



# Mount Laurel, Virginia: Home to silence, peace and good neighbors



Jackie Anderson was owner of Triple A Grocery (now Mount

Laurel Grocery) from 2005 to 2017. 'Ninety percent of business [comes from] locals,' Anderson explains. 'Some come every day. The rest are people traveling through [the community]. I used to know everybody [here]. Now I don't know half of them.'

**M**ount Laurel, Virginia, a few miles off Route 360 in Halifax County, was once a bustling community.

"There were two blacksmith shops here and a wagon-wheel maker in the mid-1930s," recalls Sidney Clark. "At one time, there were five country stores. I ran a little general store out in front of my basement where I sold sodas, bread and milk from 1964 until 1986."

In addition to running his store and raising tobacco, Clark worked for Burlington Industries for 29½ years before retiring. He adds, "I educated my children through tobacco. My son is an electrical engineer in Maryland and my daughter is a nurse in Suffolk who has a [second] home near us."

Today, the unincorporated community's only remaining store is Mount Laurel Grocery (formerly Triple A Grocery), at the intersection of Mount Laurel Road and Hunting Creek Road. The store remains a morning hangout for locals and a popular spot for a quick lunch or dinner of barbecue or hot dogs. Jackie Anderson, who worked 19 years for DScan Furniture, bought Triple A Grocery in 2005; wife Judy had run

the store about 15 years prior to Anderson buying it. In October 2017, sisters Jennifer Hatcher and Melissa Fears took over, renaming the store Mount Laurel Grocery.

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Harvie Hardie's father was only 18 years old when he opened the original store in 1928. Hardie recalls, "We carried plow parts and more hardware items [then]. Everybody raised tobacco and you could get everything here in those days. When I was a kid, all the boys in the neighborhood would be at the store. Guys used to play checkers here and politicians would come by too; it was always a hangout."

Hardie worked at a Richmond accounting firm after college and began running the store his father founded in 1966. He and wife Nancy have two grown children and grandchildren.

"I bought land and cows, raised cattle and ran the store six days a week," he explains.



All About Community Service

Clockwise from top left: The former Triple A Grocery; Harvie Hardie's father founded the store that is now Mount Laurel Grocery in 1928. Jennifer Hatcher co-owns Mount Laurel Grocery with her sister, Melissa Fears. Mount Laurel United Methodist Church was established in 1894. Mount Laurel resident Becky Irby attends Mount Laurel United Methodist Church. Mount Laurel resident Ann Lewis is church historian at Mount Laurel United Methodist Church.



Another gathering spot is Mount Laurel Ruritan Club. Jimmy Anderson, a retired environmental health specialist, says neighborhood people built a clubhouse years ago for a men's social club. Members later deeded the property to the Ruritans.

"We fund-raise, help folks who are sick ... it's all about community service, God and family," Anderson says. "We have about 35 people but whenever we do a large fundraiser we have about as many non-Ruritan volunteers as we do Ruritan [members]. It's like what you saw with the hurricane and floods in Texas, that's what people do here. If someone has a problem, neighbors pitch in and do something about it."

Anderson, who graduated from Virginia Tech, returned to the area where he grew up to live and work after college, noting, "It's still very rural and country ... that's why I like it."

Ann Lewis remembers one community tradition that has continued: group trips to Myrtle Beach. Lewis explains, "Three couples started it. My son is 50, it's shifted to my son's generation." Over 70 locals recently made a group trek to Myrtle Beach.

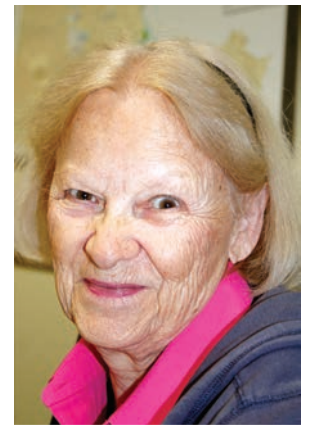
Over and over you see community service at work. Bobby and Lucy Conner started Halifax County Heritage and Antique Machinery Festival, a three-day event held the first weekend in May at South Boston Fairgrounds. The community itself includes modest houses, farms and grand historic homes.

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Two still-thriving churches grace the area: Mount Laurel United Methodist Church on Newbill School Road and Bethel Grove Baptist Church on Mount Laurel Road. Sidney Clark says Bethel Grove was established in 1874; the current brick church building was built in 1955. A deacon at Bethel Grove, Clark explains, "We have had [only] seven pastors in the church's history. The church's third pastor, the Rev. H.L. Brooks, baptized me and married me [to wife Mamie]. He was there 38 years."

Church historian Ann Lewis says Mount Laurel United Methodist Church was established in 1894. In 1929 the old church building was torn down and the current frame church was built. An addition, annex and a separate parsonage were added later.

Mount Laurel has no post office; local residents have Clover addresses. The nearby Clover community is home to a power-generation facility jointly owned



Clockwise from above: A donated restaurant booth from a former local restaurant is part of the display at South Boston Halifax County Visitors Center at the intersection of Highway Route 360 and Route 58. Daniel Coblentz owns Hilltop Foods, where a collection of Amish business enterprises draw locals and tourists alike. Barbara Bass, president of the Halifax County Historical Society. Bethel Grove Baptist Church was established in 1874. Diane Brown was the first female black officer in the Halifax County Sheriff's Office.

by Old Dominion Electric Cooperative and Dominion Energy. There are many retirees; others commute to jobs in South Boston, the town of Halifax or other areas. Two wineries are nearby: Bright Meadows Farm Vineyard in Nathalie and Hunting Creek Vineyards in Clover.

Carved out of Lunenburg County and established in 1752, Halifax County (pop: 36,241) was named for George Montague-Dunk, the second Earl of Halifax. The modern counties of Franklin, Henry, Pittsylvania and Patrick were once part of Halifax County. By the beginning of the 20th century, nearby South Boston (founded 1854) was the second-largest bright-leaf tobacco market in America. Although tobacco is not primary as it once was, its influence lingers.

A sign on Route 360 East points the way to Mount Laurel, whose name's origin remains a matter of speculation. Some think it was derived from a broad-leaved evergreen plant commonly called mountain laurel, often found in mountainous forest areas. But in *Country Life* (1976), author Hugh D.

Koontz III wrote, "Only one resident of the Mount Laurel community admits to ever having seen any of the mountain foliage in the area, and most who live there say they wouldn't know mountain laurel if they tripped over it."

Halifax County native Barbara Day Bass is a retired educator who spent 25 years at Richmond's St. Catherine's School, where she chaired the math and computer science departments before she and husband Walter retired to their Halifax farm. President of the Halifax County Historical Society, Bass has written numerous books on Halifax history, such as *The Golden Leaf: A Brief History of Tobacco in Halifax County* and *A Tribute to Black History in Halifax County*.

"Mount Laurel was overlooked by early mapmakers but it was in existence in the middle 1800s. It had a stagecoach stop, post office and at least one store," Bass says. "Historians note that Mount Laurel has a huge cluster of unaltered Federal and Greek Revival houses."

Local privately owned historic homes include Liberty Holly, also known as the William Adkisson House (the oldest part of the house dates to 1829) and Tranquil Hill, also known as the Dorin place since the land was originally deeded from a Mr. Dorin. Tranquil Hill, a large manor house, features a Greek Revival porch with fluted columns on each side. Built by Elijah Hundley, it dates to 1834.

Bass helped research and write *An Architectural History of Halifax County* (2016), which spotlights 300 to 400 homes. Bass says four houses have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places since the book's publication, noting that book proceeds go to the Halifax County Historical Society.

Newcomers have moved to the area, including retirees who are buying and renovating historic homes. In 2005 an Old Order Amish group from Dover, Delaware, began buying property in Nathalie, just down the road from Mount Laurel, becoming one of only four Amish settlements in Virginia. Mount Laurel resident Becky Irby calls the Amish community "the best thing to

# Historical Mount Laurel

happen to Halifax County,” citing the community’s impeccably maintained homes and farms.

“It [Dover] was so populated there,” says Laura Fern Miller, an attractive, friendly young lady who moved with her family from Maryland and married carpenter Larry Miller. “My brother was the first to move here.”

Miller’s father Daniel Coblenz owns Hilltop Foods, where a collection of Amish business enterprises draw locals and tourists alike. Lush green fields and horses serenely grazing surround Hilltop Foods. Across the road a collection of Amish-crafted storage sheds are for sale.

Old Order Amish worship in homes and operate their own schools. Miller says the community includes about 40 adults and many children, noting, “We are now putting up our fourth schoolhouse.”

Diane Brown, the first female black officer in the Halifax County Sheriff’s Office, spent 31 years in law enforcement and currently works a fulltime security job. Brown remembers “happy days” in Mount Laurel as a child.

“I come from a family of nine boys and three girls. We lived on a big farm and we mostly ate what we raised on the farm. It was a tough life, but a good life,” she explains. “There was no such thing as playing ball on Sunday and missing Sunday school. We had a playhouse outside, where my brother ‘played’ the preacher and we were ‘the choir,’ singing ... we had imagination. It was wonderful. Today you don’t even see kids out in the yard cutting grass!”

Brown was attending community college when her father died. Five siblings had to finish school, so she quit college and went to work. Her mother went to Richmond for work and came home on weekends. By age 23, Brown had a house built about 2½ miles away from her parents’ home.

She explains, “My mother was a smart woman who said, ‘Get a house and do it while you’re young so when you retire you won’t have a house note.’”

“She also said, ‘Don’t have a house note or car note [in retirement], what [money] you have left you will give to the pharmacy!’”

Brown says of life in Mount Laurel, “You don’t have to hear sirens all night, and you couldn’t ask for nicer neighbors. I appreciate every moment I am alive.” ■



Adkisson Farm House, 1829



Tranquil Hill House, 1834



Clark-Roller House, 1820

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARBARA BASS, HALIFAX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY