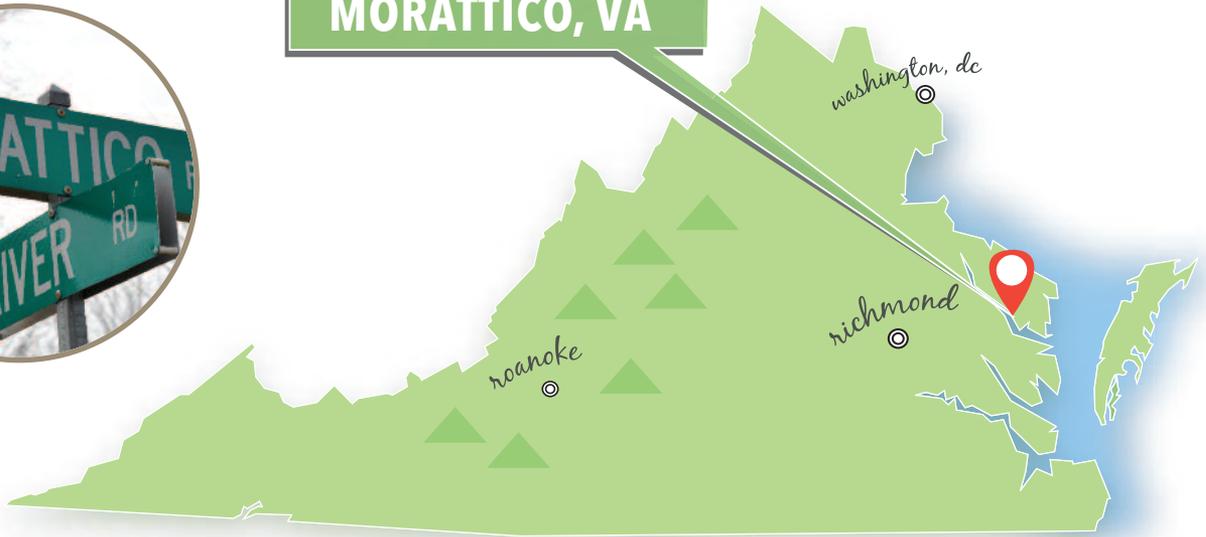




greetings from
MORATTICO, VA



Mary Byrd Martin (above) lives across from the museum in a house built in 1889. "Captain Herbert C. Glenn of Baltimore sailed into Mulberry Bay and saw the house under construction," says Mary. "He bought the property, brought his wife and infant son Dillard back, and they lived on his schooner in the bay behind the house until its completion."

Morattico: Watery Crossroad to the Past

Morattico is a village at the crossroads of three bodies of water. Its soul can be found in the watermen who made their living from the seafood-rich waters and in the residents who honor their legacy.

On your next weekend drive, take a turn into the historic village of Morattico. It remains an unvarnished portrait of the past — of the harsh life of watermen who were crabbers during the summer, oystermen in the fall, and tended pound nets year-round.

Today, the village is a blend of people who love their river community for its simple pleasures and serene lifestyle. Generations of old watermen are neighbors to a new generation of professionals — retirees and weekenders from Richmond to Washington, D.C., who quickly became part of the tight village family.

"This is a true community," says Deborah Edgar, a Richmonder who found the village on a weekend drive 10 years ago. "We borrow sugar, groceries. We take care of each other. When someone is ill, we bring them their meals. We are a family. We squabble like family and love like family."

Deborah used to take day trips to roads that "lead nowhere." When she turned into Morattico she immediately fell in love. "It's like stepping back in time," she says. Deborah is so ingrained in the community of some 125 full- and part-time residents, she became president of the Morattico Waterfront Museum.

HISTORY

Morattico was shaped by people with well-defined senses of self-sufficiency and community.

Village resident Mary Byrd Martin moved from Arlington and soon became an expert on Morattico's illustrious past.

"What's interesting to me as a come-here 15 years ago, is that the village has transformed itself several times," Mary reports. "When you get back to the earliest, earliest history of English planters, Morattico wasn't a watermen's village. Joseph Ball was a planter. They used the water strictly for transportation."



In the early 1900s, watermen occupied almost every home on Riverside Drive on Mulberry Bay.

The village name originates from its beginnings as Morraughtacund Indian grounds, Mary explains. Capt. John Smith's logs show he encountered the tribe on his exploration of the Rappahannock River in 1608. Some 500 acres became known as Morattico Plantation in 1698 under the ownership of Col. Joseph Mattheus Ball, father of Mary Ball, famous as the mother to the nation's first president and grandmother to a Supreme Court justice.

The agricultural property remained with Ball's descendants until 1889 when the Whealton brothers purchased much of it and developed a village, building houses and a steamboat landing. From 1892-1911, it was called Whealton's Wharf.

The turn of the century was a prosperous time when people and most goods were transported by boat. Skiffs were a popular means of getting to church or visiting friends across the creek. By the 1920s, Morattico had become a bustling stop on the steamboat line to Baltimore. The village had the longest wharf on the Rappahannock River, reaching well into its navigable depths. For a dime, young boys would haul passengers' baggage up and down the wharf in small wagons.

"In addition to steamboat traffic, the community boasted a doctor's office, stores, a small cafe, hotel, seafood-processing plant and bottling company," says Mary. The Lord Mott tomato-processing plant was located next to the

wharf. And children attended Frog Pond School on Mulberry Creek Road.

The area's identity as a fishing village was a result of the Tangier Island migration to Morattico after the great storm of 1933 flooded the tiny island in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay and forced some families to relocate to their favorite fishing spot.

The storm also wiped out virtually all the steamboat wharfs on the rivers. As a result of this, coupled with a growing auto industry, the romantic steamboat era had come to an end.

For the village, Tangier families like Parks, Walters and Pruett added to the strength of a self-sustaining village that was now reliant on the rich resources of the water.

FISHING VILLAGE

Perched on the north shore of the Rappahannock River between Lancaster Creek and Mulberry Bay, Morattico is the perfect spot from which to find the area's famous blue crabs. The water's low salinity also makes for a flavorful and meaty oyster.

"My father moved us up here in 1941 from Windmill Point, when I was 1 year old," says retired waterman, Capt. George Shelton. "He was a pound netter. It was easier here than in the bay."

Pound netting is an ancient fishing method where nets are set near the shore. An arrangement of nets, supported with

pine poles pounded into the seabed, guide a variety of fish into a trap where they are scooped out each morning by watermen.

George worked his dad's nets for seven or eight years before he went out on his own and branched into crabbing and oystering on his 41-foot Chesapeake dead-rise.

"I loved it. I was self-employed and free to do what I wanted to do," he says of his 52-year career.

Working on the water meant casting off before daybreak from the backyard pier. The smell of engine exhaust and the steady rumble of motors filled the air as workboats chugged off into the darkness. On a good day, a veteran waterman could tong baskets of oysters or bring up bushels of blue crabs from traps.

These were men who could build their own boats and knit fishing nets. About the only things they could count on were callused hands, a bad back, unpredictable weather, unreliable catches and uneven income.

"I would never let my son become a waterman," George says of his waterman days.

In the first half of the century, the waters around the village were filled with several dozen working boats and processing shacks lined the shore. RCV Seafood was one of the largest crabmeat businesses on the East Coast.



Top left: Morattico Museum replicates the general store of a century ago. Right: Museum president Deborah Edgar found Morattico on an afternoon drive.



The Simple Pleasures of Life on the River

Bottom left: Watch for egrets, muskrats, herons and other wildlife in the marshes. Right: Retired waterman George Shelton

RCV was first an oyster-shucking facility and then a crab-picking plant owned by the late Weston “Bitzie” Conley Jr. In its heyday, pickers produced 600 to 800 pounds of fresh crabmeat a day, while machines picked 1,000 to 1,500 pounds of claw meat. When the area’s oyster and crab populations waned, the once-thriving seafood plant fell on hard times and soon closed. The plant was razed in 2002 and condos were built in its place at Cobert’s Point on Mulberry Bay.

Disease and decades of overfishing resulted in the slow decline of the Chesapeake Bay’s lush seafood beds and eventual closing of most processing facilities. With fewer crabs and oysters, the watermen began to fade away as well.

The ‘70s became the eve of another village transformation. Improved roads and bridges now made for easy access for urban dwellers and retirees in

search of slower-paced living in waterfront communities. Most of the workboats moored to the docks have been replaced with recreational boats. While healthy shellfish are returning to area waters, many residents prefer catching crabs and raising oysters off their docks.

But rather than abandon its culture, Morattico’s newcomers embraced it. Visitors will still find streets lined with old Tidewater vernacular houses from the Whealton era, scenic landscapes of salt marshes and tidal ponds, sweeping river views and acres of rich farmland.

The new settlers know this was a special place and have joined with native families to honor and preserve heritage by establishing the Morattico Waterfront Museum.

For all its flavor of the past, Morattico remains a crossroads to the now and a place a lucky few will spend the future. ■

MORATTICO WATERFRONT MUSEUM

In 2003, the Conleys — Weston, Dorothy and daughter Connie — bought the abandoned General Store and gifted it to the community.

After hundreds of volunteer hours and thousands of donated treasures, a year later the Morattico Museum was born.

The first floor pretty much replicates the store of 1930, with groceries along one wall and clothing on the other. The old stove in the center of the room was a gathering spot for watermen at the end of a long day. Upstairs, their lives unfold in a collection of tools of their trade, photographs and videos. Living histories of working watermen and their life stories are recorded in their own voices.

Histories of village homes are preserved in the museum and led to Morattico’s listing in 2011 as a Historic District on the Virginia Landmarks Register.

Among the Indian artifacts is an axe head found in the marsh that dates back 6,000 to 8,000 years. Upon learning of its age, the museum’s first president, the late Pat McGee, is reported to have said, “Oh, I guess we shouldn’t be using it to prop up the window then.”

Recently, a museum pavilion was added for picnics, summer crab feast and barbecues, and a fall oyster roast. The annual meeting and Brunswick Stew lunch is in March and on July 4th, the parade salutes a proud heritage. Also, members like to ring in the New Year together.

If you come to visit, take the museum’s golf-cart tour, complete with map pointing out the history of significant stops.

The museum is open May through October: Saturdays from noon to 4 p.m. and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. Visit online at www.morattico.org. ■