

DOWN HOME SERIES

by Bill Sterling
Publisher, **The Eastern Shore News**

During 1998, we're making our way around Virginia, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this, our fifth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Onancock

This Eastern Shore town is bustling with retail revitalization, as tourists are drawn by its water views and its friendly residents.



BILL STERLING PHOTO

DAVE TEMENS PHOTO

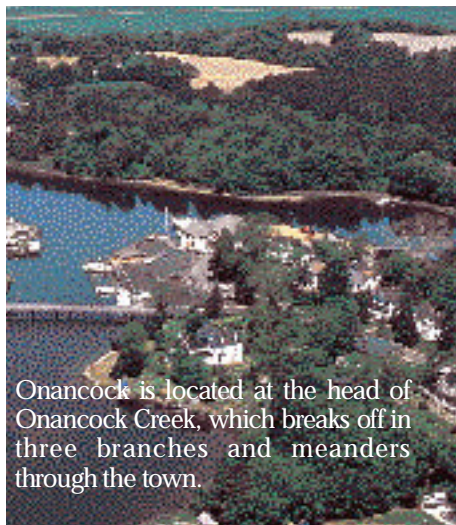


Kerr Place, built in 1799, is the home of the Eastern Shore Historical Society.

Ten years ago **David and Karen Tweedie** ventured into Onancock on a chance trip after tiring of the hustle and bustle of vacationing in Virginia Beach. Today, they run a bed-and-breakfast, an antique shop, a mail-order business selling sign-language jewelry and have just reopened historic Hopkins and Bro. Store as a waterfront restaurant and general store. Onancock has that kind of effect on people.

"We didn't plan to get this involved," says Karen Tweedie, a teacher of the deaf for 17 years. "After all, we were looking to get away from the hectic pace of Northern Virginia, but one thing led to another. We were hoping if we fixed up one storefront, others would follow. Here, we feel we can have a significant impact."

Others have followed — and the impact *has* been significant. Onancock has enjoyed a revitalization in the past decade that has filled empty storefronts and brought new-found prosperity. Recently opened specialty shops like Miguel Bizzotto's leather goods store stand next to C.D. Marsh's Jewelers, a mainstay that has been located in town 45 years.



Onancock is located at the head of Onancock Creek, which breaks off in three branches and meanders through the town.

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Jim Williams, the newly elected mayor of Onancock, is a retired nuclear engineer who believes everyone should serve as a public servant for a short while and then return to private life. He is pictured with his sailboat, **Lobo**, moored on one of the three branches of Onancock Creek that cut through the town.



BILL STERLING PHOTO

"It's been great for business" says **Cliff Marsh**. "More and more people are coming into town. Years ago the town was the retail shopping center of the Shore. People would come from miles around to shop, but the shopping center on Route 13 took much of the business away. These new shops have been good for the town."

There are new shops which offer antiques, fine gift items, carvings and pottery — then there is the House of Deals, where it is said, "You find everything under the sun here, including a left-handed monkey wrench."

Rosalie Lewis laughs when she hears that, but adds, "We always like to say if you can't find it here, we will get it for you." At the House of Deals you can eyeball a garden rake or plop down in an assortment of easy chairs. On the way out, you can buy bait for a fishing trip and pick up some tomatoes picked that morning.

In back, Rosalie's husband, **Bob**, will gather with his friends for a card game and some lively discussion, which includes some real news and plenty of truth stretching.

Bill Phillips has been selling pastries for

Rosalie Lewis (far left) can sell you anything from a garden rake to an easy chair at the House of Deals. Cliff Marsh (left) opened his jewelry store in Onancock 45 years ago.

50 years, but instead of slowing down, he recently moved his Corner Bakery shop to Market Street, the main thoroughfare in the town of 1,500 residents. Phillips says business is better than ever. "Some mornings there's not room for everyone to sit. There's a mix of new and old people who come in. The town was down for awhile, but things are looking up now," says Phillips.

Ralston's Ruminations

Fred Ralston, whose roots in town go back over 100 years and who is regarded as something of a "character," makes it a daily habit to drop by the bakery and ruminate with some local cronies. If you happen to hear their conversation, one rule of thumb is *never* to take them too seriously.

"We've solved all the world problems in our sessions," says Ralston, "except for maybe the disposal of radioactive material. But we're working on it."

Ralston, who spent 30 years as the town's postmaster before retiring to spend more time on his four boats, enjoys meeting the people who visit and sometimes move into town. "I don't put much stock in this business of natives and come-heres. Everyone has something to offer," says Ralston, "and you can learn something from everyone."

Like Ralston, Mayor **Starr Mason** has

lived on Market Street for half a century. She has also been the town's mayor for the past 14 years. She will be leaving office at the end of June, not long before the crowning achievement of her career is completed. Since Mason assumed office, she has seen every house in town hooked up to water and sewer service and has overseen the construction of new sidewalks in some sections of town.

Now, a \$2.4 million Market Street widening project will also involve replacing old town water and sewage pipes and improving storm drainage. Other improvements include new sidewalks and fire hydrants. Grants from the Virginia Department of Transportation and other sources will pay for more than \$2 million of the project, leaving a relatively small burden on town taxpayers for such major improvements.

"I went to Richmond eight times to help get funding and approval for this project," says Mason. "It's torn up the road this spring, but hopefully when it is finished everyone will be pleased with the results. I hated that we lost a 100-year-old tree, but I guess that's part of progress."

Being progressive while honoring the past is the agenda for **Jim Williams**, who assumes the position of mayor as of July 1 after running unopposed in the May election.

Although he has a long and impressive resume, having served on a number of boards and committees in Accomack County after retiring to Onancock seven years after a career as a nuclear engineer and administra-

tor, Williams may be proudest of the fact he has never held political office.

“Professional politicians often lose sight of what’s really important. I believe in the Jeffersonian principle of government that says everyone should be a public official for a time and then go back to private life,” says Williams. “It’s easy to sit back and criticize what others may do — and I’ve done my share of that, but there is a civic responsibility to run for office and contribute. It is my turn to do what I can.”

Williams wants to promote Onancock’s reputation as a friendly, water-oriented, rural village and preserve the town’s proud heritage as a historical setting.

Indeed, Onancock, founded in 1680, is one of the oldest towns in Virginia. And long before the early colonists from the western shore crossed the Chesapeake Bay to explore the land to the east, Indians had settled near the head of this deepwater creek and given it the name Onancock, which some newcomers find difficult to pronounce. (It’s oh-NAN-cock.)

Anne Nock, who wrote a comprehensive history of Onancock complete with numerous photographs which depict the town’s picturesque views and magnificent architecture, now serves as the unofficial ambassador of Onancock from her home on a high hill overlooking the town’s harbor. She often greets sailors from distant ports and offers guidance and even rides to the grocery store at the other end of town.

In her book, *Child of the Bay, Past, Present and Future*, Nock explains that her effort was not only to record history. “Onancock has a unique story to tell. My hope is that as present-day residents learn more about their heritage, they will come to realize how precious it is. And, that when those who live in other small towns or who once lived in small towns peruse the book, they, too, will have a greater appreciation of their heritage and a greater concern for the future for all of us. Wherever we live, we are responsible for the well-being of the world.”

Onancock Creek offers deep water from the mouth to the slips at Hopkins & Bro. Store. This property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and has been a hub of activity since it was first opened in 1842. Steamboats formerly transported produce and passengers to Baltimore and beyond from the store. The store itself still has all of its original counters, shelving and fixtures.

Operated from 1842 to 1966 by four

generations of the Hopkins family, the store is now owned by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. The APVA has recently made major improvements to the property for the new tenants. The Tweedies are joined by **Michael and Ellen Stephano** as partners in the waterfront restaurant and general store. The store will include provisions for boaters and tourists. It will also be a booking point for daily boat trips to Tangier Island, a trip of about 45 minutes.

Tangier Island, a quaint Chesapeake Bay island with about 700 residents, gained national attention recently when it turned down filming of a Warner Bros. movie starring Paul Newman and Kevin Costner because the script contained scenes depicting sex, cursing and drinking.

Thespians who *can* be seen — live and up close — perform at North Street Theatre in Onancock, where director Terry Bliss stages some ambitious plays involving local talent.

Until recently the Hopkins House, just a short walk from the harbor, was the home of Virginia Hopkins Phillips for her entire life — all 102 years. She was born in the house, married there and lived there until her death in 1993, a feat recognized by the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

The Hopkins House is only one example of fine architecture in Onancock. The most outstanding example would be Kerr Place, open to the public year-round. Owned by the Eastern Shore of Virginia Historical Society, Kerr Place is a National and Virginia Historic Landmark which was built in 1799. The beautifully proportioned building stands out as an authentic Federal translation of early Roman architecture. Now just one year short of its 200th birthday, Kerr Place is undergoing the final phase of more than two years of restoration and frequently hosts community events that are educational as well as social in nature.

The Onancock Firemen’s Carnival each summer provides a social as well as a fund-raising event for the town’s volunteer fire department. The carnival lasts two weeks and always includes a crowd-pleasing fireworks display on the Fourth of July.

Adjacent to the carnival grounds is an athletic complex with five fields, on land owned by the fire department. From early in the spring to late in the fall, hundreds of baseball and softball players participate in leagues including players from ages 5 to 15.

Nearby is the Trent Serini Memorial Field, named for the coach who guided

Onancock High School through some memorable seasons, including an appearance in the state championship football game in 1978. The school has served as the Onancock Learning Center for the county since consolidation moved high school students to a new facility on Route 13, and the field is home to the Accomack Soccer League. On fall Saturdays, players in brightly colored jerseys compete in three soccer leagues.

On Sundays, many of the town’s residents gather at one of the seven churches in town. Onancock is also rich in religious history. The Cokesbury United Methodist Church, no longer active, dates from 1788 and was the first congregation to organize in Onancock.

Not far from that church is a bronze marker honoring Francis Makemie, regarded as the founder of Presbyterianism in America. Makemie came to Virginia from Ireland and settled in Onancock in 1687. He married Naomi Anderson, whose family lived just across the street from the marker. The Naomi Makemie Presbyterian Church, founded in 1883, bears her name.

Onancock’s future, like its past, is linked to its blessed location at the head of Onancock Creek. Three branches of the creek meander into and around the town, providing considerable water frontage for the town’s residential and commercial districts.

Those districts are relatively close. In fact, everything in Onancock is close to each other. “What I love about this town,” says Karen Tweedie, recalling the gridlock of Northern Virginia, “is that I almost never drive my car. I can walk to my office, I can walk to the post office, to the theater, to the Social Security office, to any number of restaurants. If the supermarket was just a little bit closer, I might not ever drive my car.”

For those who desire to stay overnight, Onancock also has three bed-and-breakfasts and two other homes offering rooms. An award-winning motel is nearby on Route 13.

After all, after 318 years, Onancock has developed a lot of history to see and amenities to experience as its welcome mat draws more and more visitors...many of whom become residents. ■

To Find Out More

For further information, visit the Onancock Town Hall on North Street or call 757-787-3363. The Eastern Shore Chamber of Commerce can also offer information about Onancock and surrounding areas at 757-787-2460. Onancock also has a Web site page at www.onancock.com that offers a list of businesses and places to stay.