

■ DOWN HOME SERIES

The year 2012 marks the 15th anniversary of *Cooperative Living* magazine's popular DOWN HOME feature, so we're revisiting the communities we profiled in 1997, the first year of the series. On this fifth stop, we'll be ...

DOWN HOME IN

BRIDGEWATER

Story by Deborah R. Huso, photos by Dorothy A. Stephenson



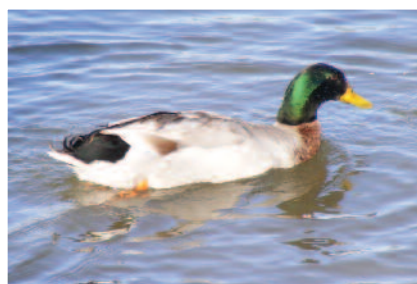
It's not hard to find ties to the past in Bridgewater. In fact, the descendants of many of the town's founding families still live here.

If you're driving into Bridgewater from the south on Route 42, one of the first things you'll notice is Seven Bridges Park. Complete with a gazebo, flowers, and friendly ducks, the park is named after the current and seventh bridge to cross the North River, since the first bridge was built in 1820. Here, visitors can watch ducks paddle by while sitting on one of the three park swings situated on the river's banks.

Locals agree — the ducks love a camera. They'll waddle up to onlookers for the perfect photo opportunity, but if someone takes too long to snap their picture, they're back down the bank and into the water again.

Seven Bridges Park is one of 10 town parks. Why so many in a town of less than 5,000 people? According to Mayor Hallie Dinkle, the town purchased the first 35-acre tract, which is now known as Oak Dale

At Seven Bridges Park, one of 10 parks in the picturesque college town, the ducks are famously photo-friendly — just don't dally!





AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 5,644

LAND AREA: 2.25 square miles

ELEVATION: 1,205 feet

FOUNDED: February 7, 1835

FACTOID: The area became known as McGill's Ford around 1759 due to the approximately 350 acres of land owned by John and William McGill on either side of the North River. Around 1820, the area became known as Dinkletown for the Dinkle family.



1. Main Street, Bridgewater. **2.** The McKinney Center for Science and Mathematics, a 75,000-square-foot building that houses science and computer labs, classrooms, and faculty offices, was named for Dr. Robert McKinney, a trustee of Bridgewater College for several decades. **3.** With a total enrollment of under 1,700 and an average class size of only 19, students at Bridgewater enjoy a very personalized college experience.

Park, in 1988. Over the years, the town determined other areas around Bridgewater couldn't be used due to their flood-plain locations, so instead of letting the land go to waste, Bridgewater started building parks. Now, in addition to providing a relaxing place for residents to while away the hours, the parks also host gospel, contemporary, and string bands on Sunday evenings at 7 p.m. from the first Sunday in July until Labor Day. They even developed a small par three golf course on flood-plain land located in an area of town known as "Sandy Bottom."

Dinkle not only grew up in Bridgewater but is the seventh generation of the Dinkle family, who first came to the area in 1798, when John and Jacob Dinkle started a sawmill, gristmill, a cording mill, and a stove mill, to live here. In fact, the town commissioned John Dinkle to build the town's namesake — the bridge over North River — in 1820. The Dinkle name is scattered throughout town — Dinkle Avenue runs through the campus of Bridgewater College, and an old building on Main Street reads "Dinkle's Tavern," which Jacob Dinkle built in 1815.

"It operated as a tavern, which in that day offered meals, lodging, and care for animals," explains Dinkle, who left Bridgewater in 1965 to attend an accounting school in Northern Virginia. After serving in the U.S. Air Force from 1966 to 1986, Dinkle decided to bring his family back to his hometown.

"My sons were young at the time and couldn't understand why we were taking them to the ends of the earth to live," he laughs. "The pace of life is slower than metropolitan areas," says Dinkle, who can't ignore the calling of his family home.



1. Mayor Hallie Dinkle is the seventh generation of a family that first came to the Bridgewater area in 1798. **2.** Longtime resident Harry Rawley and his family — (l-r) daughter-in-law Melissa, son Jon, and grandson Jacob — enjoy life on the farm. **3.** Belle Meade — a name Harry Rawley had chosen before he ever acquired the real estate to pin it on — is a 236-acre cattle and poultry operation. **4.** Lee Hartman of Bluestone Vineyard, an award-winning winery just west of Bridgewater, operates the family business with his father, Kurt. **5.** As chaplain of his alma mater, Robbie Miller is constantly inspired by the exceptional students at Bridgewater.

“Because of family ties and growing up here, it’s just a sense of belonging.”

Long-time area resident Harry Rawley couldn’t agree more. “I tell people I’ve never gotten more than 10 miles from home,” Rawley jokes. Of course, that’s a bit of an exaggeration.

“I grew up on the farm, and I couldn’t get away fast enough,” says Rawley, a Korean War veteran. “When I was in Korea, I decided that maybe the farm wasn’t as bad as I thought.” So after the war, Rawley came home, attended Bridgewater Business College, got a job as an accountant, and then ended up selling farm equipment. “They say ‘You can take the boy out of the farm, but you can’t take the farm out of the boy,’” he laughs. “I’m a prime example of that.”

In 1951, he married his wife, Reba, and 13 years later, he took over the farm equipment business, Valley Implement Sales, located in nearby Harrisonburg. In 1997, he retired and passed the business, which also includes Bobcat of Augusta in Staunton, to his sons.

In 1980, Rawley purchased a 236-acre farm that now holds three turkey houses, 100 cows, and about 60 calves. Rawley said his grandson, Jon, started to show interest in the farming life 12 years ago. “I needed someone to run the farm, and Jon wanted a farm,” said Rawley, so in August of 2000, Jon and his wife, Melissa, moved into their first home — the old 1700s Hessian farmhouse that sits on the property.

“It’s a great life for our family,” says Melissa. “Our kids get experiences here they wouldn’t normally get in town.”

And a farm wouldn’t be complete without a name — “Belle Meade” — which means beautiful meadow. Rawley discovered the name during a visit to the famous Belle Meade Plantation in Tennessee. “I told my wife I didn’t know when I would have a farm but I knew what it was going to be named,” he says.

MORE THAN BIRDS AND BOVINES

In Rawley’s opinion, the biggest industry around the town of Bridgewater is agriculture, but it’s not all cattle and poultry. In fact, it’s also grapes. Lee Hartman and his father, Kurt, operate Bluestone Vineyard, which is located on Spring Creek Road just south of town. In 2008, after Hartman graduated from Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg and Kurt sold his Harrisonburg car dealership, the father-and-son team planted their first 4,000 reds, followed by 4,000 whites in 2009, and another 4,000 reds in 2010.

Today, they produce 30,000 pounds of fruit per year and obtain 75,000 pounds

from other Virginia growers to turn out 3,000 cases of wine annually. Their best-selling wine, Beau, is named after their golden retriever, and their 2010 Cabernet Sauvignon received a gold medal at the Governor's Cup and now holds a spot in the Governor's case, which travels with the Governor, allowing him to promote different products from Virginia. Currently, the Hartmans own 25 acres of land with 11 acres under vine.

"Agri-tourism is starting to be a really big thing in the area," says Lee. "Virginia is also starting to be known as a great wine destination."

Dinkle says the biggest employers in Bridgewater are Marshall's Distribution Center, Perdue, Bridgewater Retirement Community, Dynamic Aviation, and Bridgewater College.

A FAMILY TRADITION

For Robbie Miller, who serves as the school's chaplain, attending Bridgewater College is a bit of a family tradition. A graduate of nearby Turner Ashby High School, Miller is the fifth of five children to attend the college. In addition, both of his parents studied here. After graduating from Bridgewater in 1979, Miller attended Bethany Seminary in Chicago and eventually moved back to Bridgewater with his wife, first serving as pastor at Eastern Mennonite University before landing back at Bridgewater College. Today he oversees the spiritual life on campus and also teaches a part-time class called "Lands of the Bible," which is a study abroad program that travels through Israel, Palestine, and Jordan every two or three years.

But Miller says the best thing about his job is working with the young people. "I mostly enjoy their energy," he explains. "The nature of my work puts me in regular contact with exceptional students who constantly inspire me with their willingness to enrich the lives of others."

Miller says Bridgewater College also contributes to the community and surrounding states through programs and events such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Habitat for Humanity, Relay for Life, and the CROP Hunger Walk, which allows the college and community to work together to raise around \$11,000 for the Church World Services hunger program.

"Bridgewater is a very peaceful place, a good place," says Miller. "I've lived in several metropolitan areas — Richmond, Washington, D.C., Chicago — I certainly enjoy what those areas offer, but what I've discovered is I'm a small-town kid at heart. And once other people come here, they tend to stay here." ■



Cottage Crafts' owner Judy Galang specializes in handicrafts she makes herself. She takes custom orders for items with school and college colors and logos.

IF YOU GO...

Harvey's Homemade Ice Cream and Coffee sits on the corner of High and Main streets and is the perfect place to grab a quick snack or sip no matter if the weather is hot or cold.

After leaving Harvey's, visitors can turn right down the sidewalk and leisurely meander down Main Street and stop in at any of the shops along the way.

Massages are available at **Back on Track Massage**, and other fun places to check out include **White Elephant Antiques**, **Grace Salon and Tools for Living Well**, or **Cottage Crafts**, which is located in a small brick building the town used as the first bank in 1867.

Seven Bridges Park is a great place to enjoy a book in the gazebo, spread out a picnic blanket on the grass, or

swing on the riverbank while watching North River and its ducks float by.

And when tummies start talking, there are a few different places in town to choose from. One can almost experience Italy when sitting at a table in **Francesco's Ristorante Italiano** on Main Street. Francesco's offers pastas, pizzas, wraps, and sandwiches.

There's also **Red Apple Chinese Buffet** or the **Sunrise Coffee House and Bakery**, which are both located on Main Street. Just a short drive up the road on the other end of town sits another local favorite — **New York Flying Pizza**.

To finish out the day, visitors can hop in the car and head over the bridge next to Seven Bridges Park, turn right onto Spring Creek Road, and visit **Bluestone Vineyards** to sample their award-winning wines. ■



Just west of town, visit Bluestone Vineyard's tasting room to sample an award-winning wine against a Blue Ridge Mountain backdrop.