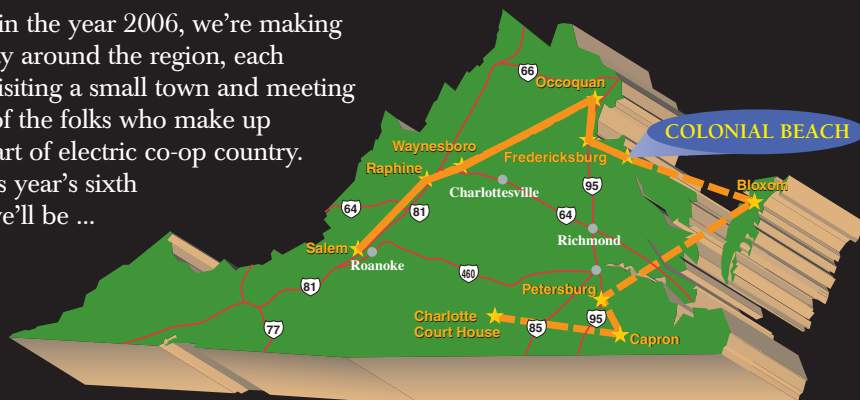Again in the year 2006, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's sixth stop, we'll be …

DOWN HOME IN

COLONIAL BEACH

by Susan Tracy, Contributing Writer

Many visitors first discover the small and friendly town of Colonial Beach almost by accident, like a colorful shell during a walk on the beach.

Stretching along Virginia's second longest public beach, the community is not only a great place to live, but the kind of place that visitors come back to again and again.

"The Beach," as locals call it, offers plentiful opportunities for boating and water sports, fishing, shopping, antiquing, golfing and a host of fun activities for the whole family. And, it is a great place to escape to for peace and solitude – life is laid back in this "golf-cart" community.

Egrets and great blue herons stalk the creeks and it is common to see ospreys and bald eagles wheeling overhead or tending their young on the nesting platforms around town. Cormorants, terns and gulls fish from the piers. While you will occasionally hear the clang of the town's colorful trolleys or the clop, clop of horses' hooves as Mike Rose's horse-drawn carriage takes people around town, birdsong is more prevalent and small, hand-printed signs on some of the stop signs offer the warning, "Slow – Duck Crossing."

Beautiful living waterscapes on the Potomac and its creeks have attracted many artists. Colonial Beach is home to a thriving arts community and authors as diverse as the late Sloane Wilson, author of *The Man In*

The Grey Flannel Suit, and romance author Sherryl Woods.

Fish, crabs and shellfish are plentiful along the Potomac and Monroe Bay. Native Americans used weirs, traps, nets and lines to catch the abundant fish and crabs, and gathered baskets of the plump and salty Chesapeake Bay oysters. In the 19th century watermen haul-seined fish along the white sand shores of the five farms that would later become the town of Colonial Beach.

American naval hero Adm. John Paul Jones sailed into Monroe Bay on one of his missions during the War of 1812.

Stained glass artists Bee Stumpf, Mary Coombs, Kitty Norris, Eleanor Caruthers, Sue Willett and Kathryn Cleary created the five stained glass roundels of a fish, an osprey, a blue crab, the Colonial Beach pier and the town seal that are inset in the transom above the door to the Bone Room, where the Town Council meets. The Bone Room was named in honor of longtime Mayor George W. "Pete" Bone, who has also served on the Town Council and as town manager.

Local historians say that the white sand, which gave what was called White Point its name, was so distinctive that well-known architect and planner Frederick Law Olmstead had tons of the sand excavated and transported by schooners to city parks in Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York, including Central Park.

The area around the five farms was sparsely settled and would see no direct action during the Civil War, but began to be recognized for its beautiful and healthful environs in the second half of the 19th century.

In 1878, investor Henry J. Kintz acquired White Point in exchange for land in New York and $500, and formed the summer resort's first board of trustees to dedicate the streets and a public park along Monroe Bay. The park still exists.

The long link between Colonial Beach and Washington, D.C., was first forged by the summer resort's founding fathers, who formed the Colonial Beach Improvement Company in 1883 to sell real estate and to develop wharves, hotels, telephone service, and amusements to attract summer visitors.

Clockwise from top: 1) Colorful beach cottages exude old-world charm. 2) Everyone heads for the wide sandy beaches and the boardwalk with the first signs of spring. 3) Elizabeth "Binky" Fenwick remembers when her grandfather, Henry Clay Parker, Sr., and father, Morles "Big Head" Rollins, would dip crabs out of the live box at the end of the pier to cook in a large iron kettle over a wood fire. 4) The municipal pier, where steamships once delivered Washingtonians on Sunday excursions. Center: The family home of inventor Alexander Graham Bell, The Bell House, is a popular bed and breakfast, and one of a number of historic and modern accommodations at "The Beach."

This first board consisted of A. Melville Bell, president; Anthony Pollack, vice president; Charles J. Bell, secretary; R.H. Evans, treasurer; and Gardiner G. Hubbard, W.W. Curtis, A.E. Bates, Ed. W. Byrne and Garrick Mallory, all prominent Washington-area residents.

A. Melville Bell, who was father of inventor Alexander Graham Bell, was

"Do you have crabs ... We do," says the sign at Shady Lane Seafood Carry-Out. Elgin and Betty Lou Nininger celebrated their 43rd wedding anniversary and their 40th year in business in June. Their son, Dean, has joined them in the business.

In the 1940s, Colonial Beach Telephone Company's switch room and three public pay phones were located in what is now The Museum at Colonial Beach. Museum Education Director Edna Edmonson shows visitors two walls of carefully preserved graffiti from this era in the Waterman's Gallery at the back of the Museum.

also president of the Colonial Beach Telegraph and Telephone Co., which was once housed in what is now The Museum at Colonial Beach.

When callers came to use the public phones, they would often scratch the numbers into the wall and these have been carefully preserved.

Alexander Graham Bell continued to come back to his family's Victorian home on the Potomac each summer, and the Bell House is now a popular bed and breakfast.

Life at Colonial Beach has always been inextricably linked with the water. Many families in the area have been watermen for generations. Visitors and locals, then as now, often came by water to enjoy this sunny beach town, which still has several marinas, wharves and a marine railway. Each year Colonial Beach has a Blessing of the Fleet and several boat parades, and the Colonial Beach Yacht Club hosts events and regattas.

The *St. John* was one of many steamships that brought summer visitors from Washington, D.C., to Colonial Beach beginning in the 1880s.

From the 1890s until the early 1940s, steamships brought Washingtonians for Sunday excursions. Well-dressed passengers disembarked at the municipal pier and strolled along the boardwalk to take in the fresh salt air, and to see and be seen.

At the Wolcott Hotel, one of many hotels, motels and boarding houses that sprang up, a tuxedoed gentleman, towel over his arm, rang a dinner bell announcing dinner was being served. After enjoying dinner, visitors promenaded on the boardwalk and enjoyed amusements like the roller coaster, bowling, pitch-penny and, later, movies, before returning to Washington on a romantic moonlit cruise with a band and dancing.

Some early real-estate advertisements also billed Colonial Beach as a great place to build a summer cottage where your family could "rusticate" in the healthy salt air, away from the city.

"My parents first came here in the '30s and bought a piece of land and built a house that was little more than a glorified beach cottage, thinking they would retire here," says **Edna Edmondson**, who is now a year-round resident and director of education at The Museum at Colonial Beach.

"We children had the privilege of coming down from Washington on the Friday after the last day of school and staying through the summer until the week before school opened, while my father returned to the city each Sunday.

Potter Sherri Sundberg works and gives classes at Sherri's Pottery Place in the Fisher Gallery, which also features a number of other local artists' works on display and for sale.

"We were always riding our bikes and we would often take our fishing gear and go down to the Stanford Marine Railway and fish for those little narrow 'tobacco boxes,' what we called rainbow perch. Mother would fry them up and make cornbread and that was dinner … and we loved it, says Edmondson.

Many residents – like Colonial Beach native **Elizabeth Fenwick's** family, who owned much of the land around Monroe Bay – have been watermen for generations and continue to either work on the water or in related occupations like the Stanford Marine Railway.

"There was always work to do, and they were always working to make sure there was enough to get through the winter," remembers Fenwick.

"They fished with nets in the spring and salted herring, and crabbed in the summer, and then tonged and dredged for oysters in the winter. In the 1950s, when there was a dispute between Maryland and Virginia over water rights, they weren't supposed to go out and oyster, but they did; it was called the 'Oyster Wars.' "

In the 1940s, Fenwick's grandfather, Henry Clay Parker, Sr., also began cooking steamed crabs in a big iron kettle over a wood fire near the edge of Monroe Bay. Parker's Crabshore, the family-style pavilion restaurant which was open March through December, was a favorite for hot crabs, seafood and homemade sides for three generations.

"He and my dad [Morles Rollins], whom everyone called 'Big Head,' would dip the crabs out of live boxes at the end of the pier," remembers Fenwick.

In 1949, Charles County, Md., legalized gambling and offshore gambling became legal in Colonial Beach beyond the low-water line on the Maryland-owned Potomac River. Five local casinos, including the Little Reno, had small gaps in the piers, allowing guests to "step" into Maryland. Champagne flights aboard the seaplane *Pink Lady* brought Pentagon and government officials and guests to relax and gamble for a few hours.

When the Charles County law changed in 1958, Colonial Beach's slot machines ceased to ring with the clank of silver dollars, but the town continued to grow and thrive, with an eye always to the future.

In fact, even the high winds and rushing seas of 2004's Hurricane Isabel couldn't daunt Colonial Beach. The community plans to break ground for a new community stage during the Bluemont Concert series this summer. ■

IF YOU GO …

The historic and picturesque town of Colonial Beach on the Potomac River is two hours from Baltimore, Md., and an hour and a half from Washington, D.C., and Richmond.

Visitors can enjoy a stroll along the long community boardwalk and two miles of public beaches. Marinas offer deep-water slips for boaters, or you can enjoy the town pier for fishing and crabbing or to disembark from your craft and explore the town.

"The Beach" also offers great shopping, antiquing, golfing, water sports and fun activities for the whole family. Or, if you prefer, the community offers solitude.

Take a sunset boat cruise, a day fishing trip or rent a golf cart and ride along the waterside and see the many old Victorian homes in this community with historic and modern accommodations.

Sample the vibrant local cuisine. Restaurants old and new offer everything from local seafood to Chinese and Peruvian dishes; and half can be reached by boat.

Visit local artists' studios or join the fun with classes offered by local artists and the **Colonial Beach Art Guild.**

The Museum at Colonial Beach offers a look back to when gambling was legal and most residents made their living on the water.

Deep-water slips are available to visitors arriving by boat.

Explore local and national history at **Monroe's Birthplace**, **George Washington's Birthplace**, and **Stratford Hall Plantation**, birthplace of Robert E. Lee.

Award-winning **Ingleside Winery** offers free tours and tastings. Don't miss **Westmoreland State Park's** scenic trails, boat rentals and activities. Enjoy berry-picking and picnicking at **Westmoreland Berry Farm**.

Annual festivals and events abound, including Potomac River Festival, Heritage Rivers Art Show and Sale, Antique Boats on the Bay, Bluegrass on the Potomac, Annual Rod Run to the Beach, Antiques Show, Boardwalk Arts & Crafts Festival, and Truck and Van Show. There are also a golf tournament, holiday celebrations, two annual rockfish tournaments, a triathlon and many more community activities.

Take some time and enjoy this unique riverside town in Westmoreland County.

Colonial Beach Chamber of Commerce:
www.colonialbeachva.net
(804) 224-8145.

Town of Colonial Beach:
(804) 224-7181. ■