



In 1992, historian John Rothert designed the wings to the original temple-like 1849 Greek revival Powhatan County Courthouse. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

POWHATAN

A HORSEBACK RIDE AWAY

By Phil Audibert

“**T**he very reason we are located right here is that it was a horseback ride away from the next facility and jurisdiction.

That really drove everything,” explains Powhatan’s unofficial historian, curmudgeon, benefactor, preservationist, outdoorsman, re-enactor, woodworker and businessman, John Rothert. Rothert is curled up on a comfy sofa in his museum-like shop just across a side street from the Powhatan Courthouse. The walls are festooned with antique hand tools, and, oddly, a Monopoly board. A cat approaches, tail button-hooked in greeting.

“It got to be too far to ride from

one courthouse to the other,” explains John of the 18th-century practice of laying out long counties west of Richmond like

spokes on a wheel. “We are where we are in this place today because this is a horseback ride away from Midlothian and a comfort-



Oakdale Farm, one of 26 equine facilities in Powhatan County (Photo by Phil Audibert)

A country lane wends its way down to the James River which defines Powhatan County's northern border. (Photo by Phil Audibert)



able stage-coach ride from Chesterfield.” Today of course, Powhatan is a comfortable half-hour automobile drive from downtown Richmond.

But it may as well be a horseback ride away. Somehow the legions of urban residential sprawl, although poised, have not invaded its eastern boundaries—yet. And if you drive past the plantations and historic homes along the Huguenot Trail (Route 711), you’d hardly know that the state’s capital is a horseback ride away along the James River. Farther west, where Route 60 suddenly chokes down to two lanes, dense woodland is interspersed with three-board fenced horse farms, many literally a horseback ride away from the next.

Welcome to Powhatan, a 273-square-mile county with 28,000 souls, a rich and varied history, a slew of houses and buildings on the National Register and a vibrant small business community. Powhatan is also the name of its storybook county seat that after decades of neglect is experiencing something of a renaissance.

Ruth Boatright was born and raised here. “It was a thriving community and village at one time, and then everybody

kind of moved out, and it was desolate for a number of years,” she remembers. “Now everybody bought the places and restored them – the whole village has come back to life,” she exults, crediting the aforementioned historian and curmudgeon John Rothert.

Rothert first came here in 1972 “just in time to preside over the get-out-of-

Possibly built as early as 1730, The Mill Quarter is a splendid example of Georgian architecture. (Photo by Phil Audibert)



town of everybody.” The straightening and four-laning of what used to be the stage-coach line to Lynchburg, the east/west artery that is today’s Route 60, bypassed the village entirely. Everyone moved their business to strip malls along Route 60, and Powhatan Courthouse became just that – a sleepy hamlet with nothing but governmental offices. Although at the time many thought the bypass spelled political and economic suicide, in retrospect it is what ultimately saved the village.

Rothert bought the old Courthouse Tavern and restored it. “And the next thing I knew I bought another place, and another place and another place. . . .”

The Monopoly board on his wall serves as a daily reminder NOT to buy Park Place or Boardwalk. “If you own everything and you get lazy or stale, so does the town,” he explains. “You want other people to come to Boardwalk or Park Place; you want them to bring their energy.” Among many other projects, John is responsible for designing (in 1992) the wings of the historic temple-like 1849 Greek Revival Powhatan courthouse.

Sherry Swinson is Powhatan

County's economic development director. She says Powhatan is currently growing 2% per year, adding, "During this downswing for residential times, we have seen an upswing for commercial, which is very positive for us."

She points to massive projects poised just across the county line in Chesterfield: the big-box Watkins Center and adjoining 5,000 residential-unit Roseland. "The outer ring will come probably into Powhatan, so we'll see, hopefully, a huge amount of commercial growth from that."

Note that she said nothing about residential growth, and in fact, even though Powhatan is only a half hour away from downtown Richmond, it has managed to mostly escape the dreaded and hugely expensive (schools and services) bedroom-community syndrome. Still, when Rothert came here in 1972, all five members of the Board of Supervisors were dairy farmers. Today there are only two dairy farms left in the whole county. But it is interesting to note that a list of equine facilities in Powhatan goes on for two pages; there are 26 in all!

"Everybody wants this to be a rural county," sums up Ruth Boatright. The problem is that not everyone can agree on



Floyd Yates, age 105 is credited with, among other things, re-introducing the wild turkey to the area. (Photo by Susie Audibert) Yates first stopped at Maxey's Store in 1927. He's been here ever since. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

what rural really means. Is it three-acre lots with faux chateaux in the middle of what used to be a cow pastures? Or does it mean truly preserving large working farms, open space and woodland?

Kathy Budner of the Chamber of Commerce paraphrases a recent impassioned plea from the daughter of a lifelong dairy farmer at a recent Board of Supervisors meeting. "You all keep talking about wanting to keep this rural, but because of the taxes, you're pricing us right out of the county. There goes your rural, if the farmers can't hang onto their farmland."

Budner hopes to keep the best of both. "The word is manage, not control, and everybody you talk to from a community that's been through this, they say you're



fighting a losing battle. But we keep thinking that we're going to win this one." And they just might with those no-strings-attached all-important tourist dollars starting to flow in from just a horseback ride away.

Powhatan History in a Nutshell

In 1608, Captain Christopher Newport led an expedition up the James River and ran into the Sioux-speaking Monacan Indians who populated this area. The Chief, Powhatan, for whom this county is named, was the leader of the Algonquin nation in Tidewater. In 1700, King William granted French Huguenots (Protestants escaping Louis XIV) 10,000 acres along a stretch of the south bank of the James River. They settled in abandoned

Robert E. Lee spent the summer of 1865 here at Derwent before accepting an offer to head Washington and Lee University in Lexington. In this study, he wrote letters promoting the healing of a nation torn apart. (Photos by Phil Audibert)



Monacan villages. The names of some of these Huguenot families are still in evidence today, most notably in the Powhatan community of Michaux (then Pineville), settled by Abraham Michaux in 1705.

Patrick Henry, the first Virginia-born governor of the state, created the county in 1777. It was then named after General Charles Scott, a Revolutionary War hero and aide to George Washington. The county seat was called Scottville (without an “s”). In 1836, to dispel confusion with Scottsville in Fluvanna County, the name was changed to Powhatan, to honor Pocahontas’ all-powerful Algonquin father.

By the mid 19th-century, Powhatan was doing well; the 1852 census lists 8,171 people, with 16 merchants, 13 doctors, and 13 lawyers. Powhatan was generally spared the ravages of the Civil War. Robert E. Lee pitched his tent one last time near his brother’s house on the Huguenot Trail on April 14, 1865, after surrendering at Appomattox. The next day he rode into Richmond to join his wife and children in rented quarters at 707 E. Franklin Street – a horseback ride away.

But what happened that summer clinches Powhatan’s role as “where the healing of the American Civil War began.” Lee, facing possible charges of treason and broken both financially and in spirit, wanted to find “some quiet little home in the woods.” The Cox family of Oakland plantation in western Powhatan offered him Derwent – a horseback ride away from Richmond. Currently Derwent is owned, ironically, by people named Cox, Ken and Valerie to be precise. Imagine their surprise when these South Dakotans unwittingly became custodians of this shrine four years ago.

Almost lost in the early 1960s, Derwent was saved and added onto in the 1980s. “You don’t see elaborate millwork or molding or that kind of thing – just a simple country farmhouse,” notes Ken. He points that it was from Lee’s downstairs study/bedroom that Marse Robert penned

words such as these to a naval officer: “I believe it to be the duty of everyone to unite in the restoration of the country and the reestablishment of peace and harmony.” The interior of Derwent is not open to the public, but outside there is a Civil War Trails marker and plaque, and the point could be made that this is indeed THE last stop on that trail.

The next most significant thing that happened in Powhatan was the arrival of Floyd Yates in 1927. “I came here for two cents and that’s the truth,” says this vibrant, totally cognitive 105-year-old man. He was on his way to Farmville in his horseless carriage when he stopped at Maxey’s Store (where The Four Seasons restaurant is now) across from the courthouse. “I was dirty and dusty. I came into this store, and a Coke was five cents if you drank it there. If you took the bottle with you it was seven cents.” He pauses and protests, “I couldn’t afford that!”

“So, I stood there by the counter and drank the Coke, and a man saw the Masonic ring on my finger. He knew I wasn’t exactly a bum. So we talked and I find out he’s the president of the bank, chairman of the school board. So I determined that

Powhatan was a good place.” He pauses another beat. “So I’m still here.”

Among many other accomplishments, Floyd Yates cites six terms in the Virginia House of Delegates: “I was friendly with most governors.” He also headed the Department of Conservation and Economic Development, and most importantly, he was chairman of the Virginia Game Commission for six years.

Wild turkeys: “They were my favorite bird to hunt, and they had gotten very scarce here,” he notes. Although Yates won’t elaborate any further, John Rothert fills in the blanks, saying that Yates went to Alabama and arranged to import wild turkeys to Virginia. Apparently, in those days, they’d load a DC-3 with cages containing toms and hens. Flying at low level, “You’d grab a tom out of here and a hen out of here, and throw ‘em out at about treetop level.” How’s that for a blind date?

Every morning, Rothert cautiously crosses Old Buckingham Road, Powhatan’s main drag, on his way to breakfast. And every morning, he does a little dance in the middle of the street, marveling that, “You’ve gotta WAIT to cross. It almost brings tears to my eyes; I always envisioned

Featuring a two over two center hall and 14-foot ceilings, Fighting Creek Plantation was designed by Alexander Jackson Davis. It is today the home of Bev and Kemper Baker. (Photo by Phil Audibert)



that people would come.” He points to the prospect of \$4-a-gallon gasoline. “It might be a good thing. A slowdown might give us a chance to think; that’s just transportation taking over for planning again. The very reason we are located right here is because it was a horseback ride away.”

A Tour of Powhatan

There are an incredible 17 Powhatan County sites on the National and/or State Historic registries. Just on the Huguenot Trail alone, there are more than a dozen. Here are just a few examples:

The Mill at Fine Creek: Built in the mid- to late 1730s and destroyed by fire almost 200 years later, the still-standing three-story stone ruins currently serve as the centerpiece of a wedding and special-events facility. Fine Creek, so named for its good fishing, flows rapidly over a rock bed to the James River. The original Miller’s Cottage now serves as a honeymoon suite.

Malvern: Fine Creek owner Lisa Benusa recently acquired this property alongside bustling Route 288, the route that links I-64 West with I-95 at Petersburg. Plans call for the manor house to be converted into a 12-room inn with basement pub, adding five guest cottages, a spa and a special-events facility for 400 guests. A planned amphitheatre will host the Powhatan Performing Arts Foundation – all of this by the fall of 2009!

Fighting Creek Plantation: One of the earliest land patents in the county (1724) consisted of 2,000 acres to Colonel William Randolph II in an area just south of Powhatan Courthouse. Kemper and Bev Baker have lived and entertained here for the past four years, but feel they have been a part of Powhatan ever since they owned an old tavern in nearby Cartersville. Bev says, “The creek supposedly ran red with blood from the warring Indians,” hence the name.

Designed by Alexander Jackson Davis, this remarkable home features a two-over-two with center hall. Two one-

story wings serve today as a kitchen and a den. The entire house is stucco over brick with floor-to-ceiling arched (dare we say Palladian?) windows and 14-foot ceilings on the first floor.

Mill Quarter: Part of that original Randolph 1724 land grant included this property. Possibly built as early as 1730, it is currently owned by Werner and Roseanne Gutmann. It is a splendid example of Georgian architecture, a two-over-two with a center hall and an 1830s one-story addition in back.

Food

The County Seat is the happening place in Powhatan, where the desserts and gossip are homemade every day. Every chair in the room is different. Four generations of this mom-and-pop eatery stare down at you from a photo on the wall.

But perhaps you’d like something different, like the more upscale Village Garden Café. Order any of the Panini; they’re all good. Or for dinner try the Greek/Italian fare at the The Four Seasons, located in the old Maxey Store building where Floyd Yates saved his two cents.

Or if barbecue is your style, there are three places in Powhatan. Try Turner’s BBQ on Old Buckingham Road; it’s the real deal.

Fun

Check out the Y: With 5,000 members, it is named after its benefactor, Elizabeth Randolph Lewis. Ironically, her unexpected death served as a funding catalyst, making the building possible. Also, there are plenty of equine facilities in Powhatan as well as hiking trails, thanks to a wildlife management area on both sides of Route 60 West. Currently, locals are excited about a planned \$7.5 million state park on the James River. The Powhatan Performing Arts Foundation will soon find a permanent home at Malvern. The James River Bateau Festival draws participants and spectators every summer, and live music is featured

most weekends at The County Seat. But the brightest jewel in Powhatan’s entertainment crown is the Festival of the Grape, featuring 21 wineries and slated for October 25.

Finally, on a hill overlooking the James River sits an astounding structure. Located on 2,500 acres, 1,200 of which are protected by an easement, it is part of the Belmead/St. Francis de Sales/St Emma’s complex, created by Saint Catherine Drexel to give young African-American men and women an education before the government would. But that is a story of its own.

Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs since he was 16. Recently, he won several first-place awards from the Virginia Press Association. His wife Susie is a skilled photographer in her own right.