

DOWN HOME SERIES

Farmville's Heart of Virginia Festival has become an annual rite of spring for the Central Virginia region.

Again in the year 2004, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's tenth stop, we'll be ...



DOWN HOME IN

FARMVILLE

by Ken Woodley, Contributing Writer

Farmville calls itself the Heart of Virginia. That advertising's a bit false. America's heartbeat pounds there, as well.

And our country's conscience, too.

There is a pulse of nation-shaping muscular idealism in Farmville's history, especially in education, unlike any other town in the nation.

The belief that all men are created equal rang like a liberty bell, without cracking, in Farmville; or if it did crack it kept ringing anyway. And that women are equal, too.

Black and white.

Every color in between.

The civil rights movement was

AT A GLANCE ...

POPULATION: 6,845

LAND AREA: 7 square miles

INCORPORATED: 1798

ELEVATION: 385 feet

FUN FACT: The last major battle of the Civil War was near Farmville, at Saylor's Creek.



born in Farmville. And Virginia's first institution of higher learning for women – now known as Longwood University – was opened there, too.

If Farmville looks like a quintessential slice of America – a riverside town established in 1798 because the current meant commerce and currency (until the railroad meant more) – it is. But not in a way that Norman Rockwell ever dreamt of painting.

Beyond the lovely tree-lined avenues and a main street any American would recognize, a chapter of the nation's autobiography was written with all the hope, strength and faith that forged, through America's struggle to wake up and live toward its idealist dreams, a country worth dying for.

The annual Jaycees Christmas Parade gives Santa Claus a chance to visit Farmville, to the delight of children of all ages.



Parades down Farmville's Main Street are a treat throughout the year, and allow participants an outlet for civic-spirited exuberance.

When Neil Armstrong declared on the surface of the moon in 1969 that he had taken "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," he was merely following in footsteps already taken in the town of Farmville by citizens of Prince Edward County.

Like the current of the Appomattox River, which separates Farmville's Prince Edward residents from those who live on the other side of the river in Cumberland, the ripples of history continue flowing from that seminal moment on April 23, 1951, when the American civil rights movement was born in

Farmville. Black students at R. R. Moton High School went on strike to protest separate and unequal conditions that included tar paper shacks for classrooms. On that day, mankind in the U.S.A. began leaning forward in anticipation of the leap to come.

More than four years before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of an Alabama bus, teenagers in Farmville peacefully and emphatically expressed their belief in words Thomas Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence. Yes, all men are created equal.

By the end of that week 53 years ago, those students and their families made a conscious decision to challenge segregation itself. And so those small steps on a spring day in Farmville became a giant leap toward the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* United States Supreme Court decision in 1954 that toppled segregation in America's public schools.

Prince Edward, thus Virginia, became joined with four other U.S. jurisdictions to comprise the legal case and final decision that began to utterly transform the face of America, and the nation's soul.



(Above) Sometimes, the Heart of Virginia Festival makes you look twice, as these young celebrants can attest. (Right) Traditionally a big event in Farmville, the first day of school sees many teachers and school staff members easing students' transition from summer to school days.



IF YOU GO ...

Farmville will be one of the lucky handful of Virginia communities to have the honor of hosting the National Holiday Tree before it reaches the lawn of the U.S. Capitol. The 70-foot tree will be in Farmville on Saturday, November 27, and displayed downtown.

There will be special holiday festivities that day as everyone is invited to share in this momentous holiday occasion. The U.S. Capitol has been adorned with a National Holiday Tree since 1964 and since 1970 that tree has come from a national forest.

This year marks the first time the tree will come from Virginia – either the Jefferson or Washington National Forests. Farmville is proud of having the honor of “hosting” the tree and a fabulous celebration is planned.

The Farmville Area Chamber of Commerce can be reached at (434) 392-3939 for addi-

The Colonade at Longwood University is one of the landmark structures among many interesting Farmville buildings.



tional information about the National Holiday Tree activities and other Farmville attractions.

The R. R. Moton Museum for the Study of Civil Rights in Education is located at the intersection of South Main Street and Griffin Boulevard – call (434) 315-8775 for hours.

The Longwood Center for the Visual Arts is located at the intersection of Main and Third streets – call (434) 95-2206.

There are several fine motels and a wide variety of excellent restaurants in Farmville. ■

Words that had been written by our country's Founding Fathers, vowels and consonants carved in marble and stone, set in monuments and statues, were given arms and legs and a heart and lungs by young Americans in a Farmville school. “Freedom” and “equality” received muscle and sinew and marched from Farmville out in all directions through America's conscience and its heart of heartlands.

Visit Farmville today and many of the buildings could bear witness to American history that, with the retreat of Confederate General Robert E. Lee through Farmville to Appomattox, led to the end of the Civil War and, with the strike at R. R. Moton High School, cradled the civil rights movement.

Today, the town has a vibrant and welcoming retail business community – everyone has heard of Green Front Furniture – yet is uniquely centered between five state parks that offer abundant outdoor recreation a few moments down the road. There is always something happening – concerts by the Appomattox River on First Fridays during the summer and classic movies shown outside on the big screen, for example.

Longwood University is the geographic center of the town – its museum-quality center for the visual arts is at the literal center of downtown – and, in many ways, is the economic engine of the community, the single-

largest employer and its student body contributes greatly to retail sales, which set and break records every year.

But Longwood also has that legacy of educational history-making. It was in 1884 that it became the Commonwealth's first institution of higher learning for women. And six miles south of Farmville – also contributing to the unique pioneering educational synergy of the community – Hampden-Sydney College was founded a year before Thomas Jefferson's words about equality were penned and approved for the declaration that became America's birth certificate.

The former R. R. Moton High School, meanwhile, has become a museum for the study of civil rights in education, a national historic landmark that also anchors a civil rights trail through more than a dozen Southside Virginia localities, many of whom also share the Lee's Retreat self-guided driving tour.

The nation has been celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Brown decision this year, but far fewer people know that 2004 is also the 40th anniversary of the Supreme Court's Griffin v. Prince Edward decision, which reopened Prince Edward schools that had been closed to avoid integration. The Griffin decision continues to have a far greater impact on every American family than the dust-framed



Johns Memorial Episcopal Church is another of the many interesting structures that can be found in the town of Farmville.

footprints of Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on the airless, suffocating surface of the moon.

The Griffin decision breathes in every American community on every single day, guaranteeing the right of every American child to a public education. A public education, in fact, is a constitutional right thanks solely to the triumphant perseverance of the late Rev. L. Francis Griffin, who ministered to his flock at First Baptist Church through the civil rights struggle and helped change a world that appears in the darkness of space as an oasis of blue and brown, ornamented by white clouds. A planet where the course of history can be changed by children on a day in the springtime when life is new and rivers, like the Appomattox, flow, rain-filled, with greater

momentum toward a sea that will somehow be incomplete without it.

One doesn't have to be an astronaut to know Earth periodically eclipses the moon, even its dark side, and there is, however briefly, no shining reflection of the sun. A dark side of the greatest nation on the planet was eclipsed by teenagers in Farmville over half a century ago. The light that shone from their belief in what America professed to be its founding ideals, when America didn't believe in itself, still illuminates this nation.

From sea to shining sea.

Come see for yourself. ■

The author, Ken Woodley, is editor of The Farmville Herald.



Recreational opportunities for county youngsters are a key focus in Prince Edward County and Farmville.