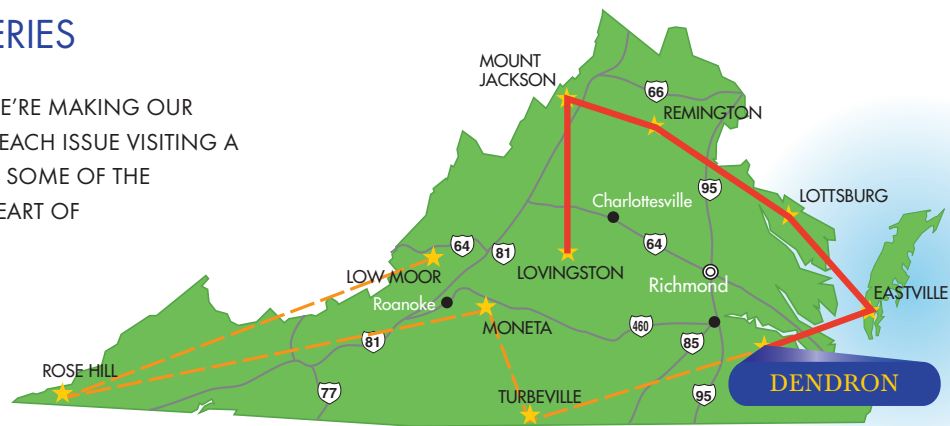


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2009, 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 SIXTH STOP, WE'LL BE ...



DOWN HOME IN

DENDRON

Story and photos by Kelly Donnell, Contributing Writer

Like the trees it was named for, roots in the town of Dendron run strong and deep.

Travelers passing through town on Route 31 may not notice the subtle hints of the town's past, but the peaceful atmosphere and old homes with inviting front porches are impossible to miss.

The town of Dendron is located in Surry County, and is home to about 300 people. It is situated about halfway between the towns of Wakefield, on Route 460, and Surry,

near the James River. Incidentally, the history of the two towns — and many other communities in the area — is deeply entwined with that of Dendron.

The area was once part of the Mussel Fork Plantation. In 1881 a sawmill hand from New Jersey named David Steele purchased this land, between the Blackwater River and Cypress Swamp, to begin his own sawmill.

A few years later, an outfit from Baltimore assumed control of the mill. This

was the origin of the successful Surry Lumber Company, which would forever change the surrounding area.

The lumber company soon organized a new railroad: the Surry, Sussex, and Southampton Railway — or SS&S. By narrow-gauge tracks, timber was brought out of Surry, Sussex, Prince George, Isle of Wight, and Southampton counties to lumber mills in Dendron.

The finished lumber products were then shipped along the rails to Scotland Wharf, where steamboats transported the goods down the James River and on to cities like Baltimore and Philadelphia.

In Dendron's early days, the SS&S provided a connection to many growing and future towns, like Wakefield and Surry, along a 28-mile stretch. It provided passenger, mail, and freight services to the communities along the railway, as well as easier access and opportunities for commerce.

As the lumber company grew, the town prospered. What was the mill village of Mussel Fork was renamed by the Surry Lumber Company in 1896. The name "Dendron" was chosen. Translated from its Greek origin, the word means "tree." A charter incorporating the town was granted by the General Assembly in 1906.

It was estimated that in 1918, Surry Lumber Company's five mills employed 1,050 people each day. In the 1920s, there were nearly 3,000 people living in the Dendron area. It then supported more than a dozen stores, two hotels, two schools, a jail, two banks, two doctors, a skating rink, and a movie theater.



The town hall sits in the middle of Dendron. Many residents active in town business fill the hall for council meetings, held the first Monday of each month.

AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: approximately 300

LAND AREA: 3.6 square miles

ELEVATION: 118 feet

FOUNDED: The town was granted a charter in 1906, but the village was named "Dendron" 10 years earlier by the Surry Lumber Company.

FACTOID: At one time, the town of Dendron was home to a skating rink, a theater, two hotels, two banks, a pool hall, a bakery, an ice cream parlor, and a number of stores.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Bank of Dendron was once located in this quaint building on the main street in town, Rolfe Highway. On the opposite side of the street is a similar, but slightly larger building, which housed the Bank of Sussex & Surry. Both are now abandoned. • This store has seen different proprietors over the years, but has recently sat waiting for a new business to locate here. Route 31, or Rolfe Highway, runs past it through the center of town. • The Dendron United Methodist Church is gently shaded by tall, old oaks. It is one of six churches serving the small town.



At one time, more yellow-pine timber was processed in Dendron than in any other mill east of the Mississippi.

However, as with many other areas in the South, the local timber supply was eventually exhausted by logging. The mills closed in the fall of 1927. The SS&S Railway made its final run in 1930.

The stores and businesses, one by one, closed as well. Left without jobs, many of the Dendron residents moved away to find work.

"In spite of the setbacks, the people remaining in town were able to adjust to a new lifestyle. Many people found it necessary to commute to other areas for employment," wrote H. Temple Crittenden in his account of the mill town, titled *The Comp'ny*.

The town evolved into a smaller, qui-

eter, and more tightly knit community. Many of the same families that came to Dendron during its heyday still have descendants here. Even current residents speak of the days of the Surry Lumber Company as if they happened much more recently than 80 years ago.

The fire of 1931 is also recalled frequently when speaking of the town's history.

There was no fire brigade or volunteer fire department in Dendron at that time, says **Shelton Stewart**, the town's current fire chief. The nearest fire departments were in Norfolk, 50 miles east, or Petersburg, 40 miles west. Both departments responded, but little could be saved. Nearly 30 buildings perished.

The town's fire department was organized later, in 1949. The original two-bay firehouse

still stands, but is now privately owned. The department, and its equipment, outgrew that firehouse in the late 1970s.

The current home to the Dendron Volunteer Fire Department was completed in 1984. A framed collage of pictures documenting its construction hangs just inside the door.

"As the sign says, it was a 'dream come true,'" says Stewart in reference to the title printed on the collage. "We've come a long way."

There are 25 active members of the Dendron Volunteer Fire Department. The volunteers serve one-third of Surry County, an area of about 100 square miles. The volunteers respond to about 60 calls per year, Stewart estimates.

The volunteer firefighters in town have a

IF YOU GO...



Melvin Blizzard's model of a Surry Lumber Company mill is on display at Dendron Museum.

Dendron Museum. Featuring displays commemorating Dendron's history, the Museum is open on the second full weekend of each month. Volunteers from the Dendron Historical Society operate the museum, which includes photos and mementos from the Surry Lumber Company and the town's past. More information is available at www.dendronva.org.

The Surrey House Restaurant and Country Inn. Located about eight miles north of Dendron in Surry's county seat, the Surrey House Restaurant features down-home country meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Open Tuesday through Sunday. The Country Inn, situated just behind the restaurant, has 11 rooms to accommodate guests. More information is available at www.surreyhouserestaurant.com.

Chippokes Farm and Forestry Museum. One of the oldest continually farmed plantations in the country, Chippokes tells the story of Virginia's agricultural history. Tools used throughout the years in forestry and agriculture are on display in the various farm buildings. An old sawmill on the plantation is operated during special occasions, such as the annual Steam and Gas Engine Festival, and the Pork, Peanut and Pine Festival. (757) 294-3439.

Chippokes Plantation State Park. Home to the Chippokes Farm and Forestry Museum, the park is located on the James River in Surry County. Enjoy camping, hiking, biking, and fishing among the peaceful pines. The Chippokes Mansion, built in 1854, is surrounded by formal gardens with azaleas, crape myrtle, boxwood, and seasonal flowers. (757) 294-3625.

Jamestown-Scotland Ferry. When traveling on Route 31 between Surry County and Williamsburg, there is no bridge spanning the James River. Instead, travelers cross the river via the ferry, which runs 24 hours per day, seven days per week. The ferry docks adjacent to historic Jamestown, where settlers first arrived in 1608.

Bacon's Castle. This home, built in 1665, is the oldest documented brick house in America. It became known as Bacon's Castle after rebel followers of Nathaniel Bacon seized the home during the uprising against the Colonial government in 1676. A glimpse of life in the late 1700s and 1800s is offered by visiting the house and its adjacent garden. Open seasonally for tours. (757) 357-5976.

Smith's Fort Plantation. Established in 1609 by Captain John Smith, the plantation includes a beautiful Flemish bond brick home built in 1751. The Falcon House now serves as a museum for the plantation. The land was once given to John Rolfe by Chief Powhatan when Rolfe married the chief's daughter, Pocahontas. The Smith's Fort Plantation also hosts an annual Old Virginia Christmas Festival of Crafts. (757) 294-3872.

The Virginia Diner. Located about seven miles south of Dendron in the town of Wakefield, the Diner was first established in a refurbished Sussex, Surry, and Southampton Railroad car. Now, the restaurant is a landmark in the "Peanut Capital of the World." Delicious and distinctive Virginia peanuts are sold here, and at nearby businesses such as Plantation Peanuts and the Wakefield Peanut Company.

strong presence. When old enough, some firefighters' children have chosen to serve as well. Two of Stewart's own grandsons, **Randy** and **Joseph Gwaltney**, are now active members. Stewart's wife, **Jean Savedge Stewart**, has been a member for 29 years, and currently serves as secretary and treasurer.

"We're beginning to get more younger members, and that's good," Stewart notes. The department has a junior firefighter program that allows youth to volunteer, too.

Steak dinners, held as both a fundraiser and a social event by the fire department, are popular among the Dendron community.

"I think we could have one a month," laughs Jean Stewart. "We haven't had one yet this year, so everyone's begging for one now."

In the fire department's early days, donations to support the organization were collected at popular town gatherings like dances and Ruritan Club suppers.

STRONG HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Another organization with strong support from the community is the Dendron Historical Society, with about 200 members.

A group of local historians runs the Dendron Museum, located adjacent to the town municipal building. Outside of the Dendron Museum sits a boxcar from the SS&S Railway. It is believed to be the only remaining car out of the original 70 that once hauled lumber to Scotland Wharf.

After the boxcar had served its purpose on the railroad, it was used as a corn crib on a nearby farm. The owners donated it for preservation, and it was brought into town via flatbed truck in 1997.

Bill Richardson, president of the Historical Society, says the group formed then with the immediate task of restoring the boxcar, which represented so much of the town's past.

The group hopes to build a second structure to house the antique fire truck that served the town during the early days of the Dendron Volunteer Fire Department. The department's first fire truck has been carefully restored by Wally Faison, a town resident.

"We were trying to preserve the history," Richardson explains, and noting the Surry Lumber Company's influence. "If it weren't for the lumber company, Dendron wouldn't be here."

"It was the biggest thing between Norfolk and Petersburg," he says of the Surry Lumber mills and the town that grew around it.

Inside the museum, a photo album offers a glimpse of what is left of the mill sites today. Pieces of the foundations are still there, but are obscured by brush as the land has begun reclaiming the former industrial sites. Sections

of a horse barn and three company houses are about all that remain, Richardson says.

The old Mussel Fork plantation house is still standing, too, but is in much better condition. It was recently moved and donated to the town of Dendron. There are no definite plans yet for its future. The mayor says several local residents and historians have made suggestions for its preservation that the town council will consider.

"We were very glad to get it," Mayor Yvonne Pierce says of the house, which now sits in a field just out of sight from the main road.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

Even though the community cherishes these landmarks from the past, it values the memories and neighborly relationships even more.

Anecdotes and stories of years past are easily recalled and shared. Helen Cooke Eggleston remembers one such story about a neighborly prank.

One Dendron gentleman named Mr. Frank Dickerson would walk to the post office every morning, she said, passing by Mr. Wilton Cooke's house.

"Wilton had a garden. He would see Frank, peeping over there at his garden as he walked by. Every day, he asked Wilton, 'There's no tomatoes out there yet! What's wrong?'"

Wilton eventually tired of his neighbor's ribbing, and responded by tying red balloons to his tomato vines. While making his morning walk the next day, Frank is said to have done a double take at the new "tomatoes" on the vine — but never teased his neighbor about the plants again.

"That's just the kind of interaction, the good-natured relationships, that we have here," Eggleston says.

Eggleston was born in Surry County, and has lived in Dendron most of her life. She raised four children in town. Several of her neighbors also had children of the same ages.

"We always had a houseful of kids running in and out," she says. "They ran all over town, among the houses, but we always knew where they were."

Most of the children who have grown up in Dendron haven't had very far to travel to attend school. In the same year that the town was incorporated, a four-room school was built on Liberty Street.

Smaller schools in the area were eventually consolidated, and the Dendron school grew. In 1936, the Dendron school was one of the county's three main institutions. For



TOP TO BOTTOM, L-R: Yvonne Pierce was elected mayor of Dendron in 2008, and has served on the town council for a total of 14 years. • The original house from the Mussel Fork Plantation was recently moved to a field just out of sight from those traveling through town. • The Dendron Volunteer Fire Department serves an area of about 100 square miles. Clockwise from front left, firefighters Dennis Holmes, Wilbur Cornett, Joseph Gwaltney, Chief Shelton Stewart, Roger Newby, Cody Bonner, and Jason Cornett are pictured. • The Dendron Volunteer Fire Department's first fire engine is a 1939-'40 Chevrolet open-cab truck. Wally Faison spent about a year restoring it. • Lloyd Hamlin attended high school in Dendron, and later came back to Surry County to teach. He now serves as superintendent of the county's public school system. • Business is steady at the Dendron Market, a convenience store located in the middle of town.

decades, the classes held there varied, but the facility remained an anchor in local education. It was torn down in the late 1970s.

Today, the Surry Elementary, L.P. Jackson Middle, and Surry High schools are located just outside the town limits. The district has about 1,030 students.

Lloyd Hamlin is the current superintendent of Surry County Public Schools. He graduated from L.P. Jackson High School in Dendron in 1964. After attending college, Hamlin returned to the classrooms, no longer a student.

"I came back to teach at L.P. Jackson," he says. "It was a combined school at that time, because it had elementary school and high school grades on the same site."

Hamlin recalls that when he and his classmates had attended L.P. Jackson, there was no gymnasium at the school.

"We played outside, on a dirt court. In spite of that, we still had some of the most successful basketball teams in the region," he says with a smile.

SMALL-TOWN ALLURE

The small-town lifestyle is still proving to be attractive to young families.

"We do have new people coming into the area," notes the mayor. "Some are retirees, but

the majority are families with children. Many of them are coming back, because their parents or families are here."

The new residents, Yvonne Pierce believes, have chosen Dendron as their home because of its atmosphere and its location. She says she is pleased to see both new and established families in town.

"I've looked forward to working with citizens to make it a better place to live," she says. "I want people to come in and be involved. The population is so small that we're a family. Everybody knows everybody."

Pierce has served on the town council for 14 years, and was elected mayor in 2008. She has also worked for the county school system for more than 30 years.

With its roots entrenched in the timber industry, the town is now facing a new prospect of business and innovation. Old Dominion Electric Cooperative announced last year that it was considering a site in town for a prospective coal-fired base-load power-generation facility.

Although the lumber mills, the steam locomotives, and the loggers are now only a memory of the past, history is very much a part of Dendron. It is unforgettable — and undeniable — simply in referring to "Dendron," the town built from the trees. ■