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ThrowBack | by Audrey T. Hingley, Contributing Writer

# Stuckey's Lives Again

Breathing new life into a roadside institution



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STUCKEY'S

**G**eorge Huckstep has nothing but fond memories when it comes to childhood road trips that included stops at Stuckey's in Virginia.

"Whenever we'd go to Virginia Beach, we had to go to Stuckey's. My mom used to get Stuckey's candy to keep us kids quiet," recalls Huckstep, who lives in Crozet with his wife Debbie.

**"What drew me back was a love of the brand and knowing what it could be."**

- Stephanie Stuckey



Recently returning home from a trip to Delaware, the Hucksteps noticed one of 16 billboards scattered along U.S. 13 on Virginia's Eastern Shore that beckons travelers to the Mappsville Stuckey's, 12 miles from the Maryland state line. The store is the lone, standalone, original Stuckey's remaining in Virginia.

The Hucksteps had to stop, and that's exactly what Stephanie Stuckey was hoping for. In 2019, the former attorney and Georgia state legislator sank her life savings into reviving the Stuckey's brand.

At its peak in the 1970s, Stuckey's boasted 368 stores nationwide. Now, it's down to about 70. As CEO, Stuckey is determined to regenerate a company founded more than 80 years ago as a satisfying diversion from the open road.

"What drew me back was a love of the brand and knowing what it could be," she says. "Part of it was pride and wanting to see the family legacy restored. This is my last career, my calling, my family. It took me awhile to pull off at the right exit; this is the exit I was meant to take."

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In the 1930s, Georgia pecan farmer W. S. Stuckey Sr. and wife Ethel opened a roadside stand in Eastman, a small town about an hour's drive from Macon, to sell part of their overflow crop to Florida-bound tourists heading south.

Ethel also made batches of what came to be known as Stuckey's famous pecan log roll candy. By 1937, the couple had opened a retail store in Eastman. They added a restaurant, souvenirs and fuel sales, and birthed a teal-roofed brand that became a must-stop on family excursions.

In 1965, the Stuckeys sold the business for \$12 million to Pet Milk, which promised an infusion of capital into the family-run business. IC Industries later acquired Pet Milk, and Stuckey's gradually fell off the map. W. S. Stuckey Jr., Stephanie's father and a member of Congress from 1967 to 1977, reacquired Stuckey's in 1985, but by that time it had dwindled to about 75 stores.

"After my grandfather sold the company, it experienced an incredible downfall. We lost hundreds of stores and went from roadside icons to roadside eyesores," Stephanie Stuckey says.

Right, W. S. Stuckey Sr. Far right, the last original Stuckey's store in Virginia is in Mappsville.





At left, Stuckey's CEO Stephanie Stuckey shows the company's line of treats.



"The humanity and personality [often leaves] when iconic brands get bought out; that happened to Stuckey's and I am trying to resurrect that. I'm bringing back the old logos and classic candies. I did a post about how I'm determined to bring the brand back and had 157,000 comments from just one post," she says.

## DESTINATION MAPPSVILLE

Today, Stuckey's maintains a store in Rhode Island that company vice president Jack Boucher says "has always done well," with its other operations stretching from Virginia to Florida, and west to Texas, Oklahoma and Missouri. Other Virginia Stuckey's locations include a store in Chesapeake and one in Ivor in Southampton County.

The Mappsville location was built in 1965 and envisioned as a stopping point for travelers coming to the Eastern Shore via the then-newly opened Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. Owners Carl Mintner and Frank Stuckey Jr. — Stephanie's great-uncle — sold the franchise to Katherine and Marinos Kalmoutis in 1997.

Originally from New Jersey, the Kalmoutis family moved to the Eastern Shore in 1980, operating the Sandpiper Restaurant until 1995 before selling it and buying Stuckey's.

"The original store had an apartment attached to it where a manager and his family lived," Katherine Kalmoutis recalls. "We repurposed that for a drink cooler and storage."

"Travelers tell us they've followed our billboards. They stop because it's a landmark," she adds. "They have good memories of Stuckey's and want to pass [the experience] along to their kids and grandkids."

Kalmoutis is thrilled that Stephanie Stuckey now heads the company, noting, "She's breathing fresh air into Stuckey's franchises. She has a lot of social media going on and it's exciting to see, and is making us even more optimistic."

In addition to travelers for whom Stuckey's is a destination, Kalmoutis says the store is also "a local hangout with loyal customers who eat and shop here."

The Mappsville store sells gasoline and includes an in-store



Above left, Katherine Kalmoutis, who bought the Mappsville Stuckey's franchise in 1997 with her husband, Marinos.

Above right, Jennifer Fletcher is an Eastern Shore native who has worked at the Mappsville Stuckey's for 31 years.

grill. It also offers Stuckey's candies and treats, unique souvenirs and gifts.

Open daily, the store's 10 employees include Eastern Shore native Jennifer Fletcher.

"I started working here at age 18 right out of high school, and I've been here 31 years," Fletcher says, joking that the Kalmoutises "inherited" her when they bought the store. "You see different people from all over here."

While still rural, the Eastern Shore served by A&N Electric Cooperative is also changing, with more people, more development and more traffic.

"There are more chain stores and a Walmart in Onley," Kalmoutis says. "But everybody wants to keep the Eastern Shore the way it is, with a quieter way of life."

## PANDEMIC PROBLEMS

Kalmoutis closed Stuckey's from March 19 to May 10 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining ownership made the decision because of a lack of knowledge about the virus.

"We were worried about our customers and employees first," she says. "When we reopened May 11, people were so happy to see us."

COVID-19 also affected Stephanie Stuckey's plans to visit every store.

She has dropped in at more than 50 locations and vows she'll call on the rest, following her late grandfather's example of constantly traveling and visiting stores.

Her plans include offering more pecan products, reacquiring sites her grandfather selected and expanding online. As people get out and enjoy traveling again, she hopes Stuckey's is part of their travels.

"My challenge is that a lot of our stores are fixer-uppers; I am working to turn that around," she says. "I think there's a tremendous nostalgia for road trips, and everyone loves a comeback kid. I think people are rooting for us." ■



Audrey T. Hingley is a Virginia-based freelance writer.