

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

Again in the year 2011, 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

ONLEY

Story and photos by Candy Farlow, Contributing Writer

The opening of the New York, Philadelphia and Norfolk Railroad (NYP&N) on Virginia's Eastern Shore was the catalyst for the development of many of the towns in the region. Onley is a prime example, for prior to the railroad's opening in 1884, Onley was little more than an intersection connecting Wachapreague to the east, Onancock to

the west, and the county seat — Accomac — to the north.

While Wachapreague was a bustling seaside resort, Onancock an important Chesapeake Bayside port and Accomac the center of local government, the area

then known simply as "Crossroads" had little to draw interest.

But when the rail line opened a ticket office and warehouse for freight at the location, a new era — and new name — sprung forth for the tiny village.

No longer was it just a "Crossroads,"

but rather a destination in its own right, and the town was soon dubbed "Onley," a name possibly derived from "Only," the nearby estate of former Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise.

Then folks came to Onley for a variety of reasons, none more important than the produce markets where, season by season, farmers came to the auctions to sell their bounty to the produce dealers. Strawberries, still dewy from the fields, came by horse cart to be looked over, bid on and loaded aboard the freight cars. Mighty steam engines then hauled their loads to the big cities up north. Other Eastern Shore produce was handled the same way, as was the much-sought-after bounty from local waters.

While the steam trains have long left the tracks and the historical Produce Exchange building now serves as a church, Onley has nonetheless remained one of the primary centers of commerce on the Eastern Shore. Now boasting more than 60 retail businesses,

A local Coast Guard unit presents the colors at the town's annual Veterans Day Parade. All types of vehicles are featured in the parade.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOWN OF ONLEY

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: Approximately 500

INCORPORATED: The town of Onley was not incorporated until 1950.

ORIGINS: Onley was one of several Eastern Shore towns that sprang up along the railroad in the mid-1880s. The village was originally known as Crossroads.

FACTOIDS: The town supposedly got its current name from "Only," the estate of Henry Wise, who served as governor of Virginia from 1856 through 1860. Onley has the largest concentration of retail trade on Virginia's Eastern Shore.



1. The historic Produce Exchange building now houses a church. **2.** Many lovely Victorian homes grace the tree-lined streets of the town. **3.** Onley United Methodist Church is one of several houses of worship in town.

the town recently welcomed the Shore's only Walmart, and more construction is on the drawing boards. According to Mayor Billye D. Custis, two new strip malls will soon join the two large plazas in town and the Eastern Shore Public Library plans to build a new main location on property recently donated by Shore Bank. Also well along in the planning stages is a new Municipal Building to serve as the town office and police station.

Onley is also home to many other establishments that serve the entire Shore.

The Eastern Shore Family YMCA and Eastern Shore SPCA are located just south of the town limits, as are Nandua High School and Nandua Middle School.

One of the oldest established organizations in the town is the Accomack County Woman's Club, founded in 1925 and still going strong.

One of the newest buildings is the new Onley Community Health Center, operated by Eastern Shore Rural Health System, Inc. (ESRH). ESRH was founded in 1976 to bring a doctor to the then-underserved

town. A federal grant for \$100,000 got things rolling. Today, the Onley Community Health Center is but one of five centers operated by the organization that provides primary care to over half the Eastern Shore's population. The budget today is over \$11 million, with only some 30 percent coming from grant programs.

And it seems more medical facilities may be in the town's future.

Riverside Health System recently announced plans to build a new hospital



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOWN OF ONLEY

1. Onley Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company provides emergency medical care and fire protection to the town and surrounding area. 2. Onley is the retail center for Virginia's Eastern Shore. 3. Veterans get pampered at the town's annual Veterans Day event. 4. The Onley Train Station is now the objective of a preservation group. 5. Walter Marks, a retired Virginia State Trooper, leads the town's four-man police department. 6. The Onley Recreation Association maintains a pool and tennis complex in town. 7. No town is complete without its barbershop. 8. Onley's mayor, Billye D. Custis.

to replace the aging Shore Memorial Hospital in Northampton County. Currently it appears the Onley area is the front-runner for the new location.

While all of this activity bodes well for the future of Onley, the town has faced progression without the loss of its small-town qualities.

Only an estimated 500 people reside within the corporate limits, where small-town amenities abound.

Onley Recreation Association operates a pool and tennis complex and sports an award-winning swim team.

Churches play a large role in the town as well. Onley United Methodist, Onley Baptist, St. Peter the Apostle's Catholic Church, Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, Rock Church of the Eastern Shore and several independent congregations all meet in the area.

A Neighborhood Watch group not only provides extra eyes for the town's police force, but meets socially as well, even spearheading the town's Christmas caroling activities.

Onley Volunteer Fire and Rescue Company, founded in 1971 after a devastating fire destroyed a large section of the town's business district, now has some 50 volunteer members providing emergency medical response as well as fire protection. With the assistance of paid staff provided by Accomack County, the company is able to provide fire and advanced life-support services to the town and surrounding area 24 hours each day. The fire station does double duty as a gathering place for the community, especially on important occasions such as Veterans Day.

VETERANS DAY CELEBRATION

In 2000, looking to celebrate Onley's 50th birthday as an incorporated town, observance organizers chose Veterans Day as the date. It was natural to make recognition of the town's veterans a part of that event. The celebration was such a huge success that it was decided Onley would put on a party for vets each year thereafter, and so they have.

Now, the annual event begins with a lively parade followed by a dignified observance. Next, the crowd gathers at the fire station for free hot dogs, chili and home-baked goods. Then town officials and volunteers present a program before entertainment takes the stage. Veterans Day in Onley is indeed small-town America at its finest.

Celebrations such as the Veterans Day fete might soon have a new venue in Onley. The town has secured a lease on property owned by Eastern Shore Railroad, the present-day embodiment of the old NYP&N. Already the Society for Preservation of Onley's Train Station (SPOTS) is working on plans to preserve the station that is such a rich part of the town's history. Those plans also include using the station and surrounding property as a stage area for local festivals and concerts.

A visit to Onley is in itself a pleasure. But like the true "Crossroads" it was — and is — Onley is also ideally suited as the hub for a visit to other attractions on the Shore. Assateague Island National Seashore is but a 45-minute drive to the north, a drive that takes travelers by NASA's Wallops Visitors Center at Wallops Flight Facility, as well as through the charming seaside resort town of Chincoteague.

NEIGHBORS OF INTEREST

Just five minutes to the west is the port town of Onancock, a favorite of yachtsmen and local watermen alike. There more restaurants and galleries await the discerning visitor and kayaks are available for rental. To the east, a mere 15-minute drive away, is the Flounder Fishing Capital of the World, Wachapreague. There boaters can launch their own craft, rent a small boat or book a charter aboard one of the many party boats in the harbor.

Lodging in Onley includes a Comfort Inn and nearby bed-and-breakfast establishments, while several area restaurants offer diners choices from fast food to full-course meals.

Most local restaurants feature local produce in season and the freshest seafood to be found.

Indeed, the days of the Produce Exchange and the strawberry auctions are gone, but the Shore's freshest produce can still be found in Onley, both in the three modern grocery stores in town and — in season — from farm stands that dot the street corners and parking lots.

Truly, there's nothing more inviting than purchasing your just-picked tomatoes, fresh-from-the-field sweet corn and succulent watermelons from these down-home vendors. But if you've just got to have that big-store experience while on the Eastern Shore, well ... you'll find it only in Onley. ■



Chesapeake Bay Bridge fishing pier.

IF YOU GO... Getting here is half the fun.

Enjoy the 17-mile Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel crossing from Virginia Beach to the southern tip of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. You'll find Onley about halfway up the Virginia portion of the Delmarva Peninsula. Don't worry about getting lost. You'll already be on U.S. Route 13, the Shore's only major highway. It'll take you right to the middle of Onley. But on the way, you might want to take a side trip or two as you'll be passing the **Eastern Shore of Virginia Wildlife Refuge**, **Kiptopeke State Park**, and **Historic Eastville** and more charming places off the beaten path.

Before you get to Onley proper, stop in **Turner Sculpture**, located on Route 13 just south of town. Here father and son William and David Turner practice the lost wax method of bronze casting. Turner Sculpture's work now graces some of America's most important establishments, including the American Museum of Natural History and Constitution Hall. The Gallery is open Monday through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (757) 787-2818; www.turnersculpture.com.

North of Onley you'll want to visit **Historic Accomac**, the county seat of Accomack. (The county gets a "k" on the end, the town doesn't.)

There are numerous bed and breakfast choices on the Shore, but in Onley proper you'll find a nice **Comfort Inn**. Call them at (757) 787-7787 or visit www.ComfortInnOnley.com.

Bring a bike ... there are no hills in this neck of the woods.

You might also want to bring a cooler and stop in **Edwards' Seafood** where the fish, crabs and shellfish are right off the boats. ■