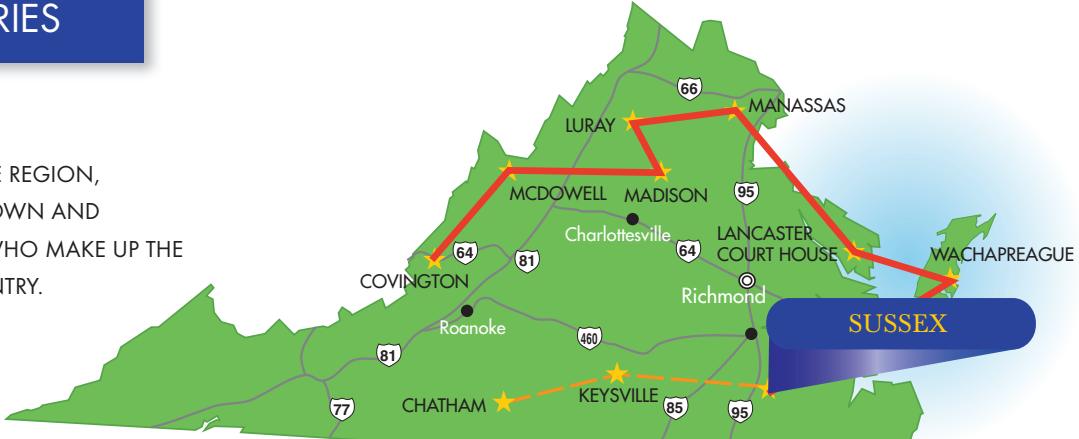


DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2008, 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 EIGHTH STOP, WE'LL BE ...



DOWN HOME IN

SUSSEX

STORY AND PHOTOS BY AUDREY HINGLEY, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

SUSSEX COUNTY'S ABUNDANT FIELDS AND FORESTS SURROUND THE TINY TOWN AT ITS CENTER.

When you talk to residents about Sussex, you start to hear the same words again and again – words like serene, peaceful, laid-back, quiet. The other thing you sense in the voices of residents is a love for the area and its people.

The tiny hamlet of Sussex (the post office currently has 50 rented boxes, a good benchmark of the community's size) sits smack in the middle of Sussex County, a 496-square-mile county south of the James River and east of Richmond. Driving from I-95 south and exiting onto Route 40, visitors are treated to a two-lane country road surrounded by a combination of flat, narrow fields lined with corn and/or pine trees in a lush blanket of green.

Carved from neighboring Surry County in 1753, Sussex's economy remains agriculture-based, with more than 160 farms in the county averaging 517 acres in size. Principal crops include peanuts, cotton, corn and soybeans. Eighty percent of the county's land is commercial forestland, dominated by loblolly pine, oak and hickory. Major employers include government, education/schools, the Virginia Diner in nearby Wakefield and the Virginia Department of Corrections, whose two maximum-security prisons in the county employ over 800 people and house 2,000 inmates.

Turning from Route 40 onto Courthouse Road, the courthouse area typifies the early 19th-century Virginia county seat, with the county courthouse complex, including the Jeffersonian courthouse building completed in 1828, on one side of the road. Across the road is Thornton's Store, first opened in 1913; the Sussex post office; the original clerk's office built in 1817 (now privately owned and not open to the public); a colonial-style brick BB&T bank; and several private homes.

Gary Williams, who has served as clerk of the circuit court for 33 years, is almost finished writing a nine-chapter history of Sussex County. "It [writing the book] is hard to complete, with a full-time job," says Williams of the heavily researched and footnoted book. "We have not had a county history written since 1942, so it's long overdue."



The Jeffersonian courthouse building in Sussex was completed in 1828. INSET: Sussex County native Gary Williams has served as clerk of the circuit court for 33 years.

AT A GLANCE...

POPULATION: 50 in Sussex Courthouse area; 12,000 in Sussex County

LAND AREA: 496 square miles; 317,400 acres

FOUNDED: 1753

ELEVATION: 108 feet

FACTOID: The original clerk's office, built in 1817 and adjacent to Sussex post office, was used as a prison for Union soldiers in 1864. Captured soldiers decorated the walls with graffiti that is still visible today. The building is privately owned and is not open to the public.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Flanking the courthouse is the 1924 clerk's office. • Immediately north of the courthouse is the ca.1800 Dillard house, a two-story weather-boarded building that likely once served as the courthouse tavern. • Thornton's, a third-generation family business, has been in operation in the community since 1913. • The Sussex Resource & Technology Center opened in 2006 and offers patrons free high-speed Internet and wireless Internet access, 10 state-of-the-art computers, and free beginning computer classes.

Now 64 and in his second year of an eight-year term following his re-election last fall, Williams adds, "Sussex County has been the centerpiece of my life. I have a great love for where I came from. I grew up here, went away to the College of William & Mary and taught school for three years in Henrico County near Richmond – and came back. Home drew me back."

Retired nurse **Dorothy J. Graves**, 71, grew up in nearby Stony Creek. She moved

to Richmond with her husband, but when he passed away more than four years ago she returned to Sussex as a primary caregiver for her mother, 93-year-old **Mae D. Johnson**. Despite the fact that Sussex is rural and gas prices are skyrocketing, Graves says rural living is cheaper.

"My utilities are cheaper and you can have your own garden here, which reduces food costs," she points out. "It's peaceful and quiet. You can get in touch with God again and see the stars."

Asked what would surprise outsiders about Sussex, Graves replies, "The unity of all races. This is a real community, where people help each other."

Since she came home, Graves has busied herself with volunteer and church work. She and her mother enjoy going to the Sussex Resource & Technology Center, where Graves is taking a computer class in Microsoft Excel. Graves says her mother has dementia and enjoys playing games on the center's computers.



◀ Sussex County native Christel Key says she returned to the area after college to fill the role of program coordinator for the Sussex Resource & Technology Center and "to give back to my community."

▶ County administrator Mary Jones: "We feel there is interest now in Sussex because of [nearby] Fort Lee's expansion plans and expansion at the port at Hampton Roads."



◀ Retiree Jim Hajacos: "I like the solitude, and it's laid-back here ... it reminds me of the 1940s because nobody seems to be in a rush."

▶ Long-time resident Karla Hardin describes Sussex as "quiet and peaceful, for the most part."



◀ Retired nurse Dorothy Graves, who moved home to care for her mother: "You can get in touch with God again and see the stars."



Dorothy Graves (standing) and her mother, Mae Johnson, enjoy coming to the Sussex Resource & Technology Center, where Graves is taking a computer class.

Christel Key, 24, is program coordinator for the Sussex Resource & Technology Center.

The brainchild of **Chequila H. Fields**, social services director for Sussex, the center opened in 2006 and offers patrons free high-speed Internet, wireless Internet access and 10 state-of-the-art computers. Open to adults age 18 and older, self-directed online classes are available as well as teacher-led beginning computer classes like keyboarding or Microsoft Word. Classes for seniors and beginning computer classes are free, other than the cost of any books needed. The center offers fee-based classes on subjects like Web development and graphic design. Senior citizens from the Crater District Agency on Aging come to the center once a week, where they began using the computers to play games and moved on to basic computer functions. The center also offers help with resumes, job applications and job searches, GED classes and even has a food closet.

"We're doing focus groups now to meet the needs of the community. Most of our classes run from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. so people can come after work," Key explains.

Key, who grew up in nearby Jarratt, moved back home after living in Norfolk and Lynchburg during her college years. She came home "for this job and to give back to my community."

The hardest thing about returning to country life?

"I have to plan trips ... you can't just run to Wal-Mart," she says.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS KEY

Sussex County's administrator, **Mary E. Jones**, grew up on a peanut farm in Sussex. She says the county's biggest challenge is

economic development, adding that the board of supervisors is in the process of hiring the county's first economic development director.

"We feel there is interest now in Sussex because of [nearby] Fort Lee's expansion plans and expansion at the port at Hampton Roads," Jones explains. "The county has over 100 acres to develop its first industrial park, as well as owning just under 200 acres near I-95 and Route 301."

Jones says most workers now commute to Petersburg, a 30-minute drive, or to Richmond or Tidewater, which means a 45- to 60-minute drive.

Another county focus, she says, is providing health and medical care: "Fifteen percent of our county population is over age 65. The health department is in Sussex, and there are medical clinics in Stony Creek, Waverly and Wakefield, but there is no hospital in the county. Residents are 30 to 40 minutes from the nearest hospital, depending on where in the county they live."

The biggest concern now is that Sussex, as well as neighboring Southampton and Surry counties and two North Carolina counties, is being considered by the U.S. Navy for an outlying landing field (OLF). "NO OLF" signs are seen everywhere in the area, making clear most residents' sentiments about the issue.

"Local governments and citizens have formed a coalition to oppose it. Noise is a major concern, as is the environment," Jones explains. "It will encompass 2,000 acres but will impact 30,000 to 40,000 acres, as well as impacting the type of crops grown. We're also concerned this could be a precursor for moving Oceana's training base in Virginia Beach here."



Thornton's, in business in Sussex for nearly a century, carries a wonderful selection of quaint gift items and collectibles, and offers homemade sandwiches in its fountain area.

Jones says if Sussex became the OLF site, there would be no economic advantage: only 72 jobs are proposed and she says the Navy will provide most of those people.

GENERAL STORE SPANS DECADES

Across the street from Jones' office, Thornton's Store is a busy place. There are no restaurants near the courthouse, but Thornton's offers homemade sandwiches, chips and drinks.

Store owner **Morgan Thornton**, 61, is a third-generation owner and also has been the Sussex postmaster since 1979.

Started as a general store by Thornton's late paternal grandfather, the business once carried everything from meats to hardware. Today the store boasts a quaint gift area, tables in the lunch/fountain area, and convenience-store items. Thornton's own collection of store-related collectibles provides authentic decor, including a scale model of the original 1913 store. He is, he says, only one of four Virginia dealers for the Whizzer, a moped-like vehicle that Thornton calls "a bicycle with a motor on it." Whizzers on display, with a suggested retail price of \$1,499, are eye-catching and get 120 mpg. Thornton rides one but says he has yet to sell any of the vintage-inspired vehicles.

Like many natives, Thornton left for city life, graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University and working in banking for seven years before returning to become postmaster and run Thornton's Store.

"We haven't been discovered yet," he says. "Sussex has been ruled by farmland and forestland, and people are holding on to their land."

Customer **Jim Hajacos** moved to Sussex in 1984 from Petersburg, commuting to his

job at Fort Lee before retiring in 1989. He was attracted, he said, by the home he and his wife ended up buying, Three Creek Plantation. His house was built in 1857 and has five acres, although it once was part of an 800-acre tract.

"We wanted to live in a rural area. I like the solitude, and it's laid-back here ... it reminds me of the 1940s because nobody seems to be in a rush," Hajacos, now 70, explains. "Our neighbors were especially cordial."

Hajacos says he is likely one of the few people who supports an OLF for Sussex: "I worked at Oceana for three years ... jet noise is like a train, you get used to it. The Navy needs a place to train young men, and I think national defense comes first."

Employee **Karla Hardin** moved to Sussex in 1962 when her husband took a job in Hopewell. Now 70, she retired seven years ago and works part-time at Thornton's. She describes Sussex as "quiet and peaceful, for the most part." Youthful-looking and friendly, Hardin admits she would hate to see an OLF in Sussex.

"When we were first married, we lived in St. Louis near McDonnell Douglas [testing area] and I remember I couldn't sleep at all," she recalls. "I never got used to it."

Gary Williams says people who like to hunt and fish are attracted to Sussex.

"I think it's different from living anywhere else; a place to be if you are looking for a slower lifestyle," he says. "It's a great place to get away from it all; there are still some remote areas in the county. If the OLF comes, we are about to lose that due to noise pollution."

He adds, "It's an unusual thing today where you can [still] find a place where someone is not living right under you." ■



The Miles B. Carpenter folk art museum in nearby Waverly is open Thurs.-Mon., 2-5 p.m.

IF YOU GO...

The **Sussex Courthouse area** features the county's Jeffersonian courthouse building, completed in 1828 by master builder Dabney Cosby, Jr., who built several court structures in the style he learned while in the employ of Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia. In the Sussex courthouse, there is a projected pedimented pavilion with an arcaded ground floor instead of the more-usual columned portico. The courthouse is on the site of the original courthouse, which was built in 1756.

Flanking the courthouse is the **1924 clerk's office**, a building with an ornamented facade of four Tuscan columns. A similar 1950s building houses county offices. Immediately north of the courthouse is the ca.1800 **Dillard house**, a two-story weather-boarded building that likely once served as the courthouse tavern.

Thornton's Store is an authentic country store experience. It is across the street from Sussex Courthouse. Homemade sandwich lunches are served. Call (434) 246-9204.

Other county attractions include:

The Miles B. Carpenter Museum and Sussex County's **Heritage Folk Art Museum**, both on Highway 460 in Waverly. The Carpenter Museum Complex includes the first peanut museum in the U.S. For information: (804) 834-3327 or (803) 834-2151.

The Virginia Diner, on Highway 460/322 West Main Street, Wakefield. The diner began in 1929 as a refurbished railroad car and today serves breakfast, lunch and dinner featuring Virginia ham, biscuits, southern fried chicken and peanut pie. There is a unique gift shop. 1-888-VA-DINER; www.vadiner.com.

LODGING

Two chain hotels are in the Stony Creek area, seven miles west of Sussex Courthouse:

Hampton Inn: (434) 246-5500

Sleep Inn & Suites: (434) 246-5100 ■