



Residents will be able to enjoy the beauty of Loudoun's many streams and to hike along the historic Potomac River.

proposes “a county-wide linked system of accessible trails and linear parks built along streams and other natural features of the county, linking together all parts of the county and most of its existing parkland into one network of natural green spaces.”

Under the county's plan, these accessible trails along streams and other features will be embedded into linear parks that are wide enough to protect its natural character and provide migration paths and viable habitat for wildlife while providing attractive trails and other features to residents. The plan is to develop a system that meets local community goals while also interconnecting all of Loudoun into one larger community. Thus, various parts of the large system will be designed to appeal to the interests of spe-

cific user groups like equestrians, mountain bikers, family groups, serious hikers, picknickers, fishermen, and so on. Some parts of the network will follow stream valleys while some, especially in rural Loudoun, may run along ridgelines or even along unpaved rural roads.

But, as Director Torpy points out, “The ambitious program will take time to fully realize its vision. It will require a combination of careful planning, creative programs, support from community organizations, donations and proffers from property developers, and contributions from willing landowners.”

To implement this ambitious program, the County Parks and Rec Department, along with its Parks, Recreation and Open Space Advisory Committee, is taking a series of significant steps including engaging the public, interested groups and neighborhoods in discussions about the desired features of such a county-wide network, fleshing out goals and characteristics desired by different groups and communities and surfacing questions and issues. They have also contracted with an experienced consultant to develop a detailed plan for the proposed network of parks and trails and established an advisory subcommittee of interested stakeholders

from a variety of groups to oversee the plans and progress of the consultant and the LPAT program.

Meanwhile the Parks and Rec staff is continuing to vigorously pursue attractive trail and park opportunities as they arise in new development applications and among HOAs and other property owners.

This is an ambitious program. Some elements of this large system may be created and linked together with existing trails and parks in the next two or three years; other sections and linkages will take longer. Some landowners and HOA's may take a while before they see the network growing and understand the value of connecting their own trails to the larger county network. So while some sections may be completed soon, it may be a decade or even longer before Loudoun can realize all the goals it has set out.

But, as it grows and flourishes, Loudoun's system of linked parks and trails will become a premier asset of the county, will combine the comfortable suburban living of Loudoun with easy access to authentic natural experiences, and will fulfil the desires and dreams of its many residents.

As one of Loudoun's Supervisors said when the program was approved: “We'll get this done, and I think 20 years from now people are going to look back and say, ‘man, those people were really smart back then in 2019.’”

Mitch Diamond is a retired businessman and active preservationist who lives with his wife and multiple horses, cows, donkeys, dogs and a goat on a historic farm near the old Quaker village of Unison in rural Loudoun County.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

To care for the past

For centuries, the villages of Loudoun County have been the hub of rural and agricultural communities. Located at important crossroads and usually the site of a church, school, mill, post office or store, they were and remain the economic and social centers for their area. These historic rural villages still serve as the core of their communities, represent our long and rich history and have become a focus for tourism and the vitality of our rural economy. Filled with historic buildings, rich with history, connected by historic winding tree-lined roads and trails and surrounded by farms, estates, forests and streams, they embody the

essential values we treasure in our rural areas.

The Loudoun Historic Village Alliance was organized in 2019 in order to give the remaining rural historic villages a stronger and more united voice in county and state government, because as Loudoun grows, our villages face a multiplicity of challenges, including increasing traffic, failing water supplies, the encroachment of modern and dense development, the demands of new residents and tourists, proposals for intrusive new public facilities, the pressure to close village schools and the needs of new rural businesses.

We hope you will enjoy learning more about our historic villages in this and future issues.



A sunny ride through the charming village streets of Unison.



BLEMONT PHOTOS: WIB MIDDLETON

BLUEMONT: A World Apart

BY PETER WEEKS

As I approach the Blue Ridge Mountains from eastern Loudoun County on busy Route 7, I'm barreling down the highway with commuter traffic until I begin the slow climb up towards Snickers Gap.

Turning left onto Clayton Hall Road and descending around a sharp corner, it feels like I am entering another world—a world more tranquil and welcoming than the one I left behind. And then I see the sign: "Welcome to Bluemont." My shoulders relax and the feeling of coming back home fills me every time.

Bluemont, a tiny hamlet nestled under the Blue Ridge, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One of its found-

ing fathers, William Clayton, built a stone mansion in 1797 that I pass by on my right when I reach the intersection of Clayton Hall Road and Snickersville Turnpike.

It's not just its history that harkens back to the earliest settlements in Virginia, but the character of the people who have inhabited the village over generations: friendly, self-reliant, ready to lend a hand to a neighbor. A bit of Mayberry with real-life Andy's, Opie's, and Aunt Bee's.

Across the street from this intersection, the wood-clapboarded Bluemont General Store stands sentry, shaded by an ancient oak tree. The store has been a mercantile landmark since 1846. Passing through its entrance door evokes

Above: The Bluemont General Store, 1846; opposite page E. E. Lake Store, 1901, and the Bluemont United Methodist Church, 1851.

simpler times when greetings and a warm smile marked familiarity. Shelves of canned goods saddle up to, well, saddles, beside coolers of ready-to-scoop ice cream, bottled (!) milk, fresh farm eggs, and pies.

More on the ancient oak: Bluemont was honored this year by the Arbor Day Foundation as a "Tree City USA" in recognition of its commitment to maintain and expand her tree canopy.

Proceeding along the Turnpike, the homes that line the street are handsome and cared for, with wide porches for visitors

Early photographs show horses and wagons on hard-packed dirt (or mud) roads. It wouldn't be until the 1930's that Snickersville Turnpike was paved.

More on Snickersville Turnpike: The first toll road in America (admittedly a bad precedent), it was an important passage for over four centuries to deliver goods from the port of Alexandria, for early pioneers heading westward, and for the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War.

Just a block down the Turnpike stands the E.E. Lake Store which decades earlier provided agricultural supplies to surrounding farms. Bluemont has been primarily an agricultural community

during its existence, the fertile soils of the Piedmont producing corn, wheat, and grazing land for cattle (both beef and dairy). The store boasts being the only general store in Virginia still in its original condition. The wood counters, shelves, and two large display bay windows appear as they did over one hundred years earlier. Fittingly, it is now home Sundays to the Bluemont Farmers Market.

In an adjacent section of the Lake Store, formerly the old post office, the Plaster Museum of Bluemont Heritage has opened. Honoring the Plaster family who have played a prominent role in Bluemont for generations, the museum preserves historical artifacts and records in an online archive. Following the success of its Civil War exhibition last year, this year's theme is "Education in Snickersville/Bluemont in the 19th & 20th Century." Open Sundays.

Upstairs, the original dance hall and platform stage says something about village life: they knew how to let their hair down! Tiny Bluemont had not one, but two

dance halls, the other in a building across the street.

At the same corner intersection is Railroad Street, named for an event that literally transformed the village: the day the trains came to Snickersville/Bluemont, July 4, 1900.

More on Snickersville: Bluemont before 1900 was called Snickersville after Edward Snickers who ran a ferry across the Shenandoah and other commercial activities. Well, the railroad had expressed interest in extending the train route that already ran from Washington to Round Hill. To further entice railroad officials, some villagers thought a name-change and a bit of cash would seal the deal, and "Bluemont" sounded just right. And so the resort era began as visitors left steamy, hot Washington seeking the cool breezes on the Blue Ridge.

Elegant hotels and modest boarding houses opened their doors to the influx of tourists who were met at the station with horse and buggy to their lodgings and excursions out into the country. Alas, the railroad and the resort era, and the prosperity it brought, passed in 1938 with the popularity of automobile travel.

A short distance past Railroad Street on the Turnpike is the old stone United Methodist Church that was erected in 1851 and, across the street, the Bluemont School in 1921 (the present Community Center). A total of five schools, public and private, have educated children at various locations in the village since the early 1800's.

Bucolic vistas begin to open up as I continue south on the



Turnpike and to my left is Plaster's Field, which every September becomes a field of cars bringing people to the renowned Bluemont Fair. The 51st Bluemont Fair was postponed to 2021 because of the pandemic. The Fair draws thousands of visitors who delight in its old-fashioned country fair atmosphere: music, food, pony rides, artisanal crafts, children's games, and much more.

Nearby, Great Country Farms, the Bluemont Vineyard, and Dirt Farm Brewery are popular destinations, particularly on weekends. The idea of reverting to a Turnpike toll road to fill village coffers briefly crosses my mind.

Further along the Turnpike, heading south towards Philomont, stone walls and post and rail fences frame wide stretches of open pastures. Miles and miles of unpaved roads branch out deeper into the area surrounding Bluemont. Unchanged over the centuries, some brought farmer's crops to mills, while others traced Indian hunting trails.

Life now in Bluemont has come full circle. The boom and bust of the resort era has been replaced by steadier commerce, mostly agriculturally based: vineyards, cideries, and craft breweries alongside thriving equestrian and cattle businesses. The challenge for Bluemont will be to retain its sweetness and pastoral views well into the 21st century and beyond.

Peter Weeks lives on the Blue Ridge overlooking Bluemont. He is President of the Bluemont Citizens Association and President of Friends of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

UNISON: Claiming Its Heritage

BY MITCH DIAMOND

Unison, the southernmost of Loudoun's Quaker villages, is located in southwestern Loudoun, between the towns of Middleburg and Round Hill. The village is surrounded by open fields, woods, horse and cattle farms and historic farm houses with views of the Blue Ridge visible from its tree-lined unpaved roads.

The village was settled in about 1740 by Quakers who had migrated down from Pennsylvania, via Maryland and across the Potomac to the fertile farmlands of Northern Virginia. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, after the Revolutionary War, the village became a local center for Methodists. Unison (then called Union) grew rapidly as the County's agricultural economy blossomed. In 1813 the village of Union was officially established by the General Assembly of Virginia, and in 1817 it changed its name to Unison as another Virginia village called Union had a prior claim.

Unison became an important center in its area of Loudoun County with schools, hotels, taverns, homes and numerous businesses and a fine two-story brick Methodist church built in 1832 by enslaved workers under the direction of William Benton, Loudoun's foremost architect.

In 1862, in the second year of the Civil War, Union and Confederate troops fought through the streets of the village as the huge Federal Army of the Potomac tried to cut off the Army of Northern Virginia from its sources of supply in Richmond after the terrible battle at Antietam. Loudoun's church became a Federal field hospital while a home across the road served the Confederate wounded.

Following the war, the village entered a long period of quiet stability. Through the middle of the 20th century, Unison maintained itself as a viable village with its own churches, general store, a famous saddle shop, and even a baseball team that played in the Loudoun baseball leagues. But, by the 1980s the town was in decline, too far away from the new highways that now carried the bulk of Loudoun's commerce and population.

By the 1990s the town had become little more than a sleepy residential enclave with only 50 permanent residents and 14 or so houses. The last retail enterprise, Unison Store, a general store that had been in continuous operation since 1880, closed in August 1996.

In 2001 a local group of residents formed a 501(c)3 nonprofit group, incorporated as "The Unison Preservation Society," with their stated goal to help protect and preserve the historic village



and surrounding countryside of Unison. As a result of their efforts the village of Unison was placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register in 2002 as the Unison Historic

District, and on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.

And, on Sept. 22, 2011, due to the research of Unison Preservation Society and the US National

CAPTION for both photos here:

Park Service into the Civil War battles and skirmishes that had taken place in and around the Unison area, the 8,000-acre Unison Battlefield, stretching from Philomont to Upperville with Unison at its center, was successfully listed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and The National Register of Historic Places. It is considered one of the best preserved battlefields in Virginia.

Unison Heritage Day, celebrated close to the Fall anniversary of the three-day Civil War battle, has become a major attraction in the area, luring hundreds of visitors to enjoy bluegrass music, barbecue, fresh shucked oysters, a vast array of desserts prepared by the members of Unison's United Methodist Church, auctions and art shows and good conversations with neighbors and friends.

The lovely village still has its notable church, its general store has been restored and is used as the village's community center, the old Quaker cemetery is well tended and many of its historic homes have been restored. It is still surrounded by open fields, woods and horse farms, crossed by multiple fast flowing streams and traversed by the many narrow, tree lined, unpaved roads that have served its residents for almost 300 years.

To read about the author Mitch Diamond, see page 12. For more information about the village visit the Unison Preservation Society website: www.unisonva.org