



A resilient community looking to make the best of what lies ahead.



Nassawadox, Virginia

This Eastern Shore gem of a town, between two waters, is also a town between two eras.

Nassawadox gets its name from the Native American phrase for "land between two waters."

The town of approximately 500 people on Virginia's Eastern Shore — slightly less than a half-square mile — is bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by the Chesapeake Bay. It sits on Route 13, the main artery on the 75-mile-long peninsula, and is divided into bayside and seaside areas on either side of the highway.

Today, Nassawadox finds itself a town between two eras. In late February, Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital closed its doors in Nassawadox and opened a new \$85 million facility in Onancock, about 20 miles north. Citing the desire to be in a more centralized area of the Eastern Shore and a need for a more modern facility, the hospital's board of trustees voted in 2010 to relocate the facility, taking with it a cancer center and many medical practitioners. An urgent-care center is in the plans for Nassawadox.

The town had been the site of the Shore's only hospital since 1928, when Northampton-Accomack Memorial Hospital opened about the time of the Great Depression. Dr. William J. Sturgis Sr., known as the father of the hospital, led an effort to raise \$150,000 for construction of a 25-bed facility.

In 1903, while traveling by train from

Baltimore, where he had taken a patient for surgery, Dr. Sturgis had read an article about the success of the first American community hospital in Missouri. He devoted the next quarter-century to raising funds for a hospital on the Eastern Shore.

"Nassawadox has been the hub of the medical community for 88 years," says Tommy Rayfield, who with his family has operated Rayfield's Pharmacy for 42 years. Rayfield is only the third owner of the town pharmacy, which first opened in 1913.

Now 75, Rayfield has no thoughts of retiring or leaving Nassawadox once the hospital relocates. "We have too many loyal customers to pick up and leave," he says. "As long as I can stand, I will be here."

Rayfield, who was born at Cobb Station at nearby Cheriton and delivered at home by a family doctor who charged his father \$5, met his wife Francie at the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond.

"I always knew I wanted to live in the country," says Rayfield. "I had an opportunity to go into research, but I like people and running an independent

pharmacy seemed like the life for me."

It was easy for Mrs. Rayfield to sign on. She is also a pharmacist and in the early years of the business, juggled running the pharmacy and raising two sons while her husband also served as the hospital pharmacist. She is the daughter of a pharmacist whose sister was a pharmacist. Both of the Rayfields' sons are pharmacists, and one is married to a pharmacist. The other son married a doctor.

"We always say we are a family heavily involved in drugs," says Rayfield with a hearty laugh.

TOWN WILL NEED TO ADAPT

Many residents feel Nassawadox will face challenges without the economic benefits the hospital brings to the area. There may be no better example of a survivor than Franco Nocera, who 25 years ago opened Little Italy Ristorante in town.

Born in Italy, Franco was only 9 when he saw his father die from injuries suffered in World War II. His mother, unable to support Franco, sent him to an orphanage. At age 17, Franco emigrated to America.

Knowing no English, he got a job loading and unloading ships and eventually became a supervisor at Maxwell House Coffee in Hoboken, New Jersey, going to school at night to learn English. On a rare vacation to Cherrystone



The Nassawadox facility closed in February.



Drury and Patsy Stith

Campground on Virginia's Eastern Shore, Franco and his family discovered they loved the area and all it had to offer.

So, along with his wife Cathy and their three daughters, Franco opened Little Italy in 1992. Over the past quarter-century, Franco has become a local celebrity with a weekly radio show; his restaurant often hosts benefits for local causes.

Now 69 with his three children grown and having moved to other careers, and his wife missing time at the restaurant recently due to health issues, Franco says he is tiring of the long hours but undaunted about the future.

"The hospital made a good business decision. I would have done the same thing if I were in their place. At my age, I will do fine. We have steady customers and get a lot of tourists in the summer."

At the other end of the age spectrum, Josh Lattimore, who bought Northampton Lumber Co. 10 years ago at the age of 28, having worked at the building supply store since he was a teenager, is charged with energy to promote Nassawadox's future while also having a healthy respect for its history.

Lattimore says he recently discovered records that show Northampton Lumber Co. was founded in 1887 by the Walker and Holland families, not 1898 as originally believed. Lattimore, who purchased the business from Pat Widgeon, is only the third owner of the business, designated on the National Register of Historic Places.

In its early years, the company included

a steam-driven sawmill. Timber was hauled by teams of mules to be milled on site.

"I am told the steam-driven sawmill is the largest remaining of its kind on the East Coast," says Lattimore.

Lattimore is widely praised by town leaders for his efforts cleaning up the property where the restored sawmill sits, in addition to clearing railroad property on Route 13 and overseeing a major renovation of the store three years ago. He also has a refurbished railcar on his property that draws visitors.

"The town looks much better when you ride by on Route 13 because of Josh," says Jenny Floyd, who has owned and operated The Smiling Dolphin for 42 years. Her shop sells artwork, art supplies and picture frames. "He not only keeps his property clean, he's helping others to spruce up their property."

Floyd says business is not as good as it once was at her shop, but she loves her work and her customers. "I have a more relaxed schedule now and really don't want to think about getting rid of all this stuff," looking at frames, artwork and assorted art supplies that fill the shop.

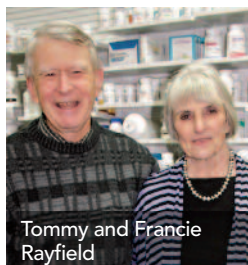
MEDICINE, LEADERSHIP INTERTWINED

With the hospital such an integral part of Nassawadox, it is not surprising that

several of the leading citizens are from the medical field.

Dr. Arthur Carter, a native of neighboring Franktown, was an OB-GYN at the hospital for a dozen years. He says he stopped counting how many babies he delivered in his career when he reached 6,000. Dr. Carter says his most memorable experiences from the hospital "were the happy faces and smiles of parents seeing and holding their newborn baby for the first time, in addition to the pride and satisfaction of the nurses and aides of the hospital staff for another job well done."

Long retired from his medical practice but active in community affairs, Dr. Carter is the grandson of Shore native Peter J. Carter, who was a prominent African-



Tommy and Francie Rayfield



Franco and Cathy Nocera



Josh Lattimore

American politician in the decades following the Civil War. Carter escaped from slavery and then served with the U.S. Colored Infantry during the Civil War. In 1871 he won election to the House of Delegates representing Northampton County, and was re-elected three more times.

Dr. Carter, who has long been a champion for racial harmony and awareness, is optimistic that Nassawadox



A Town Between Two Eras



Clockwise, from upper left: Dr. Arthur Carter was an OB-GYN at Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital for a dozen years. He stopped counting how many babies he delivered in his career when he reached 6,000. • The old sawmill still stands in a building partially refurbished by a grant and now the property is maintained by Northampton Lumber Co. • The main street of Nassawadox is named Rogers Drive after John T. Rogers, who once owned most of the land where the town is now located. • Jenny Floyd has operated the Smiling Dolphin for the past 42 years.

“will continue to have viable small businesses that offer various and needed services to the area.”

Dr. Drury Stith and his wife Patsy, a retired physical therapist, have lived in the former home of hospital founder Dr. William Sturgis for 41 years. Now 73, oncologist Dr. Stith retired once, but it lasted only three months before he resumed his short walk across the street to Shore Cancer Center.

With the cancer center also moving north with the hospital, many of Dr. Stith's

Patsy Stith, who retired 12 years ago when her first grandchild was born, served 10 years on the council before becoming the town's mayor for 10 years. She is now a council member who has always had the town's interest at heart. She is most proud of helping residents who were living in substandard housing move to new apartments that provided amenities lacking in their previous homes.

“When I moved here, I said I would give it two years because I grew up in the city, but there was no place I felt as comfortable as I was here, including where I grew up,” says Patsy, who enjoys painting in her spare time. “We've had a good life here,

raising four children, all educated in public schools.”

TOWN HISTORIAN

Jack Hallett is also on the town council and regarded by many as the town's historian. “I guess they call me that because I've lived in town about as long as anyone,” says Hallett, 73, and living in the same house where his father and grandfather once resided.

Hallett's great-grandfather was John T. Rogers, who once owned all the land between Seaside and Bayside roads, where

much of Nassawadox is located now. The town's main road that runs east to west is Rogers Drive. Rogers, who died in the early 1900s, is credited with naming the town.

With respect to the impact of the hospital leaving, Hallett says, “It will work or it won't. It's a lot easier to write history than to write the future.”

Among those uncertainties about Nassawadox's future is who will fill the mayor's seat. Ed Gibb served two-and-half years and stayed on two more months when no one ran last November. But he resigned at the end of January, saying he needed to devote more time to his general contracting business.

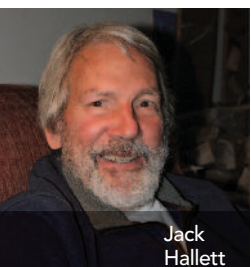
As of January, neither Gibb nor other council members were certain who would be the town's next mayor.

Felton Sessoms, who returned to his native Nassawadox after earning a college degree in biology and then serving in Vietnam while in the Navy, has long been involved in town matters.

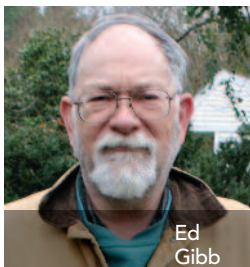
“I had friends and family who said I was crazy to come back because I had good opportunities elsewhere, but I wanted to make a difference here.”

Today a minister at age 69, Sessoms took over his father's grocery business in town before embarking on a 27-year career as an environmental health specialist with the county while also serving three terms each as a councilman and mayor. He

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Jack
Hallett



Ed
Gibb



Felton
Sessoms

patients feared he would retire again. But not so. “I guess I will have to drive to work,” he says, “but there are too many exciting things happening with the treatment of cancer to retire now. The medical advances we are seeing keep me motivated.”

Dr. Stith has cut back to two days a week, leaving time for his hobbies of growing orchids, playing in a local bluegrass band and building a huge, outdoor train set. He also was elected for the first time to the town council, where his wife is a veteran.

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believes there was a time the town could have been more proactive in keeping the hospital at its current location.

"There were some grants available that could have helped provide a wastewater treatment plant for the hospital, but we didn't pursue them aggressively enough," he believes. "They might have stayed if we had not been so conservative. I think the hospital leaving will not only affect Nassawadox, but the entire county. It is Northampton's second-largest employer."

NASSAWADOX TREASURES

Although kids might not choose sides and play pick-up games like they did a generation or two ago, more than 800 youth play organized baseball, softball, soccer, football and volleyball at Randy Custis Memorial Park, a 31-acre complex directly behind the Northampton Fire and Rescue station in the town limits.

The park was the dream of Randy Custis' parents, Phil and Barbara, after their son was killed by a drunk driver at age 9 in 1978.

Today, volunteer coaches spend countless hours working with youth, maybe none more than John Gorman, who coaches

LAND BETWEEN ■ N A S S A W A D O X , V I R G I N I A ■ TWO WATERS

soccer at the youth level and also led the county high-school soccer team to the state championship game last year.

Tyler Webb, a Nassawadox native and a baseball player who got his start in T-ball at the park, is now on the Pittsburgh Pirates' major league roster.

Just on the outskirts of Nassawadox is Brownsville, a historic farm that remained in the Upshur family from 1652 to 1978, when the Nature Conservancy purchased the 1,000-acre property as the headquarters for the Virginia Coast Reserve, which includes 14 undeveloped barrier islands along the coast of Virginia's Eastern Shore. The islands serve to protect the mainland from storms; they encompass over 40,000 acres of pristine salt marshes, vast tidal mudflats, shallow bays and productive forest uplands. It is the longest expanse of coastal wilderness remaining on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

Another treasure for Nassawadox is

Northampton Free Library, a branch of Eastern Shore Public Library that provides residents an accessible place to learn, meet and pursue a variety of activities. Among the leading advocates for building the Nassawadox branch, which opened in 2006, were noted husband and wife authors David Poyer and Lenore Hart Poyer.

As town historian Hallett notes, the future is not so easy to predict. One glimpse into Nassawadox's past is a YouTube video of the James E. Douglas home movies from 1939-'41 that shows the busy nature of the town when the railroad was active and there were car dealerships, a bank and grocery stores in Nassawadox.

Whatever the future of Nassawadox, about to begin an era without the hospital in town for the first time in almost a century, its leaders appear to be resilient and looking to make the best of whatever lies ahead. ■



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