

Northumberland County
Century Farms highlight
the generational ties to land
and an enduring way of life



A. Mason Brent and Keith Harris discuss the harvesting of sunflower seeds which was delayed due to recent rains and storms. Photo by Jackie Nunnery

Roots run deep

For centuries, people have lived off the land and waters of the Northern Neck. Well before the English began settling here in the early to mid-1600s, Native Americans had long recognized the abundant life and fertile soils of the region and built their own communities.

From its earliest Colonial beginnings to its very existence as a Commonwealth today, Virginia has relied on the natural resources it has possessed or supported its cultivation. First: timber, furs and sassafras; then later, tobacco, hemp, wheat and corn.

The agricultural history of the region often emphasizes the early wealthy planter families with names like Lee, Carter, Ball and Washington, at the expense of smaller farms—and more importantly farmers—who also had vital contributions to the area’s history and economy. Through years of planting and harvesting, through floods and drought, they have farmed to put food onto the tables of their families and the surrounding community.

by Jackie
Nunnery

This is especially true of Northumberland County, the “mother county of the Northern Neck.” Since its founding in 1638, agriculture has been a vital component of the economy—not just for the value of the farm products, but for the rural beauty that continues to draw people to the region. Even today, roughly one-quarter of the county’s 286 square miles is still devoted to farmland, according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture.

In addition to acreage that has been continuously used as agriculture for centuries, there are some farms that have been held in the same family for generations—and fewer still that have the distinction as a Virginia Century Farm.



Brothers Mark Downing and Michael Downing have followed in their father's footsteps to carry on the tradition of the family's farm. Here, they show their favorite tractor from their father's collection, a 1959 John Deere.
Photo by Jackie Nunnery



A. Mason Brent is the fifth generation to call this historic Heathsville house and farm home.
Photo by Jackie Nunnery

Virginia's Century Farm Program

Established by the General Assembly in 1997 and managed by the Virginia Department of Consumer Services, the Virginia Century Farm Program "recognizes and honors those farms that have been in operation for at least 100 consecutive years and the generations of Virginia farm families whose diligent and dedicated efforts have maintained these farms, provided nourishment to their fellow citizens and contributed so greatly to the economy of the Commonwealth."

To qualify, a farm needs to have been owned by the same family for at least 100 years, be lived on or farmed by a descendant of the original owners, and gross more than \$2,500 from the sale of farm products.

The Downings' Bleak House Farms in Lottsburg is one such farm. The Downing family acquired the farm by marriage sometime around the Civil War, according to Michael Downing, one of the current owners. Through generations, the farm has provided for the Downings and stayed within the family. The late Frederick Downing received the distinction in 1997 and sons Mark and Michael continue in his footsteps today.

Today, Bleak House Farm, named long ago for the drafty home that still sits on a peninsula nearly surrounded by the Coan River, is a large and bustling mostly-grain-based operation. The next generation, Michael's daughters Darrah, 16, and Meghan, 12, have already started their own farm business: a successful pumpkin patch.

When asked about the importance of keeping this land and operations in the family, Michael shrugged. "I can't imagine and don't remember being anywhere else but doing this, here."

To date, 1,474 farms like Bleak House have been recognized across the Commonwealth, with 69 of those within the Northern Neck, including 20 in Northumberland County.

Roanoke, Heathsville

Situated off of a busy Route 360 as it enters Heathsville, the quiet farm looks hardly different than when its current resident, A. Mason Brent, came here as a child for weekends and summers. But a closer look reveals that parts of the farm have been repurposed for events, taking advantage of the sweeping pastoral views and the rustic charm of an old barn. Over the years, there have been countless parties in addition to a popular "Oysters and Oldies" roast, which benefits St. Stephen's Church in Heathsville every year.

Brent pointed out that these were not the first events held on the property. Back around 1974, shortly after his father, Andrew Jackson Brent Jr. (1918-1996), refurbished the barn by removing the chicken coop and adding a floor and a basketball hoop, students from Northumberland High School called and asked if they could hold their prom there. They did, putting the band up in the hay loft and dancing on the new wooden floor.

The farm was first established in the Brent family four generations back when Andrew Jackson "AJ" Brent (1827-1889) purchased the home from Mottram Ball Cralle in 1852. Brent



Grain has been harvested from Roanoke for generations. Photo courtesy Brent Family Collection, Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Society



Roanoke circa 1910. Photo courtesy Brent Family Collection, Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Society



A. Mason Brent shows sunflower seeds grown on the farm that will be sold for feed through Bay's Best. Photo by Jackie Nunnery



Roanoke today.



The family of Dr. Andrew Mason Brent, second generation of Roanoke: son, William Seymour Brent; daughter, Alma Mason Brent; son, Robert Andrews Brent; wife, Roberta "Bertie" Andrews Harper Brent; nephew Frederick de Shields Brent. Photo courtesy of A. Mason Brent

lived there with his wife, Sarah Mason Stith (1829-1896) and their two sons. AJ was also the first permanent resident in the Brent family plot on the property, just off the barn.

According to Brent, the name 'Roanoke' came from the Randolph family, who were cousins. They had a farm back in Charlotte County called Roanoke, "so when the Brents bought this farm, they named it Roanoke so that when the cousins came to visit, they would feel like they were at home in Roanoke. So, we come from a long line of hospitality."

Brent said the small family farm was a "self-sustaining project run by the men-folk in the family, plus hired hands that lived on the property and got breakfast before they went to work. They grew grains for animal feed and had their own animals" to feed themselves.

Like many farmers, the generations of Brents had other occupations in addition to managing the farm. AJ was also the court clerk for Northumberland County from 1850-1859 and AJ's son, Dr. Andrew Mason Brent (1856-1926), lived on the property with his wife Roberta and their seven children, and sometimes saw patients at the house.

"For years after that, some of the Brent sons ran the farm, but it's been leased in agriculture from the early 1900s on," Brent said.

Today, the fifth generation Brent follows in those footsteps of managing multiple roles. When he first retired and moved to Roanoke full-time in 2001, Brent—who was never a farmer before—got into the grain business. He first started up Bay's Best Feed in 2005 with local farmer, the late Billy Dawson, then later with Rob Hinton to farm the land. While Brent has "retired a second time from the grain business," there is still non-GMO corn for corn chips, barley for whiskey and sunflower seeds for feed, all grown on the farm, with area farmer Keith Harris at the wheel.

Today, Brent is part-owner of the Copper Fox Distillery, while continuing to provide barley, rye and corn for their whiskey through Bay's

Best.

There is more history to the land than just farming. There are 50-year old magnolias that Brent recalls planting with his father, and a towering sugar maple that has been shading both the front lawn and the home for at least a century. Brent joked that it was also "a smoking tree," which he would climb up into during his trips to the farm to duck hunt with his father.

The home itself has expanded and changed over the generations to meet the needs of the families that lived there. There was a story-and-a-half home built sometime in the 1760s, which later became a wing to the three-story home built around 1820. Around the 1900s buildings, from elsewhere on the property were added to the house for more space, creating "a hodge-podge," Brent said, of floor heights and walk-



The Brent family plot provides a constant reminder of the generations that have come before. Photo by Jackie Nunnery



The original farmhouse continues to stand on the point overlooking Bleak House Farm and the Coan River. Photo by Jackie Nunnery



Barley, rye and corn for distilling are all grown on Roanoke Farm. Copper Fox recently developed Dawson's Reserve, a bourbon whiskey dedicated to the late Billy Dawson. Photo by Jackie Nunnery



Continuing with the tradition of each generation improving on the farm, A. Mason Brent and his grandson, Jack, built a "treehouse without a tree" this past summer.

ways.

Brent made his own changes to the home in 2006, adding a matching east wing where he lives with his wife, Linda, and all the modern conveniences. By doing so, it left the older part of the house "for the kids and grandkids to come and have their own space."

Inside, Brent gives a tour, highlighting the upstairs bedrooms where "all the kids would sleep" and showing off the family piano, ornate and solid, that has been "sitting here for over a hundred years in that very spot." The story goes that Dr. Andrew Mason Brent's wife, Roberta Andrews Harper Brent (1856-1933), was given the piano by her son Andrew Jackson "Jack" Brent II (1884-1920). According to Brent, Roberta "loved music and played the piano, but had neither one here in the middle of the wilderness."

Brent applied for the Century Farm designation in 2003. It was important to him because of

his "strong interest in history and how we got to be where we are and where we've been, about it being a prologue of the future. I consider anything historical to be of high value."

In addition to valuing that history, Brent also sees himself as a caretaker of it. "I've had generations before me build this place up. They were building a legacy. I just consider myself a steward of this property and the house. It's my job to do what I can to maintain it, improve it, and pass it on to the rest of my family, so they can enjoy what I've always had here."

Even those not named Brent feel something of a familial tie to the property. Brent recently hosted about 25 people from the area on opening day of dove hunting season, a long-held tradition. In thanking his host, Mack Mothershead of Lottsburg said, "in these times of uncertainty when you're not sure what to do or where to be, I speak for the group when I say, when we're here, we know we are where we are supposed to be."

Just a few of the lost objects from past generations found during restoration projects. Photo by Jackie Nunnery

