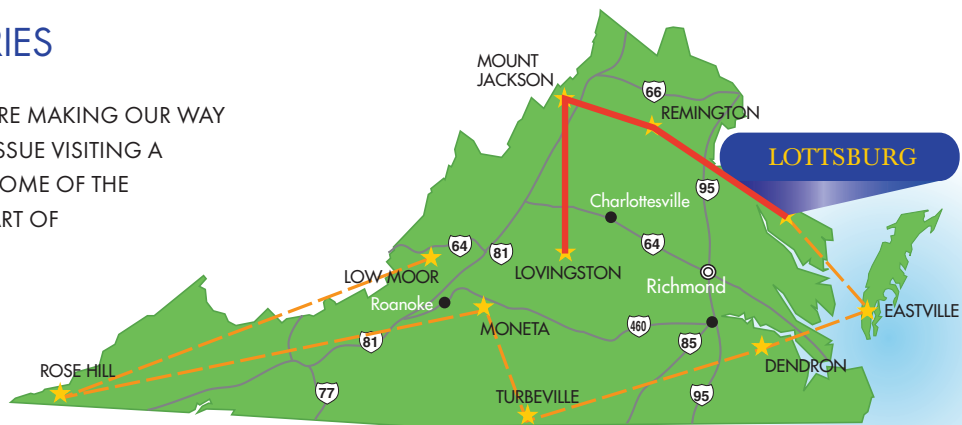


DOWN HOME SERIES

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 FOURTH STOP, WE'LL BE ...



DOWN HOME IN

LOTTSBURG

Story and photos by Audrey Thomasson, Contributing Writer



The Coan River, which flows from the Potomac to the town of Lottsburg, was once traveled regularly by steamboats.

For many travelers, the village of Lottsburg is no more than a mixed scattering of homes, businesses and farms along Northumberland Highway on the road to the more picturesque towns of Heathsville, Reedville and Kilmarnock.

Located in upper Northumberland County on the Northern Neck, Lottsburg may lack the composition and charm of its more popular neighbors, but its aesthetic appeal lies beyond the highway. The tranquil landscape and the friendly people are why folks like to call it home.

There is harmony in the raggedness of the Coan River that divides into two branches to embrace the area. Fed by the Potomac River, the Coan's deep waters flow up to forests of maples, oaks and pines, and skirt rich pastures and working farms of winter wheat, soybeans, corn and tomatoes.

In the air, salt mingles with the pungent odor of fish at Cowart Seafood and Lake Packing Company, Inc., where oyster shucking begins at 5 a.m. and the canning of herring roe and hominy are still part of the operation.

During the romantic era of steamboats, Lottsburg was home to a flourishing seafood industry that dominated the banks of the Coan and an abundance of canneries that packed produce from local farms. The area was so productive, steamboats docked at several landings including Cowart's, Cherry Hill, Lake, Bundie, Lewisetta, Coan and Walnut Point, picking up products and passengers bound for Baltimore.

But as with many rural communities, technology changed the landscape and many of the local jobs went away. While farming is still an important component, most canneries shut down long ago. The declining health of the Chesapeake Bay continues to take a heavy toll on the seafood industry, forcing out many watermen and seafood plants.

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 1,278

LAND AREA: 13.75 square miles

FOUNDED: In 1795 Lancelot Smither purchased the land. After his death in 1800 and that of his wife, Nancy, in 1809, the land they called 'Lottsborg' was deeded to their orphaned children.

FACTOID: The origin of the name Lottsborg is presumed to be a derivative of Smither's first name — Lancelot, according to area historian Carolyn Jett in a bulletin of the Northumberland Historical Society.



(COUNTERCLOCKWISE, FROM UPPER LEFT) Cowart Seafood is the area's biggest year-round employer. • Lake Cowart, Jr., the fourth-generation owner of Cowart Seafood. • Bringing up oysters for shucking. • Calvin Keyser outside the crab-packing plant he and his brother opened in 1955.

Cowart's is one of the few to survive and is the area's biggest year-round employer with some 80 to 90 workers. The family business started around 1898, making owner **Lake Cowart, Jr.**, the fourth generation.

"My great-grandfather dredged oysters with a sailboat in the late 1800s. And my grandfather ran the steamboat dock and store. In those days the steamboats came here three days a week, because there were no bridges for trucks," Lake said.

Today, Cowart's is thriving thanks to innovative aquaculture systems that will produce oysters faster, as well as strengthen their resistance to disease. Because a single oyster

can filter 50 gallons of water a day, Cowart's is planting oyster beds in public waters in the hope of accelerating repopulation as a way to help restore the health of the bay, according to aquaculture manager **A.J. Erskine**.

Another seafood plant still in operation is Keyser Brothers. Located around a bend in the river from Cowart's, crabbers can still drop off their morning catch for steaming, picking and packing for market. Even in the off season, the pristine plant still smells like steaming crabs.

Calvin Keyser and his brother **Norman** started the packing plant in 1955. In the 1950s and early 1960s the brothers were young and crabs were plentiful.

"We used to bus in 50 to 75 workers each day," Calvin said. "The pickers could put up more than 150 barrels a day."

Now in his 80s, Calvin is running the business alone and at a slower pace. The decline in the local crab population, competition from foreign markets, and the rising costs of busing pickers from Kilmarnock and Littwalton have made it very difficult to make a profit, he explained. In the past three years, production has dropped to some 30 barrels a day.

While area waters may offer up fresh seafood, residents must drive a couple of miles to the neighboring towns of Callao and



Lottsburg Fall Festival takes place outside Allison's Hardware.

IF YOU GO ...

Lottsburg Fall Festival

This October event is organized by Allison's Hardware. Artists, crafts, food, music and fun for the whole family. For details, e-mail allisonsace2@yahoo.com.

Holley Graded School

2439 Northumberland Highway (Rte. 360)

For nearly 90 years, the Holley Graded School helped open the doors to greater opportunities for rural black children of the Northern Neck. The present structure was built in 1922 and replaced the original schoolhouse built during the Reconstruction era in 1869. The school stands on two acres purchased shortly after the Civil War by abolitionist Sallie Holley (1818-1893), a native of New York State, for whom the school was later named. Holley Graded School served the black community until desegregation in 1959. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and Virginia Historic Landmarks. The building is closed to the public.

LODGING

A visit to Lottsburg will require lodging just a couple of miles up the road in Callao or in nearby Warsaw. Listed are the closest places to stay.

Northumberland Motel

Northumberland Highway (Rte. 360) in Callao
804-529-6370

Cats Cove Cottage Bed & Breakfast

Private cottage for two off West Yeocomico River
804-529-5056 / www.catscovecottage.com

Greenwood Bed & Breakfast

99 Maple Street, Warsaw
804-333-4353

DINING

Lottsburg Café

2919 Walmsley Road
804-529-5300

For the Occasions

803 Northumberland Hwy., Callao
804-529-6693

Nino's Pizza and Subs

Callao
804-529-7548

Quinton Oaks Grill

At Quinton Oaks Golf Course near Callao
804-529-7977 / www.quintonoaks.com

Hughlett's Tavern

Restaurant, tavern, museum, gift shop in Heathsville, behind the old courthouse off Rte. 360
804-580-7900

WINE TASTINGS

Vault Field Vineyards

2953 Kings Mill Road, Kinsale
804-438-4433

Belle Mount Vineyards

Newland Road, Warsaw
804-333-4700 ■



Located in the center of Lottsburg, Callao Auction House regularly draws a crowd.

Heathsville for groceries, clothes and other personal necessities. Visitors looking for overnight accommodations or evening dining must do the same.

Lottsburg is home to the Northumberland County school administration office. Other businesses include a print shop, combination automotive shop and café, Get 'n Zip, modular home builder, and an Ace Hardware Store known as Allison's.

In the center of the village is the famous Callao Auction House — pitting folks from around the region in a bidding frenzy over collectibles and antique furnishings. Saturday mornings will find a crowd gathered as auctioneer **Grayson Smith** works up the price of each bid. Check for auction dates on the Web site auctionzip.com.

Situated at a bend in the road overlooking the village is the most prominent building around — Zion Baptist Church. With its towering silver steeple, it is the cornerstone of the community for **Edward and Eleanor Holden**, members for more than 70 years.

Zion Baptist has served the black community since before members ordained their first pastor in 1869, according to Eleanor.

“Before the Civil War, slaves attended church with their masters,” she said. Eleanor read a passage from a history book on Zion Baptist that claimed the white congregation felt blacks were multiplying too rapidly and should start their own church. With a twinkle in her eye she closed the book and delivered her version of events, “It was because blacks were too noisy.”

The Holdens were married 64 years ago. The secret to their lasting relationship may be that they were life partners in every way. Eleanor stood side-by-side with her waterman husband each day, helping to clean fish. Their little seafood business was well known to office workers in Alexandria, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, where Edward sold fish out of the back of his refrigerated truck, even earning a feature story in the *Washington Post* as the “fishman” from Lottsburg. There were many times when Eleanor had to drive up to re-stock his supply.

A stroke three years ago sidelined the 89-year-old waterman from the work that brought the couple so many good memories. But he said it was the church and the school that made life worth living.



Edward said he “found” Eleanor when they were students at Holley Graded School, a segregated school for black children. Both enjoyed reminiscing about their school days together.

The day after our interview Eleanor passed away, leaving Edward in the care and love of their church family.

Holley Graded School educated children up through the seventh grade in a little schoolhouse situated near Zion Baptist Church. The four-room building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a Virginia Historic Landmark.

According to historian **Mark Huffman** of *Northern Neck Today*, Holley Graded

ABOVE: Edward and Eleanor Holden receive a house call from Assistant Pastor Marvin Johnson (center) of Zion Baptist Church.

BELOW: Holley Graded School was founded in 1868 by Emily Howland, Caroline Putnam and Sallie Holley, leading abolitionists and suffragettes of the day.

was founded in 1868 by three northerners, Emily Howland, Caroline Putnam and Sallie Holley. Leading abolitionists and suffragettes of the day, the women worried that black children in Virginia were not receiving an education so they moved to Northumberland County and began a school outside



Artist Bill Martz on location

BILL MARTZ Impressions

Get a bird's-eye view of the region by stopping in at Bill Martz Impressions on Route 360 in the heart of Lottsburg. You'll find original oil paintings and reproduction prints of the landscape and its natural inhabitants by artist Bill Martz.

Bill is recognized for his ability to capture the spirit and rhythm of the region on canvas. His tributes include an invitation last year to create paintings of National Monument Park, the site of Wakefield, George Washington's birthplace.

Bill and his wife, Teresa, lived a struggling artist's life for many years, having given up their jobs to pursue Bill's dream. They moved to the area in 1978 with only \$80 in their pockets. Teresa talks proudly of their rise from renting a little house on the water that didn't have the bare essentials like running water or electricity, to buying their present home nearly two decades later. The purchase was a testament to Bill's talent and Teresa's devotion.

Don't expect an impersonal atmosphere if you visit. The gallery is also their home. Bill will probably be out on the river painting, but Teresa will be there to give you a warm welcome. And before you know it, not only will the paintings seem to transport you to each location, you'll be exchanging stories with Teresa like old friends. Check out their Web site at www.billmartz.com or call 800-248-7281.



"Breakwall Ambush" by Bill Martz



Jim and Page Frischkorn enjoy retirement on the river.

Heathsville. In 1869, Sallie, also an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society, purchased two acres in Lottsburg and the school was built.

In 1917, Holley Graded School was deeded to a black board of trustees who continued the education legacy solely on funding from the black community until desegregation in 1959.

Lottsburg's slow, quiet pace is a quality that attracts artists, boaters and city dwellers to its shores to paint, bird watch or kick back in their waterfront nests and enjoy the peace and beauty of the natural setting.

For former Ashland residents **Jim and Page Frischkorn**, it was the only place they considered for retirement. After all, she is from the Cowart Seafood family and Lottsburg is home. Because the area also offers plenty of waterfront property at affordable prices in comparison to other regions, they were able to build their rustic dream house at the water's edge.

"The area has everything we wanted — the kind of living we wanted. And it's convenient to towns for shopping and entertainment, as well as hospitals," Page said.

The Frischkorns, like so many others in the area, are happy to show off their wonderful neighborhood and share local history with anyone who stops by.

That "down home" feeling is evident at places like Allison's Hardware, where neighbors are greeted by their first names and owner **Nancy Allison Fisher** genuinely cares about the community the store serves.

Two family-oriented events are organized by the store every year. One crowd

pleaser is the Lottsburg Fall Festival in October. Folks enjoy all sorts of fun entertainment including pumpkin picking, face-and-hat decorating, and music. There's plenty of food and it's a great opportunity to purchase crafts from area artists. For information on this year's events, e-mail allisonsace2@yahoo.com.

Eugene Brown is a sales associate at Allison's. Born and raised in Lottsburg, he returned after 10 years of travel with the military.

"It's a quiet, friendly place. You always want to come back home," he said.

Lottsburg's charm is centered in the joy, pride and cohesion of its citizens. It is the kind of place where sense of community does not come from a showy façade, but rather is present through the strength of church families and unified beliefs. ■



Eugene Brown returned home to Lottsburg after 10 years of travel with the military. Says Brown, "It's a quiet, friendly place."