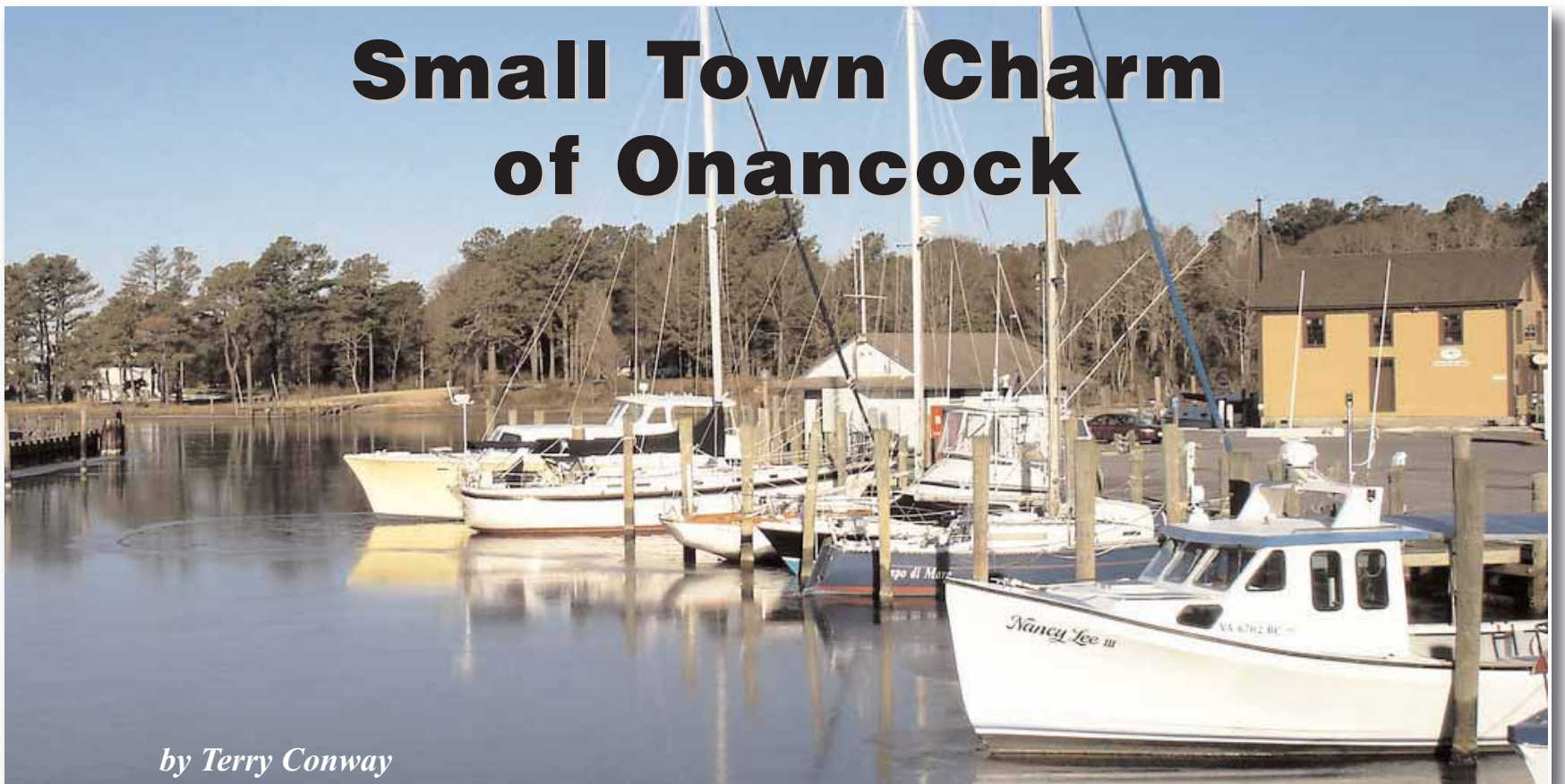


Small Town Charm of Onancock



by Terry Conway

On the way to Onancock, Virginia you'll pass genteel countryside and working farms that cultivate soybeans, tomatoes and green beans. Like the nearby watermen who trawl the Chesapeake for crabs, oysters and local catch, the farmers have been at it for generations.

Founded in 1680 as Port Scarborough, Onancock (pronounced oh-nan-cock) had its organized beginnings at the headwaters of Onancock Creek though English settlers and Indians had peopled its shores long before. The waterfront village acted as a trading hub surrounded by farms serving as a significant trade and passenger link between the Eastern shore and cities on the Virginia mainland, Washington and Baltimore. The port was a major stop for the Baltimore Steamboat Line from the mid-1800s until 1935.

Nestled between two forks of a creek on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the area is an appealing mix of meandering creeks, wild marshes and small villages. The expansive marshes provide habitat for several heron species, glossy ibis, gulls, common passerine

species and ospreys nesting on the channel markers. It is a popular overnight port for sailors, offering dockage and a nice location to stop off during Chesapeake Bay tours.

The village's rich heritage is reflected in its oak and elm tree-shaded lanes and gorgeous 19th century homes. Visitors will find a collection of stately Victorian homes with wraparound porches, gambled roofs, gingerbread porches, pineapple motifs and other eye-catching decorative trim. Onancock is also known for earlier styles of architecture, including the vernacular Eastern Shore "big house, little house, colonnade and kitchen" styles.

The business district (barely two square blocks) has experienced a burst of new restaurants, art galleries and shops. Roseland Theater shows international films once a month, while North Street Playhouse produces works by Neil Simon and Truman Capote featuring local talent. The symmetrical Federal-style Kerr Place is a mar-

velous 210-year old plantation-style brick manor. In the restored brick-floored cellar, volunteers piece together antique crockery and china from bags of shards unearthed on the grounds. A museum on the second floor offers interpretative exhibits from the Society's collections currently include a maritime exhibit related to the Barrier Islands as well as a collection of antique waterman's tools, old photographs of village life. Inside the former 1842 Hopkins and Bro. General Store, now housing Mallards at the Wharf restaurant, sepiatoned photos of watermen decorate the plank walls. Near the hostess desk, a contented woman spins wool, one of the Colonial arts she demonstrates daily. Next door you'll find an old steamboat ticket office, ferries continue to operate daily cruises to Tangier Island, a crabbing community where residents still speak with lilt derived from

Cornwall, England.

Main Street starts where the creek's north and central branches divide leads to a town dock and boat ramp. Winding roughly ten miles out to the Chesapeake Bay, the creek is well marked, but pay close attention to buoys as the channel is narrow in some spots with shallow sandy bottom on either side.

Across the channel is Watts Island. The southern tip once housed a lighthouse, but as erosion took its toll the lighthouse was swept out into the bay. Today it's a rookery for hundreds of herons, egrets, gulls and other birds. Once in the bay, fishermen will find a series of hard bottoms along the channel edge including Robin Hood, Stone Rock, Crammy Hack, Hack's Rock, and Anglers.

Back in town, stop by House of Deals that hawks fresh seafood and an array of tantalizing veggies that sit under its sidewalk umbrella. Bizzotto's Caffe specializes in international cuisine that ranges from veal, steak, grilled tuna and crab cakes. Arriving from Argentina in 1995, Miguel Bizzotto has long been known as a master



A view down Market Street.



Kayaking on Onancock Creek.



Historic Ker Place and the Eastern Shore Historical Society.

leather craftsman. His handbags and briefcases are featured gallery items at the Gallery next door to the Cafe.

Over at Blarney Stone Pub you'll find the requisite fish and chips, but also alluring twists like "Irish nachos"...Alaskan salmon on a bed of waffle fries. There are a half dozen appealing accommodations, ranging from Victorian country inns to a boutique hotel. The artist, Charlotte Heath, serves creative American cuisine in her own hotel. Flamenco, a retro bar, keeps the nightlife humming.

For more information, call 757-302-0388 or visit www.onancock.org