

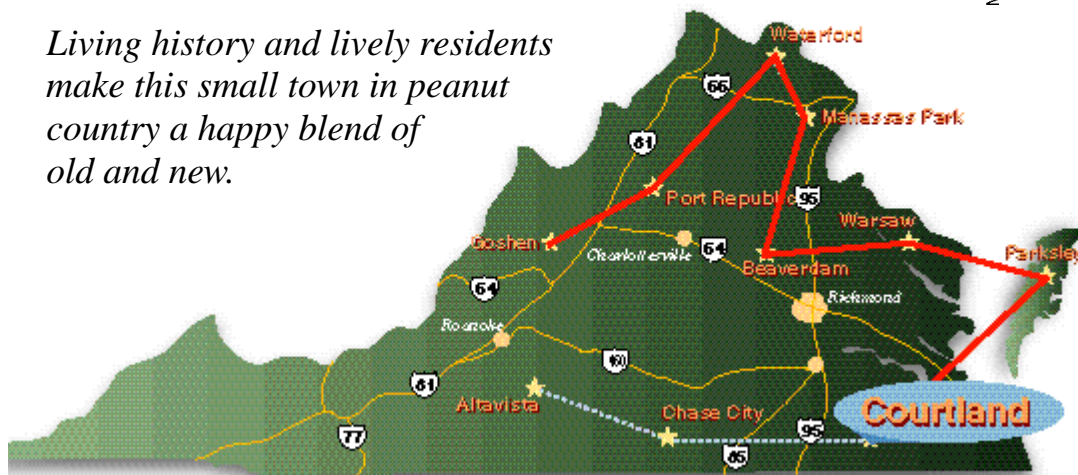
DOWN HOME SERIES

by Merle Monahan,
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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 eighth stop, we'll be...

Down Home in Courtland

Living history and lively residents make this small town in peanut country a happy blend of old and new.



MERLE MONAHAN PHOTOS



Several beautifully restored 18th- and 19th-century homes dot Main Street in Courtland. Seven Gables (above), circa 1790, is owned today by Mrs. Julia Mitchell.

When Southampton County was formed from Isle of Wight County in 1749, county officials labored over where to establish the county seat. Then, in 1750, they settled on a site centrally located in the county, and for convenience made it near the banks of the Nottoway River, to provide a means of shipping for the largely agricultural county.

No more than a crossroads, the tiny settlement began to flourish once a courthouse and other county offices were constructed in 1752.

Today, the site is largely unchanged, but the name has changed three times. Courtland has been the name of the county seat now for more than 110 years. The town continues to be the hub of government activity for residents of the more than 600-square-mile county.

Named Jerusalem in 1791, the town was known in the beginning simply as "The Town at the Courthouse," and is today a



The Rochelle-Prince House, restored home of James Rochelle, is one of several museums in Courtland.



Helen Howell (at organ) and Linda Updike are dressed in period costume for Heritage Day at the Southampton Agricultural and Forestry Museum/Heritage Village.



Far left: Jeff Barnes, the town's only police officer. Left: Herbert "Hank" Edwards in front of his hardware store. Above: Lewis Holmes Davis, mayor of Courtland.

"I don't think you could find a town more modern, yet more conscious of its past than ours," says Mayor **Lewis Holmes Davis**, who is proud of the small town of just over 1,000 he has guided for 15 years. The retired educator and athletic coach says the town is a nice, quiet place in which to settle down and raise a family.

"The schools are good and the crime rate is low. In fact, we've had very few real problems since I've been mayor."

But the town has not always been quite so placid and peaceful, laughs local historian, **S. V. Camp III**.

"As soon as the first courthouse was completed," he says, "the third Monday in each month was designated as court day, a day when people came from both ends of the county to visit or shop, to talk politics and,

cross between the old, the not-so-old and the new. Several beautifully restored 18th- and 19th-century homes dot Main Street through the business district, as the courthouse, circa 1834, stands tall and majestic across the street from Mahone's Tavern.

One of the town's original taverns, Mahone's was built between 1735 and 1750 and was later to become the boyhood home of Confederate General William Mahone. It is named for Mahone's father, Fielding Mahone, who once owned the property.

Interspersed among these reminders of the past and farther down Main Street are a modern library and art museum, a new state-of-the-art county administration office complex, and the county sheriff's department and adjoining jail. A nursing home and shopping center are nearby. Then, somewhere between

the old and the new are two other museums dedicated to preserving the heritage of the area.

An old country store and a one-room school are just two of the many interesting sights at Courtland's ag museum.



more often than not, just to have a good time.”

Camp says he suspects the good times were heightened by the “spirits” served in the many taverns and ordinaries surrounding the courthouse. “This and the people’s passion for horseracing on Flaggy Run Road near the courthouse actually gave the town a reputation.”

The reputation followed the town for years, according to Camp. As late as 1874, entries in the recently published diary of Southampton County farmer Daniel W. Cobb referred to the “drunken rowdiness on court day in Jerusalem. There was plenty of brandy drinking and quarreling and broiling and some fitting (fighting) and jailing,” Cobb noted.

A Historic Uprising

Even with the rowdiness, Courtland was probably little different from other small towns during this era. However, on August 22, 1831, national attention was thrust upon the small community when Nat Turner, slave and preacher, and a small band of his followers fortified with apple brandy, entered the home of resident Joseph Travis and killed five members of the family while they slept.

A slave revolt sprang from this tragic event, which resulted in 57 deaths before the insurgents were apprehended. Turner was

tried and sentenced in Courtland in the second of three courthouses built during the town’s 249 years.

It was in 1888, shortly after its incorporation, when the name Courtland was given to the town. At the suggestion of Postmistress Fannie Barrett, the town was named for the nearby courthouse, rather than the distant Holy City.

Today the taverns no longer operate as such. And the name seems to please residents. **Herbert “Hank” Edwards**, 84, who owns a hardware store, one of the few remaining retail stores on Main Street, says he wouldn’t be anywhere else. “My father started this business in 1911 and I’ve been working here since I came home from the service in 1945. I grew up, married and raised my family here — only left long enough to serve my time in the Army and to get an education.”

Collin Pulley agrees, adding, “I feel I belong here because my roots are here.” Pulley, who owns a furniture store on Route 58, just outside of town, is commander of the Urquhart-Gillett Camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and can name 18 of his relatives who served in the Civil War. “Regardless of how some people feel about the war,” he says, “this was a very important part of our heritage and I’ve always felt we should honor these brave men.”

Pulley laughs when reminded of a story

about Courtland’s Union General, George Thomas. Although from Confederate territory, Thomas opted to serve with the Union Army and the story is told that, because of this, he was able to prevent Union troops from ever entering Southampton County.

“There’s no truth to that,” Pulley says, smiling. “I’m sure that if there had been anything here the Union Army wanted, they would have invaded, no matter what General Thomas said.”

Family and history are important to the people of Courtland and some have gone to great lengths to preserve things of the past. On seven acres just off Main Street, a museum has been established just for this purpose.

“We started with 600 items,” says **William Howell**, president of the Southampton Agriculture and Forestry Museum/Heritage Village. “That number has now risen to 4,000 and things are still coming in.” Howell is quick to add that everything is donated.

The museum consists of several buildings filled with artifacts of the Nottoway Indians and articles from the 18th and 19th centuries. “Inside the main building, we’ve set up a country kitchen, bedroom and back porch,” says **Lynda Updike**, president of the Southampton County Historical Society.

Updike notes that dependencies include everything from a grist mill and saw mill to a country store, one-room school, ice and

If You Go... If you’re interested in county history, then Courtland is the place to go. This small town of just over 1,000 people boasts three museums, two of which are dedicated solely to the preservation of the area’s heritage — agriculture and forestry.

Located at 26315 Heritage Lane, just off Main Street, the **Southampton Agriculture and Forestry Museum/Heritage Village**, is open from 1 to 4 p.m. each Wednesday and Sunday from March through November.

The other is the **Rochelle-Prince House**. Located on the east side of Main Street, it is open every other Sunday from 2 to 4 p.m. The museum actually is the restored home of James Rochelle, clerk of court during the Nat Turner trial. Owned by the Southampton County Historical Society, it is furnished in period furniture of the early 1800s.

Each year these two museums feature

Heritage Day, when crafters and artisans assemble from all over the country to demonstrate their wares. Held annually on the Agriculture and Forestry Museum grounds, this year’s date will be September 18, from 9:30 a.m. until 4 p.m.

The third museum is the **Walter Cecil Rawls Library and Museum Arts**. It also is on Main Street and is open during normal business hours.

To reach Courtland from Richmond, take I-95 South past Petersburg to exit #12, the Courtland exit (Route 35). Travel 32 miles on Route 35 to Courtland. From Norfolk and Virginia Beach, take Route 58 West for approximately 53 miles and from Emporia, take Route 58 East for approximately 27 miles to Courtland.

Another attraction is the **Franklin/Southampton County Fair**. Drawing 20,000 people annually, it is held each year for five days in August. This year it ran from August 11 through 15.

To get there, take Route 58 east from

Courtland for two miles to Newmarket Road. Follow the signs to the fairgrounds.

No visit to Southampton County would be complete without some of its finest peanuts. The Peanut Patch, located on Route 58 West, features Virginia peanuts and candies, as well as collectibles and gifts for all occasions.

There is only one restaurant in Courtland, but it offers excellent food at reasonable prices. **Plan to dine at “For Pete’s Sake” on Main Street**. It’s open every day except Saturday. Other restaurants and motels are offered at nearby Franklin.

Finally, Southampton County’s 250th anniversary, ongoing since January, will end with a “Big Event” at Southampton High School on October 30. Starting in Courtland at 2 p.m. the parade will travel down Route 35 to the intersection of Routes 35 and 58, where other events will take place on the grounds of Southampton High School. ■

smoke houses, a country home and two out-houses.

"We've been working with the museum for 11 years now," she says, "and hope to continue for many more." To further inform the public of times past, Updike and the society put on what they call Heritage Day, when crafters come in from all over the country to demonstrate their wares. It is held annually on the museum grounds. The ninth one will be held September 18.

Back on Main Street, a second museum, the Rochelle-Prince House, is located across the street and a few doors down from the courthouse. It is the restored home of James Rochelle, clerk of court during the Nat Turner trial. "We've furnished this house just as it would have been in 1835 when he was here," Updike says.

"We work hard to maintain these museums," she notes, "because we want our children now and in years to come to see exactly how our ancestors lived. If we don't, in a few years there'll be nothing to remind us that electricity was not always here and the bathroom was not always inside."

According to **Jenny Blythe**, director of the art museum, it was established in 1958 along with the Walter Cecil Rawls Library. "I understand Mr. Rawls, who donated the money for the library, was himself an artist and felt it would be good for the town."

In a separate building now, the art museum is actually part of the library, and showings are still held in the gallery in the main building, says **Beverly Worsham**, assistant director. "This was a wonderful gift to the town," she adds. "Before we opened, if we needed to use a library, we'd have to go to Franklin."

Worsham, with the library for 25 years, notes that branches have now been opened in parts of three other counties, as well as the city of Franklin. "We are expanding daily," she says, "Our system is becoming more computerized and records are much easier to maintain."

In addition to the library, the county clerk's office is open to the public for researching old documents and records as well, says Clerk **Wayne Cosby**, a veteran of 18 years with the county. "We have micro-film records dating back to the formation of the county; however, we do not have birth or death records," he says.

Courtland is not only a town where the old coexists with the new, but it's where local and county governments work independently of each other. For instance, the town employs

its own policeman, even though the sheriff's department is right there. "This way we have someone on hand when we need him," says the mayor.

This would seem to make sense, for the sheriff's department has to cover 18,000 people and one of the ten largest counties in the state. Townspeople say the department is doing an excellent job.

But **Sheriff Vernie Francis Jr.**, in office for the past 15 years, does not take all the credit for the performance of his office. "I've got some good people working for me," he says.

The sheriff's office covers the spectrum from law enforcement to crime prevention, in addition to maintaining two jails. "Our people are on duty 24 hours a day," Francis says. "We answer all kinds of calls. In fact we usually have a department to cover whatever may be required. But our main concern, of course, is to protect the people."

Legendary Lawman

And this has been the concern for other sheriffs as well. "I remember how it used to be 40 years ago," says long-time resident **Milton Futrell** with a smile. Futrell was

referring to the legendary Sheriff T. Boisie Bell, who served the county for 33 years, retiring in 1954.

"I believe he was the bravest man I've ever known. He once walked into the face of a loaded shotgun, called the man by his first name and relieved him of his weapon. Now you don't see many men who could do that.

"Boisie had his own way of doing things, but by gosh, he always got his man."

Bell was loved and respected by all who knew him, says his daughter **Kathryn Martin**.

"He knew everybody in the county and could address most by their first names. He never wanted anyone to think he did not remember them."

Courtland was born of necessity, says local historian **Kitty Futrell**. "It has survived fires, pestilence, floods and several wars. But despite all this it always springs back and next year will be 250 years old."

This year the town will help kick off another celebration. On October 30, it will host the parade that will kick off the county's "Big Event," celebrating Southampton's 250th anniversary. ■