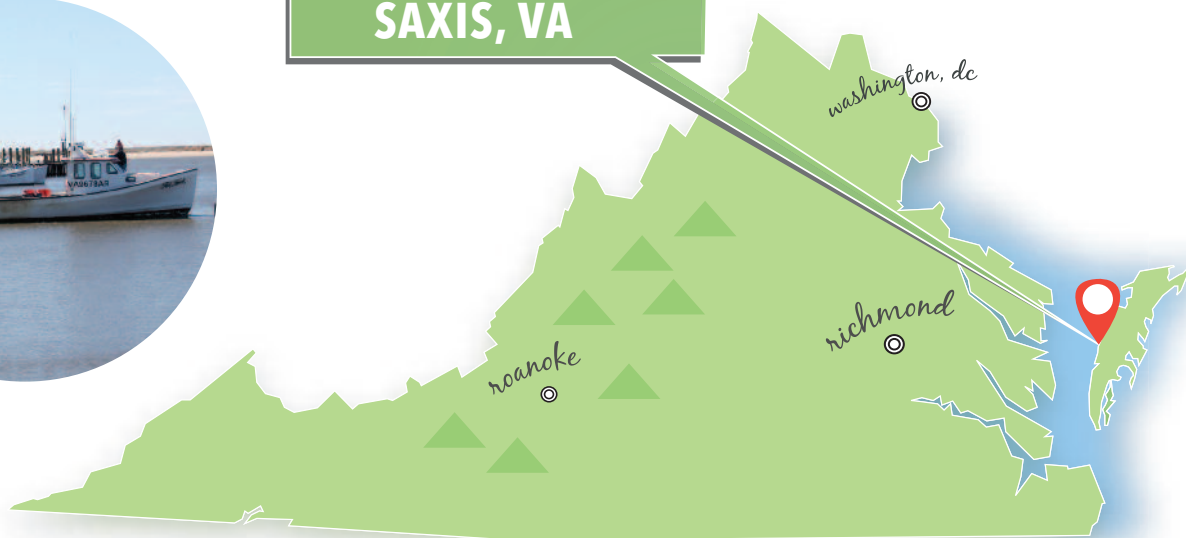




*greetings from*

**SAXIS, VA**



**Captain Bill Bailey**  
(above) prepares to  
tie up his 45-foot  
*Fish Hawk* after a  
day of rockfishing  
out of Saxis.



## Saxis: 'Almost an Island,' a Community with Character

**This Eastern Shore town is where the water meets the land.**

**S**axis is the type of town where you can have a conversation in the middle of the main road and not feel forced to hurry for fear a car might run you over. In Saxis, they call two cars meeting each other rush hour.

One March day recently, 91-year-old Elsworth Linton, the oldest man in this town, paused in the middle of the road to answer a question as he was crossing the street to show a visitor the new location of the Saxis Island Museum.

"Changes? You bet I've seen some changes on Saxis. I used to know everybody who lived here. Now, I hardly know anybody," said Linton, who worked on the waters surrounding Saxis all his life.

"We also have too many regulations today on what you can catch."

Rail thin, with a memory as sharp as ever, Linton said, "I'm looking to live to be 110," moving on to the other side of the street.

A short while later, the visitor is in the kitchen of Kathryn "Kitty" Glenn, 94, the

oldest resident on Saxis who lives in what is said to be the oldest house in town.

A section of her Victorian-style home was built in the late 1800s, and she has lived there 70 years, spending 49 of those years teaching in Accomack County. She was only 20 in 1941 when she first stood in front of a class in the Saxis Grammar School, which she had attended as a child. "I knew every man, woman and child on Saxis then," said Mrs. Glenn, looking at a photograph of her great-grandfather, James C. Weaver, the first-ever superintendent of Accomack County Schools. "Back then, there were children everywhere on Saxis, swimming, crabbing or playing games in the backyards. Now I have an 11-year-old great-grandson on Saxis, and there's no one else his age here."

Mrs. Glenn, who was born in 1922 when there were almost three times more residents than today's 220, also laments there are no grocery stores on Saxis. "You can't even buy a loaf of bread here. I remember when there were 10 or 12 stores here. We even had a movie theater once."



MIKE SWOLSKI PHOTO

An aerial view of Saxis Island shows it's not actually an island, surrounded on three sides by water and marsh on the remainder.

No one passes through Saxis to get somewhere else. The tiny hamlet is 11 miles from Route 13, the last two miles a narrow causeway bordered by marsh. The road bears left in town, passing the sign proclaiming that the town was founded in 1664. It wends its way past an assortment of houses, many with crab pots stacked in the backyard, and ends at the harbor with a panoramic view of Pocomoke Sound, and not far beyond, the Chesapeake Bay. With the exception of a few short side roads that branch off Saxis Road, a visitor has seen virtually all of Saxis upon reaching the harbor.

Though quaint in its own way, Saxis does not host nearly as many tourists as better-known Eastern Shore of Virginia islands such as Chincoteague and Tangier. Strictly speaking, Saxis is not actually an island, as defined in Kirk Mariner's 2011 book, *Saxis, Almost an Island*, because it is surrounded by water on three sides and marsh on the fourth.

According to Mariner, the first white man to see Saxis probably was none other than Capt. John Smith, who explored this region in 1608. Saxis was first settled by Robert Sykes in 1666, two years after the sign at the entrance of the town proclaims, meaning this year the town will celebrate its 350th anniversary. By 1670, it was owned by one man, William Anderson.

But when the first post office opened in 1884, the postmaster gave the town the name "Saxis," a variation of Sykes.

Moody "M.K." Miles played a major part in Mariner's book and is considered by most to be the town historian. He also was heavily involved in opening the town's museum in September of 2013, serving as the president of the board of directors. The Saxis Island Museum is in one half of the post office building, a 13-foot by 20-foot room, and contains artifacts collected by a small group of citizens. Miles said there was a big debate about whether to include

the word "Island" as part of the name of the museum, adding the earliest maps always referred to Saxis as an island.

Miles helped to obtain a \$100,000 grant from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, with the Eastern Shore Community Foundation providing 10 percent of the funds. The grant will allow the group to move the museum to the Crockett Store, more than 100 years old and the oldest store building left standing on the island. The store is owned by Jim Lewis, the vice president of the board and another key member of the committee. Lewis, Miles and Hannah Tull Glisson, sister of former mayor Charles Tull, who suggested the idea of the museum before he died in 2010, provided most of the items currently stored in the museum. The restoration, due to be completed by this summer, will leave the wooden building looking much like it did a century ago.

"We hope the museum will attract visitors to the island interested in our history, but we are not looking for too many tourists. We like our slow pace of life," said Miles. "Mainly, we are just looking to preserve our history, and if someone with a connection to Saxis brings their children to see a bit of the town's past, our mission has been worthwhile."

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Top left: Mark Miles, now 74, still works as many as 150 pots a day during crabbing season. Right: M.K. Miles is considered by many the town historian and is president of the board of directors for the Saxis Island Museum. Center: The crab soup, topped with chunks of crabmeat and garnish, is among the favorites at Captain's E. Hurricane Grill and Tiki Bar. Bottom left: Elsworth Linton, 91, in front of the Crockett Store, a century-old building that will be the site of the Saxis Island Museum, now located in a room next to the post office. Right: Mayor Denise Drewer has led Saxis through a tumultuous time with two major storms battering Saxis since she took office in 2010.

Saxis Mayor Denise Drewer echoed that sentiment about not wanting too much change. "We want to make Saxis a cleaner, nicer place to live," she said, adding that the influx of out-of-area residents over the past 20 years has helped achieve that goal. Although the listed population of the town is 220, Drewer said it is closer to 180, and about half of the landowners have out-of-town mailing addresses. "They are not looking to change things or control everything. They came to Saxis because they like the way of life here. In many cases, they have renovated homes or torn down dilapidated structures and replaced them with new homes."

Drewer said the beach at the outskirts of town has become popular with visitors looking for sea glass. "We placed a couple of benches there and hope to establish a small park where visitors can kayak, hike or simply enjoy the view."

In the past few years, the town has started a yard sale, an oyster roast and an antique show. "Our last oyster roast attracted over 300 people. We couldn't

have done all this without the help of volunteers, many of them out-of-area residents," said Drewer.

For all the changes noted by the town's two oldest residents, Saxis still remains much the same in many ways as it was a century ago — a working waterman's town where "following the water" is a way of life.

Mark Miles, 74, works as many as 150 crab pots a day during the summer and was busy one day this spring putting the finishing touches on new pots. "What would I do if I retired?" asked Miles. "If I stopped working, I might just wither away."

Bill Bailey returned to the harbor one day recently with a load of rockfish he and his crew had caught that morning on his 45-foot boat, the *Fish Hawk*. Bailey said he fishes until he reaches his commercial quota, this day bringing in several tubs of 15- to 20-pound stripers. During the oyster season winter months, the harbor is almost full with boats due to the easy access to nearby oyster grounds.

Many of the watermen and other island residents gather at one of the store's two restaurants for meals. Martha Linton has been operating Martha's Kitchen dockside at the wharf for about 10 years. She's been known to toss wrapped sandwiches to watermen as they pass by in their boats. Serving breakfast starting at 5 a.m. during the summer months, Linton said she enjoys the banter with her customers, many of them regulars. Her oyster and clam fritters hang over the plate and make the bun look ridiculously small. "Years ago, I saw a cook named Midge make fritters that way on Chincoteague, and I said to myself, 'If I ever had a restaurant I would make them like Midge,'" said Linton.

A bit down the street is Captain's E. Hurricane Grill and Tiki Bar. A visitor might question if he is still in Saxis upon first seeing the colorful Tiki Bar at the entrance. At the rear are several booths and tables, where seafood diners enjoy fresh seafood, with crab soup, topped with chunks of crabmeat and garnish, among

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the favorites. Joy Bardinelli started the restaurant with her husband Frank last August and is looking forward to her first full summer, with plans to have a waterfront patio that can be accessed by boaters.

Shore Seafood, the town's largest business, is also located adjacent to the harbor. Started by Greg Linton and Andy Drewer in 1981, Shore Seafood is a wholesale seafood distributor best known for the crabs and oysters it ships all across the nation. "We can pack soft-shell crabs one day and the next day they could be on the lunch menu in Los Angeles," said Drewer. Linton said the company employs about 30 people, taking on additional people in the summer.

Saxis is also a survivor, having been battered by Hurricane Floyd in 1999 — the same year a fire destroyed Saxis Methodist Church, now rebuilt with the help of many volunteers — and then again in back-to-back years when Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy devastated the area in 2011 and 2012. All three storms brought severe tidal flooding to Saxis, only 3 feet above sea level in many areas.

With erosion threatening much of the town, former mayor Charles Tull sought funds to install eight breakwaters costing



Martha Linton at Martha's Kitchen with one of the famous clam fritters that are larger than the plate and make the bun look ridiculously small.

\$3.2 million along the west side of town. However, the town would have to come up with a third of the money. He died before the money could be found.

Drewer, on the town council since 1995, succeeded Tull in 2010 as mayor and was able to secure funding from the Virginia Port Authority for an almost 600-foot jetty completed in 2014 to protect the town's harbor. The project cost about \$300,000 with no expense to the town. The harbor is dredged by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers every eight years or so to keep the channel cleared in the harbor. The largest tract of land in town is a 12-acre spoil site used by the Corps of Engineers to dump material.

Mayor Drewer looks to the future with hope but also a practical point of view. "We are still losing land in different places on Saxis, but we know funding for a seawall for a small town like ours will be difficult to get. We know other areas were hard hit, too," said Drewer. "We understand about priorities. We are always looking for ways to control erosion, but we are also focusing on smaller projects that are realistic. We have received a grant for a septic system, bathrooms and a pavilion at the harbor. We are just doing the best we can with what we have." ■



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