

# New Beginning for An Old Village

## Esmont In The 21st Century

By Patrick Healy.  
Correspondent

Once there was a little village, set in a beautiful corner of Albemarle County. This village thrived due to its industrious people, natural resources and, not least, a great transportation link which curved into the village, then out and away to the world's markets. Villagers prospered by holding good paying jobs, or by reaping the profits from the seemingly inexhaustible wealth they produced. For a while, the village bank was one of the richest in the Commonwealth. People looked out for one another, and filled the village shops, schools, and churches. But, in time, what had been bountiful turned deadly, and the main artery swept the village's wealth away, on its way out of town. Is this a story of some hypothetical Scottsville, absent its levy? Actually, it is a very real patch of Esmont's history, in the years following World War II. The next chapter tells of the younger villagers' moving away, and of the elderly's passing. The stores went the way of the bank, and were abandoned. Weeds and brambles reclaimed fields and road beds, and homes fell into disrepair. But the village remains, and its greatest resource, its people, are gearing up to make the place they love as pretty, and relevant, as it was in its heyday.

Peggy Purvis Denby was one who moved away; but she is back, and she has a plan. "When Don and I walked through town that first time, it just broke my heart," says Denby. For decades, Denby's family owned and ran the Purvis Store at the southern end of the village. "I was born in the back part of the store where we

lived." Don, is Don Jones, Peggy's husband. After retiring, they took to the road, traveling the blue highways, and enjoying the sights, sounds, and people of our vast nation. Once they settled back here, and took that first walk through the village, they both knew that trying to improve conditions in the village was something that Peggy just had to do. Veterans of a neighborhood improvement project back in Atlanta, they had a good notion of how to proceed. "First, you listen," says Don. "People will tell you what they want." Peggy points out the necessity of finding the people who can help accomplish the stated goals. "You have to get people involved."

Thus, was Friends of Esmont, Inc. born; a 501 (c) (3) corporation with the goal of "bringing the village back to life". Oh, what happened next! "The response was overwhelming," says Denby. "Just from word-of-mouth, we heard from people all over the area, and from all across the country." Soon the little non-profit had a functioning Board of Directors, a website, and was hosting well attended regular monthly meetings. Best of all, they had a plan. Denby credits our Town Administrator, Matt Lawless, with help in formulating the FoE Program Plan. "Our communities have been linked for generations. There is so much history to share," says Lawless, referring to Scottsville, and the nearby, unincorporated communities of Porters Precinct, Esmont, Chestnut Grove, and Alberene. Denby characterizes those communities as

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The Purvis Store, in the Village of Esmont. Photo by Patrick Healy

### Crossword

by Margie E. Burke

**ACROSS**

1 Fizzy drink

5 Toned down

10 5:1, e.g.

14 Large-scale

15 Join together

16 Medic or legal starter

17 Take it easy

18 Something to recycle

20 Completely surround

22 Back out (on)

23 Rudimentary seed

24 Net-surfer's stop

25 "War of the Worlds" star

27 James Garner title role

31 Like some criticism

32 On the wagon

33 Woman with a habit

34 One who raised Cain

35 "Grab \_\_\_\_!"

36 Bring on board

37 Newton fruit

38 "Humble" dwelling

39 Adorable sort

40 Period of unbridled activity

42 Day spa offering

43 Fail to mention

44 Winter wear

45 Radio noise

48 Guiding light

51 Free-market proponent

53 Scrabble draw

54 Furthermore

14

17

20

23

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31

34

37

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43

45

51

54

57

55 In need of a massage, maybe

56 Divisible by 2

57 "\_\_\_\_ there, done that"

58 Like a beaver

59 "It's a Wonderful Life" actress Donna

**DOWN**

1 Like the Sahara

2 Doing business

3 Talk out of

4 Protests, e.g.

5 Bodybuilder's goal

6 Quitter's cry

7 Bad thing to blow

8 Posting at JFK

9 Like the needy

10 First game of the season

11 Social outing

12 Type of race

13 After-Christmas event

19 Coin collector?

21 Football play

24 Fine fur

25 Like the needy

26 Diameter halves

27 Prone to sulking

28 Ambition

29 Vatican tribunal

30 Prepare to be dubbed

32 Young hog

35 Give up the throne

36 Shoddy goods seller

38 Fess up (to)

39 Be concerned

41 Skin soother

42 Hesitate

44 Outlaw chasers

45 Healing sign

46 Saga

47 Cathedral recess

48 Metallic sound

49 On the safe side, at sea

50 Tear

52 Pastoral setting

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The Past Is Not Forgotten: Retired Esmont Postmaster, Judy Brochia-Blake shows how she rang the St. Stephens Curch bell on Memorial Day to honor Esmont native, Frank Peragory, a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient killed in World War II. All photos by Patrick Healy.



The "Colored" School, in Chestnut Grove.

the "forgotten corner" of Albemarle County. The Plan's purpose is to make Esmont the "hub of activity" it once was, and thus a destination.

**The heart of the Program Plan is its Projects List. Those projects are:**

- 1). A Rails-to-Trails plan for the old Esmont-Alberene Quarry Line track bed. Long term plans could extend the trail to Schuyler to the west, and Warren to the east.
- 2). Duplicate the old rail depot, long since demolished. The new depot will serve as trailhead for hikers and cyclists. At some point, the trail and depot would be given to Albemarle County Department of Parks and Recreation.
- 3). Encourage, and aid in the restoration of historic homes.
- 4). Establish a Wildlife Refuge along Ballinger Creek. This would include restoration of low-lying wetlands, and construction of a boardwalk. The Refuge would serve educational and recreational needs, as well as the myriad critters sure to settle into a welcoming habitat.
- 5). Research and write a full history of the Esmont Village, and Communities.
- 6). Create easy access (i.e. parking, and gentle paths) to the Fulment Farm parcel north of Irish Road, and west of the Village of Esmont. This 200 acre parcel encompasses the old slate quarry, and will tie into both the rails-to-

trails, and Ballinger Creek projects.  
7). Restoration of Purvis Store, putting the old store back to work as a cafe/bistro, B&B, or tourist information and transportation center.

It's a challenging list. As we go to press, FoE received the disappointing news that their application for a rails-to-trails planning grant has been denied; not the hoped-for outcome, but par for the course in the non-profit business. The Friends will keep pushing on that issue, and participants at June's FoE meeting were both optimistic and enthusiastic. Community support is solid. Its main obstacles to goal completion are the eternal ones of money, access to property, and the marshalling of necessary skill sets, so Denby is focusing on the Depot as a priority. A period building, freshly painted and of recognized purpose, with its "Esmont" signs hanging off of each end, will build the brand. And the kid who grew up in that hub of community activity called Purvis Store knows that it is the attractive merchandise that will sell.

**Readers who are curious, interested, or have something to share should contact the Friends of Esmont. Their next meeting will be on Monday, July 15th, at 7:00 PM. The meeting will be held at St Stephens Episcopal Church in the Village of Esmont.**



Friends of Esmont Founders, Don Jones and Peggy Purvis Denby. Photo courtesy of Friends of Esmont.

## About Don & Peggy

Don and Peggy have long looked for the opportunity to finally "hang'em up and hit the road". They are both semi-retiring from their paid jobs and have replaced themselves in their many volunteer roles, and will begin living their dream. Don has spent many years as a health care professional which he will continue as they tour the country. His volunteering in a number of neighborhood organizations, particularly in public safety, will cease for the duration of RV living. Peggy, who also spent a number of years in the health care industry, finished up her work life as Executive Director of Keep Atlanta Beautiful and will continue to play a minor role with that organization for a while on the road. Public Safety and neighborhood advocacy were Peggy's volunteer passions and can be expected to resurface once she is back living in "stix and bricks."

With no previous knowledge of full timing, or being on the road, Don and Peggy did lots of research but have much to learn and are taking off with some amount of excitement, fear and trepidation!