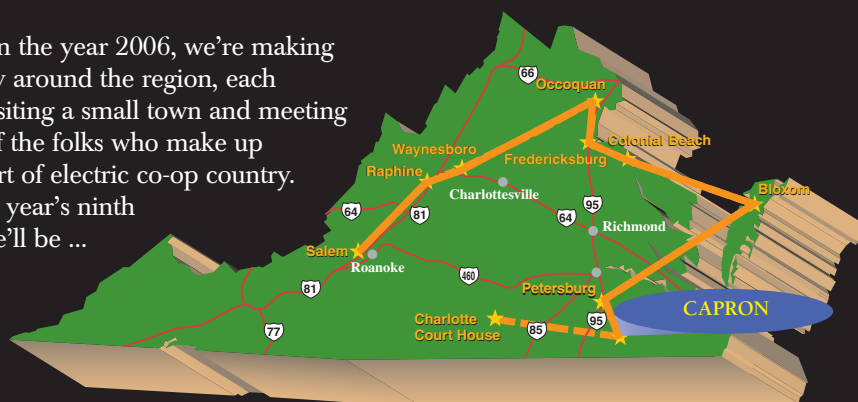


## DOWN HOME SERIES

Town Hall (right) is one of a handful of entities that make up the tiny town of Capron.

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 ninth stop, we'll be ...



## DOWN HOME IN CAPRON

by Audrey T. Hingley, Contributing Writer

### AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 162

LAND AREA: 0.2 square miles

FOUNDED: 1888

ELEVATION: 110 feet

**FUN FACT:** Passenger trains once ran through Capron four times a day, two going each way.

According to local resident Ira "Pete" Barham, "You could write a letter, mail it to Franklin, Va., and get an answer by return letter the same day."

Driving down U.S. 58 from nearby Emporia on the way to tiny Capron, Virginia (population 162), in Southampton County, travelers pass field after field of farmland. This is peanut, soybean, and cotton country, with thousands of acres bursting

with such crops. Capron's Main Street lies just off Route 58, a bustling four-lane highway filled with tractor-trailers and travelers bound for somewhere else.

Travelers venturing into Capron today will find a town where freight trains still pass

daily, anchored by J.T. Barham & Company's store, and boasting a collection of tidy houses with manicured lawns and front-porch swings. There's also the Capron Post Office, the Capron Town Office, the Bank of Southside Virginia, the Capron Volunteer







PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUDREY HINGLEY



Native Pete Barham (left) was Capron's mayor for more than 40 years. Barham and his son and grandson own and operate J.T. Barham & Co. (above), the community's anchor business. Moses Wyche (right) has worked at the store for 45 years.



Fire Department and several churches. Out on "the highway" (U.S. 58), as locals call it, there's Pope's Citgo Slip In store and gas station and, on the other side of U.S. 58 on Main Street, Porky's Barbecue restaurant.

Natives like **Ira "Pete" Barham**, 80, who served as Capron's mayor in 1960-'62 and again from 1966 until his retirement in 2006, remember a bustling Capron of yesteryear.

"I grew up when the town had dirt roads. We had 12 stores and two blacksmith shops before World War II," Barham recalls. "This was a thriving little town in the 1930s, with a train depot where passen-

ger trains came through four times a day, a box mill, a hotel and a livery stable where the firehouse is now.

"People didn't have electricity here until 1939. We didn't have a refrigerator in our house until World War II," he adds. "When I grew up we had wood heat and chickens in the yard. We had to milk three to five cows twice a day, and I delivered milk by bike [on my bicycle]."

Today J.T. Barham & Company continues to be operated by Barham, his son Ira Thomas "Tommy" Barham and grandson Christopher Barham. Pete Barham attended Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University for one semester before volunteering for submarine training and a 28-month stint in the U.S. Navy from 1944-'46.

He came home planning to return to college when his father's heart attack changed his plans.

"I couldn't leave him with the responsibility [of the store]," Barham recalls. "He died at age 58 in 1949 and left me the store and \$4,000 in cash – not really a lot to run a business."

He doesn't know when the store, founded by his grandfather, J.T. Barham, opened, but says a customer once brought in a bill of sale from the store dated 1835. Although the store still operates, complete with a vintage 1912 cash register, it has evolved into a business that sells fertilizer, seed, chemicals, farm supplies and also buys grain.

On a warm day, **Moses Wyche** takes a break and sits on the store's gray concrete





front steps. Wyche, 64, the recently elected Capron District representative on the Southampton County Board of Supervisors, has worked at Barham's for 45 years.

"This is God's part of the world," Wyche says of Capron. "I feel fortunate to have been born and raised here."

He adds, "I went to New York City for three months after I graduated from high school here in 1961. I came back to help Dad, a farmer, get his crop in ... the guy here at the store had quit, and Mr. Barham got me out of the fields and told me I had a job here if I wanted. I've been here ever since. I didn't like the fast life. I like the country."

J.T. Barham bookkeeper **Betty Banty** moved to Capron when she married a local. She calls Capron "a nice little laid-back town with a lot of new people moving in." One such newcomer is **Maureen Shelly**, who moved to Capron over four years ago to get away from the city.

"When I came here, Moses [Wyche] said 'If you need anything or need to know anything, ask me' ... it's true, if you need a

notary, or whatever, ask him," Shelly says. "I grew up in a rural area. I immediately felt welcomed here."

Capron was first settled in 1888 when the Danville/Atlantic (later Southern) Railroad was constructed. The earliest days of Capron revolved around sawmills, logging and the railroad.

The first building constructed in Capron was today's now-crumbling train depot. Originally named Princeton, in honor of railroad vice-president Judge Prince of nearby Courtland, Virginia, in 1890 the town's name was changed to Capron, after Southern Railroad's general freight and passenger

agent. The name change came after postal authorities requested it, citing mail-handling confusion caused by the post office having the same name as Princeton, West Virginia.

**Ginger Smith**, 34, officer-in-charge at Capron Post Office, notes that about 150 of the town's 360 post office boxes are full, a good indication of town population. The Capron zip code actually includes 391 boxes, including rural mail delivery spanning a 92-mile radius.

Smith, married to local farmer **Stuart Smith** and mother to two boys, moved from Dinwiddie County nine years ago. She lives with her family on the "homeplace" where her husband grew up, and says, "It's wonderful here. I like a small town, where everyone knows everyone. It's more like a family than a small town."

Town residents commute to jobs at the local prison system, at International Paper or Hercules chemical company in Franklin, or to jobs in the Tidewater area.

Mayor **Nick Kitchen** moved to Capron 16 years ago from Courtland after finding a house he liked on Capron's Main Street.

"I found people here are pretty much like people in the rest of the county. I have always felt welcome, and the small-town atmosphere where you can trust your neighbors has kept me here," he says.

Kitchen, 43, is vice-president of Kitchen's Welding Inc. and Kitchen's Cranes Inc., a five-mile drive away. Elected in July 2006, he says after Barham retired as mayor, people approached him to run as a write-in candidate. Winning the election by one vote, he oversees town finances and the municipal water system, noting that the job "is really more involved than I anticipated."

The town's train depot was the first building constructed in Capron.







The biggest topic on everyone's mind is growth. Pete Barham thinks the town "will end up being a housing development.

"I don't see any hopes of any [more] retail outlets in Capron," he says. "People also don't visit each other like they used to ... there's people here I don't know, as small as it is."

**Clarke Fox**, who along with brother Cliff Fox runs Foxhill Farms Inc., says Capron has been "discovered" in the past five years.

"It started with people moving here for 10-acre lots. Now they are building homes on 1-to-2-acre lots and our [property] assessments have tripled in the past year alone," Fox, 46, explains. "The challenge for Capron is to keep it from becoming a ghost town. The people moving in ... will they want to keep it up? A lot of people are just using it as a bedroom community."

Since landowners who lease land for farming could get more money by selling for development, farmers are understandably concerned. Land costs coupled with increased traffic make farming even more of a challenge. People move for a rural lifestyle, then complain about "tractor dust," Fox says.



"And the traffic? Yesterday I had to get a police escort to get my combine home," he notes.

Clarke and **Cliff Fox** farm more than 2,000 acres spread out over 165 fields. They own about a third of the land and lease other land to grow cotton, peanuts, corn and soybeans. In 2006 the farm was honored by the Southern Farm Press' High Cotton Award, which recognizes land stewardship as well as high cotton production.

"Dad, who's retired but still helps us with farm operations, always told us you're just caretakers of the land while you are here on earth," Fox says of their conservation efforts.

**Jeannette Everett**, who works for the county Commissioner of Revenue and is chairman of Community Electric Cooperative's board of directors, is also a farmer's wife. Husband M.L. Everett, Jr., grows soybeans, pumpkins, grains and cotton. She notes, "We want to preserve our agricultural heritage, which is difficult in these changing times."

From far left: Locals Ginger Smith, Nick Kitchen, Betty Banty, Jeannette Everett, and Clarke Fox.

**Sharon Painter**, who opened Porky's Barbecue with her daughter in 2004, says Capron's a good place to start a mom-and-pop business.

"I love Main Street, where the church bells ring at lunchtime and at 6 p.m.," she says. "I cater to farmers and hunters, and we have many people who get take-out meals. And we get celebrities in Capron – last year David Hartman [former host of ABC-TV's *Good Morning America* show] came in on his way to Oceana with his son."

"The growth will eventually hit us after awhile but I think we can hold on to our agricultural roots," Everett says. She likes to tell the story of a "come-here" who complained at the county office about rising tax assessments.

"He said, 'What do I get, for my tax dollars?'" Everett recalls with a grin. "An employee answered him, simply, 'peace and quiet.'" ■



The Vincent House, Capron's oldest home, was built in 1889 and is registered as a Virginia Historic Landmark.

General information about the Capron area can be found on the **Franklin/Southampton Area Chamber of Commerce** Web site, at [www.fsachamber.com](http://www.fsachamber.com), or call (757) 562-4900.

Southampton County has **three navigable rivers, the Meherrin, the Nottoway and the Blackwater, which offer a variety of water-sports action.** There are five public boat landings in the county. Fishing, boating and hunting are all popular pastimes in the area. For more information, contact the **Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries** at (804) 367-1000 or visit their Web site at [www.dgif.virginia.gov](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov).

To understand the county's rich agricultural history, visit the **Southampton Agriculture and Forestry Museum** in Courtland. It's open Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays, from 1 to 5 p.m. Call (757) 653-9554. ■