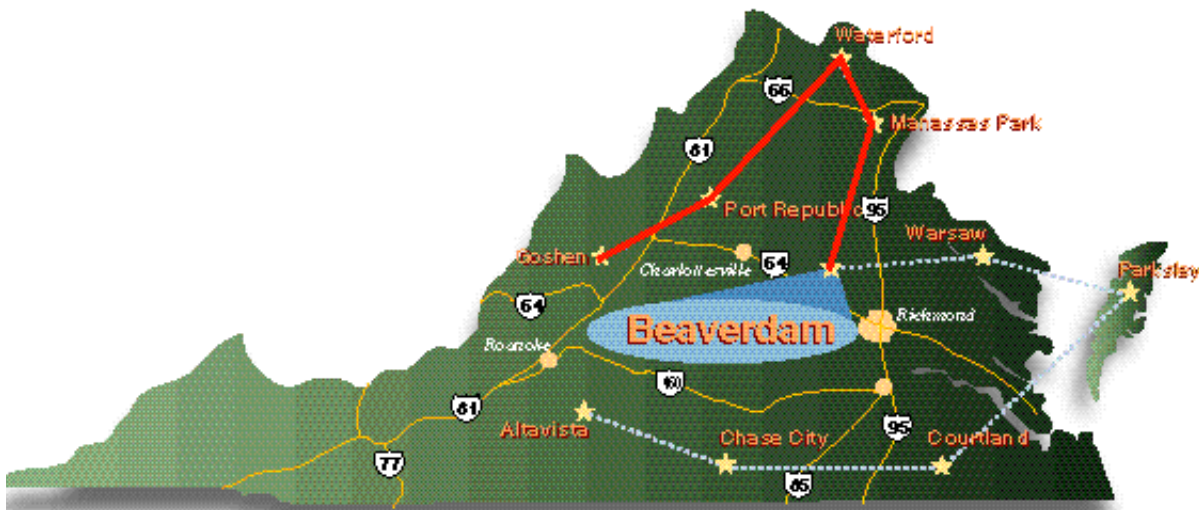


DOWN HOME SERIES

by Chris Dovi,
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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 year's fifth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Beaverdam



The long-closed Luck Store (above) served for many years as a social hub for locals. The restored depot (above, right) and the local elementary school now serve as the social centers of activity for this friendly, lively community steeped in history.

Close neighbor to Virginia's capital of Richmond, Hanover County has seen phenomenal growth in recent years, as city dwellers have packed up and moved to the country and scenery has all too quickly given way to suburbs.

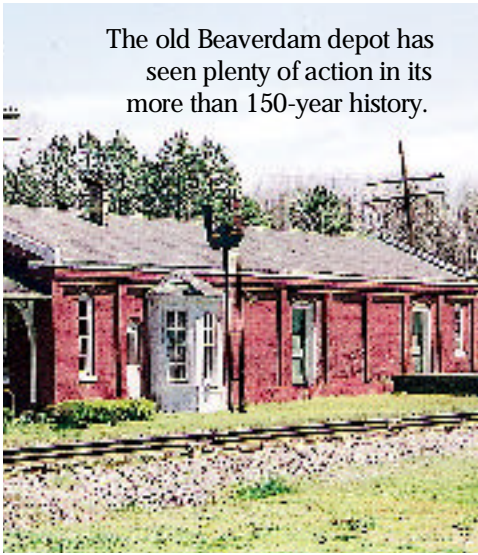
Despite the impressive influx of new residents, there is a corner of this historic county — home to presidents and patriots — that has remained largely unchanged over the last several decades.

Situated in the far western end of Hanover, well past its better-known railroad town cousin, Ashland, is the tiny hamlet of Beaverdam. Much of this scenic and historic area is served by Rappahannock Electric Cooperative.

Once a vital railroad community, one of the biggest news items of late just may be the brand-new stoplight in front of the fire station on Beaver Dam Road heading into town.

"Since the old steam engine left, you might say the romance of the old rail is gone," says town old-timer **Lynwood Buchanan** (pronounced Buck-anon). In 1952, passenger service to Beaverdam was

The old Beaverdam depot has seen plenty of action in its more than 150-year history.



Sights you're unlikely to find within spitting distance of a town center, a working dairy farm and a nearby horse farm are just two of the scenic rural features that help define Beaverdam.

discontinued, leaving as regular rail traffic the coal, grain and tanker trains that rumble non-stop through town. The trains that stop in town nowadays do so to pick up railcars loaded with silica.

Easy Friendliness

A collection of turn-of-the-century homes is clustered around the tracks of the CSX railroad, as a soft breeze through town sings a tune of easy friendliness. Neighbors here still wave to neighbors, and even to strangers.

Beaverdam's earliest European residents arrived in the late 1600s. Before the rail, there was an early leg of modern-day U.S. Route 1 that passed through just east of town.

Bill Terrell has deep roots in the area. His family was granted land near Beaverdam by the British Crown in the late 1600s. Terrell still lives on the property where his



It's not Beverly Hills 90210, but Beaverdam 23015 is just fine for James Sams, postmaster for the town for the past 17 years.

family for generations ran a tavern where weary travelers stopped.

The old tavern burned in 1885, but the home Terrell shares with his wife, Peggy, still rests on parts of the original foundation. The English-style basement is original, and Terrell and his wife say they still find artifacts of his ancestors while doing chores in the garden.

The arrival of the rail meant big changes for the little town. In the 1800s, Beaverdam became a hub for local farmers, who brought their goods to town for transport to Richmond and points beyond.

Then came the Civil War, which arrived with a vengeance in Beaverdam. The station was too important for Confederate troop movement not to catch the eye of Union raiders. The town and its tiny depot were burned three times. In February 1864, in one such raid by Union forces on their way to Richmond, the commanding officer reported burning 20 buildings in addition to the depot.

There was another raid that brought Beaverdam a bit of fame. This raid coincided with the last time that noted Confederate raider J.E.B. Stuart saw his wife before his death.

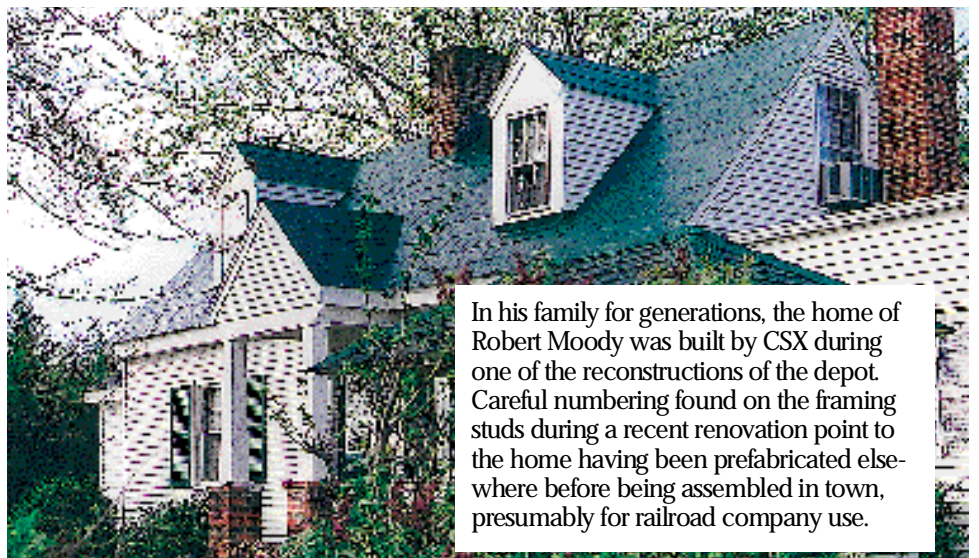
"Stuart's family was staying near Beaverdam at the time," explains **Eric Mink**, a historian with the National Park Service and an expert on local Civil War history. The family actually stayed at the home of Edmund Fontaine, owner of the rail line and later a Virginia state senator. It was at the home of Fontaine where Stuart kissed his wife goodbye for the last time, before being mortally wounded the next day at the Battle of Yellow Tavern. Fontaine's home, Beaver Dam, no longer exists, having burned in 1868. The namesake town, of course, survives into the 21st century.

After the Civil War, a sense of normalcy returned to Beaverdam, and its small-town pace remained relatively the same into the 1950s, when CSX finally ended passenger stops in Beaverdam.

As a student at Beaverdam High School in the 1950s, Buchanan remembers one of his teachers speaking about the impact she saw coming from the end of passenger service to the town. A native of Mississippi, this teacher at the time told Buchanan that the rail's importance to the town reminded her of her own childhood years before. "She said it reminded her of when the steamboats used to come in," Buchanan recalls. "Soon as they left, she said, everybody left. It was like a ghost town. That's what it was like here."

The old Luck Store, now long-closed, once served as a gathering place for folks waiting for the train that took them to work in Richmond. "That's where they'd wait for the train — around the old potbellied stove," says **Robert Moody**, a resident since 1938, "and it'd be better if the train was late."

"More time to talk," concurs Terrell, who was graduated from Beaverdam High School a year ahead of Moody.



In his family for generations, the home of Robert Moody was built by CSX during one of the reconstructions of the depot. Careful numbering found on the framing studs during a recent renovation point to the home having been prefabricated elsewhere before being assembled in town, presumably for railroad company use.

With the end of the passenger line, the old Beaverdam station, long the heart of the community, also closed. Some of the old businesses that operated here through the years, just like the railroad, also slowly ran out of steam.

But others have kept chugging along, still lively and friendly. Enjoying a bite to eat at the Crossing Gate Café, with its green-checked tablecloths and homey menu items, is **Carlyle Luck**, who owns a cabinetry shop in town. He says he likes what he sees now, but remembers a time when the town boasted more businesses.

And though Beaverdam — like many small towns — may not be the commercial center it once was, it still remains a vibrant, upbeat center of many social activities. Beaverdam is really more than “just” a small town, as the name is used proudly by residents to define a much larger geographic area. It really defines the close-knit sense of community in this part of Hanover County.

That sense of community togetherness was richly exemplified in the 1980s, when the Beaverdam depot — no longer used by CSX for its intended purpose as a stop for passenger traffic — was slated for destruction. It was only through the work of many dedicated townspeople that the depot was saved.

“If they’d have torn it down, you could have just about taken Beaverdam off the map,” Buchanan says. “Beaverdam is just wrapped up in that old depot.”

“You could see daylight through the roof,” remembers **Hugh Joyce Sr.**, president of the Association for the Preservation of the Beaverdam Depot. Joyce’s wife, Barbara, founded the association.

As a local artist especially interested in painting train stations and historical buildings, the old Beaverdam depot readily drew her

attention, Joyce says. “She became very interested in its preservation, and rightly so.”

Barbara’s Legacy

Barbara Joyce passed away in 1992, but not before succeeding in her campaign to restore the station. Today, the station serves as a sort of community center. “It’s owned by the people of Beaverdam,” Joyce says. “There’s still a lot of work to be done, but it’s improving every year. It’s a combination of a railroad museum, so to speak, and an event hall. It’s kind of a focal point, being the center of town.”

Where Confederate soldiers once waited for marching orders, Beaverdam residents today gather to listen to free weekend concerts or attend special events such as weddings and birthday celebrations, marking far happier times for a building that has been burned and abandoned so many times throughout its history.

“It’s really doing what it should do,” says Joyce of the depot today. “It’s a place where the community can come.”

This lively center of town activity even serves as a music hall on the second and fourth Saturday nights of the month, when locals gather with their guitars and mandolins to play bluegrass tunes.

And despite the loss over the last few decades of some long-time businesses, the town and its surroundings are drawing newcomers. “I used to know everyone on this end of the county,” Buchanan says. “There aren’t many of the old folks left.”

But with the departure of the old faces, new ones have come in triplicate. And many of the new residents are families with children, one of the reasons why Beaverdam Elementary School is a hub of community activity and a magnet for community support.

And the town is also big enough to rate its own post office — something in which many folks in town take pride. “It’s just like any small town,” says postmaster **James Sams**, a veteran of 17 years behind the counter in Beaverdam. “It’s holding its own.”

In fact, Beaverdam is doing more than that; Beaverdam is actually growing. What required just two postal routes in the 1960s when Buchanan was a rural carrier, has since grown to three routes plus an auxiliary route.

And once a year in September, the town grows even more. The Beaverdam Heritage Day event, now preparing for its third year, has consistently drawn crowds in the thousands.

Celebrating all histories and cultures that have left their mark on the town, the event includes everything from Civil War displays to Native American dance troupes to pioneer re-enactors to black history discussions.

The event also draws a wealth of local and regional artists and craftsmen to show their wares. But with the setting of the sun on Heritage Day comes the return of the peace and tranquility that reign in Beaverdam the other 364 days of the year.

And that’s just the way the old-timers like it. Because, despite all the changes over the years, including the loss of the railroad and the addition of a lot of new faces in town, most long-time Beaverdam residents agree that the town is just right for them.

“It’s keeping its character,” Buchanan says. “I just like it here.”

“There are a lot of good people around here,” admits Luck. “I don’t think I’d be satisfied anywhere else.”

“It’s the perfect community,” says Moody, defining the essence of Beaverdam in four words, with the last one being the key one. Community. ■

If You Go...

Be ready for a lot of driving if you plan to visit Beaverdam and environs, but remember that the long hauls in the car will pay off.

The town itself offers evenings of down-home bluegrass music by local musicians the second and fourth Saturdays of every month. Bring your guitar or mandolin and hope for a chance to join in.

Beautiful rural scenery painted with grazing cattle lines the way down Route 738 from the town of Beaverdam to the Ashland Berry Farm. Now in its 20th year, the farm is known as the area’s largest supplier of bedding plants, according to owner Ken Gustafson. Of course, strawberries are the farm’s biggest draw. Starting the second week in May, the farm opens its gates to between 5,000 and 6,000 visitors each weekend, anxious to pick fresh strawberries. And again throughout October, the farm opens its gates for pumpkin picking and nightly haunted hayrides. The farm also boasts an impressive selection of

shrubbery and outdoor koi ponds.

If you’re going this summer, consider timing your visit to coincide with the town’s 4th of July Parade and Celebration, which offers a lot of fun for family members of all ages.

Another can’t-miss stop on a trip to Beaverdam is the Windy River Winery at 20268 Teman Road in Beaverdam, which features wine tastings, regularly scheduled live music and entertainment, and numerous festivals throughout the year. For information on events call (804) 449-6996.

Another big draw is the numerous array of antique dealers back down Beaver Dam Road toward Montpelier. Montpelier also boasts an historic past and retains many impressive old structures, including one of the oldest remaining one-room schoolhouses in the state.

Skipping a bit back down Route 54 to Scotchtown Road takes visitors to the home of Patrick Henry, famed patriot of the

Revolutionary War, whose fiery words helped spark the flame of independence in the colonies.

Returning to Route 54 and following the road to Ashland brings visitors to yet another quaint village-style town that has grown up with the constant rattle of the rails as a pulse for the comings and goings of residents. Like Montpelier, Ashland boasts numerous antique dealers as well as local artists and craftsmen. Glave and Company on Center Street in town boasts a fine selection of work by talented local artists.

And, of course, near Ashland and only 20 miles from Beaverdam is the family theme park, Hanna-Barbera’s Kings Dominion.

To reach Beaverdam from Washington D.C., take I-95 south to Exit 92-A, Ashland. Follow Rt. 54 through Ashland and proceed west. Rt. 54 becomes Rt. 33. Follow Rt. 33 through Montpelier. Hang a right at Beaver Dam Road. Stay straight to Beaverdam. ■