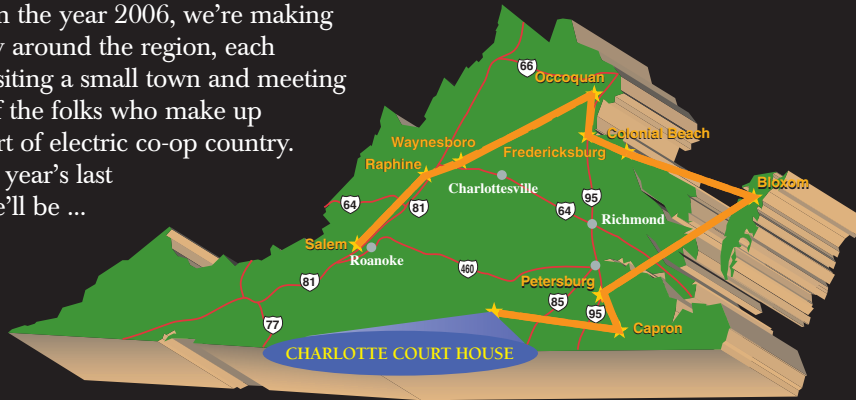


Again in the year 2006, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's last stop, we'll be ...



# DOWN HOME IN CHARLOTTE COURT HOUSE

by Crystal Vandegrift, Contributing Writer

## AT A GLANCE ...

**POPULATION:** Estimated in 2003 to be approximately 453.

**LAND AREA:** 4.0 square miles.

**FOUNDED:** As Daltonsburg in 1755; has had several names, including Marysville, Maryville, Smithville and The Magazine before being named Charlotte Court House in 1901.

**ELEVATION:** 596 feet.

**FUN FACT:** George Washington is said to have not liked the coffee or food he had while dining at Tankersley Tavern in 1791, saying, "If this is coffee, bring me tea, if this is tea, bring me coffee."

**P**icturesque, quaint Charlotte Court House, the county seat of Southside Virginia's Charlotte County, is truly a town rich in history.

So rich, in fact, that the courthouse square has been listed on the state and national registers of historic places as a Historic Courthouse District for its uniqueness.

"It has the look of a little Williamsburg," says **Stephanie Heintzleman**, the county's assistant administrator.

The courthouse district is centered on two main routes, highways 40 and 47. The town began as Daltonsburg in 1755 during the French and Indian War and was later called Marysville and Smithville before being renamed Charlotte Court House in 1901.

Many historic events occurred within the town, including a visit from George Washington dating back to 1791 when he stopped for breakfast at Tankersley Tavern while returning from his southern tour.

Today the tavern, located on highway 40, is home to a bookstore, The Yarn Corner.

The tavern is also believed to have been the site of a famous debate on states' rights between Patrick Henry, Virginia's first governor, and John Randolph, representative and senator, in March of 1799. Henry, who spoke for three hours, gave his last speech in Charlotte Court House, while John Randolph, who also spoke for three hours, gave his first.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CRYSTAL VANDEGRIFT





Just a few months after the famous speech, Patrick Henry died at his home, Red Hill, in Charlotte County about 30 minutes from Charlotte Court House.

“There is just so much history here,” says **Bob Moates**, Civil War re-enactor and owner of Bob Moates Sports Shop. “So many of the buildings in the town that are still standing were involved in our history.”

Highway 40 (left) is one of two main routes that form the center of the town’s courthouse district.

Charlotte Court House is also historically unique because it has the only courthouse building designed by Thomas Jefferson and constructed in 1823 that is still standing and still in use today. This courthouse was the setting for the major motion picture *Sommersby*, filmed in 1992.

Today, those visiting the courthouse district not only get a glimpse of unique architectural design, but visitors can stop by the Charlotte County Museum housed in the county’s old 1936 jail.

The museum provides a wealth of information and history on Henry, Randolph, and Ambassador David K.E. Bruce, who donated land and money to the town so that a library, two high schools, and other county offices could be established. The museum promotes Charlotte County, through events such as the Ride in the Heartland bicycle event held each fall and the Celebration of the Arts held in the spring.

History buffs and lovers of architecture will enjoy a walking tour of the historic district where the Old Brick Tavern, built in 1823 and renovated in 1998 for the circuit court clerk’s office, houses county records from 1785 to the present and displays Patrick Henry’s will.

The tour would also include the old clerk’s office, built in the 1890s, featuring the original marble floors and fireplaces; the district court building of Greek Revival style,



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 1) Bob Moates, Civil War re-enactor and owner of Bob Moates Sports Shop. 2) The 1841 replica cannon that resides in courthouse square. 3) Mayor Stephen Walker.**

built in 1830; the county library, built in 1810; and a replica of the first clerk’s office, which houses the APVA museum.

Village Presbyterian Church, another Greek Revival structure, Masonic Lodge, Smith’s Store and Tuckers Store, all circa 1825, are also on the walking tour. “This is a well-preserved little colonial village,” says librarian **Jim Watkins**.

Just down the street is the Central High Museum, where African-American culture is displayed in the school’s former library. Central High School was open from 1939 until desegregation brought about its closing in 1969; it was the county’s only black high school.

The museum opened in the fall of 2001 and gives visitors a chance to view memorabilia from the school, such as photographs, sports jerseys, textbooks, and news articles.



In addition, the town of Charlotte Court House also makes it on the map as part of the Wilson-Kautz Raid Driving Tour and The Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail. The county library is highlighted on the Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail as being one of the first to allow access to African-Americans, thanks to Ambassador David K.E. Bruce and his donations of libraries not only in Charlotte Court House, but in 11 other counties as well.

Bruce also helped fund construction of Randolph-Henry High School, established in 1938, in the town. Today, the school division is rated outstanding among other school divisions in the commonwealth.

Even the town's fire department holds history dating back to its beginning in 1948, when it was located directly behind the courthouse. Fire chief for the past 35 years, **Ed Stanley**, remembers when the department had only one fire truck. "When I first joined there was only a 1951 Chevrolet fire truck and a 1948 GMC van that was used to carry equipment." He says, "We only had 500 gallons of water to put out a fire."



Judy Bernaldo (seated) and Karen Price inside the What Dreams May Come gift shop.

Today, a visit to the town's municipal building will reveal five fire trucks and other apparatus. "We have been able to purchase three new trucks in the past six years. This is just a great neighborhood and we've got some good people here," says Stanley.

Those visiting the town should not expect to see large retail businesses, lots of traffic or a hustle-bustle lifestyle. In fact, there are only a few locally owned businesses and no traffic signals in the town itself or the county. "Charlotte Court House is still a place where family and friends can enjoy a relaxed pace of life," says Mayor **Stephen Walker**. "We aren't too busy to help a friend or neighbor. More importantly, they don't need to ask for help, it just appears; go for a walk in the town and five people will pull over and ask you if you need a ride."

The town, with an estimated population of 453 according to the 2003 census, has two bookstores, a newly opened craft shop, a florist, and a pharmacy, all of which provide visitors the opportunity to pick up unique gifts and items while traveling through. "There may be a few drawbacks to not having big businesses or having to drive to a large grocery store, but it's a very attractive place to come and I think in the long run more people will begin to move here," says town clerk, **Karen Price**.



A replica of the first clerk's office houses the APVA museum.



In her spare time, Price also owns and manages What Dreams May Come, a consignment shop for local artisans and crafters. “The concept began because I knew several people who made things but were traveling outside the area to sell them, and I thought it would be nice to have a local shop that featured artisans and crafters.”

For those interested in Civil War history and portraying a soldier, Bob Moates Sports Shop has everything a war buff could want. Moates, a re-enactor himself, over the years, has portrayed General Robert E. Lee in set-

tings ranging from ceremonies to documentaries on the History Channel.

Also for the Civil War buff, visitors will see an 1841 replica cannon that was placed in the courthouse square this past summer alongside the Confederate War Memorial.

The residents of Charlotte Court House not only take pride in their town’s history, but love its friendliness and slow pace of life, as well. “When people ask me how long I have been here, I always say that I am doing life with no desire for parole,” says Charlotte Court House District Supervisor, Gary Walker. “I consider Charlotte Court House to

FROM FAR LEFT: 1) Claudia Koch (left), owner of A Story Below bookstore. 2) Fire Chief Ed Stanley. 3) Tankersley Tavern. 4) Public library.

be the ‘Mayberry’ of Southside Virginia, a place where we still know who our neighbors are and still care about each other.”

In the words of Mayor Stephen Walker, “Charlotte Court House is a nostalgic trip to a time and place worth visiting. Many people give thought to settling down in a quiet, relaxed environment and those of us who chose to make this our home have done just that.” ■

## IF YOU GO ...

Charlotte Court House is where history buffs can enjoy a walking tour of the historic district and see the only still-standing courthouse believed to be designed from plans of Thomas Jefferson.

**Tankersley Tavern** is where George Washington visited in 1791 and was the site of a famous “debate” (see photo) on states’ rights between Virginia’s first governor, Patrick Henry, and Representative and Senator John Randolph. Today, **The Yam Corner** bookstore is located inside the tavern and is open on Saturdays.

**The Charlotte County Museum**, open daily, provides a huge selection of history on Patrick Henry, John Randolph, Ambassador David K.E. Bruce, and Randolph-Henry High School. Online at: [www.co.charlotte.va.us/museum](http://www.co.charlotte.va.us/museum).

**Old Central High Museum**, open Saturdays 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., displays memories and achievements of graduates from the county’s only historically black high school.

**What Dreams May Come**, open Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., features gifts and treasures hand-crafted by local artisans and crafters.

**A Story Below**, open Wednesday through



Friday from 2 to 6 p.m. and Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., offers used books, antiques and pottery.

**Bob Moates Sports Shop**, open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., offers modern and antique firearms, black powder, gunsmithing, fishing tackle and Civil War re-enactment supplies.

Nearby **Red Hill National Memorial**, Patrick Henry’s last home and burial place, is open daily. Contact: (434) 376-2044; [www.redhill.org](http://www.redhill.org).

**Staunton River Battlefield State Park** is open daily. The bridge and fort still stand as they did in 1864. Relive the Civil War Battle of the “Old Men and Young Boys” at this historic site of the Battle of Staunton River Bridge. The park also offers a nature trail and observation platforms. Online at: [www.stauntonriverbattlefield.org](http://www.stauntonriverbattlefield.org).

**Wilson-Kautz Driving Trail/Virginia Civil War Trails**: Follows the route of Union raiders in 1864, ending the desperate defense of the Staunton River Bridge. Call 1-800-6RETREAT or visit online at [www.varetreat.com](http://www.varetreat.com).

**Veteran’s War Memorial**, 165 King Street, Keysville: A plaza of several memorials, dedicated to local veterans. Phone: (434) 736-9088.

**Vietnam War Memorial**, 4677 Drakes Main Street, Drakes Branch. Phone: (434) 568-3091.

**Drakes Branch Museum**, 4849 Drakes Main Street, Drakes Branch. Open the second and fourth Saturdays of each month, 10 a.m. to noon. Highlights railroad and tobacco markets of past centuries; [www.co.charlotte.va.us/museum](http://www.co.charlotte.va.us/museum). ■