

Washington County

Captivated by Natural Beauty, Enriched with its Own Historic background leaves reassurance for local towns tourism industry.

BY LISA SPRUILL

Washington County is known for its vast waterway (Albemarle Sound) and for being the first county in America to be named after Gen. George Washington, before he became president of the United States.

Washington County is located in the northeastern region of North Carolina. Its breath- taken 336 square miles of land are filled with beautiful waterway and bountiful wildlife. This small but quaint county is bounded by the winding Roanoke River on the northwest side, and on the north side, it is bordered by the largest fresh water sound in the United States- the Albemarle Sound.

Washington County consists of three incorporated towns, Plymouth, Roper and Creswell. All three towns are located along U.S. Highway 64.

Plymouth is the westernmost town and also the county seat. Roper is located more centrally in the county, with Creswell being the easternmost town in the county.

Washington County has been recognized by the *National Geographic Magazine* as having the state's second largest natural lake- Lake Phelps- located in the town of Creswell, once known as Cool Springs.

Offshore of Lake Phelps is Pettigrew State Park. The park is in the middle of Washington County-in the town of Crewsell. Deep within the forest of Pettigrew State Park grow cypress trees that date back at least a 100 years. Sid Shearin, parks superintendent, is familiar with the park's surrounding trees; so familiar that he has named several of them and today they are recognized by his given names. He has named a 120-foot tree the "Lake Phelps Monster". Its hollow spots look like peering eyes.

With the passing of time, tree. Which once grew deep within the lake's sand, now stand tall along the bank of Lake Phelps. Their branches are covered with towering volumes of moss, as high as one's eyes can see. Each branch weighs heavily downward, giving the trees a scary look. Their trunks have a cavity large enough for children to play hide and seek. You can enter the hollow

sycamore tree and exit at the picnic area. Shearin says that the hollow tree trunk is always a favorite of the children that play in the park.

The Park has nature trails that lead to some of the state's largest trees. These trails not only lead to exploring nature but also lead to exploring the park's historical findings. Along one of these trails the park has provided an information center filled with ancient artifacts found as early as 8,000 B.C. sunken deep within the lake itself. These artifacts once belonged to Native Americans.

Canoes have been recovered from the bottom of the lake, one as large as 37 feet in length. Native Americans made canoes by burning the interiors of cypress logs then carved away the charred wood leaving only a shell left to sit in. After their seasonal hunting season was over, today's archaeologists

believe that the Native Americans sank their canoes until next hunting season, hoping to protect them. These artifacts included pottery and at least 30 sunken canoes.

Lake Phelps is one of North Carolina's clearest lakes. Shearin says, "Since there is no city or agricultural runoff into the lake, it is one of North Carolina's least polluted bodies of water. Only rain feed into the lake."

Davis Spencer, resident of Creswell says, "I like the lake because I can wade in it, wet a hook and within minutes, I've got a large mouth bass." The Public Broadcasting Station-stationed in Raleigh recently filmed an hour-long documentary on the large mouth bass living in Lake Phelps. "This lake is as good as it gets for catching large mouth bass in Northeastern North Carolina," says Spencer.

Aside from Mother's Nature gifts, Washington County abounds with admirable man-made contributions, such as Somerset Place. This plantation offers a comprehensive and realistic view of the 19th century lifestyle of both slaves and master of the slaves. Lake Phelps borders this plantation to the present day, five-by-eight miles to be exact. To the earliest days of Somerset to the end Civil War, people of different races and economic statuses lived on the property. Somerset Place became one of the upper south's largest plantations. The Civil War brought closure to the prosperity of Somerset Place. Today, tours are given to the public in hopes of reliving the lives of the plantation's owners, the enslaved community, the employed whites and the free blacks.

Creswell boasts a number of well-preserved old homes and historic sites in town and surrounding countryside. One preserved home is the Daniel Davenport Homestead. This old and rustic home can be visited at any time during the year. Judy Mayo, Washington County tourism director, says, "When you arrive at the Davenport Home, you step through the front door and step back in time."

Several townfolk welcome tourist at the Davenport Homestead by portraying the lifestyles of the Davenport family. Unlike the Somerset Place, the Davenport home wasn't filled with lavished luxuries. The house is less than 600 square feet, not much bigger than our family room for today's home. They did not have slaves to help scrub clothing or to help make quilts and rugs with discarded rags. A loom was used to

weave simple fabric for clothes, tablecloths and other uses. Recycling was a way of life for the Davenport family. Kathy Smith, volunteer at the Davenport Homestead, says she enjoys portraying the life style of the late 1700s. "Makes me appreciate what I have in the 20th century, especially when it comes to doing the laundry," says Smith. People from all over come to the Davenport Homestead to relive the past.

Heart of Washington County

The largest town in Washington County is Plymouth. It became the first incorporated town in Washington County in 1787. Plymouth is best known for its involvement in the Civil War that took place 240 years after the Pilgrims came ashore.

"By 1956 Plymouth was the second largest seaport in North Carolina," says Harry Thompson, curator of the Civil War Museum. Merchants used boats as a

means for transporting their goods. Soon, transportation began to slow down. Trucks eventually replaced trains and boats. As the train station slowly began closing, the town's people made complaints. As a result, the station owner gave one of the three condemned stations to the Plymouth community, now recognized as the Civil War Museum.

Plymouth residents relive the history of the Civil War in both memories and by actual reenactment. On February 1, 2001, a group of local residents met for the first time to form an organization that would help bring understanding of the War between the States. Members participate in the reenactment of the battle to give the correct historical impression of Navy life during the Civil War period.

Residents of Plymouth are preparing especially hard for this year's annual

reenactment. On May 1, The History Channel cable network, will be on site filming its third annual reenactment of the Civil War. Residents take pride in portraying the events; it's their way of showing respect to the heroic soldiers that lost their lives during the war.

Plymouth Today

Downtown Plymouth has redeveloped itself. Within 19 months, 27 of the downtown buildings have been sold. These buildings now house an ice cream shop, an antique shops, a coffee shop, The Garden Spot Cafe, the Oyster Bar, Andy Womble's law office, many hair salons, The Soundside Group, a cotton distributor, and a child advocacy agency.

Few businesses that have been downtown for a number of years are still going strong. These businesses are the Jewel Shop, Brenda's flower shop, Heart to Heart flowers, Time Finance, Cherry's Appliances, Royalty Finance

and the Civil War Museum. Each shop carries a unique touch of memorable history inside as a reminder of the town's achievements.

One of the great achievements for Plymouth residence is the rebuilding of a lighthouse that once stood on the Roanoke Rivers banks. This lighthouse was used to guide ships safely into Plymouth's harbor. The original lighthouse was burned to the ground in 1885. Today, at the end of Water Street, stands a replica of the original lighthouse. The original blueprints, dating back to 1866, were used to rebuild the lighthouse. "We went all the way to California to get the blueprints from the man that took care of them all his life. I was told to get rid of these prints but I just couldn't," says Harry Thompson, curator of the Civil War Museum. Now this remarkable

lighthouse once more overlooks the Roanoke River.

Plymouth has many places of interest in Washington County but one that's worth visiting is The Garden Spot Café. This café is known for serving a unique menu for lunch and dinner. They serve steak, salad, seafood, sandwiches, wraps and their famous county cooked barbecue ribs. The Garden Spot opened for business in 2002 and has become a popular eating ground for both residence and tourist.

Randy Swain, resident of Plymouth-says, " I don't have to travel 50 miles anymore just to get a great tasting seafood platter, The Garden Spot hits the spot for me."

"There's food to suit everyone's taste and style. You have a choice of Mexican, Japanese, Italian, Seafood or just old fashion fast food," says Mayo, Washington Tourism Director.

Plymouth offers a wide variety of choices for their traveling tourists' needs. Plymouth received their newly built hotel, Holiday Inn Express, three years ago. A larger hotel was needed in order to accommodate the growing number of tourist traveling through the Washington County area.

Erica Daniel, front desk receptionist at the Holiday Inn Express, says, "We have 60 rooms, and at start of Memorial Day weekend, all rooms are filled until the summer ends." Along with the Holiday Inn Express, there are three smaller motels.

The industry for Washington County has soared to great heights over recent years. The county has been experiencing new business and commercial development especially along US Highway 64. New additions to the county are Gulfstream Products, a manufacturer of fiberglass tubing,

Kanban Inc., a warehousing facility, French Ketch Seafood Inc., Inc. and a new medical waste facility in Creswell. The towns of Creswell and Roper are now pursuing industrial opportunities in their jurisdictions. With the upcoming expansion of Highway 64 all of Washington County will prosper.

Weyerhaeuser Paper Company is the County's largest industries. Its enormous plant is located on approximately 24 acres of land along the Roanoke River in Plymouth. Over 2,400 jobs are provided for local residents.

Weyerhaeuser manufactures pulp, paper, lumber, and salt treated lumber. Today, Weyerhaeuser has three million acres of timberland.

The second largest employment provider for Washington County is Agriculture. Eastern North Carolina consists mainly of farmland. Plymouth residents are involved in agriculture

year- round. Most of the crops grown are corn, soybeans, wheat, peanuts, tobacco, cotton, cabbage and sage. The planting of each crop is a year- round cycle; that assures residents with jobs and maintains the agricultural economy.

Washington County Public Schools are responsible for being the county's third major employer. There are approximately 2,400 students in five schools; a Pre-K school, a Pre-K-6th grade school, a 5th-8th grade school, a 7th-12th grade school and a 9th-12th school. Washington County schools provide over 424 jobs for their residents. County public schools give an economic boost for resident of Washington County.

Washington County has an ample supply of natural beauty, rich historical background and promising industry. If you're already a resident or just visiting, Washington County is sure to captivate

the hearts of everyone, who ventures its great land.