

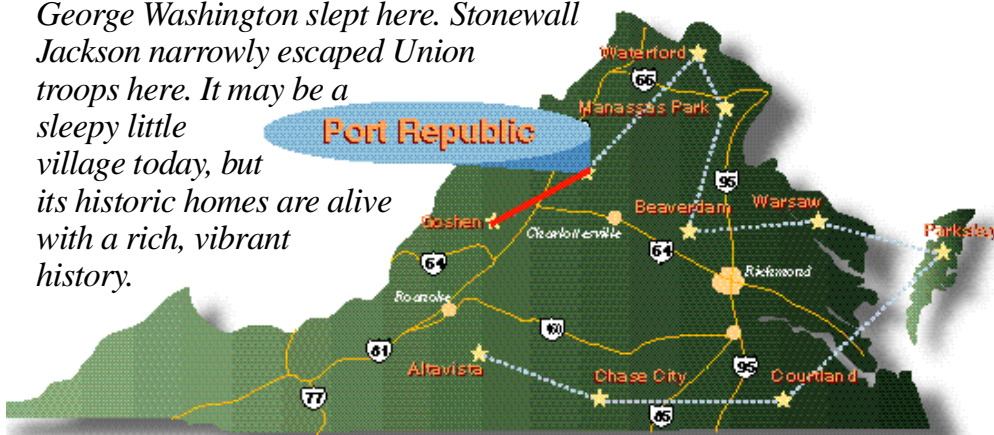
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Garrett Johnston,
Contributing Writer

During 1999, 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 second stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Port Republic

George Washington slept here. Stonewall Jackson narrowly escaped Union troops here. It may be a sleepy little village today, but its historic homes are alive with a rich, vibrant history.



While on a driving tour of Port Republic, guide **Anita Cummins** and a visitor approach a majestic white house on a hill. Farms surround this twin-columned home, creating a scene from an era seemingly long past. The historic aura is not by coincidence. Known as the Bogota (pronounced Ba-go-ta), the house is the very same one that provided a vantage point for spectators at the Battle of Port Republic on June 9, 1862.

"The Strayer sisters watched the battle from the porch," says Cummins, president of the Society of Port Republic Preservationists.

This (left) is the only pre-Civil War barn left in Port Republic. Union troops burned the town's other farms in 1864. The barn, which rests on the original 19th-century German foundation, was spared after a local six-year-old girl begged a Union colonel not to burn it. Stonewall Jackson used hay from the barn to burn the bridge over the Shenandoah River during the Battle of Port Republic. (Below, right) Anita Cummins, the president of the Society of Port Republic Preservationists, stands outside her home that was built in 1856. (Below, left) A view looking up at the "Coaling," where some of the fiercest action of the battle took place. Union cannons occupied this key strategic spot at the beginning of the battle, but Confederate troops, led by the Louisiana Tigers, eventually overran them.





GARRETT JOHNSTON PHOTOS



Residents of the Bogota house (left) watched the Battle of Port Republic from the porch on June 9, 1862. (Above) The structure that now houses the Port Republic Museum was built in 1830. Stonewall Jackson paid respects to Confederate General Turner Ashby, a local hero, at this house.

And history doesn't dwell just at the Bogota house. This tiny, unincorporated town, just 10 miles southeast of Harrisonburg, is steeped in the past. Historic homes are seemingly as abundant in Port Republic as the hay bales in the rolling fields surrounding the town; at least 17 of the town's 500 homes date back to the 19th century.

Within eyesight of Bogota sits the Lynnwood house, where George Washington stayed in 1784 to discuss the navigability of the Shenandoah River with Thomas Lewis, the King's First Surveyor. During the Civil War, almost 80 years later, Lewis' descendants nursed injured Confederate troops in the home. Like the Bogota house, descendants of the original builders still reside at Lynnwood.

History Abounds in "The Village"

About a mile down the Shenandoah River from the Lynnwood home lies the main part of Port Republic. The area, known as "The Village," features many of the town's historic homes, including one that dates back to 1790. In Colonial times, and even as part of the fledgling United States, the town was home to a thriving boating community; hence the name "Port"

Republic. Flat-bottomed boats used to float from Port Republic to Harpers Ferry or Georgetown, carrying timber, farming and mining products and goods manufactured at Port Republic businesses.

The first flour mill was built on the river in 1746 and an act of the General Assembly officially recognized the town in 1802, setting up the layout that The Village still enjoys today. In 1832, 22 businesses existed in Port Republic. Thirty years later, at least 12 mills sat in silent witness to

Stonewall Jackson's narrow escape from Federal troops on Main Street just before the Battle of Port Republic, the last battle in Jackson's famed Shenandoah Valley Campaign.

Except for the post office, the businesses and the town government are long gone, a product of Civil War destruction, the railroad and the Great Flood of 1887. Cummins is the closest the town has to an official representative, though the mayor's post is open to the person who donates the most

This was once the home of the first free black to live in Port Republic after the Civil War. The addition on the right was built in the same log style as the original structure.



money in a given year to the Society of Preservationists. With it comes one responsibility: lighting the town Christmas tree.

Many people in this small community today are middle-aged empty-nesters and senior citizens. With little left besides a neighborly atmosphere, the town, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1981, feeds off its heritage. A Preservationist brochure on the town states, "Today, it is a pleasant little residential community remembering its rich past."

And that seems to be the way residents prefer it.

"Everybody likes it...because it's a friendly community," says **Ruby Rankin**, who has lived in The Village since 1963. "Everybody knows everybody else. It's a pretty good place to live."

The natural beauty of the Shenandoah Valley has attracted many from outside the state. **Steve Smith** moved to Port Republic from Florida after he and his wife hiked the Appalachian Trail on their honeymoon two years ago.

"(We) had decided that we would end up in the Shenandoah Valley. It turned out we stopped in Harrisonburg first, and then found this place," Smith says. "My wife had pretty much lived down in Florida all her life. I just wanted to get back up into the seasons."

The Shenandoah River is no longer navigable by large boats, but the nearby waterway is still a prime topic for residents in the town. Like their predecessors from more than two centuries ago, residents of The Village still grapple with flooding. The banks of the Shenandoah River's local tributaries overflow periodically, causing major flooding in 1936, 1945, 1985 and 1996 and causing minor damage on countless other occasions.

"I figure there's going to be a big flood about every 10 years," says **Phyllis Smith** (no relation to Steve), who moved from Arlington to raise her children, and now lives with her husband in The Village. "People on the back street (Water Street), get water in their first floor. The North River backs up the South River and then when that starts backing up, that's when we get it really bad."

No Easy Answer

Little apparently can be done to stop the flooding, though Rockingham County is helping the town enlist the Army Corps of Engineers to survey the problem. The dams

built in the past to funnel water into the races (or canals) for industrial power a century ago, now sometimes lift water over the banks and onto Water Street.

"(We talked about) what we can do about it, while really there isn't a whole lot you can do," Phyllis Smith says. "It's going to flood. This is in an area where it's going to flood.... (But) you can do things where it might not be so bad."

The main concern of some, though, revolves around possible town growth. Steve Smith joined the Society of Preservationists in hopes of helping the town maintain its simple pace.

"I was just interested in taking part in keeping the community the way it is, for as long as possible," Smith says. "That seems to be the main objective anymore. I think (change is) inevitable. Nearby there's a farmer (and) it's a known fact that in time he'll develop (his land) up here on the hill. Our main concerns are to preserve Port and to make it known, not just its Civil War past, but its local past."

The prospect of change has created other moments of "excitement" in the town. The Society of Preservationists was originally founded in 1976 after residents researched town history to successfully prevent a regional sewage treatment plant from being located on the battlefield. Since then, the Society also successfully opposed a 40-acre gravel pit and asphalt plant, a junk car lot, a limestone mining operation, and a housing development, all of which were slated for battlefield land.

Change Comes at a Country Pace

But despite efforts to freeze the town's landscape, change is coming, though at a slow, country pace. Last October 1, the houses in The Village received numerical addresses to replace the old post office box numbers that made it difficult for emergency personnel to locate addresses. Numerical addresses may be old news in some towns, but not in Port Republic.

"That's a little something different," Phyllis Smith says. "People probably say, 'Boy, they're really ancient.' We're just getting that put in."

"Ancient." "Historical." Whatever word you want to use, the people of Port Republic are proud of their town's past, and are intent on preserving its 19th-century character in the 21st century. ■