

## ■ 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 eighth stop, we'll be ...

DOWN HOME IN

# HEATHSVILLE

Story and photos by Audrey Thomasson, Contributing Writer



If you're traveling to Heathsville, it's probably your destination since it isn't on the way to much else — except perhaps miles and miles of shoreline for swimming, hiking, boating, kayaking, crabbing and fishing. Or a stop on the way to catch the Chesapeake Breeze for a day trip to Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay.

And if that's on your menu, be sure to take time to look around Heathsville and meet some of its residents. You may discov-

er a few descendants of the first European settlers. Maybe you'll meet a newer kind of "settler" — folks from places like Washington, D.C., and Norfolk who were searching for a tranquil lifestyle and stumbled onto this quiet village in the Northern Neck.

Here, Northumberland Hwy., the town's main street, blends the 20th century with the 18th and 19th centuries in its structures, stately churches, a grand plantation house and family farms. Explore down a

side street and discover an old grist mill at spring-fed Clark's Mill Pond, just outside town limits. A rope dangling from a tree branch will tempt kids of all ages to swing out into the pond on a hot summer day. It doesn't get much more Americana.

Heathsville is the county seat for Northumberland County. Travelers looking for the beach will discover the village is landlocked. But the water isn't far away. The place is surrounded by the Coan and Potomac rivers to the north, the Chesapeake Bay to the east and Great

Wicomico River to the south.

"We lived on the water in Northern Virginia," says Barbara Tricarico, who moved to Heathsville 18 years ago with her architect husband, Rocky. "Now we live in town. It's the opposite of what most people do who move to this area."

### DISCOVER HEATH'S LEGACY

Barbara and Rocky live in Chicacoan Cottage, built around 1800 by the town's namesake, John Heath. Born in Northumberland in 1758, Heath graduated from the College of William & Mary where, at 18, he founded the undergraduate honors organization Phi Beta Kappa with three fellow students and became its first president. He was a captain in the Revolutionary War at 23, before becoming Commonwealth's Attorney at Northumberland Courthouse.

By the age of 35, Heath was serving in the U.S. House of Representatives and

(Below) St. Stephen's Parish is one of several historical churches in the village of Heathsville. (Right) Just outside town, the rope swing that hangs over Clark's Mill Pond tempts children of all ages.







## AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 142 (2010 U.S. Census)

LAND AREA: 3.98 square miles

ELEVATION: 102 feet

FOUNDED: 1681

**FACTOID:** Rumors of a ghost haunting the old courthouse were reinforced recently when the county calendar carried a photograph of the building that revealed an apparition of a woman glaring out a downstairs window.



**1.** Barbara Tricarico at Chicacoan Cottage, a residence built around 1800 by the town's namesake, John Heath. **2.** The new Northumberland County Courthouse. **3.** The Confederate memorial, erected in 1873 in front of the old courthouse, honors the 40th Virginia Regiment with the names of local soldiers who died in the Civil War.

in 1803, he joined the Council of State, advising the governor until his death in 1810 at age 52. In 1837 the post office was renamed Heathsville.

Sometime around 1800, it is believed Heath built Chicacoan Cottage and a similar house called the Academy, both located on a lane overlooking St. Stephen's Parish and the town's main street. The cottages were built as rentals, according to historian Thomas Wolf in the book *Historic Sites in Virginia's Northern Neck and Essex County*.

Chicacoan Cottage features a Flemish brick facade, center hall plan with two

rooms on each floor, and typical English basement that accommodates a kitchen and gathering room. According to Barbara, the home was restored in the 1970s by a meticulous craftsman who repurposed many materials for authenticity and preservation of original character.

### EXPLORE HISTORY

Windows to the past can be found all around Heathsville — in courthouse square, a number of historic buildings including the inn and tavern, and a traditional commons in the heart of the village.

The county courthouse was established here in 1681. The present 1851 white brick building replaced a series of courthouses before finding new life in 1998 as the county administration offices when a new court opened several hundred yards west.

The historic area features a number of notable buildings, including the Old Jail on Back Street. The two-story 1839 brick structure managed to survive two fires and modernization in 1918. It was the third oldest Virginia jail still housing prisoners when it closed in 1958.





**1.** The pavilions that surround the Tavern Green are used by member artisans of the Tavern Foundation guilds. **2.** The historic Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern (RHHT), which sits in front of the Tavern Green, is one of the last surviving structures of its type in Virginia. **3.** Tavern Green visitors can order custom-forged products from the blacksmith guild. **4.** Alene Kimberlin of the Tavern Quilters Guild enjoys sharing skills with other quilters at their monthly meetings. **5.** Cristian Shirilla is director of the new YMCA that opened earlier this year in the old Northumberland High School building. **6.** Local school children get a visit from penguins after a family reading program of *Mr. Popper's Penguins*.

Tucked between the old and new courthouse stands the pride of Heathsville — the historic Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern (RHHT), one of the last surviving structures of its type in Virginia. Graced by porches running the length of each floor, it's been a key element of the county seat since it opened for business around 1795. Today, it houses a restaurant and gift shop.

Behind the Tavern is the Green. Once the location of the inn's stables and vegetable garden for guest meals, it is now a community gathering place. The grassy area is surrounded by pavilions used by Tavern Foundation guilds, including Spinners and Weavers, Blacksmith, Wood Working, and a carriage shop. Country bands are often on the Green entertaining folks attending an event.

### ENJOY LOCAL EVENTS

Also located on the Tavern Green is a community center with large kitchen for functions and a multitude of silent auctions. One of the most popular is the Quilt Show and Auction.

The Quilt Show, held every other year, is scheduled for Oct. 13, 2012. Quilts will be up for bid, but there will also be live music, food and a boutique of member-made pottery and crafts. Don't miss it if you're looking for bedspreads, blankets, pillows, jackets — anything colorful and one-of-a-kind.

"Quilts are made by members of the Tavern guilds," says Alene Kimberlin. "The quilters meet once a month and the spinners and weavers meet twice a week in the historic building." It is a great place to meet and learn skills from quilting members from Essex, Northumberland, Lancaster and Richmond counties.

In case you think this is a "chicks-only" event, the Blacksmith Guild will be making and selling forged works at reasonable prices.

Springtime opens with the return of the farmers' market to the Green. It features local produce, baked goods, cheeses, and hand-made crafts on the third Saturday of every month from April to October.

Don't miss the races! If you can't make it to Churchill Downs, try the Kentucky Derby Party happening every May on the Tavern Green. Ladies wear colorful straw hats, men smoke cigars, and everyone, even the youngest of racing fans, has fun cheering for their favorite horse on a giant TV screen under the tent. Food is abundant and proceeds benefit the RHHT Foundation.

Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern presents a special Golden Village Christmas the first Saturday in December, where visitors can shop for fantastic handmade crafts. And bring



the kids, because Santa will be there. There's a special shop upstairs open just for kids to pick out a gift for mom and dad — and we're not talking "junk." There are some real prizes up those steps. No adults are allowed and no gift is priced over \$1. All the packages will be wrapped by Guild members.

St. Stephen's Parish is the site of the popular Strawberry Festival held each spring on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. It draws more than 100 artists and crafters and features baskets and baskets of strawberries and servings of strawberry shortcake. But get there early because strawberries sell out mid-morning.

The church is also the site for a Harvest Festival on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, with locally grown produce the feature attraction. Fish fries abound at Heathsville United Methodist Church also on Memorial and Labor Day weekends. But come the fall season, the Methodists line up their big pots of Brunswick Stew.

Tracing your family tree? Try the genealogy records at the Northumberland Historical Society, adjacent to the Old Jail.

## TASTE CULTURE

During the steamboat era, the area was home to a flourishing seafood industry and an abundance of canneries, where local farm produce was packed for market.

Visitors can still get a taste of the culture and learn the importance of protecting the bay and its treasures by stopping by area seafood companies like Cowart's Seafood, near Lottsburg. Cowart's runs a thriving aquaculture system that produces oysters, and also operates a packing facility. Omega Protein, near Reedville, is the largest producer of Omega 3 protein oils from menhaden fish harvested in area waters. The companies are a short drive away.

## CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

Northumberland Highway (Rte. 360) brought Heathsville a little closer to everywhere else when a desirable four-line highway linked the area to Warsaw and Tappahannock. One of the first places you'll see as you enter town is the new YMCA. The facility opened earlier this year in the old Northumberland High School building. Facility director, Cristian Shirilla, is happy to be close to the action.

"Heathsville has great places to eat, to gather and now a great place for the entire family to gather poolside," he said of the Y's brand new pool, including slides and a wading pool with giant crab sculpture for toddlers to climb.

Visit Heathsville and delight in the beauty, history and recreation of the region. ■

## IF YOU GO...

**Seafood Industry:** A short drive to Cowart's Seafood on the Coan River to see the arrival of oysters. Arrive early for oyster shucking. Or drive to Reedville and watch the menhaden fleet or pound-net fishermen docking with daily catch destined for restaurants along the eastern seaboard — you can even purchase fish from them.

**Museums:** Visit the Fishermen's Museum in Reedville for the history of area watermen and learn about the hard life of the pound-net fisherman. The Farm Museum offers a selection of farm and home equipment from years past. With a little luck, you might catch a few Native Americans beating drums and demonstrating traditional Indian dance.

**Parks, beaches, piers, ramps:** Hiking trails abound with boardwalks, viewing platforms for spotting birds and an abundance of wildlife. Plenty of excellent spots for canoeing, kayaking or fishing: Bush Mill Stream Natural Preserve; Dameron Marsh Natural Area Preserve; Hughlett Point Natural Preserve and beach; fishing pier on Great Wicomico; and Vir-Mar public beach. Boat rentals are available at Ingram Bay Marina.

**Cruises:** No boat? No problem. A number of marinas offer charter services, including seasonal daily cruises to Smith Island from Smith Point Marina or Tangier Island from Buzzard's Point on the Chesapeake Breeze.

**Wine Country:** Stop in at the award-winning Athena Vineyards and Winery near



Aquaculture dominated the area in the past. Today, seafood companies like Cowart's, just 10 minutes west of Heathsville, welcomes visitors to learn how oysters filter the rivers.

Heathsville, then continue on to eight other area vineyards: Good Luck Cellars, Dog and Oyster, Jaycey Vineyards, Ingleside Vineyards, Belle Mount Vineyards, Vault Field Vineyards, General Ridge Vineyard, and The Hague Winery. All offer wine tasting, tours and gift shop.

**Campgrounds:** Chesapeake Bay Camp Resort on the Little Wicomico River offers pool, playground, miniature golf, showers, boat ramps and canoe rentals. Tents to big rigs, all welcome; or, choose to stay at Smith Point Marina and Campground.

**Lodging:** While there are no accommodations in the village, B&Bs are scattered around the county. Or, check out a variety of lodging in Kilmarnock, just 20 minutes away.

## ANNUAL EVENTS

**Farmers' Market:** April - October, third Saturday of the month, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern.

**Kentucky Derby Party:** May, first Saturday, noon to 4 p.m., Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern.

**Strawberry Festival:** Memorial Day weekend, Saturday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. St. Stephen's Parish.

**Fish Fry:** Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends, Saturday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Heathsville United Methodist Church, \$10.

**Harvest Festival:** Labor Day weekend Saturday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. St. Stephen's Parish.

**Quilt Show Auction and Boutique:** Oct. 13, 9 a.m. Live auction 1 p.m., silent auction 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

**Brunswick Stew Sale:** November, first Saturday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Heathsville United Methodist Church.

**Golden Village Christmas:** December, first Saturday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Rice's Hotel/Hughlett's Tavern. ■



For Ruth Harris, one of three owner/operators of Athena Vineyards, "It was a hobby that got out of control."