



This year *Cooperative Living* is taking a road trip along Route 360 as it crosses Virginia from the Chesapeake Bay to North Carolina. Each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.

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# Fish Stories

*Reedville, the first stop on my Route 360 road trip, may just be a speck of a town, but once upon a time, it was the richest town in the U.S. And yes, that's true ...*

It's a dreary, gray day, rain falling steadily, as I begin my journey along Route 360, windshield wipers slapping back and forth, as the tiny town of Reedville comes into view. Situated seemingly in the middle of nowhere at the eastern tip of Virginia's Northern Neck, Reedville seems like an anomaly. Grand Victorian houses, expertly



Reedville's Main Street is lined with gingerbread-trimmed Victorian houses.

painted, with curling gingerbread trim line the Main Street with manicured gardens and swinging white gates peppering sharp-looking lawns.

An unknowing observer might ask, "What do people do here?"

Well, they fish. Though many of the palatial homes on Main Street are owned by second homeowners and retirees these days.



## THE RICHEST TOWN IN THE COUNTRY

It was not always so. Wendell Haynie, a former pharmacist who spent the first 18 years of his adulthood fishing, tells me, "In 1912, Reedville was the richest town per capita in the nation." At the turn of the last century, the town grew wealthy on its menhaden harvests. This populous Atlantic coast fish was originally sought for its oil, which was used like whale oil, for lamps. Today, the fish and its oil are more commonly used for bait, animal feed, and oil for manufacturing. "China is the biggest customer," Haynie remarks.

He can remember when Cockrells Creek sported 18 menhaden factories. Today there is only one on the whole Atlantic Coast.

The fishing industry is still alive here though greatly changed, and the tools of the trade have changed as well. At Reedville's Fisherman's Museum, Haynie shows me the types of cotton net and organic cork he used for fishing when he first started in the industry in 1946. "You had to pickle the net three times a day to keep it from rotting," he explains. Now everything is synthetic, and the fishing crews have shrunk as well. "You used to have 30 men on a boat; now there are 12," he remarks.

He says fishing boats went out for anywhere from a day to a week at a time. Crew members received \$19 per month, plus room and board, in the 1930s, allowing the men who worked the boats to send most of that money home to family during the hard years of the Great Depression.



One-time fisherman and long-time member of the Reedville Fisherman's Museum, Wendell Haynie stands in front of a model of the B.H.B. Hubbard, Jr., a local fishing boat that served in World War I.



The historic Elva C. and Claude W. Somers are docked behind the museum.





Peale Rogers is a 4th-generation pound-net fisherman.

## FISHING FOR GENERATIONS

Menhaden aren't the only thing fishermen in Reedville are after these days. Fourth-generation fisherman Peale Rogers says menhaden make up about half his income, but he also fishes for

striped bass, flounder, crabs, and jellyfish. Rogers is a pound-net fisherman, and his dad, brother, and two uncles have also earned their livings on the water.

"We have nylon nets now, hydraulics, and anti-foulant paint," says Rogers, who has one part-time employee as opposed to the old days when he would have needed 12 men to do the work of a typical fishing boat. All of that makes the life of a fisherman easier and the work less labor intensive, but it's still one of

the hardest jobs around. Rogers says the state grants fishermen net locations these days, and he leaves his nets at those locations March through November. "We drive poles into the bottom, hang the nets on them. Then

the fish hit the net. It's a little like herding cattle." He says he fishes right off of Reedville and also has nets about 30 minutes out. Rogers says restoration of the Chesapeake Bay has increased fish numbers, especially for menhaden and crabs.

But even as numbers of fish have increased, the number of those working in fishing has declined. "You used to have to get up super early to get the fish first," Rogers notes. He can remember when the bay and creeks outside Reedville had thousands of pound nets. Today, he says, there are only 80 or 90.

Rogers sells some of his catch to wholesalers but, in the last eight years, has gotten into freezing, packing, and marketing his own fish. "It allows me to make \$8 per box as opposed to \$4," he says.

A lot of the direct sales are local. "People can come to my door and buy fish," he notes, though he's seen the market for a lot of his catch decrease. "Now people are more interested in pre-boned tilapia and mahi-mahi."

Changing demands have diminished opportunities in Reedville, and Rogers is an increasingly rare breed.

"The fishing industry is no longer central to the economy here," Haynie says. "But Reedville is a great place to live."

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## The Town That Reed Built ... Well, Not Quite

It might surprise you to know the town of Reedville was named after a Mainer. In 1874, Capt. Elijah W. Reed moved from Maine to the Chesapeake Bay, wanting to take advantage of the largely untapped bounty of menhaden in the region.

While there were watermen already in what came to be known as Reedville, they learned from Reed how to render oil from the fish by the millions, growing the local industry by leaps and bounds and making millionaires out of

local sea captains. Hence, the reason for all the mansions on Main Street.

Wendell Haynie's ancestors were among those Reed would have run into when he relocated to the bay. His fishing family has been in the community since 1640. "My family got here 200 years before that old carpetbagger," Haynie jokes, though he has to acknowledge the town owed its great prosperity to Reed.

"The town's appearance hasn't changed much," he adds, though

you can explore the history of its shifting economy at The Fisherman's Museum of which Haynie is a founding member. He says pretty much all the museum's artifacts came out of people's attics. One exception is the model of the *B.H.B. Hubbard, Jr.*, one of 11 fishing boats that served in Europe in World War I and the only one that came back. Haynie was among the museum founders who constructed the model. ■

## ● IF YOU GO ...

Before you begin your journey down Route 360 starting in Reedville, check out the **Northern Neck Tourism Commission** online (804-333-1919, [www.northernneck.org](http://www.northernneck.org)). You can obtain a good overview of the history of Reedville and surrounding communities on the Chesapeake Bay at the **Reedville Fisherman's Museum** (504 Main Street, 804-453-6529, [www.rfmuseum.org](http://www.rfmuseum.org)), or if you happen to have ancestry from this region of Virginia, explore the surname index at the **Northumberland County Historical Society** (86 Back Street, Heathsville, 804-580-8581, [www.northumberlandvahistory.org](http://www.northumberlandvahistory.org)).

You can take a day trip to **Tangier Island** from Reedville via **Tangier Rappahannock Cruises** (468 Buzzard Point Road, 804-453-2628, [www.tangiercruise.com](http://www.tangiercruise.com)). Day trips to Tangier are only offered May through October and require reservations.

For lunch, hit **Cockrells Creek Seafood & Deli** (567 Seaboard Road, 804-453-6326, [www.smithpointseafood.com](http://www.smithpointseafood.com)) where you can try the local catch — crab cakes, sea scallops, oysters, and rockfish with hush puppies or cole slaw. You can also pick up fresh fish here to grill at home. It can be a little tricky finding dinner in Reedville in the off-season unless you're in town on a weekend.

If you are, try **The Crazy Crab** (804-453-6789, [www.reedvillemarina.com](http://www.reedvillemarina.com)) on the marina at the end of Main Street for a steak topped with lump crabmeat, or **Tommy's Restaurant** (729 Main Street, 804-453-4666). If you're in town mid-week, **Newsome's Restaurant** (235 Jessie DuPont Memorial Highway, 804-453-9071, [www.newsomesrestaurant.com](http://www.newsomesrestaurant.com)) in nearby Burgess offers reliable downhome fare Monday through Saturday.

Spend the night at **The Coach House Inn at The Gables** (863 Main Street, 804-453-5209, [www.thegablesbb.com](http://www.thegablesbb.com)), where you can elect to stay in the mansion, coach house, or a waterside cottage. Each morning after breakfast, proprietor Barbara Ann Clark gives tours of the unusual mansion, which features the mast of the *John B. Adams* running through the center of the home's top two stories as well as many interior features reminiscent of a sailing ship. Capt. James Fisher and his wife Emily built the house to incorporate his ship. The "crow's nest" at the top of the house is shaped like a compass rose. ■



The Gables was built by Capt. James Fisher and designed to incorporate his ship, the *John B. Adams*. Current owner Barbara Ann Clark gives tours of the home to Coach House Inn guests.



Across the street is the local bank that Capt. Fisher saved with a \$120,000 contribution during the Great Depression.