

DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2004, we're making our way around the region, 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 seventh stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

ACCOMAC

by Bill Sterling, Contributing Writer

Accomac is all about history and government.

It's what **Kirk Mariner**, an Eastern Shore native who chronicles local history and is the minister of Williamsburg United Methodist Church, writes in his book, *Off 13, the Eastern Shore of Virginia Guidebook*:

"It is said that among Virginia's old towns only Williamsburg has more historic architecture than Accomac. Certainly few places in Virginia, and none on the Eastern Shore, surpass the county seat of Accomack

BILL STERLING PHOTOS



AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 529

LAND AREA: 0.4 square miles

INCORPORATED: 1786

ELEVATION: 40 feet

FUN FACT: Originally named Drummondtown after a man who owned most of the land.

County in preserving handsome buildings from the past. A Virginia Historic District was created here a few years ago, and Accomac is so historic that almost the whole town was included in it."

Accomac is not about shopping. You can count on one hand the number of merchants in a town with a population of 529.

Built in 1838 with bricks from a 1767 structure at a site outside of town, St. James Episcopal features an excellent example of painted decoration in a form called "trompe l'oeil." This illusionistic style deceives the eye with its painted columns, pilasters, paneled hallways and doors that are actually fakes painted on a flat surface.





The annual July 4th Parade has grown tremendously since having only about 20 participants 37 years ago, but popsicles are still handed out to everyone on the courthouse green following the parade.



Accomac is not about dining. The only eatery opened in May and closes at 2 p.m. each weekday and remains closed on weekends. Fishermen sometimes grab a sandwich with their bait and tackle from the town's only gas station at the edge of town.

Accomac is one of those towns that roll up the streets after 5 p.m. when the

county officials, lawyers and bankers leave town. On weekends visitors will walk the tree-shaded streets, admire the pretty gardens, and enjoy a picture-perfect town that exudes history.

Quite often, they are holding Mariner's book and following suggestions for a walking tour of the town. Their conversations are rarely drowned out by any passing traffic.

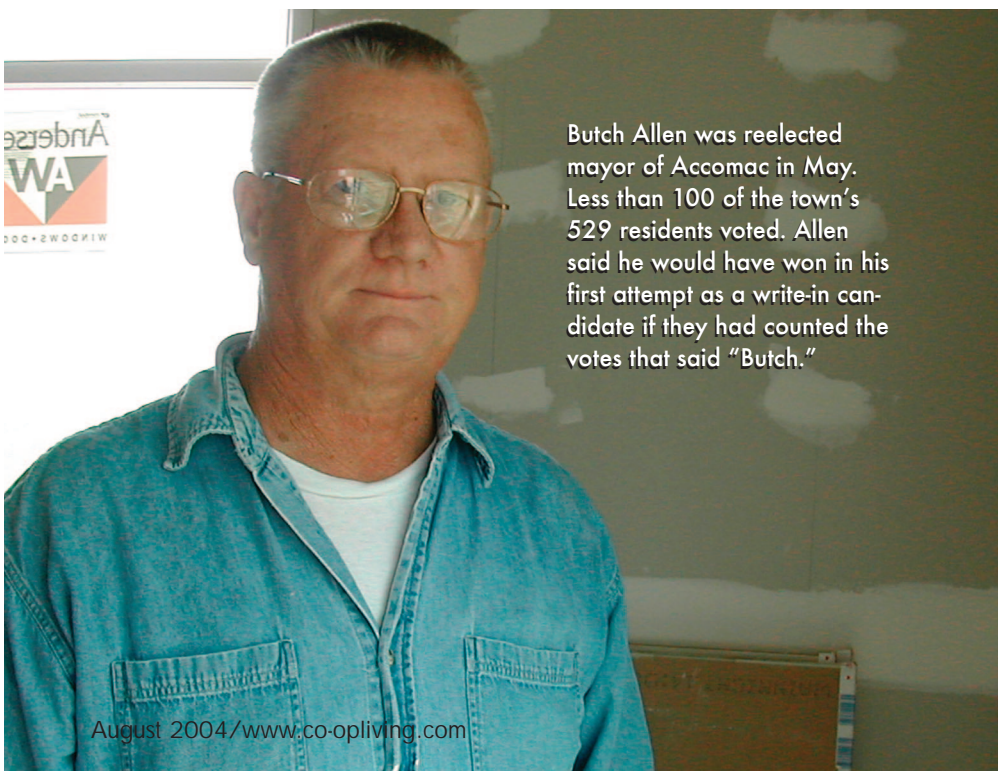
The Courthouse, erected in 1899, replaced an earlier one built on the site in 1756.

The site of Accomac, spelled without the "k" on the end, was chosen for the county seat of Accomack in the 1600s. However, when the town was established by the state in 1786, it was named Drummondtown after a man who owned most of the land. It wasn't until the late 1880s the town was officially renamed Accomac, after attempts failed to move the county seat to Parksley, where the railroad was creating a bustling town.

Even a Union soldier, among the troops who occupied Accomac during the Civil War, wrote in a local paper that Accomac was a "one-horse town."

Floyd Nock, a noted architectural historian who died in 1997, used that phrase in the title of his book, *Drummondtown, A One Horse Town, Accomac Court House, Virginia*. Nock, who grew up near Accomac on Folly Creek, had an office in town and wrote two other books on his beloved Accomac.

One book, *What the Saturday Evening Post Missed*, is full of anecdotes and stories passed on and compiled by Nock in an easy-to-read manner. The title is based on a story about a young, aspiring *Saturday*



Butch Allen was reelected mayor of Accomac in May. Less than 100 of the town's 529 residents voted. Allen said he would have won in his first attempt as a write-in candidate if they had counted the votes that said "Butch."

IF YOU GO ...



The Debtor's Prison, erected in 1783, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Cafe serves breakfast and lunch during the week. There are no overnight accommodations available. A Comfort Inn motel is located about three miles away in Onley, and there are several bed and breakfasts in Onancock, about four miles away. Several dining establishments are also located there. ■

The best way to see Accomac is a walking tour to enjoy the historical architecture of the town. There are two books available at the Book Bin in nearby Onley which guide the visitor on a walking tour. The books are "Off 13: The Eastern Shore of Virginia Guidebook," by Kirk Mariner and "Walking Tours of Accomac," by L. Floyd Nock III.

The Eastern Shore Public Library is located in Accomac.

Dining is limited. Mallard's Sidewalk

Evening Post writer sent by his editor to visit Accomac to seek out interesting people for his stories.

When he saw some men sitting on a bench in front of the courthouse, he asked them where he could find some "characters." They pondered awhile, wanting to help him, and one man finally said, "Son, you must be looking for Eastville. It's 30 miles farther down Route 13." The reporter took off, not knowing he was speaking to the characters he was seeking and leaving a wealth of information behind.

Today's mayor of Accomac is regarded as a "character" by some. **Brooks "Butch" Allen** became mayor seven years ago after he went to a town council meeting because a neighbor complained about a portable toilet on a lot he owned. Allen gladly removed it, but felt the neighborly thing to do was to ask him first before going to the town council.

He unsuccessfully ran for mayor as a write-in candidate in the next election. "They told me I would have won if they

could have counted the votes that said 'Butch,'" the nickname he had been known by since growing up in Accomac.

When the then-mayor resigned in mid-term, the town asked Allen to become mayor because he continued to attend council meetings and showed interest in town matters.

Reelected in May with 43 votes – four more than his opponent – Allen says his priorities are to see that trash removal is done in a timely manner and to keep taxes low. He says the typical attendance of five people at most council meetings is outnumbered by the six council members. "When we get a really hot issue, there might be 15 or 20 people attending," says Allen. He doesn't say what a "hot" issue is.

Allen, who is a self-employed construction worker, is now building a house at the edge of town for his daughter, her husband and their three children. There is no town hall, and thus no need to keep office hours. Accomac is different from most towns in that it does not need a police

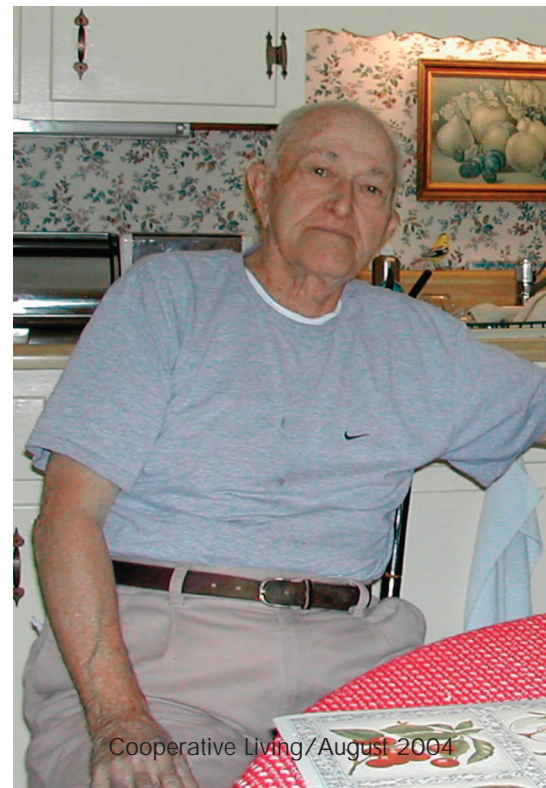
force because the county sheriff's department is headquartered there. It also does not have a fire company, depending on nearby towns including Tasley, Onancock and Parksley to respond to emergencies.

One of the most important events in Accomac's history was a fire. It was in 1921, and it was fought with a bucket brigade and a couple of fire extinguishers that were no match for the flames that reached uncontrollable proportions. When the toll of the fire was finally tallied, 14 buildings had been destroyed.

"I stood on the sidewalk and watched the old hotel burn down," said **French Coleburn**, now 92. He was a boy of eight at the time and watched his father and other men try to save as much as possible before the building crumbled. "That fire was a big blow to the town. Some families lost their business and had a hard time recovering."

Coleburn has lived all his life in the same house on Courthouse Avenue, but around him he has seen people come and go. "There hasn't been a lot of new construction in town. This house is over 100 years old, but I've seen a lot of houses sold a few times. I used to know everyone who lived in town, but not anymore."

Coleburn can tick off the names of several grocery stores that once operated in town, recalls a pool hall where men congregated, and points out where a



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Pearl Lilliston has been working in the clerk's office since 1939. For many years her cat, "Judge," remembered in a portrait above her desk, would sleep on her desk. The courthouse records are the second oldest continuous records in the country. Only those in neighboring Northampton County are older.

bank, a drugstore and even a blacksmith shop once stood.

"When I grew up there were no stone roads in town ... There were a few cars – nothing like the traffic today – and there were enough horses to keep a blacksmith in business," said Coleburn.

Coleburn's father worked at the *Peninsula Enterprise*, a newspaper founded by the Edmonds family in 1883 in Accomac. "He made \$15 a week, but that was enough then to feed a family."



The town also once hosted the only high school in Accomack County for African-American students. The school was named for famed local educator Mary N. Smith in 1934, after she led a fund-raising drive that lasted over a decade. A new Smith high was completed just outside of town in 1953, and the structure became a middle school when the schools were integrated in 1970. The middle school closed in June, although Smith's family and graduates of the school want it converted to a museum or multi-cultural center.

Pearl Lilliston doesn't remember much about the great fire of 1921. She was only seven at the time. But Miss Pearl, as most know her, has worked in the busy court clerk's office since 1939. Now 90, she still works three days a week, usually leaving shortly after lunch.

"There was a time I did it all," says Lilliston, "everything from indexing, typing, recording deeds and whatever else that needed to be done."

To get a measure of the continuity in the clerk's office, Lilliston has worked for only five clerks and five judges in her 65 years in the office. The office has the second oldest continuously kept records in the country – second only to those in neighboring Northampton County.

A fixture who is no longer in the clerk's office, but remembered in a portrait that hangs above Miss Pearl's desk, is "Judge,"

French Coleburn, pictured with his wife Dachia, has lived in his house all his 92 years. He recalls the fire of 1921 that destroyed a large part of the town.

Vince Taylor, one of the few merchants in Accomac, moved his marine business here in 1981, and says he likes the quiet nature of the town.

a cat who slept on her desk each day. Judge was profiled in the local newspaper and was adopted by lawyers and others who visited the clerk's office each day. He died several years ago.

Jack Mason, who left Accomac after college and was doing public relations work in Phoenix when he made a decision to return home and start a real-estate business in 1967, recalls the excellent education afforded at the old Accomac High School. The last graduating class was in 1953, and then the building served as an elementary school, and then primary school before closing in 1998.

The school is now vacant while elementary students are bused a few miles outside of town to a school bearing the Indian name, Accawmacke.

"In my time, we had students go on to become a journalist at the *New York Times*, an advertising executive at NBC, and an accountant with DuPont. The teachers would work with students after school and have students come by their house on weekends. They really prepared you for college."

Vince Taylor, who owns Sandpiper Marine, moved his business to Accomac in 1981. "We're off the beaten path here," says Taylor, "but we do get business from people who come to see the historic buildings in town. Accomac is a quiet, friendly town, and we're happy to be here."

Those historic buildings include the old

courthouse, erected in 1899, and the debtor's prison, erected in 1783. The debtor's prison is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. There's the courthouse, erected in 1899, replacing an earlier one built on the site in 1756. Across the street from the courthouse is a sign marking the birthplace of Henry A. Wise, the only Eastern Shoreman elected governor of Virginia.

Back Street, considered by many to be the loveliest on the Eastern Shore, includes several homes whose origins date to the 1700s, and others from the 1800s that typify the "big house, little house" style of architecture so prevalent on the Eastern Shore.

One of the most interesting attractions in Accomac is St. James Episcopal Church. Built in 1838 with bricks from a 1767 structure at a site outside of town, the church features an excellent example of painted decoration in a form called "trompe l'oeil." This illusionistic style deceives the eye with its painted columns, pilasters, paneled hallways and doors that are actually fakes painted on a flat surface.

One of the biggest events of the year – maybe the only big event – is the July 4 parade in Accomac. Only non-motorized vehicles are allowed; thus, it is primarily a bicycle parade with some strollers and wagons filled with children and either pushed or pulled by parents.

Now in its 37th year, the parade started out as a small gathering of maybe 10 children when founded by Joanna Snyder. And though the parade has become hugely popular and has grown tremendously, the annual tradition of handing out popsicle sticks on the courthouse green continues.

Small-town America is never more evident than when adults and children alike lick their popsicles as the Declaration of Independence is read followed by some patriotic tunes from the county band.

The parade, like most everything else in Accomac, is keeping in the town's style of doing things just a little bit slower and quieter than most places. ■

Bill Sterling is the editor/general manager of The Eastern Shore News, located in Accomac. He has been with the newspaper since 1974.