

## DOWN HOME SERIES

Mr. Peanut reflects Suffolk's rich history with the peanut industry, particularly Planters Peanuts.

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 eighth stop, we'll be ...



## DOWN HOME IN SUFFOLK

by Allison Williams, Contributing Writer

Peanuts put Suffolk, Va., on the map, and just as they have for centuries, agricultural fields still stretch for miles across the city's rural landscape.

But the 360-square-mile city is changing fast.

In Suffolk, now one of the fastest-growing cities on the East Coast and the second

fastest-growing city in Virginia, commercial businesses and upscale subdivisions are sprouting as quickly as crops in the fields.

Suffolk's rich history can be traced back almost 400 years, when the Nansemond Indians

### AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 71,000

LAND AREA: 360 square miles

INCORPORATED: 1742

ELEVATION: 50 feet

**FUN FACT:** Suffolk was named after Gov. William Gooch's home in Suffolk County, England.

peacefully roamed the shores and woodlands of the area and early Jamestown colonists traded with the tribe.

In the early 1700s, the English began to settle in the area and in 1742, the town of Suffolk – named after Gov. William Gooch's home in Suffolk County, England – was formally born.

Suffolk's first inhabitants were members of the Nansemond Indian tribe, who had made their homes along the banks of the Nansemond River by the time English settlers came in the early 1600s. Every August, the tribe holds a powwow at its ancient tribal grounds, drawing thousands of visitors from across Virginia. The tribe also operates a Nansemond museum in Chuckatuck.

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The pie-eating contest is always a favorite – and certainly, one of the tastiest – activities at the Suffolk Peanut Festival!

On more than one occasion throughout history, the city's future was jeopardized. The British burned Suffolk in 1779, and for several years during the Civil War, the Union held the town under siege.

But each time, the residents and the town itself came back stronger, making way for the city's incorporation in 1910.

Suffolk's claim to international fame came in 1912, when young Italian immigrant Amedeo Obici moved from Pennsylvania to Suffolk and opened Planters Nut and



Contestants participating in the peanut-butter sculpting contest, a tradition at the Suffolk Peanut Fest, are encouraged to be imaginative. Last year's blue-ribbon winner Ginger Rawls sculpted a favorite snack – a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and everything needed to make it.

Chocolate Co. A couple of years later, a 14-year-boy won a drawing contest with his image of Mr. Peanut – the company's legendary icon.



With Suffolk capturing the attention of a growing number of Civil War buffs, the city's tourism department and other organizations sponsor occasional events in Cedar Hill Cemetery. The downtown Suffolk cemetery, though still in use today, has headstones dating back to the Civil War era. (Inset) The Suffolk-Nansemond Historical Society restored the circa-1885 train station in the heart of downtown Suffolk about five years ago. Today, the society operates the Suffolk Seaboard Train Station and Railroad Museum, one of a growing number of museums and cultural sites in the community.





## IF YOU GO ...

Outdoor enthusiasts will want to visit the **Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge**, the pristine 109,000-acre wildlife sanctuary that straddles the borders of Suffolk, Chesapeake and northeastern North Carolina. Owned and operated by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the refuge draws tourists from around the world.

By hiking or bicycling on the nearly 150 miles of refuge roadways, visitors may have a chance to photograph or observe all sorts of birds and wildlife in their natural habitat. Boaters will enjoy canoeing or kayaking on **Lake Drummond**, the 3,100-acre lake in the heart of the refuge.

The refuge occasionally hosts special exhibits depicting its rich history as a logging community first settled by a company owned by George Washington and other investors. Another recent exhibit featured the role the thick-filled, marshy woodland played in helping fleeing slaves escape to freedom. In fact, the refuge was recently formally recognized as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

For information, call the refuge headquarters, (757) 986-3705.

If you happen to be near Suffolk next month, mark your calendar to attend the biggest community party of the year – the **27th Annual Peanut Fest** – Oct. 7-10. The four-day celebration honoring the goober opens with the Suffolk Ruritan Club's annual shrimp feast, which sets the stage for all sorts of activities over the next three days. Past festivals have drawn up to 200,000 people, lured by big-name entertainers doing free shows, the peanut-butter sculpting contest, thrilling carnival rides and the like. And, of course, there's always an abundance of free peanuts.

While in the city, take time to visit Suffolk's revitalized historic downtown community. First stop, the **Suffolk Seaboard Station**, 326 N. Main St. Thanks to the Suffolk-Nansemond Historical Society, the quaint train station, circa 1885, that sat vacant for decades is once again thriving. A highlight of the museum is an HO-scale model railroad, depicting Suffolk in 1907, when six railroads traveled through the city. For more info, call (757) 923-4750.

Across the way, the **Suffolk Visitor Center**, 321 N. Main St., has its welcome mat rolled out almost every day of the year – save Christmas and New Year's days. The tourism department visitor center recently moved into the newly restored Prentis House, one of the oldest houses in Suffolk built by for-



Suffolk's biggest community party of the year – Peanut Fest – is happening Oct. 7-10 at Suffolk Executive Airport.

mer Nansemond County Clerk of Court Peter Prentis. Call (757) 923-3880 for information on any tourism event in Suffolk. ■

Today, passersby through Suffolk are greeted by a life-sized Mr. Peanut in downtown's Character Corner.

Suffolk, as we know it today, was born out of the 1974 marriage of the old city of Suffolk, trapped within its 2-plus-square-mile city limits, and the rural Nansemond County that hugged the city on every side.



The merger, in one fell swoop, nearly quadrupled the city's population from 12,555 to 45,000 in 1974. Suffolk, after a growth rate upwards of 20 percent during the 1990s, today has nearly 71,000 residents.

### Big-City Perks, Small-Town Flavor

Residents are increasingly able to reap the amenities of a big city, while at the same time retain the affordability, flavor and character of a small town.

"Right now, people are finding they can get more house for the money in Suffolk than in other Hampton Roads cities," says developer **Mickey Garcia**, 34, of Suffolk. "At the same time, they are finding a better quality of life here."

Neighboring Hampton Roads cities grew up too fast and were unprepared for the deluge of people and services they required, Garcia says. Though Suffolk goes through occasional growing pains, it

Kent Brooks enjoys an electrifying twirl down the slide at one of the many city parks scattered throughout Suffolk.

still manages to keep up with the development and infrastructure needs far better than its counterparts.

**Elizabeth McCoury**, the city's downtown development coordinator, agrees.

"Quality of life is a huge issue – the level of services, libraries, the amount of open space, the roads, schools," she says. "There is diversity in Suffolk's housing stock."

"People can find the type of housing they want in Suffolk, whether it is a downtown loft or a planned development with sidewalks or a small farm."

Developers like Garcia, working in concert with city officials, are focused on rejuvenating the city's downtown community.

Several cornerstones to the downtown revitalization are now underway, such as construction of a \$22 million Hilton Garden Inn and Suffolk Conference Center, and the \$15.5 million restoration of the former Suffolk High School into a cultural arts center.

Located in the heart of downtown Suffolk, the high school built in 1922 was vacated in 1990 by the school system.

More than a decade later, a group of residents spearheaded a private fund-raising campaign and won the local government's support to help fund the center.

The Suffolk Center for Cultural Arts will have something for everyone: performing-arts classes, artist studios, and an auditorium for guest performances and the like, says **Betsy Brothers**, the center's executive director.

"That cultural arts center can make or break downtown," Garcia says. "Done right, it is going to have a phenomenal impact on Suffolk."

"The cultural arts center is going to be the glue that holds downtown together," he continues. "It's going to bring outsiders into Suffolk. It's going to bring a new set of eyes in to look at a new Suffolk."

That's also the goal of Suffolk's new tourism department, which is focusing efforts on the city's rich Civil War history and its close proximity to the Great Dismal Swamp Wildlife refuge.

### High-Tech Growth Exploding

In the northern section of the city, particularly along the U.S. 17 and Interstate 664 corridor, high-tech growth and development are exploding onto the scene.

The 1994 opening of the U.S. Joint Forces Command Joint Warfighting and Experimentation Center, where the military conducts war games around the world by computer, set the stage for the high-tech growth now being seen in the area.

Three years later, city leaders successfully wooed a second high-tech company: the Virginia Modeling, Analysis and Simulation Center. Today, Lockheed Martin is building a \$31 million, 50,000-square-foot global vision

integration center in the northern part of the Suffolk community.

**Tom O'Grady**, the city's director of economic development, believes those three companies have sealed Suffolk's place in the future of high-tech industry.

"When people think of a developing technology corridor, they usually think of Newport News and NASA," he says. "Now they can add Suffolk to that list."

But despite the expanding high-technology industry and new folks moving in, **Mike Williams** is hopeful Suffolk won't lose what makes it such a special place: friendly faces and cheerful attitudes.

"I think the pace is a little slower and that things are a little more laid back here than in other bigger cities," says Williams, owner of Baron's Pub, which opened in downtown Suffolk last year. "This is an up-and-coming place, and we were glad to get in on the ground level."

Mayor **Bobby Ralph** and McCoury agree that its people make Suffolk what it is.

"I hear a lot of people talking about how nice everyone is in Suffolk," says McCoury. "I think people are friendlier here because they don't get quite as rushed and harried as they do in more metropolitan places."

Suffolk does have a very "hospitable, Southern atmosphere," adds Ralph.

"We make people feel welcome here," he says. "We make them want to join us rather than be apart from us." ■