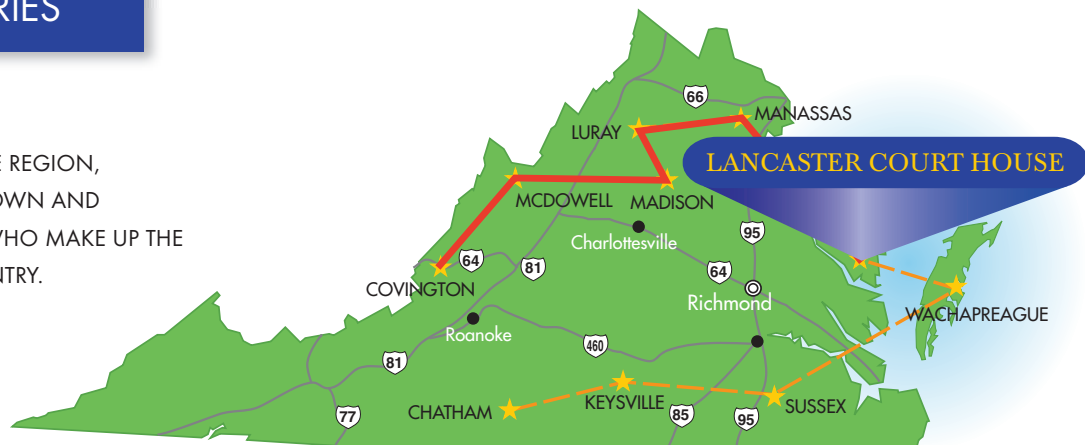


## DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2008, 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

# LANCASTER COURT HOUSE

BY AUDREY THOMASSON, CONTRIBUTING WRITER • PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUDREY THOMASSON

THIS TINY TREASURE  
IS A HUGE HARBOR OF HISTORY.



The Lancaster court building also houses county administrative offices.

During the civil war, Virginia's counties were invited to send all their records to Richmond for safe keeping. As the capital of the Confederacy, the feeling of the time was that it would be the best place to protect important documents from being destroyed by Union soldiers.

Almost all the counties complied, including the rural county of Lancaster.

Whether there was confusion caused by events, uncertainty that a village so far off the beaten path would be touched by war, or that rural folks were operating at a very rural pace, no one can say for sure. All that is known is that county officials were extremely slow to respond.

As the story goes, the records were finally packed up and on the way to Richmond, about 60 miles as the crow flies, when the courier received word that General Ulysses S. Grant was leading Union troops on a siege of Richmond. The city was burning. Immediately the courier turned around and returned the documents to Lancaster.

While most counties lost all their records in the fire, through fate, indecision or simple blind luck, Lancaster's were saved. Records dating back to the 1600s can still be viewed at the courthouse.

Today, history is one of the village's greatest assets.

Listed on the national and state historic registers, the county seat remains a quaint little place like one of those mystical villages frozen in time on a Thomas Kincaid canvas. The unincorporated village of Lancaster Court House is often referred to simply as Lancaster.

There is not much here beyond the historic buildings, except a few old landmark offices and some modest dwellings that have survived time.

## AT A GLANCE ...



**POPULATION:** About 10 to 15 people live in the historic district (according to postal workers and Eleanor Hayden, the eldest member of the village church, Trinity Episcopal, c. 1884).

**LAND AREA:** 39 acres

**FOUNDED:** Lancaster County was organized in 1651. The county seat was moved to Lancaster Court House from Queenstown in 1744 because the area was well established by Colonial militia who mustered on the Green.

**ELEVATION:** 80 feet

**FACTOID:** What most would call a driveway around the Old Clerk's Office is actually Route 686 — possibly the shortest highway in the state at 200 feet.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** The Confederate Monument on the courthouse grounds was erected in 1872.

- In Colonial days, the militia would muster on the Courthouse Green. A 19th-century barn is at the left and the prison and wooden stocks are located at the right.
- Diane Mumford is currently clerk of the court.
- Rt. 686 circles the Old Clerk's Office. Lancaster Tavern can be seen in the background.



Driving along Virginia Route 3, you could miss Lancaster (pronounced LANK-uh-stur) Court House completely if you weren't looking for it — half a minute and you've passed through it. That would be a shame, because you'd miss the opportunity to explore some wonderful treasures of the past.

History begins with a visit to the Mary Ball Washington Museum and Family Library.

Located in Lancaster House (c. 1798), the museum honors Mary Ball Washington, George's mom. Mary was born in 1708 a few miles up the road in a house that is now known as Epping Forest.

Stop in and meet county historians like **Carolyn Jett** and **Charlotte Henry**. They can (and have) filled history books and newspapers with stories and facts like those at the top of this page.

Across the street is the Family Library, where any American will have a good shot





Carolyn Jett (inset) researches family histories in the genealogic library at the Mary Ball Washington Museum and Family Library.

at tracing their ancestors, thanks to the legacy of Betty Owings.

Betty started the library as a novice and invented her own system of cataloging information. She went through every published book and every county abstract of records on marriages and wills, indexing each name she found. Subsequent librarians and volunteers kept the research going and by the time they stopped in 1980, there were thousands of index cards filled with family references.

Their work was so complete that researchers come from all over the country to collect material for other genealogic libraries or for personal family trees.

Using the same indexing techniques from “freedmen” lists and census reports, volunteer **Barbara Whitbeck** says the library is currently tracing slaves freed after the Civil War in order to help their descendants research family histories.

A typical 19th-century-construction wooden barn and blacksmith’s shop is located next to the museum. It was where families would keep their horses when they gathered together for village festivities or legal proceedings.

Next to the barn is a flat, open field known as the Courthouse Green, where the militia mustered in Colonial days.

A two-story brick jail located at the edge of the Green allowed prisoners to view community activities from behind bars. Two sets of stocks and a whipping post are located in full view of the public — a reminder of the early principles of law and order. A gallows once stood in the same vicinity,

but in 1907 executions were moved to the state penitentiary in Richmond.

In the Old Clerk’s Office (c. 1797), the county clerk had a job-for-life scheduling the business of the court, maintaining all county legal documents, recording marriages and drafting wills and deeds. Lawyers and surveyors shared the one-room structure. Most of the original plats are now housed in the courthouse and under the watchful eye of the present clerk of the court, **Diane Mumford**.

A slender, marble memorial stands alone in the center of a grassy area. The Confederate Monument (c. 1872) is believed to be the first of its kind in Virginia, and was erected by the Ladies Memorial Association to honor the sons of Lancaster County who gave their lives for the South.

Because all county business was conducted in the village, the Lancaster Tavern (c. 1790) became a popular stopping place for refreshment and entertainment. Through the years there have been repairs, additions and modifications, but the two-story structure has remained true to the depiction on an 1809 survey map. Today, owners **Lynn Gordon** and **Brenda Jackson** operate a casual restaurant on the main floor and a newly opened B&B next door. There are plans to put a tavern in the basement, where huge, hand-hewn timbers are visible reminders of an early wine cellar. The inn’s petting zoo is also reminiscent of a 19th-century lifestyle of having goats, chickens and other farm animals just outside the back door.

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# IF YOU GO...

## PLACES TO STAY

### The Inn at Levelfields

This spacious antebellum home was built in 1859 by Thomas Dunaway and is situated outside the village, but amidst many historic and picturesque sites. With an elegant dining room, formal sitting room, and informal television room, the inn is the perfect setting for reunions, weddings or just a weekend getaway. Most of the inn's 6 colorful rooms have a private bath and fireplace. Owners John Dunn and Charlotte Hollings also offer sculling sessions on Camps Mill Pond, a serene, protected and private freshwater lake. 10155 Mary Ball Road, Lancaster 22503. 804-435-6887 or 800-238-5578; [www.innatlevelfields.com](http://www.innatlevelfields.com).

### The Lancaster Tavern Bed and Breakfast Inn

Built in 1790 as a place to "refresh and entertain" citizens doing business at the clerk's office across the road, owners Lynn Gordon and Brenda Jackson have the tavern restaurant up and running, and are in the process of re-establishing the inn and basement tavern. A two-bedroom unit with bath just opened in a detached, restored building that Lynn says is suitable for a family. Two more bedrooms will open above the inn at a later date. Rooms come with breakfast in the historic tavern, and there is a petting zoo out back for the kids. Stay this summer and enjoy music on the lawn. 804-462-0080. [www.lancastertavern.com](http://www.lancastertavern.com).

## EATERIES

### Lancaster Tavern

Breakfast, lunch (7 days a week) and dinner (Friday-Monday night) are available in this historic tavern and newly opened inn. The menu features down-home cooking, homemade desserts and reasonable prices. Catering is also available, as are accommodations for private parties. 804-462-0080, [www.lancastertavern.com](http://www.lancastertavern.com). Open 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner served 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.



The Inn at Levelfields is the perfect setting for reunions, weddings or just a weekend getaway.

### Bar Point Seafood

Lunch, dinner and a bar are just the start at this casual restaurant. Owner Angie McCarty's new digs also offers outdoor dining where you can sit and relax, or join in a game of volleyball, horse-shoes or pool. Open Wednesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., it is one of the few places around where you can catch a late meal.

### Net Cruisers Cafe

Gourmet coffee, chilled drinks and sandwich shop, featuring an aroma therapy oxygen bar, Italian sorbets, gelatos, and wireless Internet. Open daily for breakfast and lunch, with live entertainment one Saturday evening each month. 8872 Mary Ball Road, Lancaster 22203, across from the high school. 804-462-7711.

## HISTORY

### Mary Ball Washington Museum

Mary Ball was born in 1703, a few miles up the road from Lancaster Court House. The museum recaptures the history of the people of the Northern Neck from the time of Captain John Smith. View a collection of artifacts, documents, textiles, and oral histories. Open Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 804-462-7290, [www.mbmw.org](http://www.mbmw.org).

### Museum's genealogy library: The Family Research Center

Americans interested in their roots should not pass up one of the most complete family genealogy libraries in America, a place that draws professional and amateur researchers alike. The library also maintains a searchable database online at [www.mbmw.org](http://www.mbmw.org). But technology does not replace the library's priceless volunteers, who know the secret ways beyond seemingly dead ends in family histories.

### Old Clerk's Office

Built in 1797, the historic Flemish bond brick building that housed the office of the county clerk is now part of the Mary Ball Washington Museum.

Lancaster Tavern owner Lynn Gordon feeds leftover biscuits to animals in the petting zoo.

### Old Jail

The earliest jail was built in 1742 and contained two rooms. The brick jail standing on the site today was built in 1819 to house criminals and debtors.

## RECREATION

### Belle Isle State Park

Belle Isle State Park offers a wide variety of amenities on 733 acres along seven miles of Rappahannock riverfront. Hiking, biking and equestrian trails; overnight facilities include camping and the Bel Air Mansion and Guest House. Ramp available for motor boaters; car-top launch area for canoes, kayaks and windsails. A full slate of activities ranges from moonlight canoe trips to bluegrass concerts to birdhouse workshops. For more info: 1-800-933-PARK or [www.dcr.virginia.gov/state\\_parks/bel.shtml](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state_parks/bel.shtml).

### Hickory Hollow Nature Trail

The birding and wildlife trail has 3.5 miles of footpaths that meander through 250 acres of deciduous forest behind the village. Protected by the Northern Neck Audubon Chapter, it is home to many interesting birds, including Acadian flycatchers, hooded warblers, and black-and-white warblers. There are over 500 plant species and abundant springs harbor a variety of creatures, including the rare Tidewater amphipod. Or take Fido out to stretch his legs — on a leash — and don't forget a picnic basket.

## SHOP

There is not much in the way of shopping in the district. A five-minute drive down Rt. 3 will bring you to Kilmarnock, the commercial hub of the lower Northern Neck, where you'll find a variety of specialty shops, restaurants and B&Bs. Continue to White Stone or Irvington (Rt. 200) for more shopping and dining experiences and award-winning golf courses.

## PLAY

It's also a short drive to the birthplaces of George Washington, James Madison, James Monroe and Gen. Robert E. Lee. The Kilmarnock Museum is down the road, while the Steamboat Era Museum in Irvington is a few minutes further. There are several vineyards in the area and antique shops along every drive.





Criminals were put on public display at the Green during the first quarter of the 19th century. • County Sheriff Ronnie Crockett.

In the early days, the Assembly regulated the tavern's rates, according to Lynn. In 1804 the cost of a quart of West India Rum, or apple or peach toddy, was 34 cents. Dinner, including a toddy, beer or cider, was 50 cents. Wines were 67 cents per quart. And lodging with clean sheets was 12 cents.

Prices have increased "somewhat."

The most imposing building in the village is the Lancaster Courthouse (c. 1861). Opening just days before Virginia seceded

from the Union, the building is still fully utilized today by the court and county services. Originally a plain, two-story brick structure, it was spruced up over the years with the addition of a columned portico, bell tower, side wings and a district courtroom.

The walls of the circuit court are lined with portraits of wigged men and slabs of engraved marble. Prominent among the displays is a portrait of hometown girl Mary Ball Washington.

Since floggings and public displays are a thing of the past, the sheriff's department and jail are no longer located on the street, but are discreetly tucked behind the court buildings.

Years of being overshadowed by county government have taken a toll. Much of the sense of community has eroded away for the dozen or so folks still living there.

The historic village may be small, but it is full of hidden treasures and remains a quaint destination and a charming piece of the past. ■