



Urbanna

by
Larry Chowning
Photos by Hay Hardy

Small-town wonders like Urbanna are what make the Tidewater region so flavorful. With each generation, the high banks of the Rappahannock River and the deep water and safe harbor of Urbanna Creek have attracted life and commerce along the shore. Before the English named the town Urbanna (meaning “City of Anne” in Latin) after Queen Anne of England, Native Americans known as Nimcock

Indians were some of the first to make this area their home. Early maps denoted the creek as Nimcock Creek. When the King of England first issued land grants for settlement of “the frontier” in the 1640s, the influential Captain Ralph Wormeley lobbied to obtain the “land by the deep water creek.” For a century and a half, several generations of the Wormeley family and their slaves lived on Rosegill Plantation across Urbanna Creek. As more immi-

grants came from England to the colonies, towns developed to accommodate a growing demand for centers of living and commerce. The Assembly Act of 1680 authorized that Ralph Wormeley be paid 10,000 pounds of tobacco for 50 acres of land on the creek to establish a town. Urbanna became a thriving colonial seaport town that would later be transformed into a seafood town with three steamboat docks and finally, in the 21st century, into a



Daffodils announce the arrival of spring on Watling Street in Urbanna. Old Haywood's Store and the main portion of the Urbanna Baptist Church with its wonderful steeple were constructed in the late 1800s.

small-town tourist destination.

Mine was the first generation of Urbanna children that was hospital-born. I was born in Richmond in 1949. My father and grandmother were born in the main bedroom of the house where my wife, Dee, and I live in today. The Palmer-Chowning House on Watling Street was built in 1875 by my great-grandfather, Charles Henry Palmer, a Civil War veteran. The land the house sits on has been in the family since the 1830s. My great-great-grandfather bought it and most of the land on Watling Street. He owned Palmer's Steamboat Dock at the foot of the street on Urbanna Creek, and he and two others financed the construction of the first bridge across the creek in the 1850s. Across the street from my home is the Urbanna Baptist Church. My great-grandfather built and designed the church with its wonderful steeple in the 1890s, and my Aunt Eddie donated the land. Edmonia Palmer Ross, my great-grandfather's sister, left her own legacy of giving to others.

I have lived in town on Watling Street all but the four years that I attended the University of Richmond. There is comfort and security in knowing that the shell footpath you walk daily out into your backyard and down to the water has the

footprints of six generations of your own family. Sometimes on holidays, I awake late at night and wonder what Christmas Day or Easter Sunday was like in 1880 for my grandmother Grace, great-aunt Mary and great-uncle Charlie who all grew up in the same rooms in which I now live. When we bring out roast goose and fried oysters on Christmas Day, baked shad in early spring, and steamed orange jimmie crabs and fried spotfish in summer, I sometimes think of them. I thank God every day that their love is all around me. It is a wonderful feeling and a security that has blessed my life.

Each step of the way, Urbanna hasn't grown much but has held onto its

The Old Tobacco Warehouse on Virginia Street is one of several pre-revolutionary buildings in town. It now houses the Urbanna Visitors Center.



intended style: That of a quaint, small-town community that attracts more than 60,000 visitors to its annual two-day official state Oyster Festival the first weekend in November. More importantly, Urbanna is home to about 600 residents, many of whom are natives and others of whom have moved here to enjoy the relaxed, small-town lifestyle. What makes the town unique is that a visit by water can be as convenient as by automobile. The town-owned Urbanna Town Marina at Upton's Point has 16 transient boat slips, with a laundry and showers for overnight boaters. The facility is handicapped accessible. From the marina, a short walk up Virginia Street leads to the heart of the business and historical district in the town.

Buildings

Town buildings are a blend of over three centuries of styles. Urbanna nearly rivals Williamsburg with pre-revolutionary buildings. For history buffs, a handy free self-guided walking tour has been developed by the town and can be picked up at the visitors' center in the Old Tobacco Warehouse or at the different shops. The tour centers on Virginia Street, which winds down to the waterfront and is home to some of the nation's most wonderful examples of early American architecture.

The tour lists 14 historic sites, four of which are on the National Register

of Historic Places: the Old Tobacco Warehouse, the old courthouse, Lansdowne and the Wormeley-Lee-Montague cottage. Once across the Urbanna Bridge, the gateway into town along Watling Street is embroidered with 19th century Italianate-style homes and highlighted by the charm and reverence of the Urbanna Baptist Church, all built in the late 1800s.

Dining

Moo's River's Edge Eatery, Boathouse Café, Virginia Street Café, Shuckers Restaurant, Café Mojo and the counter at Marshall's Drug Store offer a wide choice of dining styles. For locals, Payne's Crab House, run by sisters Catherine Via and Beatrice Taylor, is a favorite hangout. During the season, there's no question the crabs are fresh because the soft-shells come from the shedding tanks out back. The sisters run the last traditional crabbing operation in town. Beatrice runs the boat and pulls the crab pots. Together the sisters work the shedding tanks as the crabs molt into soft crabs. At Oyster Festival there is a long line waiting for their crab cakes and soft crab sandwiches. The ladies' heritage is steeped in the tradition of the Bay. Avery Payne, their father, moved to Urbanna in 1933 from Tangier Island. He eventually took over Hurley's Crab House on the creek and renamed it Payne's Crab House. The sisters took over the business in 1977; as Urbanna has changed with more upscale shops and restaurants, Catherine and Beatrice have maintained that flavor of the times when commercial crab and oyster houses lined the Urbanna shoreline.

Sport Fishing and Real Estate

In warm weather months, the creek and river are loaded with fish and blue crabs. Hook-and-line fishing runs from mid-April to November. If you're a saltwater angler, Craig Hall of Mason



Craig Hall, above, is an Urbanna realtor who knows the best fishing holes on Urbanna Creek and the Rappahannock River.

IsaBell K. Horsley has one of the oldest real estate firms in town.



Realty in Urbanna can sell you a lot on the water and provide tips on fishing that have come from years of testing the waters. The way Hall fishes, you don't need a \$200,000 craft. He has weathered choppy seas by gunk holing and bait testing in his 18-foot fiberglass skiff. Hall has mastered fishing in waters around Urbanna and brought it to an art form. He moved to Urbanna as a young man in 1963, and as an adult he worked with his father F. L. Hall in the local family-owned Texaco Oil business. He later went to work with Mason Realty in the 1980s.

A still-youthful Hall has watched and prospered from the continued esca-

tion of land values around the waterfront of Urbanna and Middlesex County and has used his off-time to fish. He lives and keeps his skiff on Sprout's Cove, a high-banked small gut on Urbanna Creek just below Urbanna Bridge. The cove is a boundary line for the town. The north bank is Urbanna, and the south bank is Middlesex County. A footbridge crossed the cove in the late 19th century, and the high banks were used as shelter for townsfolk when Yankee gunboats bombed the town in 1860s. Although Hall is a top real estate salesman, you're likely to get a quicker return phone call if you say "I've got a fishing tip for you" than if you say "I've got a house for sale." He loves to talk about fishing.

"I know people who go to the Outer Banks to surf fish, and I know for a fact I can catch just as many good fish right here as they do," says Hall. Croaker, also known as king bellies and hardheads, come in droves by mid-April in the creek. "Few people know it, but at that time you can catch a boatload off any dock in Urbanna Creek," says Hall. "They're kind of skinny about that time but good to eat." By the first of June, croaker move out into deep water in the Rappahannock and fatten up—just right for the frying pan, he says. Flounder, spot, bluefish, gray and speckled trout and rockfish are all prey to Hall, who has studied their moves and grooves for a lifetime.

The real estate business, along with tourism, has sparked the local economy since the oyster business went into decline in the 1960s. Mason Realty is the oldest firm in town. IsaBell K. Horsley Real Estate, LTD has also been around for years. The newest Urbanna firm is River Towne Properties and Real Estate.

Lodging

All lodgings are within walking distance of marinas, restaurants and shops, and there are some fancy places in town to hang your hat for the night. Right down on

the water is Liberty at Compass Quay. Nine years ago, Jim and Bonnie Vautrot found Urbanna after making a wrong turn. The couple were looking for a shortcut from Richmond to Williamsburg and somehow ended up in town. Bonnie could hardly believe her eyes. “We were so excited because the town reminded me so much of my small-town upbringing in New Hampshire,” she says. “You don’t see many towns in Virginia where everything is in walking distance.” They were living in Williamsburg, and the next weekend came back to town looking for a house. The Vautrots ended up buying a home on Virginia Street and eventually purchased the old Southern States Granary property on the creek at the foot of Virginia Street. Where the granary once stood, the Vautrots have recently built a wonderful hotel and building with 12 standard rooms and three suites, a reception hall ideal for weddings and conventions, and room for several retail shops. The new hotel is the third establishment to grace this waterfront location in the last hundred years. Old-timers in town fondly recall that not only was the granary on this same spot, but in the 1940s a popular restaurant, Hurley’s, called the space home. Hurley’s Restaurant sported an attractive ornamental turret that the Vautrots have charmingly added into their building. The spacious front veranda provides room for long nights of sitting in rocking chairs, listening to nighttime sounds of crickets singing and fish jumping and watching moonbeams reflecting on the water.

There are two bed-and-breakfast inns in town. Suzanne and Lee Chewning recently opened The Inn at Urbanna Creek. Lee has known Urbanna most of his life and graduated from Christ Church School, an Episcopal boarding school located a few miles outside of town. Suzanne and Lee bring a unique charm to the old 1870s house on Watling Street. Both have worked in the restaurant business, and Lee has been chef at some exclu-



Liberty at Compass Quay opened this year on the waterfront in town. Right next door is Payne’s Crab House, a traditional soft-shell crab business.

sive establishments on the East Coast. The Chewnings have polished up the home and grounds so that they now have a friendly, welcoming B & B sparkle.

During steamboat days, The Inn at Urbanna Creek was well known as Mrs. Hoge’s Boarding House. Stout, vivacious and confident, Maggie Hoge ran one of the more popular boarding houses in town. In her time, Maggie raised some eyebrows. The great religious awakening slowly but definitely reached into the heart and souls of many in Urbanna, and a strong temperance movement aroused the inner spirits—particularly of the “good” ladies of the Baptist and Methodist faith. Maggie was an Episcopalian—or “whiskeypalian,” as she was so described by the town’s disapproving folks. She made no bones about her values as she went about the task of growing her own grapes and brewing a tasty, sparkling wine in her basement. For over three decades, the communion glasses at Christ Episcopal Church overflowed with Maggie’s grape wine, and her custom of serving a nip of wine each day at the meal table did not seem to hurt the boarding business. The Inn at Urbanna Creek is a giant step up from Mrs. Hoge’s Boarding House, but it has not lost the flavor.

Atherston Hall Bed & Breakfast over on Prince George Street is next door to the “Ole Tavern,” now a home. Urbanna was county seat of Middlesex County from 1748 to 1852. The Tavern provided lodging, food and beverage for those visiting the town on court days. Legend has it that Patrick Henry once gave a fiery independence message from the steps of the tavern. If he gave that same message today, Henry’s oration could be heard clearly from rocking chairs on the front and side porches and in the beautiful, fenced backyard garden of Atherston Hall. William and Judith Dickinson have recently transformed the house and grounds into an elegant B & B.

Shopping

The town boasts a wonderful blend of retail shops owned by natives and by those who have found Urbanna irresistible. The gift shops and stores are not typical of many small towns. Local shopowners make buying trips to New York, Atlanta, Washington and Boston to keep their clientele from Richmond, Northern Virginia, Newport News and Norfolk happy. Bill Bridgeforth discovered the town as a boy when his parents



R. S. Bristow and Son, "Home of Good Goods," was founded in 1876 as a general mercantile store in town. Today, the store has become an upscale clothing and gift shop.

owned a cottage on the river. Saturday matinees at the town's old Rappanna Theater and 35-cent banana splits at Marshall's Drug Store are part of his 1950s childhood memories. He and his partner Jennifer Millington have opened The Garden Club, an upscale decorating store, which features antiques and other home décor suitable from floor to ceiling. There are two general merchandise store buildings left from the 1800s: R. S. Bristows and Son, "Home of Good Goods" since 1876, is on the corner of Cross and Virginia streets. The store is now an upscale clothing and gift store. Haywood's Store on Watling Street is now a flower and gift shop.

Three miles outside of town at a crossroad known as Pine Tree, an old store has been revived into the Something Different Country Store and Deli run by Middlesex native Dan Gill. The store specializes in homemade heritage foods including barbecue, smoked meats, desserts, soups and side dishes. Gill has amazing culinary skills and has a bit of a cult following from newcomers moving to the area. He spices up the place by telling tidbits of history about Urbanna and the area. Operated by Richard and Pat Marshall, Marshall's Drug Store was started in the 1920s by Richard's father and mother. It still has a 1950s-era soda foun-

Bob Green's Country Store at Pine Tree just outside of Urbanna has become Something Different Country Store and Deli. Proprietor Dan Gill specializes in homemade heritage foods.

Local artist and frame maker, Emily Chowning started Nimcock Gallery on Cross Street in 1966. She paints water and local scenes in oil, watercolor and acrylics.




tain visited daily by coffee-drinking, crossword puzzle-working, small-talking groups of retired men and women. Nimcock Gallery, run by Urbanna natives Shep and Emily Chowning, is a frame shop, art gallery and antique shop that has been in business since 1966. It is the oldest gallery in Middlesex County and features well-known paintings by Bay artists. An offshoot of Nimcock is Make Thyme, owned and operated by Dee Chowning, who during gardening seasons carries the widest selection of perennials, annuals and herbs in town. She also custom designs and creates silk wreaths to go along with gifts and other home décor.

Change is in the wind for Urbanna. Much of the 800 acres of Rosegill, right across the creek, were recently rezoned by Middlesex County to allow a 700-home housing development, nearly 150 more homes than in the 325-year-old town. It's uncertain what this will mean for small-town life. Yet spring runs of croaker and crabs come each year. Ospreys return in the middle of March; kingfishers zig and zag across the water in June. In every season muskrat and otter leave a water trail as each swims from creek bank to creek bank.

Urbanna will always be a Tidewater town. Some things will never change!

Larry Chowning is a reporter with the *Southside Sentinel* in Urbanna. Chowning is the author of the *Barcat Skipper*, *Harvesting the Chesapeake*, *Chesapeake Legacy*, *Soldiers at the Doorstep* and, most recently, *Chesapeake Bay Buyboats*. He has had numerous articles and photos published in national and regional magazines and newspapers and has won numerous Virginia Press Association awards. He is a field editor for *National Fisherman*. For

over 20 years, Chowning has traveled extensively throughout the Chesapeake Bay region writing stories and gathering oral history on the heritage and culture of fishermen. He has given talks at the Smithsonian Institute, the Maryland Historical Society, and most recently, the first annual Buyboat Rendezvous held in Rock Hall, Maryland.



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**260 Prince George St.
 Urbanna, VA 23175
 (804) 758-2101**

Dining

- Moo's River's Edge Eatery
- Boathouse Café
- Virginia Street Café
- Shuckers Restaurant
- Café Mojo
- The counter at Marshall's Drug Store
- Payne's Crab House
- Something Different Country Store and Deli
- Urbanna Market Bakery and Deli

Lodging

- Liberty at Compass Quay
- The Inn At Urbanna Creek
- Atherston Hall Bed & Breakfast
- Bethpage Camp Resort

Shopping

- Katybugs
- Rappahannock Jewelry
- Urbanna Republic
- The Garden Club
- R. S. Bristow and Son
- Marshall's Drug Store
- Make Thyme
- Nimcock Gallery
- Papeterie
- Cindy's Bynn
- The Wild Bunch
- The Urbanna Antique Mall
- Cup and Pedal
- Only One
- Forget Me Not Consignment
- Bernie's Unique Gifts
- Lazy Daze Glase-N-Blaze
- Hingley's At the River
- BayBerries On the Waterfront
- Brass Pelican
- Portside Candles