

Onancock

and the Eastern Shore

By
Larry Chowning
Photos by Hay Hardy

Aerial photo by Ann Meekins



Onancock on the Eastern Shore of Virginia is a breath of fresh air. The town of 1,500 has a gentle Old Dominion flavor. There is a nice balance of old and new and an atmosphere reminiscent of the 1950s when small-town America was innocent and thriving.

Onancock is a town that seems to have survived the ugly advance of urbanization that draws businesses out of towns

and onto super highways, often leaving behind empty and boarded-up buildings. The business community of Onancock is alive and well and extremely attractive. If you grew up in the 1950s and '60s, the Roseland movie theater in the heart of downtown Onancock will make your heart flutter. It looks like most any small-town movie house, but so many have been replaced by urban sprawl.

Onancock's lifeblood comes from the fact it is built on a deep-water creek and can be visited easily by land or sea. It sits gracefully on the land between the North and South Branches of Onancock Creek. Its history goes back to the beginning of English settlement in America.

History

With all the fanfare this year surrounding Captain John Smith and the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the first permanent English colony at Jamestown, Onancock can claim some of that glory, too. John Smith and a band of 14 settlers came to the spot where the town now sits in 1608.

After establishing Jamestown in 1607, Smith and his group set out in a small craft called a scallop on one of the most important voyages of exploration in American history.

He was searching for gold and



A tranquil waterfront neighborhood on Onancock Creek

Downtown Onancock



silver. Instead, he discovered the beauty and glorious bounty of the Chesapeake Bay region, which was much more wonderful than the silver and gold he never found.

When out on the Bay, a storm drove the band of settlers into Onancock Creek, a five-mile body of water that leads from Pocomoke Sound and Chesapeake Bay to what is today Onancock's town dock. Smith, who preserved for posterity the story of that voyage, wrote that they found a protected place, and he named it Keale's Hill after a member of his group. That name was not to last. It was later to be named Onancock, a word used by the Algonquin Indians for a "foggy place."

In 1680, the Virginia General Assembly approved the Act of Cohabitation that established 50-acre towns throughout the colony. Onancock was surveyed and laid off in 1681 and named Port Scarborough for the man from whom the 50-acres was purchased. It was also designated as the county seat, but eventually the courthouse was moved to Accomac, across the peninsula on the oceanside.

Throughout Virginia, there was some resistance to the concept of creating towns, as these towns might shift the balance of power away from the large plantation owners to new arrivals from England who would become merchants and shopkeepers. Because of this resistance, Onancock never rose to the heights of colonial fortunes compared to some of the other 50-acre towns created by the Assembly. However, unlike other designated spots that did not survive, Onancock did, and its deep-water creek was a major reason.

Architecture

Onancock has an absolutely wonderful blend of 18th, 19th and early 20th century buildings. An 1890s fire destroyed much of the town's business district, and the town fathers required that the rebuilds



Kerr Place, built around 1799 is today headquarters for the Eastern Shore of Virginia Historical Society and is open to the public.

had to be in brick so as to avoid another such catastrophe. The large, well-built brick buildings that once housed general merchandise stores and other time-period establishments have now been converted into upscale restaurants, antique stores, real estate offices, a theatrical playhouse and art galleries.

Right next to the town dock at the foot of Market Street is Hopkins Store. A vintage 1842 general merchandise storefront, Hopkins now houses a restaurant named Mallards at the Wharf and a museum. Several years ago, the building went out of private ownership and was owned for a while by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA). It is now owned by a local historical society, is protected from change, and provides a wonderful and unique flavor down on Onancock Creek.

Further up in town is Kerr place, a fine example of Federal architecture. The mansion, once owned by wealthy planter John Kerr, was built around 1799. Today it is headquarters for the Eastern Shore of Virginia Historical Society. The house is open to the public from March through December.

Built in 1778, the oldest house in town is Scott Hall. Revolutionary War hero Commodore Zedekiah Whaley is

buried in Scott Hall cemetery. In 1782, Whaley sailed from Onancock Creek with soldiers from the Accomack militia to attack Tories. Even though the Revolutionary war had ended, British ships continued to harass Bay mariners. Whaley commanded a fleet of barges, and in an ensuing battle on November 30, 1782, he was killed when an ammunition chest exploded. For his sacrifice, he is forever considered a hero, and a marker at Scott Hall denotes his status. A walking tour of the town features 27 other historical sites.

Onancock Today

The town dock is located right next door to Hopkins Store. The dock office is manned in the summertime from 8 AM to 6 PM, and the dock is open from March to November. Transient boat slips, fuel, public showers, and bathrooms are available.

The dock master is Isaac Annis, who was once a commercial fisherman. Isaac started out in 1978 as a full-time Chesapeake Bay waterman. Then, a new 44-foot Bay deadrise workboat cost him \$25,000. Crab pots and a bushel of bait cost six dollars each, and gasoline was around 50 cents a gallon.

"Now, a new boat costs



Hopkins Store, a vintage 1842 general merchandise store, now houses a restaurant named Mallards at the Wharf.

Willie Crockett



John Morrison, Jr



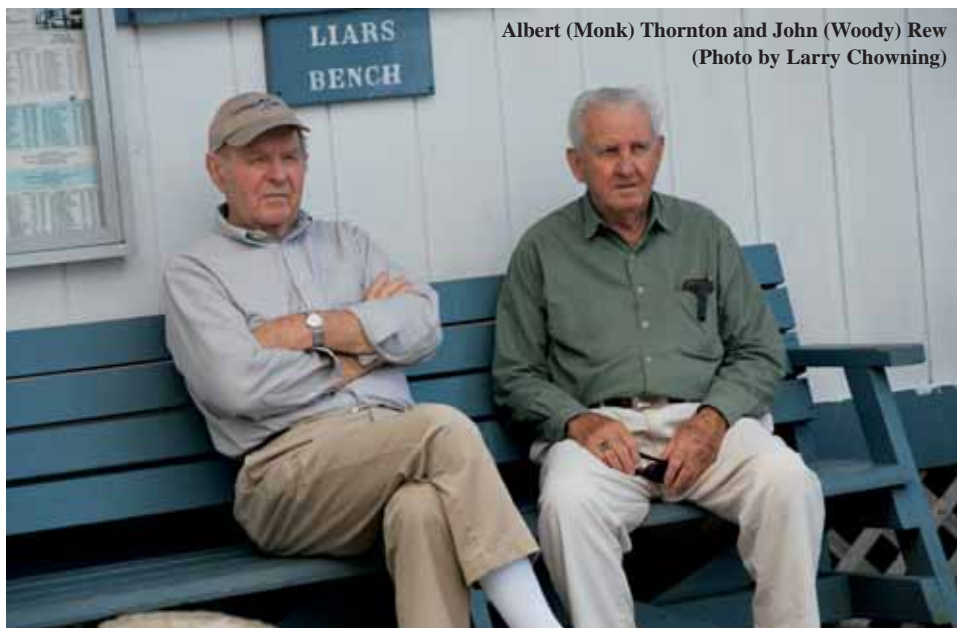
\$150,000, a bushel of bait is \$20, a crab pot \$30, and you know what a gallon of gas costs,” he said. “The real bad thing is that watermen are not getting much more for a bushel of crabs now then they were in 1978.”

These forces have driven many a waterman ashore, and Annis landed at the Onancock Dock as dock master. He seems to enjoy it, and it’s a good fit for the former commercial fisherman.

In contrast to Annis who has lived in the area his entire life, John Morrison, part owner with his son of Mallards at the Wharf restaurant, moved to Onancock full-time a couple of years ago from Rockville, Maryland. Morrison was a sheet metal worker by trade and bought a second home in a waterfront development just outside of Onancock. Looking forward to the weekend, he’d rush down as soon as work was over on Friday afternoon to help his son with the restaurant. Not wanting to leave, he would get up at 3 AM on Monday morning to drive back to work.

“It just got harder and harder for me to leave. I’d say to myself, ‘I don’t want to go back. I want to stay.’ And finally we sold everything we owned in Rockville and moved down.... There is quality of life in being where you feel welcome and where you want to be,” he said. “Onancock made me feel at home.”

Albert (Monk) Thornton and John (Woody) Rew are regular sitters on the town’s “Liar’s Bench.” The bench is located up against the town dock office. Monk and Woody are retired and live in Onancock. Monk made his living working on a farm in nearby Tasley, and Woody worked at his father’s store for 20 years before going to work for the county. The store was named R. J. Rew General Merchandise and was located on Deep Creek about five miles from Onancock. Monk said Onancock is a nice, quiet community. “At night you hardly hear anything going on,” he said. “In fact,



Albert (Monk) Thornton and John (Woody) Rew
(Photo by Larry Chowning)

there's not much going on in the daytime, but at night it's real quiet. You don't have anything to keep you awake."

The only time Woody left the area was during the Second World War. He is proud of his service to his country and carries a scrapbook in his car loaded with photos and clippings associated with his life. Inside the book are clippings of Eastern Shore boys he knew killed in the war, old photos of his father's general store, a photo of a wooden oyster buyboat named "Hopkins" and many photos of a younger Woody clad in Army attire.

The two say they meet most every day to sit and "watch the tide rise and fall" on Onancock Creek.

Onancock Town Manager Susan D. Scott said, "Onancock sells itself," but she does a good, sincere job of selling the community, too. "It's not a hard sell. People come here once, and they want to come back," she said. "We've got some of the best restaurants on the whole Eastern Shore. It's the best town on the Shore! It's a working town. It's not show. It is a working town."

Born and raised on Virginia's Tangier Island, Bay artist Willie Crockett now makes his home in Onancock. Willie

owns Crockett's Gallery located on Market Street. His paintings of Bay scenes are well known throughout the region. He's also a character with plenty of Eastern Shore flavor.

"When I moved off Tangier I lived out west for seven years, and when I came back I moved here," he said. "There's not much on Tangier to make a living in the art business." Willie always has a story. In 1983, a book entitled *Barcat Skipper: Tales of a Tangier Island Waterman* was published. It featured Tangier Island watermen Elmer Crockett. When Willie was asked about his relationship to Elmer he said, "Old Elmer! He was something. He used to have the best duck blind over there, and I'd steal it all the time. He was in it most of the time. It was on a little, tiny island. It's washed away now. We'd wait for him to leave and he'd know we were waiting for him to leave. So he'd stay as long as he could. The minute he left, we'd head out to his blind. He had a very good place."

The town has some wonderful places to stay for the night. One is The Inn at Onancock. Kris and Lisa LaMontague converted an 1885 Victorian-style home into the Inn. The LaMontagues completely

restored the old portion of the home and added a large addition off the back. "Onancock is a wonderful town," said Lisa. "People are surprised what they find here. Driving down Route 13, you really don't have any real idea what's going on in the little towns on either side that satellite off of the highway. We think Onancock is a gem," she said. "It's a real surprise when you get in here."

Good people make a good town. Onancock has Willie Crockett, Susan Scott, Isaac Annis, John Morrison, Monk Thornton, Woody Rew and many, many others. They are all good people who make Onancock a very special place.

The Eastern Shore

The Eastern Shore of Virginia is a peninsula wedged between the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay. The Shore has the unique blend of Bay and ocean culture, and a short drive will take you to either.

On the ocean side, Chincoteague and Assateague Islands are nationally known resort islands, and the annual Chincoteague pony swim and auction in July draws 50,000 spectators annually. The ocean side also has smaller communities such as Wachpreague, Willis Wharf and

Onancock Creek





*Experience the perfect
antidote to stress at*

The Inn at Onancock

VIRGINIA'S EASTERN
SHORE

It's in Our Nature



A Gourmet B&B on Virginia's Eastern Shore

30 North Street
Onancock, Virginia 23417
757-789-7711 866-972-7466
info@innatonancock.com
www.innatonancock.com

- Relax in one of five spacious guest rooms in settings inspired by favorite worldwide destinations.
 - Sleep in utmost comfort on feather-topped beds dressed with 1,000 thread count luxury linens.
 - Melt away stress in a two-person air jet tub surrounded by spa-style décor in your private bath and wrap up in fluffy warm towels and cozy robes.
 - Choose a room with a fireplace and relax in private or on the porch with a cool drink.
 - Enjoy a sumptuous gourmet breakfast every morning and a WineDown Hour with hors d'oeuvre each evening.
 - Stroll to the Wharf and several excellent restaurants, boutiques and art galleries during your visit.
 - Let us help you plan your stay with our concierge services.
- Complimentary wireless internet throughout the house.

Oyster. These communities grew from seafood and farming enterprises and today offer an Eastern Shore quaintness that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Along the coast are stretches of uninhabited barrier islands that can only be reached by boat. Untouched by time, other than by nature's hands, these islands sit alone between the wide ocean and the Shore on the edge of nature's cliff.

On the Bay side, Tangier Island is an inhabited Eastern Shore island and can be reached by tour boat or by airplane. The islanders make their living by working the water, and the unique watermen's culture is alive and well on Tangier. The Bay coastal towns of Cape Charles and Onancock have a colorful and unique history that goes back to the colonial development of Virginia.

A visit to the Shore means a trip to the ocean or the Bay, or both in a day.

gardenART on King St

'wares and whimsy's for garden & home'
AND

The Virginia Sportsman



44 King St Onancock, VA
Tel: 757-787-8818
Fax: 757-787-9311
www.gardenartonking.com

Larry Chowning is the author of five books, most recently, *Chesapeake Bay Buyboats*. He has had numerous articles and photos published in national and regional magazines and newspapers and has won many Virginia Press Association awards.