



The Inn at Little Washington

Washington, Virginia Rappahannock County

by

William T. Semple

Photos by William T. Semple and Hay Hardy

Far from his home on a river about 60 miles distant, a young man with a passion for rural Virginia jotted in his field journal:

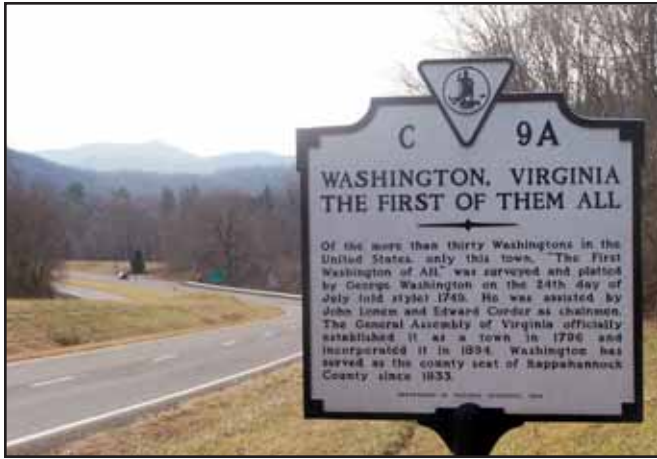
Surveyed . . . a certain tract of waste land and ungranted land situate, lying and being in the County of Culpeper, containing 400 acres and made this 22nd day of July, 1749 (OS) . . . on the second day thereafter . . . , I journeyed one half day in a northwestern direction from Culpeper (Fairfax) and in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Culpeper County (Rappahannock), I laid off a town.

Forty-one years later the same man sited another town. The new town held little appeal to him, though closer to and on the same river as his home. He was following instructions, but as from the day he landed the new job, he yearned for the quieter life of his farm. So when in 1791, the U.S. Congress named the town after him, he was quietly embarrassed. Yet, when the Virginia General Assembly officially established the little village he had surveyed years before as Washington in 1796, George Washington had no reason to be embarrassed. Historians say that as the young surveyor years before, he had named the village himself.

Today, Washington, Virginia, continues to reflect and embody our

founding father's passion for agrarian America, but more importantly, it serves as the seat of government for Rappahannock County, a rural community untouched by more than two centuries of technological change and population growth in the surrounding region, a magical kingdom of Blue Ridge Mountains, rolling bucolic farm and timberland, horses, cattle, and crops, quaint villages, fantastic restaurants, antique stores, B&Bs, music, great theatre, and local crafts.

Welcome to Rappahannock County and Washington, Virginia where friendship is a given and the values of a simple country lifestyle are preserved, all within 50 miles west-southwest of the Capital Beltway.



The scenic countryside of Rappahannock County

The county had its origins in 1833 when the Virginia General Assembly carved it out of neighboring Culpeper County after residents complained that government services were too far away. The northwestern border tracks the Skyline Drive down the Blue Ridge Mountains; the southwestern border abuts Madison County; the southeastern border abuts Culpeper County; and the northeastern border is the Rappahannock River, from which the county takes its name and whose headwaters are in the region.

Rappahannock's 170,880 acres ranks it near the bottom of the state's counties in size; even then, approximately 105,795 are woodland and 10,000 are unusable, leaving 57,000 acres in agriculture, 2,050 in roads and highways, and 1,450 acres—less than 1% of the entire county—for residential purposes. Only 75

acres involve commercial use, and 45 industrial.

While the population has rebounded from a low of 5,000 in 1970, the 7,200 residents today are still 2,500 less than the recorded population in 1850! Indeed, Rappahannock's one incorporated town, Washington, has a population of

only 181, and the five other villages, Amissville, Chester Gap, Flint Hill, Sperryville, and Woodville have no declared population at all.

The statistics show, but cannot explain why, Rappahannock is blissfully free of the commercial, industrial and residential blight that has affected so many

Residences on
Gay Street in
Washington, Virginia



once-pastoral counties. One could argue that a small population and an economy based primarily on agriculture does not require the commercial or retail services otherwise readily available a half-hour away in Front Royal, Culpeper or Warrenton. Tourism generated by the metropolitan area's fascination with the Blue Ridge Mountains is sufficient to support rural-style, destination-oriented small businesses, professional sole proprietorships, cottages industries, local crafts, country stores, specialty trades, shops, galleries, specialty restaurants and inns, bed and breakfasts, and local services, all of which reinforce the quiet, unassuming, uncomplicated lifestyle of the region. And Rappahannock lies just outside what is considered a tolerable commute into Washington, DC.

But the fundamental reason Rappahannock remains the way it is is the residents themselves, whose views, along with more than 200 years of resistance to change, are codified in and reflected by the 2004 Comprehensive Plan found on the Rappahannock government website.

New and long-time residents alike have been voluntarily restricting viewsheds and privacy. Piedmont Environmental Council reported at the end of 2005 that more than 20,000 acres of the countryside had been placed in permanent scenic easement. The reason the price of unimproved land has doubled each year for the past four years in Rappahannock is not that it can be subdivided, but that it can't. The result is a tranquil, intimate environment, where country living finds its best expression and can be found whether you've lived there forever or just arrived.

According to Justin Wiley, managing broker of Frank Hardy, Inc. in Washington, Virginia, properties in Rappahannock and the surrounding counties are hot commodities, especially to buyers from Northern Virginia. Wiley opened his office in 2000, and today there



Justin Wiley, managing broker of Frank Hardy, Inc. in Washington.

are a total of six agents with the company transacting over \$50 million of properties in 2005. Over 1000 acres of these properties are being placed under conservation easement, 400 of which are in Rappahannock. Although Wiley himself handles properties from Middleburg to Charlottesville, the other five agents all reside in Rappahannock and deal with medium to high-end properties in that area. "I am proud to say that our goal is to find conservation-minded buyers and match them up with properties that are still not protected under conservation easement," said Wiley. "We want to preserve the natural beauty of the area and the rural way of life." Wiley and his wife, Nancy Massie Wiley, are both avid foxhunters and hunt with both the Old Dominion Hunt and the Keswick Hunt.

Sam Snead of Sam Snead Realty shares the same sentiment. "We don't want to kill the Golden Goose. We are not that interested in developing Rappahannock." Snead, who is also on the Board of Directors of Rappahannock National Bank, has lived in Rappahannock all his life. His father, Rayner V. Snead, attended the University of Virginia Law School and was the Commonwealth attorney and circuit court judge in Rappahannock.

"We absolutely love living here," says Ester Settles, who with her husband

Richard, their son Bubby and Bubby's son Lee have run a country store and Settles's Cars & Trucks in Flint Hill since the 1970s. Patrons refer to the Settles as the "Google" of Rappahannock: They know everything that's going on that is important. While Richard farms as he always has, Bubby focuses on his lineup of used vehicles, and Ester holds down the fort in the office. The most popular pastime for the Settles is to greet friends and neighbors as they drop by the store, fill up with gas, order a freshly-served ham sandwich, or sit around each morning for coffee and hear the latest ear-to-the-country-road news.

Philip Morgan, an Episcopal minister by training, manages the Sunnyside Farms@The Schoolhouse where he has recently overseen an extensive renovation that has turned one of the area's best-known landmarks into an attractive and upscale restaurant, wine shop, specialty meat and produce market, ice cream parlor and store selling all kinds of products and books indigenous to the area.

"Most of our traffic comes from fall and spring season tourists," Morgan

Philip Morgan, manager of Sunnyside Farms Market at the Sperryville store.



The author wine tasting at Rappahannock Cellars



says, “but we want to attract more local residents to purchase our general goods as well as offer a top-flight restaurant without having to go to Washington, Flint Hill or Warrenton.” He pointed to the two large LCD flat panel televisions over the bar, probably the only “sports bar” in the county. The Flying Pig Restaurant is named after a huge flying pig suspended from the ceiling—Sperryville’s answer to the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum. “Our restaurant is doing very well,” Morgan said, smiling.

One of the local vineyards, Rappahannock Cellars, has won a number of prestigious awards during its brief five years of existence. The small vineyard produces and annually sells almost 5,000 cases, most of which sell right out of its elegant tasting room on the corner of Hume Road and Route 522. “The wine industry in Virginia has exploded in the last few years,” says Brian Delaney, the marketing and operations manager, “we are pleased to be a member of this important and exciting industry and to be part of Rappahannock County.”

Without a doubt, the most popular destinations for residents, neighbors and tourists are the restaurants, led by the world famous Inn at Little Washington, which can also be classified as one of the world’s most expensive. However, numerous other restaurants also beckon: The Blue Rock Inn on Lee Highway, Four and

Twenty Blackbirds in Flint Hill, The Flying Pig at SunnysideFarms@The Schoolhouse near Sperryville, Thornton River Grille of Sperryville, The Flint Hill Public House, and Griffin Tavern, also in Flint Hill. If you want to meet locals, you

should also stop by Settles, or eat breakfast at the Country Café in Washington.

Dozens of shops, galleries and services also make Washington, Flint Hill and Sperryville destination stops. My favorite is The Theatre at Washington, Virginia, which offers a year-round array of events and concerts that are comparable to anything you might find elsewhere. Artists love to perform in its intimate and acoustically warm surroundings. An evening of country theatre, coupled with a visit to the shops and dinner at any of the restaurants in the region, represents the best of what Rappahannock offers to the visitor.

Rappahannock is a haven for the outdoor sportsman. Trout fishing in the county is located on the western border primarily within the Shenandoah National



“Downtown” Sperryville

Flint Hill





Rappahannock is a haven for the “outdoor” sportsman.

Park, stocked fishing is available on the Piney River and the North Fork of the Thornton River, and the Hughes River is a designated natural trout stream.

Calvert Clark, whose mother owned The Blue Rock Inn until recently when it was acquired by Gary Harvey, maintains a string of polo ponies and hunts game year ‘round: Primarily deer, turkey, dove, and geese, all of which he says are abundant in the county. “The principal challenge is access to private lands,” he says. “Most of the old-timers welcome and encourage the tradition of using farm and forestland for hunting, but newer residents don’t take to it much, which I think is a shame. The key is to meet the landowners and earn their trust.”

The Rappahannock Hunt covers some of the largest foxhunting territory in the nation. The hunting is rugged, and it requires a sturdy horse and some nerve: I should know, as I rode with the Rappahannock in joint meets for years and survived to tell the tale, including this one.

The best way to appreciate Rappahannock is to drive there. From Washington, DC, drive through Warrenton and take a right at 211 just before the hospital. In about 20 minutes, you will enter a

twilight zone, whose timelessness will capture your heart and, if you stay long enough, replenish your soul.



William T. Semple is a freelancer writer, foxhunter, musician and realtor living in Delaplane, Virginia, who rides either his bike or his horse through some of the Piedmont's most beautiful countryside.

Places to stay:

The Blue Rock Inn
540-987-3190
www.thebluerockinn.com

Inn at Little Washington
540-675-3800
www.relaischateaux.com

Foster-Harris House
800-666-0153
www.fosterharris.com

Heritage House
540-675-3207
www.heritagehousebb.com

Places to eat:

- The Blue Rock Inn
- Inn at Little Washington
- Flint Hill Public House
- Four and Twenty Blackbirds
- Griffin Tavern
- Sunnyside Farms Market
- Thornton River Grille
- Country Cafe
- Burger N Things
- The Epicurious Cow
- Lombardy Restaurant