

**A**cross the black-blue waters of the Rappahannock is a land of enchantment called the Northern Neck. It's a place where small, salty creeks twist through the jutting fingers of sand and soil. It's a place of elegance and beauty, where the Chesapeake beckons with stunning sunrises, where the warm winds of July whisper through treetops. It's a place of yachts and historic mansions. It's the home of crab pots and fishing nets. It's a place where the air is oft filled with the haunting aroma of fried spot and croakers. Or oysters.

The Northern Neck is a place where people are welcoming to strangers. It's a land steeped in history and tradition, a land that has known plenty as well as shortage. Wars have been waged here, and great men have arisen from among the citizenry to achieve permanent positions on the pages of American history. Tucked away in this place called the Northern Neck is one of America's great little towns. Irvington: the home of the magnificent Tides Inn. The home of hospitality and happiness.



# Irvington

## The Land of Happiness

By Jim Brewer

### The History

Irvington, in Lancaster County, is the birthplace of the Lees and the Carters, famous names of early Virginia families. Irvington was once called Carter's Creek, so named for John Carter, the founder of the Carter family in Virginia. Around 1650, John Carter built his home along the Corotoman Creek and named the plantation Corotoman. His son, Robert "King" Carter, further expanded the family's holdings and wealth through the raw power of tobacco. At one time King Carter had accumulated 20,000 acres of tobacco land. With his great wealth, Carter built Christ Church at Corotoman around 1660. It is said that Christ Church was Carter's private sanctuary. It was he who maintained possession



of the keys. When the Carter family failed to show up for Sunday Services, they were held outside in the churchyard. Carter's direct descendants would include two presidents (the Harrisons) and Robert E. Lee, whose mother was also a Carter. George Washington was also born on the Northern Neck at Pope's Creek, and James Madison, the father of the Constitution, hailed from Port Conway.

During the Revolutionary War, all the healthy men from the Northern Neck took up arms to repel the British. Five of the Lee brothers would join the front lines, including "Lighthorse" Harry Lee, later to become Governor of Virginia and the father of Robert E. Lee. Following the war, much of the aristocracy would fade away, and the wealth would disperse.

In the early 19th century, the flutter of the steamboat paddles breathed new life into the economy of the Northern Neck. The first steamer, *The Chesapeake*, made its debut around 1813. The great steamships carried goods and passengers to and from Baltimore, Richmond, Washington and Norfolk, and often stopped by Irvington where the Irvington Beach Hotel had located. The steamboat era of prosperity was to pass with the arrival of the Civil War. The Union controlled the rivers and passageways on the Chesapeake, and many boats were sunk or destroyed. Trade and travel dried up. The aftermath of the War Between the States meant a new beginning for the citizens of Irvington and the Northern Neck. But the steamboats would soon return, engaging Irvington at every pass, so much so the small hamlet was nicknamed "Venice of the Northern Neck." In 1946, construction began on the Tides Inn, which would forever imprint its image on Irvington, "a dandy little place on the water."



**Miss Ann at the dock**



**The Tides Inn**

A little piece of heaven came to life at Irvington when E.A. Stephens once heard this remark: "You have so many guests, you should build a hotel to put them in." E.A. "Big Steve" Stephens was born in Wicomico Church in 1898. He was educated at William & Mary and made his fortune during and after the Great Depression. E.A. courted and married Ann Lee, a lovely belle from Irvington, and the couple built a

summer cottage there, where they entertained countless friends and guests. With "thousands of house guests," the Stephens began to seek out property for their hotel and found it high on a bluff on Carter's Creek - the Ashburn Farm, with a stunning view of the Rappahannock. The old farm was in ill repair and overgrown with weeds when E.A. and Ann Stephens purchased it for \$5,000.

Paths and clutter were cleared, and the land began to look more attractive



**The Tides Inn**

with the passing of each day. The fantasy vision of a fine hotel soon became a reality when construction began in the spring of 1946. Cypress for the view room and dining room came from a local swamp. The finest materials that could be found were used, and the attraction of the Irvington and the Northern Neck would soon be revealed to the entire world when the Tides Inn opened its doors in 1947.

But how would the “world” ever find this tucked away “diamond in a cornfield”? Through the friends of the Stephens family, and many there were, an incredible client base was created. The theme of the Inn was to treat every guest as an old friend, and that tradition carries on even today. For years, the Tides Inn was a five-star, five-diamond establishment.

Sedona Resorts, a premiere luxury resort management firm, purchased the Tides Inn from the Stephens family in April 2001. Millions of dollars were poured into the old inn to bring it up to the highest level of quality. Today there is no finer place for guests to visit. There is no finer food to eat, nor can the service be equaled anywhere. The *Miss Ann*, a 127’ vessel that served the U.S. Navy in World War II, has been completely restored and makes runs out into Carter’s Creek, the Rappahannock, and the Chesapeake Bay for sightseeing and dinner parties for the guests of Tides Inn.

Water is a way of life for the “Friends of the Inn.” Charter captains pick up their parties on the docks of Tides Inn for half-day and full-day jaunts into the Rappahannock and the Chesapeake for

some of the finest sport fishing to be found. Guests crab from the docks and take kayaks and canoes on salty expeditions. There are also fishing boats for rent at the dock.

The Tides Inn has a magnificent pool and a smooth, sandy beach as well. The Inn has 106 rooms and suites and two dining rooms to accommodate their pampered guests. The grounds are magnificent and immaculate. A par-three golf course welcomes guests on arrival, and a championship 18-hole course challenges even the scratch golfer. The Golden Eagle Golf Club has hosted numerous Virginia State Golf Association events and is easily one of the top-rated courses in the Commonwealth. Heavily bunkered with white Chesapeake sand, the course measures 6,566 yards and plays to a par of 72.

The Spa at Tides Inn bathes every visitor in luxury and contentment. Found here are many rejuvenation and restorative treatments including body massages, facials, pedicures, manicures, and contemporary treatments such as mud, seaweed wraps, aromatherapy, and hydrotherapy baths. Other activities and amenities at the Inn include biking, tennis, swimming, sailboating, family activities, shopping, and just plain relaxing.

“We are within a three hour car ride of 8 million people,” said Larry MacAfee, the General Manager of Tides Inn. “Yet, in Irvington, a traffic jam is a tractor going down the road.”

“We want our guests to experience the resort from the water,” he added. “I encourage all our guests to go out on one of our cruises.”

The cuisine at Tides Inn is extraordinary and the service equally so. The staff is exceptionally oriented towards their patrons. No detail is left unturned in order to provide the finest in personal service. It is a genuine experience to stay at the Tides Inn, where every guest is treated as an old friend. “We are a Virginia place to go,” McAfee concluded. “We think of ourselves as a little, big resort.”

## The Fish

No trip to the Northern Neck is complete without a visit to the Rappahannock River in order to “wet a line.” The Rappahannock is one of the world’s finest fishing estuaries and a major tributary of the Chesapeake Bay. The fishing season for the Rappahannock fleet begins in April as bluefish began to make an appearance. Also, in late April and early May, the flounder bite picks up, and rockfish begin to emerge from their winter hiding grounds off the coast of North Carolina

and Virginia Beach. The rockfish follow American and hickory shad up the river as far as Fredericksburg before returning to feed on most anything that gets in their way. The rocks hang around the Rappahannock until the heavy frosts of November, before moving down the Bay and off the coast. Flounder make their move up into the Rappahannock in mid-spring, and like the rockfish, stay until cold weather arrives. When the azaleas in Irvington come to full bloom, bottom fishing for spot and croaker also begins.

The universal favorite fish of Irvington and the Northern Neck is the croaker. Tasty to eat, and one of the premiere fighters “pound for pound,” croakers give more than a good account of themselves to anyone who hooks up. Catching two at a time when the run is on is an expected bonus. Croakers in the Rappahannock will bite most anything secured to a size 4 fishhook, but they have an affinity for squid and bloodworms. Three-inch salty grubs are also very effective for croakers, or hardheads, as the locals often call them. Other sport fish to prowl the Rappahannock and the mid-Chesapeake Bay include red drum, tautogs, white perch, whiting, speckled trout, gray trout, and cobia. The crabbing is also very good during most summers along the Rappahannock River.

One of the great spots in Irvington that welcomes fishermen and Virginia Sportsmen alike is the Hope and Glory Inn. Once an old school house dating back to the 1800s, the Hope and Glory is a wonderful place to kick back and enjoy the village of Irvington while taking advantage of all the fishing and recreational opportunities that the Chesapeake Bay and Rappahannock River have to offer. The Inn has both single bedrooms and individual cottages and can arrange for fishing guides and parties. Their web-site at [www.hopeandglory.com](http://www.hopeandglory.com) gives all the particulars.



Ken and Carolyn Schmalenberger



Author with 2 Rappahannock Croakers.

## The People

Ken and Carolyn Schmalenberger

The Norton family dates well back into the history of the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. For many in the Norton family, boating was the career call. Across the river from Irvington in Deltaville, Ed Norton opened a boatyard and once made boats himself. That business is called Norton Yacht Sales, now owned by Carolyn (Ed Norton’s granddaughter) and Ken Schmalenberger.

“Many of our customers come from Irvington and the Northern Neck,” Carolyn confirmed. “We are joined with the Northern Neck by the Rappahannock. It’s our common playground.” Norton Yacht Sales is one of the major players in the luxury boat market and gets customers from throughout the nation. “We carry a full line



Emily Carter



Bruce Watson at the Wine and Cheese shop

of Hunter Marine boats and also represent Tartan, a line at the upper end of the spectrum. We also do a large brokerage business in pre-owned boats, power and sail,” she said.

Sailing is an everyday event for many on the Northern Neck, and Norton’s has a sailing school designed to teach beginners and intermediate sailors alike. “We do everything from coastal navigation to bareboat,” Carolyn advised. “We do a hands-on course; it’s not all theory.” A typical course begins on a Friday evening with classroom instruction from 7 to 9 PM, followed by all-day instruction on the water on Saturday and Sunday. “You know, even on a yacht or sailboat, you can spend a lifetime on the Bay and not see it all,” she concluded

Emily Carter

The Northern Neck and Irvington area is most assuredly Carter Country. Dating back to the 17th century, the Carters have been an established family name, but it was in 1957 that Jim and Pat Carter brought their seven children (later to become nine) to the Northern Neck where Pat would start a real estate business. One of the Carter daughters, Emily, now runs the firm. “My parents loved being on the water,” Emily recalls. “They lived on Mosquito Creek for five years. When we came here, we were something of a novelty, with all the children, but the community was wonderful and very welcoming.” Though not a *born here*, Emily was four when she was uprooted from Richmond; she is accepted as a native. “I still think of myself as a *come here*,” she laughs.

Emily, at first, was reluctant to enter the real estate business and became one of the

first female crabbers to work pots on the river. She also worked in a hospital, as a carpenter’s helper, and even began an herb garden business, which never fully sprouted. Finally she took her mother’s advice and became a broker and a very successful realtor. “I’ve done about everything I knew how to find a way to stay here,” she admitted. “I love this area. The local people are warm and friendly.”

Emily and her husband, David, live at White Stone, a mile or so up the road from Irvington. “We’re all really one community. There are only 11,000 in Lancaster County. It’s still a very small town.” But the town is growing. Everyone, it seems, wants to invest in property on the Northern Neck. “In the last year and a half – in some cases – prices have actually doubled,” Emily stated. “But compared to other areas, we still appear to be a bargain.” Today, Jim and Pat Carter Real Estate, Inc. has 22 agents and three offices in White Stone, Irvington and Kilmarnock.

Bruce Watson

The “Board Meeting” is called every Thursday evening to meet at Bruce Watson’s White Stone Wine & Cheese Shop. “These are high powered people – from CEOs to carpenters,” Bruce confirmed. “It’s a great group.” The Board Meeting is not called to discuss stocks options and purchases, but to taste wines. The White Stone Wine Shop, one of many unique businesses in the Irvington/White Stone area, has one of the finest selections of fine wines in Virginia.

Bruce, from Newport Beach, California, found his way to the Northern Neck through “pure dumb luck.” Bruce worked in hospital administration in Philadelphia before settling in White Stone where he entered the boating business. “I owned two boat yards,” he said. But Bruce always wanted to own a wine and cheese

shop. He bought his current business from Fred Gilman, a Member of the New York Stock Exchange and an agent for Jim & Pat Carter Real Estate.

Gilman discovered the Northern Neck about 20 years ago while taking a smoking break at the Exchange. "Somebody mentioned the Northern Neck and I said, 'What's that?' We came down, stayed at the Tide's Inn, and liked the area so much we bought the third house we saw. It's a culture shock at first," Bruce said, concerning his move from the big city to the Northern Neck, "But you get used to it. I love it here. It's a friendly place, the weather is wonderful, and the Chesapeake Bay is at your doorsteps."

IsaBell Horsley

Anyone driving through Mathews County or on the Northern Neck is sure to have seen a "For Sale" sign bearing the name, IsaBell Horsley. IsaBell is a local gal, born in Mathews and now living in Gloucester County. "I guess I'm a half-breed," she joked. "I grew up here through the Hudgins family, but the Montague side of my family came from Richmond." IsaBell calls White Stone "a sweet little town," and Irvington she describes as "a tremendous place to live."

IsaBell is the managing broker of IsaBell K. Horsley Real Estate, Ltd., with five locations in White Stone, Deltaville, Urbanna, Mathews, and Lively. IsaBell has watched land values soar throughout her native countryside. "Waterfront property in the Irvington area will average around \$400,000," she noted. "With a house, it will be \$700,000 and up." A recent IsaBell Horsley listing, Grace Pointe, is located near the Indian Creek Yacht and Country Club. "It's five minutes to the Bay and five to the Country Club," IsaBell observed. "This property has a boathouse, and they are now outlawed in Lancaster County."


On 3 1/2 acres, the 4 bedroom, 3 1/2 bath home includes 350' of waterfront. Grace Pointe is priced at \$775,000.

### A Dandy Little Place On the River

It's no wonder so many are flocking to the Northern Neck to visit places like the Tides Inn or to buy property here. In 1957, E.A. Stephens wrote his thoughts on Irvington to his attorney in New Orleans.

*You are one of my old friends who told me I was crazy when "I sunk all that money on that lovely hill," but I want you to know that it is one of the best things I ever did in my business life. No, not from a profit standpoint, far from it, but that's not half as important as "happiness," and it has brought so much happiness to many people, including Ann and me, that I feel*

*good all over when I think about it... Stocks and bonds may be better... but I invest in happiness.*




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