



Town, county celebrate anniversaries in 2017



Hurt's water tank towers above a housing development in the mostly residential town.

By Mark Thomas, Community Relations Coordinator

Two localities served by Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC) are marking milestones this year. The town of Hurt turns 50 years old in 2017, while Pittsylvania County reaches 250. Hurt, situated near the Staunton River in the northern end of Pittsylvania County, is a mostly residential town of about 1,300 people. Pittsylvania County, which is Virginia's largest in terms of geography, is home to more than 62,000 residents.

SEC has 51 active services in Hurt and 1,780 in northern Pittsylvania County.

STARTING A TOWN

According to the Altavista Journal, incorporation of the Hurt community passed in a special election in May 1966. The vote was 196-114. Hurt Town Council met in public session for the first time Jan. 3, 1967. Madeline Key was one of the original council members and is the only one still living.

“I was delighted,” she says about being on the first governing body. She recalls donating \$100 to the town so it could start a bank account. Employees used her portable typewriter at town hall until Hurt could buy one. She helped write Hurt’s first zoning ordinance, and, much later, helped write a grant proposal for federal funds for a town water system.

Hurt started from a provision in the will of John L. Hurt Jr. It said his 200-acre property, known as Clement Hill, would become town property if Hurt incorporated within three years of his death, which happened Sept. 1, 1964. If that didn’t happen, the property would be offered to neighboring Altavista for a park. If Altavista didn’t take it, the property would remain in his estate.

According to the Journal, citizens were split. Incorporation advantages cited by a study committee included street lights, police protection and garbage collection.

Opponents, says nephew Henry Hurt of Chatham, had one reason against incorporation. “Taxes.” Hurt says it was a big fight in the community over incorporating.

MR. HURT

“Uncle John,” as Henry Hurt calls him, had laid out the town when it was still a village. He named the streets, and since he owned all of the land, he sold lots to people “he thought were responsible.” Hurt says his uncle sold the property for low prices, but made the buyers agree to paint their houses every five years and have a vegetable garden.

His uncle, Hurt says, wanted the town to ensure continuity, structure and to “bring order to his dream.” A Burlington textile factory was located on Hurt’s land, and he had also given property for churches.

“If it wasn’t for Mr. Hurt, we wouldn’t have had anything up here,” Key says.



The gardens at John L. Hurt Jr. Elementary School show pink and purple in the early summer. Hurt’s estate provides funds to maintain the gardens.

Hurt, an author and former editor at Reader’s Digest, says his uncle was an excellent writer, enjoyed bird hunting, served as a magistrate in the county and was a connoisseur of hams. Hurt says his uncle always had a dozen curing in his smokehouse and believed a ham should be seven or eight years old

before it was cut. Key says Hurt chewed gum and would generously give children a whole pack, not just a stick.

THEN, NOW

Before Hurt was a town, Ann Andrews lived in the community. She moved there in 1940 and grew up, leaving in 1952. Her dad bought the family’s house on Tanyard Road from John L. Hurt Jr.

Initially, there was no electricity, but she remembers later getting power and having a cord and lightbulb hanging from the ceiling in each room. Water for cooking, washing and bathing came from a nearby spring; she says five families had boxes in that spring to keep milk and butter. She figures 300 people lived in the Hurt community when she was growing up.

Today, Hurt has two schools, a medical center, several small businesses, churches, a volunteer fire department and a new partnership with Pittsylvania County and others for an industrial park that was once the Burlington property.

“That would help the need for jobs. It would help the town,” says Dixie Poindexter, the current mayor’s wife and chair of the 50th anniversary committee.

Poindexter also remembers when Hurt was just a community. Her parents bought

their house lot from John L. Hurt Jr. She says children went to the community school, and many people attended the Baptist and Methodist churches. The Burlington plant and the Lane cedar chest factory in Altavista were big employers.

Speaking of John L. Hurt Jr. Elementary School, Hurt left funds in his estate to maintain the school’s gardens and have a full-time librarian.

Mayor Gary Poindexter says before talk of an industrial park, municipal water system or anything resembling a town, Hurt was a place built on three foundations.

“Faith, family and community are the moral fiber that defines life in small-town America,” Poindexter notes.



State Sen. Frank Ruff (left) and Del. Les Adams (right) present a resolution from the General Assembly to Mayor Gary Poindexter.

At an April celebration, state Sen. Frank Ruff and Del. Les Adams presented Mayor Poindexter with a resolution passed by the General Assembly commending Hurt on its 50th anniversary.

Hurt will hold another celebration Sept. 23 and visitors are invited. The event at town hall and the adjacent Roosevelt Mattox Park will include music, crafts, car show, concessions and fireworks at dark.

For more information about Hurt and its anniversary, visit www.townofhurtva.gov.

PITTSYLVANIA COUNTY

Pittsylvania was created out of Halifax County in 1767, and, at that time, included the present-day counties of Patrick, Henry and part of Franklin. Pittsylvania got its current size in 1777. The county is named after William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, who defended the colonies' rights in the British Parliament.

It's a county filled with history, notes Dr. Larry Aaron, president of the Pittsylvania Historical Society and author of eight books, most on local history.

Aaron writes that fish weirs found in county rivers and stone items discovered in the soil indicate Native Americans lived in the county. Explorers covered the county in the 1600s and 1700s. Gristmills were built along creeks and rivers, and Yates Tavern, near the present-day town of Gretna, was built around the 1750s and served travelers with food and an overnight stay. Hurt, Gretna and Chatham are the three incorporated towns in Pittsylvania County.

Rachel Donelson, later the wife of future President Andrew Jackson, was born in the county, and America's first president, George Washington, stayed a night in the Peytonsborg community. Gunpowder for the Revolutionary War was made at the aforementioned Clement Hill; county soldiers fought in the Revolution and Civil War. County native Claude A. Swanson served as governor of Virginia and secretary of the Navy under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

AGRICULTURE, PEOPLE

Jessie Barksdale, a county native and member of the Board of Supervisors, says part of Pittsylvania's rich history is from agriculture. That includes tobacco, long a major county crop, but also timber, grain, and beef and dairy operations. He says brewing and winemaking are part of the county's new agriculture.

Besides continuing its agricultural heritage, Barksdale mentions the ongoing work in attracting industry and research to the county. Barksdale thinks the future is bright for the county and Danville from their joint efforts in economic development.

Former 5th District Congressman Robert Hurt, who also represented the county in the Virginia legislature, said it was an honor to serve the area and its residents in Washington and Richmond.

Hurt, now director of Liberty University's Center for Law & Government, says the county's agricultural and textile history; its "hardworking, humble and God-fearing people"; and the sense of community make the place special for him. Hurt relates a devastating event that showed community. A 200-year-old house his family used for getaways and his dad's place to write recently burned. He says as he watched firefighters suppress the blaze, it was strangely comforting to be around people who grew up nearby, knew the house, knew the community and knew the people.

Barksdale, too, mentions the community spirit in his home county. He saw it while growing up in a county that was still segregated. He says people looked out for their neighbors, which included sharing the surplus from vegetable gardens. That community spirit still exists



in the county, Barksdale says.

Pittsylvania residents and visitors alike will celebrate local history and the county's anniversary at the annual Callands Festival on Oct. 7. Callands, located west of Chatham off of Route 57, was the first county seat.

For more information, visit the Pittsylvania Historical Society's Facebook page.

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