800 for dinner reservations or stop on in.

Or visit Julie at her cozy bistro, the **Harbor Grille** (757-331-3005), for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

To truly immerse yourself in a Chesapeake Bay sunset, set sail on the **Schooner Serenity** with your hosts, captains Laura and Greg Lohse. Call 757-331-4361 or book your passage via e-mail at [lowsea@msn.com](mailto:lowsea@msn.com).

Like the town, the 1940s art deco **Palace Theater**, once the home of

vaudeville, big bands and the Miss America's Miss Virginia Pageant, is being lovingly restored. **Arts Enter Cape Charles** teaches the visual and performing arts while the marquee is ever changing. Catch a local production of "Our Town" or enjoy the Virginia Symphony in the intimacy of a historic theater. Call 757-331-ARTS.

To learn more about the town's intriguing history, visit the **Cape Charles Museum and Welcome Center** located at the town's entrance in a lofty brick-and-glass building. It opens for the season on April 28. For more information, call 757-331-1008.

Two gift shops located on Mason Avenue are worth a visit as well: **Eve's Gallery** and the **Cape Charles Trading Company**. The **Stage Door Gallery** on Strawberry Street is the place to purchase Eastern Shore artwork.

**Charmar's Antiques** also features a tiny country store museum.

Summertime is a great time to visit Cape Charles. The **4th of July celebration** is quintessential small-town USA and its informal





tives for business to locate here, the future looks pretty good."

Bay Creek, a 1,700-acre golf-marina community when complete, will hug the historic district of the town. The Arnold Palmer Signature Golf Course is set to open in June.

"People say you could have done this anywhere," says developer **Richard Foster**, "but you can't create what God created, not the Chesapeake Bay, not beautiful Plantation Creek. What makes Cape Charles and the Eastern Shore so unique is what makes Bay Creek so special."

**Mayor Alex Parry, a native of the community, believes that the changes in sight for the small town may in some ways restore it to its prosperous past.**

The town also has high hopes for the Sustainable Technology Industrial Park, located on 200 acres south of the town's harbor, to attract light industry that protects the Eastern Shore's fragile environment while providing family-wage jobs.

It is America's first eco-industrial park and one of only four demonstration models recognized nationally for sustainable development.

Finally, after years of hearing things were going to change in Cape Charles, even the staunchest naysayers have begun to believe.

### **Will Endearing Character Change?**

But many wonder if even welcome changes will change the town's endearing character.

Will people stop talking to each other at Rayfield's Pharmacy soda fountain? Will a smile to a stranger still come as easily as one to a friend when the town of 1,400 grows?

In its heyday, points out Parry, Cape Charles had 4,000-5,000 people, and the changes ahead, he believes, will in some ways bring it back to its prosperous past.

"You have to remember, there was nothing here before the railroad, and this town was built with progress, industry and forward thinking," says Parry. "The same holds true today."

Between town events that bring people together and great community spirit, he feels change will be anything but negative. "I believe strongly we will keep that small town feel," says Parry. "We'll just be a bigger 'small' town." ■

BILL SHERROD PHOTO



**Arts Enter Cape Charles teaches the visual and performing arts.**

Harbor Parties feature food, sunsets, and dancing under the stars. Dates are June 9, July 7, Aug. 4 and Sept. 1.

The Cape Charles-Northampton County Chamber of Commerce can provide more information on these events and other places of interest, call 757-331-2304 or check out the Web site at [www.ccnccchamber.com](http://www.ccnccchamber.com). ■