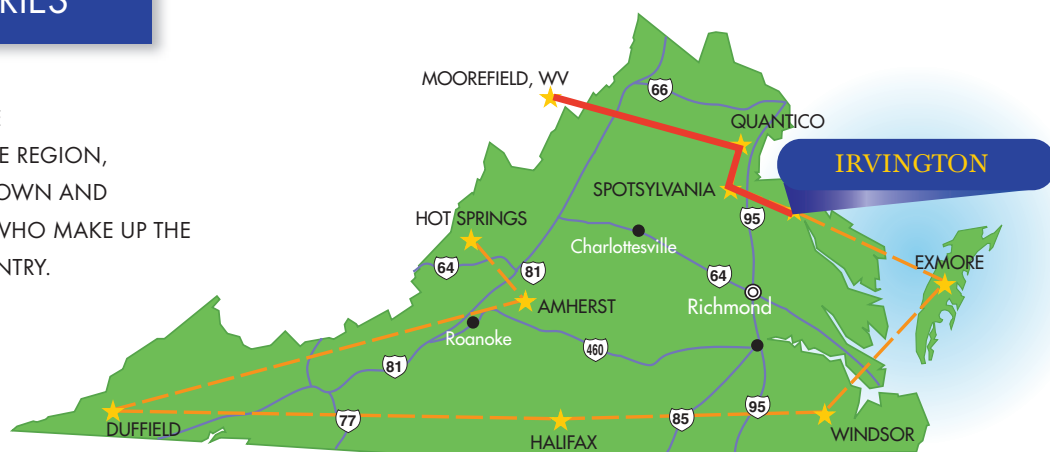


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2007, 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 IRVINGTON

BY AUDREY THOMASSON, CONTRIBUTING WRITER • PHOTOS BY AUDREY THOMASSON

HIP, CHIC, QUIET AND
QUAINT ALL DESCRIBE THIS
NORTHERN NECK VILLAGE.

Dreaming of the perfect getaway? Someplace with hip restaurants in a sophisticated waterfront resort town full of chic shops, top-notch golf courses, a resort enjoyed by presidents, and an inn frequented by celebrities?

Or do you prefer the quiet, casual lifestyle of a quaint historic village tucked away on a picturesque creek where patriotic pride can be seen on its flag-lined streets, and a town commons serves as the gathering place for outdoor markets, concerts, parades and holiday fun?

The historic village of Irvington on Carters Creek is all this and much more.

Located in Lancaster County at the tip of the Northern Neck, everything in the village is within walking distance. There are no stoplights, people take time to talk, and family histories run deep. And despite its close proximity to metropolitan areas – less than a three-hour drive to Washington, D.C., one hour to Richmond, and a quick boat ride up the Rappahannock River from the Chesapeake Bay – Irvington remains a hidden treasure.

The natural beauty of the waterways has always lured people to its shores. Powhatan Indians were among the first to fish the rivers and in 1608, Captain John Smith explored the backwaters. In the 1700s, the wealthy and powerful colonialist, Robert “King” Carter, settled the land around the creek that bears his name.

From its earliest settlement days, residents found resourceful ways to take advantage of the creek. Besides offering a rich resource for fishing, crabbing and oystering, the many inlets and coves served as boulevards for water vehicles –

six miles by land to Weems but only two miles by boat. Watercraft transported people to church or to visit neighbors while ferries and barges carried workers and horses from shore to shore.

With the advent of the steamboat era in the 19th century, vacationers along the eastern seaboard discovered a lively destination that offered luxurious resort and beachfront accommodations. Conveniently situated between the international commerce centers of



The trendy Trick Dog Café is located among chic shops and eateries in the heart of Irvington.



AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: 673

LAND AREA: 1.73 sq. miles with 8.78 miles of shoreline

FOUNDED: On June 6, 1873, Carters Creek Wharf Post Office was established and included the entire creek area. In 1891, the U.S. Postmaster called for a new name to simplify mail handling. By a margin of one vote, citizens renamed the village "Irvingtown," after Captain Levin Irving. Ironically, there were already five other Irvingtons in the country and only one Carters Creek Wharf. The village is listed on state and national registers of historic places.

ELEVATION: 33 feet

FUN FACT: It seems every place in Irvington has a story from the past. It is said that the old library building — today's town hall — was purchased with the proceeds from auctioning a pig and a pheasant. Ice cream sales paid for the sidewalk. And not long ago, a floating Bank 'N' Boat was used for banking and serenading residents of the creek with Christmas carols.



Baltimore and Norfolk, Irvington's wharf served as the southern entry to the county and the town soon became the center of commercial, social and cultural life in Lancaster.

Irvington's business district included the offices of the state's largest newspaper of the time, the weekly *Virginia Citizen*. There was an ice cream parlor; roller-skating rink; shirt, bottling, canning and fish factories; and even an opera house capable of accommodating 90 players on stage at once.

But commercial prosperity began to fade after a devastating fire razed the business district in 1917. At the time, the town was depleted of men due to the fishing season and World War I, leaving mostly women to heroically save what they could as the fire spread from building to building.

After the war, the hoopla of the steamboat era returned bigger than ever. According to newspaper accounts, by 1930 the town's Independence Day celebrations drew nearly 5,000 revelers with people cramming aboard anything that would float to watch the boat races and crowning of Miss Rappahannock aboard a barge. An all-day food fest accompanied afternoon baseball playoffs and a track meet while planes gave the daring few a flight over the bay. Festivities culminated that evening with an original production at the opera house.



FROM TOP: The view from the Tides Inn Conference Center could be a distraction for even the most dedicated business executive. • The Irvington Center offers state-of-the-art technology services to resident businesses including Select Properties Real Estate, the legal offices of Spots and Fain, Bay Home Builders, Hock Financial Group, architect John Paul Hanbury and technology software company ConSepts, Inc. • Sunsets over Carters Creek are a big part of the allure of Irvington.

But the turbulent '30s had devastating effects on the area. In the middle of the Depression, the great storm of 1933 took out 18 of the steamboat industry's 30 wharfs, marking the end of the industry. The automobile shifted transportation to land and the area became isolated by the very waters that had brought so much glory its way. The golden days were over.

Today, Irvington is the perfect destination for those looking for a slow, relaxed pace.

Walk along streets named Steamboat Lane, Tavern Road and King Carter Drive and it feels as though not much has changed since the heyday of steamboats. Turn-of-the-century charm is evident in an abundance of Victorian homes that dot the shores of the creek and village streets.

Look down to the old town wharf and it is easy to picture a steamboat dropping off passengers from Baltimore or imagine a river showboat bringing entertainment right up to the dock.

"In 1915, my parents took me aboard Capt. Jim Adams' Floating Theatre at Irvington wharf to see the play *The Sweetest Girl in Dixie*," says **Brainard Edmonds**, 94, a resident of Lancaster County. He remembers that Edna Ferber researched her book *Show Boat* on board the theatrical barge, one of the last in operation on American rivers at that time. Indeed, a check of Ferber's research logs reveals that she spent a week with the theater group in 1926, eating, playing, working, rehearsing, and even taking her turn at selling tickets at the box-office window.

A tribute to the immense importance of the steamboat industry to the area is the Steamboat Era Museum. Located adjacent to the town commons, the museum depicts the golden days of steamboats through a collection of artifacts and exhibits that also includes the role the Chesapeake Bay played in the Civil War.

"Irvington's heyday was during the steamboat era, between 1890 and 1930," says **Alexander McD. Fleet**, the town's mayor. And he should know. His family's roots go back to 1621 when Henry Fleete made the voyage from England to the colonies. While Capt. Fleete is credited with negotiating the settlement of Virginia and Maryland with the Indians, he chose to settle near Irvington on Fleets Bay.

Proud of his heritage as one of Irvington's founding families, any hint of a patriotic occasion and Mayor Fleet orders the flying of the stars and stripes from street posts across town. And come July 4th the place is alive with down-home patriotism, from a hometown parade to a summer concert featuring the Air Force band. Bring a picnic basket or dine on hot dogs courtesy of the local bank. Be sure to stay for the Tides Inn's spectacular fireworks display over the creek.



FROM TOP (L-R): Mayor Alexander McD. Fleet's family home, Haydon Hall, was one of the few structures along Steamboat Road to survive the 1917 fire. • Eliza Carr Schmidt, 6, helps her family prepare for a day of sailing aboard the family boat. • Rappahannock River Yacht Club offers great access to Carters Creek. But whether you arrive by private yacht or just want to try your hand at boating for the day, you'll find plenty of opportunities to tour the river when you visit Irvington. • Dr. Robert Westbrook, pictured with Dana George and the Pittman family, not only serves as the local dentist, he is also a town councilman. Mr. Pittman takes care of the doctor's lawn. • Not much has changed since Town Hall served as the town's library. Clerk Jackie Burrell and Mayor Alexander Fleet can be found sitting among shelves of books when they conduct town business. • Resident George Lidicker gets lunch to-go at the popular coffee spot, The Local.

IF YOU GO...



The world-class Hope and Glory Inn is a popular setting for weddings and the occasional celebrity sighting. The inn's outdoor bathhouse is tucked away in the garden among the cottages.

IRVINGTON EVENTS

- **Irvington Farmers' Market** — First Saturday of the month, May to November, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Rain or shine on the Irvington Commons on King Carter Drive.
- **Fourth of July Hometown Parade** — 11 a.m. Celebrate the beauty of small-town life in a great country.
- **Independence Day Free Concert** — 7 p.m., July 4th weekend, on the Commons with the Air Force Band.
- **Halloween Costume Contest** — October 31, 5 p.m. A pre-trick-or-treat event for children. Prizes for costumes in age categories.
- **Fall Fix-Up & Clean Up** — TBA. General spruce-up and planting around town and in Irvington commons.
- **Thanksgiving Day 8th Annual Irvington Turkey Trot** — 9 a.m. at Irvington Commons. Pre-feast run or walk of a 2- or 5-mile course through historic Irvington. 100-yard Tot Trot for kids!
- **8th Annual "Lights on the Creek" Boat Parade** — 6 p.m. First Saturday in December. The lighted boats wind their way around Carters Creek from Tides Inn.
- **Christmas Caroling under the Tree** — 6 p.m. Christmas Eve on Irvington Commons. Gather for holiday spirit and carols — and a visit from Santa.

PLACES TO STAY

- **The Tides Inn**
800-TIDES-GO, www.tidesinn.com.
- **Hope and Glory Inn**
65 Tavern Rd., 800-497-8228,
www.hopeandglory.com.

EATERIES

- **Trick Dog Café**
4357 Irvington Rd., 804-438-1055,
www.trickdogcafe.com.
- **The Local** — Gourmet coffee and sandwich shop. Order at the counter and then dine indoors or on the front patio where you can sit and watch the locals. Too crowded? Step over to the town commons and eat at a picnic table. While the children enjoy the playground, parents can play a couple sets of tennis.
- **Tides Inn** — The Tides is open seasonally so call ahead. 804-438-5000.

THINGS TO SEE

- **Historic Christ Church** — During the summer months, catch an early Episcopal service at the stunning Historic Christ Church. Tours offer historical insight about the church's founder, Robert "King" Carter, a wealthy tobacco grower and one of colonial Virginia's most prominent citizens. Carter built the church in 1735 to rival any in England. Three-foot-thick walls and limestone-slab floor frame a three-tiered pulpit that towers over individually enclosed, high-backed pews built to prevent gazing at other parishioners. A few of Carter's 26,000 known descendants include three signers of the Declaration of Independence, two U.S. presidents, a Supreme Court justice, eight Virginia governors, and Robert E. Lee. The museum and gift shop are open April-November. Guided tours are offered Monday-Saturday 10 a.m.-4 p.m., and Sunday 2-5 p.m. 804-438-6855, www.christchurch1735.com.
- **Steamboat Era Museum** — View the history of the steamboat in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an era that brought culture and wealth to the area. Open Thursday-Saturday 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday 1 p.m.-4 p.m. \$4 suggested donation. 156 King Carter Drive, 804-438-6888.
- **White Fences Vineyard and Winery** — Locally grown Meteor wine is the feature of the gift shop and tasting room located in the middle of the vineyards at the edge of town on Irvington Road. Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. September's grape stomp and harvest festival is the main event. www.Irvingtonstomp.com.

The five-star Tides Inn is a popular vacation spot for U.S. presidents as well as families looking for serene waterside lodging.

SHOP

Irvington shops offer anything from the kooky and outrageous to the out-of-the-ordinary in clothing and home accessories. You won't see chain-store merchandise here:

- **The Dandelion** — Formerly the Methodist Church parsonage, fashions for women of any age and gift boutique (4372 Irvington Road).
- **Avolon** — Gals with a flare for the Bohemian will love this shop (4341 Irvington Road).
- **Khakis and Seasons** — First-rate for men's and women's classic fashions (4345 Irvington Road).
- **Village Needlepoint** — Crafty or not, check out the colorful and creative items for sale (4395 Irvington Road).
- **River Cottage** — Art and fabulous Maine cottage furniture in dazzling Caribbean colors (4283 Irvington Road).
- **Brocante Home** — A new shop handling antiques, home furnishings and gifts (4323 Irvington Road).
- **Chaffield's Gift Shop** — Quirky and classy gifts (4353 Irvington Road).
- **Bay Window** — For the perfect T-shirt or gift (4265 Irvington Road).
- **The Old Post Office Art Gallery & Antiques** — Don't miss this historic setting and fab art (301 Steamboat Road).

NEARBY

A four-minute drive to Kilmarnock to the north or two minutes to White Stone to the east will take you to more unique shopping and dining experiences. Nearby historic sights include the birthplace of George Washington, James Madison, James Monroe and Gen. Robert E. Lee. Reedville features the Fishermen's Museum, Lancaster Courthouse has The Mary Ball Washington Museum (George's mom) and the Kilmarnock Museum just up the road. There are five vineyards on the Northern Neck plus two more opening this summer and antiques shops along every drive. ■



By mid-summer Irvington is decked out in crape myrtle trees dripping with blooms. Church bells chime the hour and fill the air with hymns. Don't be surprised to see a bald eagle or some other feathered friend soaring gracefully overhead. They are welcome visitors from one of the nearby bird sanctuaries.

First Saturdays, the farmers' market comes to the commons. Opening at a respectable 9 a.m., late for farmers but perfect for visitors, artisans offer hand-crafted pottery, jewelry, clothes, and folk art for home and garden. It's the place to find flowers, native plants, homemade food and sweets, local honey, goat cheese and a variety of area vegetables. From a library book-swap to adoption of homeless pets, there's something for everyone at this popular event.

Across the lane, vine-covered arches create a gateway into the whimsical and romantic world of the Hope and Glory Inn. Considered one of the world's top inns by both *Tatler* *Cunard* and *Conde Naste-Johansen*, the inn was recently named a top-10 American inn by *USA Today*.

The inn was the 1890 boarding school of Chesapeake Academy and had twin front doors – one for boys and one for girls – in keeping with a rule forbidding contact between the sexes. Proprietors **Peggy and Dudley Patteson**

retained the charming doors but tossed out the rule in favor of a setting that encourages romantic interludes – a courtyard fountain and balconied façade framed by country gardens of lavender wisteria, heirloom roses and hollyhocks spilling through white picket fences. A garden path sprinkled with Victorian birdhouses and garden art winds through guest cottages out back and into a private outdoor shower and tub for bathing under the stars. Sophistication and shabby chic combine in the inn's interior décor of antiques and local folk art. Don't be surprised to bump into a celebrity guest or two.

Whimsy continues through town in a cluster of shops that feature fashion boutiques, tourist shops, and a trendy coffee house that is a favorite hangout of locals called, well, The Local. Kooky art and fanciful kitsch sculptures dot the village landscape – the front porch of **Dr. Robert Westbrook's** dentist office sports giant toothbrushes for columns and across the street a dog bone is shingled onto the roof of the Trick Dog Café.

The quirky, chic eatery got its name from a dog statue that was found in the ashes of the 1917 fire. The “dog” became known as a trick dog for its natural ability to sit and stay. The Café picked up the bone, so instead of being “open” or “closed,” they are “sleeping” or “playing” and

customers are invited to “sit and stay.” Proprietor **Rob McRaney's** hip martini bar and So-Ho cuisine give this place plenty to bark about.

Outrageously massive corkscrews flanking the entrance to White Fences Vineyard and Winery on the north end of town make it hard to miss. Uncork a bottle of chardonnay in the tasting room with growers **Phoebe and Mark Hollingsworth** and sit back and watch the grapes ripen on the vine. Or drive through to the Tents, a compound loosely patterned after a “tent community” of 19th-century Methodist revivalist meetings in nearby Wharton's Grove. The distinctive Victorian/Gothic cottages offer a vacation alternative for groups looking for a little seclusion and are available through the Hope and Glory Inn. The preacher's pulpit has been replaced with a swimming pool and the closest thing to a baptism is the vineyard's grape-stomping harvest festival in September.

The luxurious yet casual Tides Inn is situated on the dividing peninsula of the creek and offers spectacular views of the water in a beautifully landscaped setting. Sedona Resort Properties recently purchased the 1940s establishment from one of Irvington's founding families, the Stephenses, and breathed new life and \$12 million into renovations. The resort is listed in *Zagat's* list of top-50 small resorts in

the world and the 2007 winner of AAA's 4-Diamond Award.

Dark mahogany plantation shutters and ceiling fans evoke the casual style of British Colonial days luring U.S. presidents out of D.C. to enjoy the inn's conference facilities and golf course. You don't have to be a guest to take advantage of the spa or one of four dining choices – try a romantic dinner cruise aboard the inn's yacht, the 127-foot *Miss Ann*. Launched in 1926, the ship's colorful history includes popular Whiskey Runs down the Rappahannock River – a tradition that continues despite a change in state liquor laws in the '70s.

Of course, the rivers and creeks continue to be the biggest draw to the area. Sailboats and cruisers have replaced steamboats while some people prefer to navigate Carters Creek by kayak, keeping an eye out for osprey and blue heron. The creek provides a picturesque view of the neighborhood for kayakers paddling in and out of coves past gentle hills dotted with a mix of houses from summer cottages to pricey estates.

Irvington cherishes an atmosphere of remote tranquility. From a humble settlement of 160 inhabitants in 1860 to 673 residents today, it clings to a desire to preserve the rural village that is both sophistication and down-home living on the shores of Carters Creek. ■