

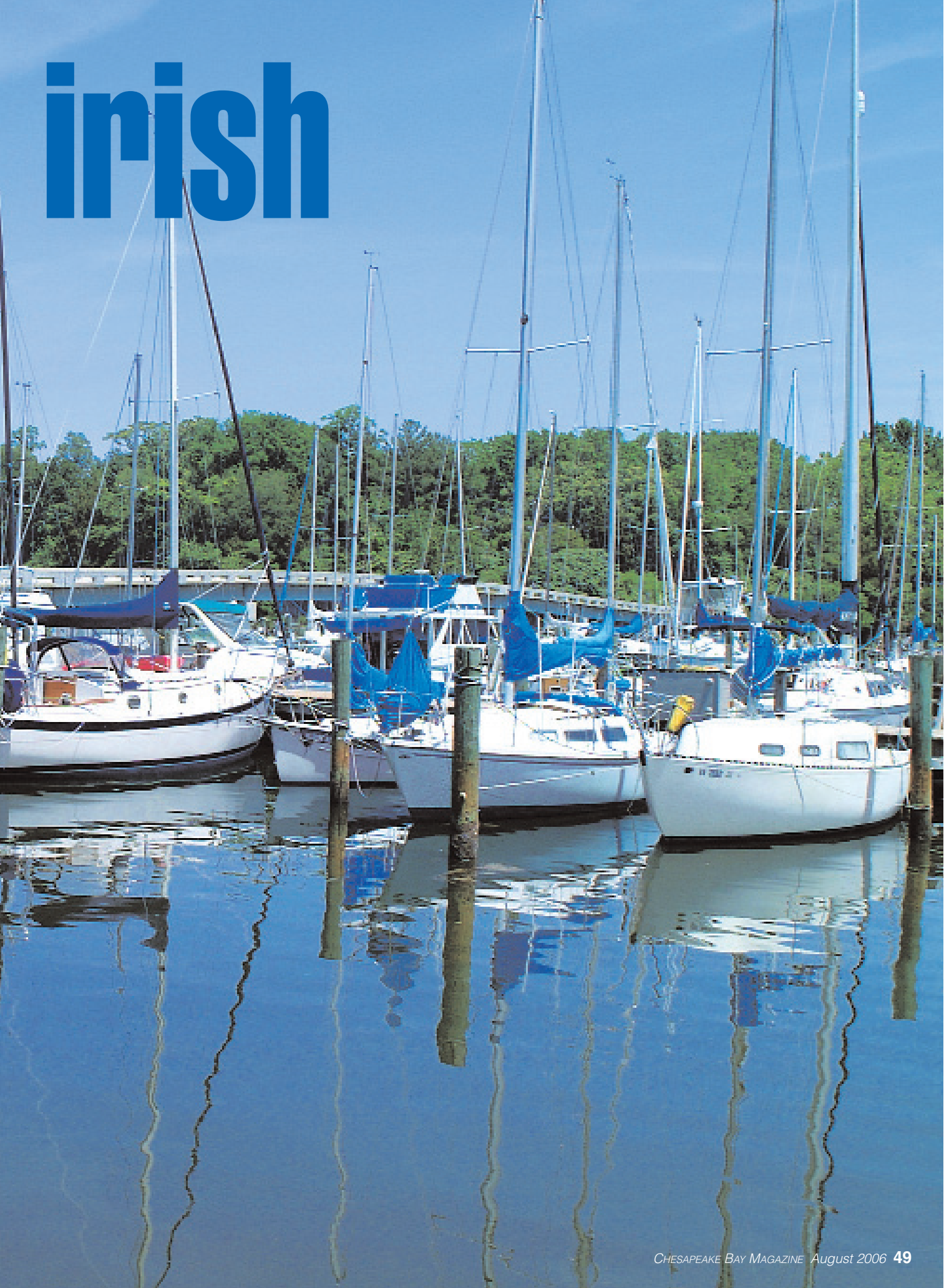
luck of the

It's easy to visit Kinsale; but beware, this little town on Virginia's Yeocomico River is the kind that makes you want to stay for good.

LONG BEFORE THERE WERE DECENT ROADS, the best way to get to small villages along the Chesapeake Bay was by water. And, I am thinking as Barb and I clear Smith Point Light under crisp, fine sails and turn into the Potomac, there's still no better way. We're pointing now, with a gentle southwesterly on our port, toward the Yeocomico River and Kinsale, Va., the little town that put down its roots on the river's western branch three centuries ago and is now about to celebrate a milestone year as the oldest settlement along the south shore of the Potomac. ¶ Established as a port by the

by PAUL CLANCY
photographs by STARKE JETT

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As much as we love it, **sailing all the way from Hampton Roads** was looking like crossing to the original Kinsale in County Cork.



colonial government in 1706, Kinsale will celebrate its 300th birthday on September 16. There will be lots of character vessels in town, perhaps a skipjack race, nonstop entertainment, spinning and weaving exhibitions, and more food than you can shake a fork at. And no doubt colonials, Indians and African-Americans—descendants of the main players on that distant stage—will be back for a 21st-century encore.

We're here in advance of said hoopla, hoping to see a little of the town and meet present-day Kinsaleans who are helping to honor this history. We left from Deltaville on a 33-foot Beneteau chartered from East Coast Yacht Management. *Ode to Joy*, my usually trusty boat, was in time-out because of bad (engine) behavior.



This worked out well because the trip is 40 miles each way from our home port on the Lafayette River—eight-hour days on the water—and as much as we love it, sailing all the way from Hampton Roads was looking like crossing to the original Kinsale in County Cork.

Well, begorra, we seem to have lucked into a couple of fine sailing days. A flight of pelicans crosses just as we turn at the outer markers. “The welcoming committee,” says my sailing pal. We enter the many-fingered Yeocomico close to sunset under the gaze of a three-quarter moon and head for the western branch and Port Kinsale Marina, one of several nearby marinas that offer transient slips. The big OPEN FOR BUSINESS banner on the boat shed is a reassuring sight. And so are the lights at the

Mooring Restaurant. A sign outside says, “If you’re lucky enough to be at the Rivah, you’re lucky enough.” We’re lucky.

Thanks to Charlie Santangelo, a restaurateur who once sold “downtown dogs” from a cart in St. Louis and introduced karaoke to bars in New York and Atlanta, the place is packed, and the food—crabcakes, stuffed flounder and veggies—is excellent. A small crowd of locals sits around the rectangular bar in the center. Toward the back, windows reflect masts that glow in the setting sun. Santangelo stops by our table. His sister and brother-in-law bought the 70-acre property, he says, including a bed-and-breakfast inn, a campground and full-service marina. Then they asked him to come for a visit. “The next

Clockwise from above: Boaters enjoying a favorite Yeocomico beach; a workboat gliding past the Great House; and 88-year old bass player Roxy Hamlet with the Brand Band at the Tiki Lounge.

Preceding pages: Kinsale Harbor Marina.



LIVING ON SPIRIT

All his life, it seemed, J.C. Waters dreamed of schooners—an odd notion, perhaps, for someone living deep in America's heartland. He taught school and built spec houses in Independence, Mo. But his “downfall,” as he calls it, was opening a boatyard on the Missouri River. The main reason was to begin living his dream. Over a period of 12 years, he built a 76-foot steel schooner, the *Spirit of Independence* (pictured above, with Waters and his daughter Joy aboard). After launching last August, father and daughter, joined by a number of friends, began the long river-by-river trek from Missouri to Mobile, Ala. There they waited out the terrible 2005 hurricane season, then proceeded to Kinsale via gulf, ocean and Bay. The elder Waters is now manager of Port Kinsale Marina. Meanwhile, he and Joy are preparing to run a charter service on the Chesapeake with Kinsale as base. Check them out at www.spiritofindependence.net.

thing I know I'm moving up here,” he says. This is apparently a real danger about visiting Kinsale. You'd better be prepared to quit your job, restore a house, pull up roots and accept the title of “come-here” like so many others. It has that cozy, inviting feel of small-town America, but with deep, deep maritime roots. There are several working skipjacks in the area, including the *Virginia W*, resting at Port Kinsale.

Santangelo, a native New Yorker, loves to rock on the porch of

his home with his dog at night and wave to passing cars. “I love the people here. They're so deeply family centered, rooted in the town. This is one of the last places where people are trying to hold on to their heritage, and I think they're going to make it.”

“Tell me,” he adds, as if pinching himself, “if I'm not in a beautiful place!”

The stars are achingly clear as we head back to our slip and our aft berth. At dawn, red-throated barn swallows swoop across the water and perch on lifelines and dock lines. Over granola and coffee we decide it would be great to walk to the village. We could motor there by boat or borrow a marina bike, but it's just a couple miles over back roads, and this is a chamber of commerce kind of morning. So off we go.

It's great going on country walks with Barb because she notices everything—the buttercups and bluets beside the road, the sweet-smelling wild roses and wild azaleas, the path on each side of the road that animals take, the fields of soybeans and wheat, the young osprey crying out as it circles on just-now-tested wings.

Near the headwaters of the branch there's a bridge that drops down beside Kinsale Harbor Marina and, right next door, the silos of a big granary now run by Perdue. There's a deep channel here beside a man-made point probably built on oyster shells. Tugs and barges are



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regular presences on the downtown docks.

Past the marina on "Steamboat Hill" several old commercial buildings seem to be awaiting rediscovery. There's part of a former general store that now houses a design firm, but most of the other buildings seem now to be storage space. There's a green-shuttered Kinsale Museum on the Green and nearby a now-vacant ice-cream parlor. The focal point is a pleasant village green, with newly planted trees and a gazebo. Small plaques indicate members of the Kinsale Foundation who have helped save historic buildings, create the green and, just recently, place the entire town on the National Register of Historic Places. On the gazebo floor is an inscription:

KINSALE, VIRGINIA 1706

CEANN SAILE, EIRE

The town's name, Gaelic for "head of salt water," may have been brought over by the first of ten generations of Baileys who have lived here. Among other structures is a nifty two-story bank building of textured cement blocks and several closed car dealerships, one of them now a private home. One place that seems open is Kinsale Restorations, at the back end of a former blacksmith's building. The door is open and we poke our heads in. Todd Ransone is applying finishing touches to a display case that he's making for the museum. With its eased edges, it looks like the kind of ship's carpentry he used to make for Tiffany Yachts on the Great Wicomico River south of here. Nearby is a mahogany wardrobe he recently restored.

Ransone, who once farmed with his dad in the Pungo end of Virginia Beach, seems as friendly as everyone else in town. He plans to

build his own workshop near his home on the river, but in the meantime, he says, it's great being where people stop and talk and where so much history surrounds you. "Whenever the wind blows," he says as a grin starts, "I figure it's the spirits talking. I just open the door and let them come through."

The spirits clearly inhabit this place, and I need room to let them walk through my notebook. But Barb and I have promised to return the boat by nightfall, so we must depart for now.

A week later, I'm back in Kinsale, this time staying at the Skipjack Inn, the B&B on the Port Kinsale Marina property. It was built in 1912 for the H.C. Pennington family, later serving as a fisherman's hotel and then part of the marina. The inn was renovated in 1998, with period furnishings in each room. What I like best is the sweeping view of the Yeocomico the next morning and the sandy beach that begs to be explored.

Santangelo loans me a copy of *Westmoreland County, Virginia*, a hefty tome that tells you everything you ever wanted to know about the county that sired dozens of famous Virginians—including George Washington, James Monroe and Robert E. Lee. And to my delight, I learn that the book's editor, Walter



Above: Curator Martha Dandridge Scott in the Kinsale Museum.

Top: The plaque and grave of Lieutenant James Sigourney, who was killed in a naval battle with the British in 1813.

Opposite page: J.C. Waters and his daughter Joy on the schooner *Spirit of Independence*.



A few weeks later the British bombarded the town, reducing it to rubble and ashes.

CRUISER'S DIGEST: KINSALE, VA.

Going to Kinsale means discovering the Yeocomico River, a many-branched system of deep-water creeks on the Virginia shore of the lower Potomac, just upstream from the Coan River. The name (yo-KAHM-eh-ko) means "four dwelling places" in the Algonquian language, but a

19th-century survey showed more than a hundred Indian camps or village sites on the Yeocomico, some dating back more than 12,000 years.

Because of a couple of pound nets and plenty of crab pots along the Potomac shoreline, we found it was best to

stick to the deep channel. Besides, there's a "danger area"

with a wreck symbol on the charts just past the Coan River. After green can "9", it's exactly 2 nautical miles to the "birthday cake," a flashing red ("2") marker that was erected on the base of a former light and resembles a candle. But the cake itself, on a shoal that guards the entrance, is no joke. We watched the depth drop to about 8 feet as we crept past the marker before resuming its otherwise friendly approach.

Kinsale is located near the headwaters of the West Yeocomico—a slight wiggle left and right as you follow the clearly marked channel. Keep in mind that tugs and barges frequent this river on their way to the grain elevators in Kinsale.

MARINAS AND BOATYARDS

Unless otherwise noted, the following marinas offer overnight slips, gas and diesel fuel, electric service, restrooms, showers, laundry facilities and a

pump-out station.

- In Kinsale:**
Kinsale Harbour Yacht Club (804-472-2514); pool; no service or fuel; Kinsale Seafood Restaurant and Tiki Lounge.
Port Kinsale Marina (804-472-2044, www.portkinsale.com); pool, service and repairs, marine supplies, bed-and-breakfast; Mooring Restaurant (804-472-4470).

- Nearby:**
Krentz Marina Railway (804-529-6851); service and repairs, marine supplies, motel; no showers, fuel or pump-out.
Olverson's Lodge Creek Marina (804-529-6868, www.olversonmarina.com); pool.
The Boatyard at Harryhogan (804-529-5826); service and repairs only; no marina services.
White Point Marina (804-472-2977, www.whitepointmarina.com); pool, marine supplies, service and repairs; no laundry.



KAREN ASHLEY

Briscoe Norris Jr., lives in town and that he would be happy to receive a curious visitor.

Just as I pull up to the Norris's house on Kinsale Road, he noses into his driveway on a bicycle, wrapping up his morning ride to Yeocomico Church (also circa 1706). His wife Lynn invites me in for cereal and strawberries fresh picked yesterday at one of the berry wonders of the world, Westmoreland Berry Farm. Then the ever-energetic Norris, known to all as Petie, invites me for a walking tour. The village, he points out, is a mix of housing styles. The Norris's own house, built in 1888, has some Victorian gingerbread along the roofline. The other houses include a smattering of early Federal, late Federal and Classical Revival. We walk briskly up Kinsale Road, which is lined on one side by a crumbling WPA era sidewalk.

Although Kinsale was officially founded as a port, nothing much happened here for a century or more. There was one naval engagement during the War of 1812, in which a young American commander, James Sigourney, was killed. He was buried at the nearby Bailey family cemetery, where a small naval cannon still presides over his grave. A few weeks later the British bombarded the town, reducing it to rubble and ashes. It did not really recover, Norris tells me, until just before the Civil War, when steamboats made their appearance.

Then the little town boomed. Before

Right: Todd Ransone varnishes the 100 year-old armoire he restored.
Opposite page: Photographer Starke Jett's Anna Sarah is tied up alongside the Port Kinsale skipjack Virginia W.

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CRASSOSTREA RAPIDUS

Just around the corner from the historic Kinsale village on the West Yeocomico River is a phenomenon that's being watched closely by oyster growers throughout the Chesapeake. Bevans Oyster Company has begun growing, harvesting and selling thousands of fat, healthy native oysters.

What Ronnie Bevans and his associates are doing is essentially outmaneuvering the diseases that have devastated Bay oysters. The killer diseases, MSX and Dermo, usually show up in Chesapeake oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) when they're about two years old, but the Bevans oysters are grown and harvested in 12 to 18 months. They grow that quickly because they're sterile, so all their energy goes to growth instead of reproduction. "They live their lives just to eat, filter the water and grow," says Margaret Ransone, wife of carpenter Todd Ransone and one of Bevans's five daughters.

Bevans pull-starts the outboard on one of the company's skiffs and takes me out to a small barge near the mouth of the river. We're going to watch an operation that began when the critters were bought from hatcheries and then force-fed nutrients until they had grown, in about six months, from roughly the size of a grain of sand to nearly an inch across. We circle slowly as the crane on the barge picks up large, flat wire baskets about the size of a card table and lowers them into the water.

About 700 of these baskets will go into the water each year. The company, which has only been doing this for a year, can't come up with the exact size of the harvest yet. But the system is capable of producing several hundred bushels of oysters a day. Suddenly,

Bevans Oyster Company, which was founded on the tasty bivalves 40 years ago but recently has been selling many other fish products—like chum and menhaden—is very much back in the oyster business.

Ronnie Bevans grew up at Coles Point, 12 miles up the Potomac, where both his and his wife's grandparents were in the oyster business. So there's more than a little satisfaction in seeing the business bounce back. "We've been blessed, I'll put it to you that way," he says.

Petie Norris, who grew up eating wild oysters on the shores of the Yeocomico, is rooting for Bevans. "Anything that's grown wild is covered with barnacles and slime," he says. "These farmed ones are the same oyster, but they're up off the mud and they're nice and clean. You just hold

them in your hand and they look like little works of art."

Left: Ronnie Bevans oversees the placement of baskets.



LUCK OF THE IRISH

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steamboats, Norris says, people felt penned in. “To live here was like living on Tangier or someplace. It was not easy to get off and somewhat dangerous. You had to get on a sailboat. A road trip up to Fredericksburg was a several-day experience by horseback. Steamboat was a comfortable, relatively safe way. You just hop onboard, have a drink and watch the scenery go by. It just transformed society in the whole Bay region.”

Between about 1870 and 1930, Norris tells me, things really came together. With its abundant crops of tomatoes, watermelon, grain and oysters, Kinsale had something to offer, and the locals acquired a taste for fine furnishings and clothing. The boats from Baltimore facilitated the exchange. There was a tavern and inn at the top of the hill near the general store. Salesmen arriving by steamboat would stay there, rent a horse and buggy and set off for a day of making calls through the region.

As cars pass on the road, Norris waves to every one of them. We stop at the smallest of the town’s car dealerships, originally Sid Beale’s Blacksmith Shop. Norris calls it a “transitional building” that signaled the town’s demise. First, Beale repaired buggies there; then cars, brought there in sections, were assembled. “So cars are comin’ up, steamboats are fadin’,” he says, keeping up his brisk pace. “The crossover year was about 1930. The boats died so fast, it was kind of like a bubble. They peaked in the mid-twenties, and by the mid-thirties they were extinct. They just burned up or became hulks. The same thing with sailboats. The Yeocomico is littered with schooners. They were just pushed up in the marshes and allowed to rot. That’s the iron law of America. If it doesn’t make money, nobody’s going to fix it. Nobody’s going to put a roof on it. Nobody’s going to repair a hull. They just let ‘em go.”

Norris and I end up at the museum where Martha Scott, the curator, resumes the town’s story. This month, the theme

is businesses, and the little museum is showcasing poster-size black-and-white photographs. There’s a scene of workers at one of the canneries, peeling and packing. Black workers are on the left, white workers on the right. A display shows labels like “Pride of Kinsale Tomatoes” and “Westmoreland White Sweet Corn.”

“Every time I drive into Kinsale, I get into a laid-back mode. I don’t know what it is about the place, but it’s great.”

There’s a 1926 photo of people boarding a steamboat. One of the children in the picture, Scott says, is still living in town.

There are lots of other displays, including a three-tiered oil lamp the color of Pepto-Bismol, primitive children’s toys and photographs of the James Adams Floating Theater. The fabulous theater, which inspired the musical *Showboat*, called at Kinsale as well as dozens of other ports. There’s a glamorous shot of Adams’s wife, Beulah, clutching a bouquet of roses.

It seems that when you scratch a Kinsalean, you scratch history. Martha Scott, it turns out, was born a Dandridge—as in Martha Dandridge Custis Washington, the first First Lady. “It’s no big deal here,” she says. “Everybody in this town is related to the Washingtons or the Lees. You can’t escape the fact that you belong to them and they belong to you. I didn’t look at it that way for a very long time until I was using some of grandma’s recipes and Momma said, ‘You know Martha Dandridge wrote this recipe.’”

That’s what “come-heres” mean when they talk about deep, close-knit ties among “been-heres.” These folks go *way* back. And yet, newcomers tell me, they readily welcome new blood—especially people who get involved in the town’s preoccupation: preservation. “I had people let me know that they like that we put up a green tin roof,” says Paul Sherman, who with his wife Valerie has restored the six-bedroom, 106-year-old Moss Hotel as a private summer resi-

dence. There are still Moss descendants in town, and the Shermans feel privileged just to be accepted, says Paul—whom I meet on Memorial Day weekend at Kinsale Harbor Marina, just down the street from “the hotel.” His son Alex—whom locals call “Junior,” for reasons that baffle Sherman—works at the marina part-time. The marina is in full holiday weekend mode. A bluegrass band is holding forth, and the upper deck overlooking the lovely harbor is crowded with diners. Since taking over management of the marina and buying the restaurant three years ago, Bill and Lisa Marshall have watched the once empty slips fill up. Now there’s a waiting list. Like business owners in town, they were accidental tourists—came to the marina to buy a sailboat (a Catalina 30), hung out, fired up the grill for slip neighbors, found the restaurant was for sale, and plunged in. Marshall credits marina owners Jim Wilbert and Bob Horan for upgrading the place with new decks and other improvements. The restaurant, formerly just a deli, looks like it’s here to stay. Marshall says they’re already listed in the museum as the restaurant’s longest-lasting owners.

There’s definitely a relaxed atmosphere at Kinsale Harbor. George Buhrman, originally from Millers Island near Baltimore, is here with his girlfriend and her son. Improbably, Buhrman is dangling over the water on a hammock, rigged off the bow of his Tartan 30 with spinnaker pole and halyards. Like everyone else around here, it seems, Buhrman is thinking about staying. “Every time I drive into Kinsale, I get into a laid-back mode. I don’t know what it is about the place, but it’s great. Now, I’m looking at land for a retirement home.”

This thing about Kinsale is catching. Looking at that old bank building, I’m thinking, now that would make a great gallery—or, Barb says later, an art school, like the one they have in Mathews. Or, I offer, a bookstore and coffee shop. Okay, maybe I’m dreaming. We’ll be back in September, of course, for the big birthday celebration. But, you know, just for the weekend. . . . ■