

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 fourth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN HAMILTON

by Shannon Sollinger, Contributing Writer

Imagine a town-green meeting in Colonial Boston. All the citizens get together, talk about the problems facing their small community, and agree on ways to make life better. Everyone gets to talk.

Now imagine that Norman Rockwell painted a portrait of that town-green get-together.

You're in Hamilton. It's never abandoned its roots, put down by Quakers and Methodists as the community of Harmony decades before the United States was a gleam in a colonist's eye. It's still a harmonious place, from

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 620

LAND AREA: 132 acres

ESTABLISHED: Incorporated Feb. 18, 1875, while John Hughes was mayor. The first settlers established the town of Harmony about 1750, and the name was changed to Hamilton's Store in 1826 when president John Quincy Adams approved a Post Office in Charles Bennett Hamilton's store. In 1835, Hamilton's Store became just plain Hamilton.



Harmony United Methodist to the storefront Town Hall where citizens and their elected representatives meet around a massive oak table and work to make the town a better place.

Hamilton has, for the moment, insulated itself from the suburban sprawl that surrounds it. Loudoun is the second or third fastest-growing county in the nation, and nearly all the farms around the town have morphed into three-acre-lot subdivisions with enormous houses.

(Far left) Molly Andrews chats with store clerk Sue Phillips at the Natural Mercantile, Hamilton's "whole grocer." (Left) Leslie Lowry offers fresh local produce, locally grown meats and foodstuffs, and oysters in the "R" months at Lowry's Farm market.

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Town Council meetings in Hamilton are low-tech, a community get-together around the old oak table.



Even before getting into town proper, antiques stop at Hamilton Antiques. John and Stephanie Ware, with Emma assisting (left), stock their shop with furniture, art and architectural salvage from around the world.

Purcellville to the west has happily embraced big-time growth and has doubled in size over the last decade; its subdivisions now lap against the Hamilton corporate boundary.

Staying small has been the biggest battle on Colonial Highway since the “Hamilton Fight” in March 1865, when Mosby’s Rangers tangled with a unit of the Loudoun Rangers, the only Union contingent raised in Virginia during the War Between the States.

There’s nothing big here. Visitors find four locally owned and operated antique shops, a small grocery, a farm market, a diminutive neighborhood school, a new

bank, four churches (the Baptist church in the middle of town doubled in size last year), a modest restaurant and a tiny diner.

Visitors flock to Loudoun for the big things – the Celtic Festival, the antique fair at



Owner and chef Tim O’Neil (above) holds culinary court at Hamilton’s Planet Wayside, the number-one pick on Donovan Kelly’s list of the top 50 “Crummy But Good” eateries in the Washington metro area. O’Neil’s signature blackboard message changes daily – and never lacks attitude.

May 2004/www.co-opliving.com



Oatlands, the horse races and corporate bashes at Morven Park, the Waterford Fair.

They come to Hamilton for a quiet night's rest, a good meal and a quiet day in a peaceful, harmonious town. The two B&Bs in town attract wedding guests, fox hunters, bicycle trekkers and family historians. The biggest problems the council and the citizens have faced recently are impatient drivers and bringing the sewer plant up to state standards.

Some things never change. The councilmen of March 12, 1875, passed an ordinance to prevent fast driving or riding through the streets (and to assess fines for errant cows and hogs).

Back in the Day

Hamilton's heyday came in the years between 1868, when the railroad came out this far, and 1926, when the businesses and homes at the core of the town burned to the ground.

The railroad paved the way for summer visitors from swampy and un-air-conditioned Washington, DC, to the east. Like Purcellville, Round Hill and Bluemont to the west along Route 7, Hamilton beckoned to those summer refugees. And it built sprawling Victorian boarding houses to put them up in mountain (or at least hilly) coolness for the hot, humid summers.

The railroad went out of business years ago, but the right of way became the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad Park, 30 yards wide, 45 miles long, from Alexandria to Purcellville. Bikers and hikers exit the trail – paved for bikes and prams and skateboards, crushed bluestone for horses – at Ivandale Street and spend the night at one of the two bed-and-breakfast establishments in town.

Bill and Vicki Gallant moved to Hamilton in 1988 from then-rural Ashburn (where their house stood is now a four-lane highway) to fulfill two dreams – live in a stone house, run a B&B.

"I'll buy that for you," Bill said one day, when they drove by and saw the "for sale" sign in the front yard.

He did, and Stonegate is open for visitors from Easter Monday to Thanksgiving.

Breakfasts are simple and mouth-watering – strata, fruit, toast, "and Bill's Belgian waffles are to die for," according to Vicki.

IF YOU GO ...



Hamilton is just about the center of Loudoun County and visitors can spend all day there, or branch out to the other towns and attractions of the county.

Mark June 5 on the calendar – the third annual **Hamilton Day**.

Hamilton Day starts by 8 a.m. at the park in the center of town with a 5K run (or walk, this is a low-key group). The parade – organizer Terry Moon hopes that every single person in town takes part – is at 10 a.m. The mayor rides or walks in the parade (led by the VFW Honor Guard), and later helps give the awards for the best-decorated bicycle and the best float.

The park anchors family fun all day. There will be barbecue, picnics, games, fire-and-rescue company volunteers will show off their trucks and the "smoke house" for children, and the rescue helicopter will touch down.

Town Hall hosts the art show.

For lodging, there's **Stonegate** and **Ivy Hall** bed-and-breakfasts in town. Visit www.vabb.com for a listing of all the B&Bs in the county.

Visit **The Loudoun Convention and Visitors Association** at www.visitloudoun.org for complete listings of dining, entertainment, art shows, lodging, wineries and scheduled events.

Highlights in the area include the **Loudoun Museum** in Leesburg (eight miles from Hamilton) and its newest exhibits, "The Prize of

From Easter Monday to Thanksgiving, Vicki and Bill Gallant welcome tourists and cyclists to Stonegate, one of two B&Bs in town.

Liberty: Opposition to Slavery," and "The Victorian Home" (www.loudounmuseum.org).

The Potomac Celtic Festival takes over Morven Park in Leesburg, June 12 and 13, featuring a juried craft market, live music and dance on eight stages, Scottish games, pipe bands, story telling, Celtic trades such as weaving and blacksmithing, pub tent, Celtic foods and help researching Celtic ancestry (www.pcfest.com).

Nearby **Breaux Vineyards**, perched on a hillside off Harpers Ferry Road in Between The Hills, hosts its annual Cajun Festival and Crawfish Boil, June 12, and the Bluegrass Festival, July 17 (www.breauxvineyards.com).

Lansdowne Resort east of Leesburg offers golf, weekend spa getaways and on June 19, the Culinary University: The Outdoor Chef, Barbecue and Beer. Come back July 17 for The Visiting Chef Weekend, and August 20 to 22 for a Food and Wine Camp Weekend (www.lansdowneresort.com).



The Janney house, 1876, is one of two Hamilton properties on the National Historic Register.

The fieldstone Georgian house holds court in the center of a two-acre lawn – including a 150-year-old cucumber magnolia that boasts a 16-foot circumference. Both guest rooms have private baths, one with a whirlpool tub.

Stonegate was built in 1938 by Dr. William Frazer for his new bride Anne. Before that, the sweeping lawn was home to Sommerville.

The Sommerville (or Sommervell) sisters built a large frame home on the grounds in 1881. The bustle of construction drew the attention of *The Loudoun Telephone*, which commented, “This new house will be quite an addition to our town.”

“References given and required,” read a tourist brochure distributed by the Telephone Power Press at the end of the century. “Parties with children need not apply.”

Sommerville, as it was known, burned to the ground in 1924, two years before fire devoured the downtown block. The Gallants offer visitors photos of both Stonegate and Sommerville.

Boarders can spend the day visiting the local antique shops, biking to the Blue

Ridge mountains to the west, or getting in the car for a visit to the new Air and Space Museum annex at Dulles Airport, about 20 miles away.

Where to Eat

For meals, there’s Planet Wayside – inspired soups, sandwiches, specials and barbecued brisket served up with attitude – on the west end of town, and the Beautiful South – neo-American country cum middle European nouveau – at the east entrance.

Planet Wayside – passersby always slow down to check out the latest bon mot from owner **Tim O’Neil** on the blackboard out front – seats 28 inside and 40 on the patio out back (dodge the poison ivy in the corners). The ramshackle hut was the food court for Ivandale Wayside Gardens in the 1930s.

Planet Wayside copped the number one ranking for “crummy but good” eateries in the Washington metro area, in Donovan Kelly’s “Quest for the Holy Grill.”

Madeleine Albright, a Loudoun resident, has brought friends to dine here, much to the consternation of her security

detail (“the wrist talkers”). O’Neil’s version of the Secretary of State’s adventure ran in the county weekly, *The Loudoun Times-Mirror*, and is now local legend. O’Neil will tell the story with minimal urging.

The Ivy Hall B&B, just off South St. James Street, offers two full rooms and a suite. Owner is **Georjann Overman** (she threw over life as a HUD lawyer for life in the country).

Overman is hostess and chief cook (and probably bottle washer). “I like my own cooking,” she said. The menu is open to suggestion – fruits, homemade breads, French toast, eggs, quiche, blintzes.

Ivy Hall was built in 1881 by local mason Richard Ruse as a summer home for the Rev. Henry Branch, a Presbyterian circuit rider. It’s all brick, right down to the interior walls, and boasts two-story bay windows and natural light throughout.

Special requests are no problem. Last season Georjann served up a Passover dinner.

A trip to the past starts at Hamilton Antiques, where **John Ware** settled in an old garage across the road from the Beautiful South two-and-a-half years ago.



The unpretentious Town Hall will showcase an art show on the town's third annual Hamilton Day, scheduled this year for June 5.

He's been a restorer for more than 25 years, and the store offers everything from painted furniture to architectural salvage. Ware will convert a piece – an armoire to an entertainment center, perhaps – but not at the risk of “corrupting a true antique.”

Stephanie Ware specializes in old chandeliers. The entire first floor glitters with crystal prisms, glass bead chains and tiny lights.

A little further west is the Natural Mercantile, in the building that was once the Laycocks' market. Hamilton is a leader in adaptive reuse – the brick Masonic building was once a school and now houses a woodworking trade.

The Mercantile is more than a grocery, started by Swedish native **Eva Rudland** in 1983. "It's a cultural experience," says clerk **Sue Phillips**. A community bulletin board (llamas, horses, bank loans, dance lessons, tai chi) fills the wall behind the bins of bulk-served organic foodstuffs.

Everything in the store, dairy products, produce, bread, honey, even the peanut butter and the snacks for hikers, is guaranteed organic.

Visitors can stock up on cool drinks and organic snacks and head west for the rest of the antique experience – Hamilton Station in the center of town, next door to Town Hall (which shares a parking lot with the Hamilton Volunteer Fire Company), and Hamilton Country Road across from the Post Office. ■