



# Unison Preservation Society NEWSLETTER

*Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside*

*Dara Bailey photo.*

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• WINTER •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

## What's Next for the Unison Store?

*Dear Unison Neighbors and Friends,*

The basic idea behind the Unison Preservation Society (UPS) is simple. It is about protecting and preserving our rural community and promoting a sense of community within our neighborhood.

Over the years, we have tried to accomplish our mission in a variety of ways—through, for example, our annual Unison Heritage Day celebration on the village green (see page 3 of this newsletter), small art and yoga classes that take place weekly in the UPS community center, or fighting a developer's plan to build a 28-home subdivision almost on top of the village of Unison.

In 2015, we will turn our attention to the Unison store. A year and half ago, Dr. Betsee Parker generously gifted the old Unison store to UPS so that we could turn it into a community center. We have taken our time and tried to be thoughtful on how to do this. To begin with, we decided to give the businesses renting space in the building enough time for an orderly departure, which wasn't accomplished until the end of 2014. And we needed to consult with architects to come up with plans for converting the old store into a safe, public space.

All of this has taken a lot of time and work but our initial plans are almost complete. In the near future, we will be inviting all Unison area residents to a meeting to see what we are proposing for the store and to get your feedback on what you think we should be doing.

Your feedback is important. We want to make sure that whatever we do works for Unison.

While we plan to preserve the wonderful character of the old store building, it will need some modest remodeling to make it more functional and to meet current building codes. This will require funding and donations from our neighbors and friends. We already have set up

the Unison Store Endowment Fund and will be reaching out to residents of the Unison area with a capital campaign for making the necessary renovations.

Please join the conversation, participate in meetings, bring your good ideas and chip in what you can. This will be our top priority for 2015.

*- Harry Bigley, President, UPS*

## Historic Howardsville—Right Next Door

*By Kim Hart*

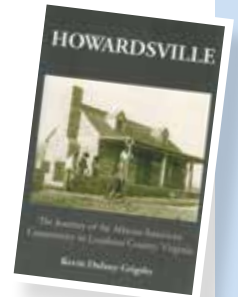
The collection of houses on Greengarden Road just east of Newstead Farm is officially known as Howardsville. It is one of the last communities in Loudoun County that was founded by freed slaves after the Civil War in which many of the homesteads still belong to the descendants of those freed slaves.

The history of Howardsville begins in 1861 when William and Mary Stephenson purchased a 28-acre woodlot from the landowners of what is now Newstead Farm. William Stephenson, born in Ireland, was a wealthy Upperville landowner who, according to the 1860 Census, owned \$20,000 in property in this area—a considerable holding at that time. His wife, Mary, owned another \$4,000 worth of land.

The 1860 Census also shows that Stephenson owned twenty-two slaves. The Census only lists the age, sex and race of these slaves: No names. There is one male slave on this list who may have

been Jacob Howard but that is unclear, as is exactly where Howard lived and worked. A diary kept by Elizabeth Carter, Stephenson's sister-in-law and owner of Oatlands Plantation in Leesburg, seems to indicate Howard was "loaned out" by Stephenson to Carter to work on her considerable landholdings.

Kevin Grigsby, author of *Howardsville: A Journey of an African American Community in Loudoun County, Virginia*<sup>1</sup>, has studied Carter's diary and her frequent references in it to Jacob Howard. According to Grigsby, Elizabeth Carter, a widow and one of the wealthiest citizens in Loudoun County prior to the Civil War, clearly considered Howard "a highly valuable worker." "One wonders if she played a role in helping him become a landowner<sup>2</sup>," Grigsby says. Whatever



# Almost Taxed Out of Howardsville Family Homestead

By Howard Lewis

Thomas Reid still lives on the land in Howardsville that his great grandfather purchased as a freed slave nearly 150 years ago at the end of the Civil War.

The fact that he's still there is something of a miracle since Loudoun County three years ago almost taxed him off this land and out of his house.

Reid's home, mostly a cabin built in the mid-1800s, has no indoor plumbing, needs a lot of repair work, and sits on a little over an acre of land that doesn't perc. Nonetheless, over the years, the County, without ever visiting the site, steadily raised the assessed value of property until it reached nearly \$230,000 in 2008. At this point, Reid's extended family, who had been helping out with paying the property taxes, gave up and stopped paying.

In the next few years, unpaid taxes and penalties rose to \$18,000. Reid, living on Social Security and doing part-time work, had no way to pay this bill. So, in November 2012, the County prepared to seize his property and literally sell it for back taxes on the Courthouse steps. A local foundation, Windy Hill, stepped in and made an emergency loan to Reid to save his home. Reid hasn't missed a monthly loan payment in two years.

The next part of this saga entailed trying to get the County to reassess Reid's property. Over nine months, Windy Hill helped Reid wend his way through a daunting bureaucracy. After mustering volunteer assistance of a lawyer, a surveyor, a soil scientist, and an engineer, not to mention an appearance before Loudoun's Board of Equalization, the assessed value of the Reid home and land was reduced to \$1,130 (not a typo).

So, Thomas Reid remains in his Howardsville home. He is still making regular payments on his loan. Making ends meet got harder this fall when Reid, who is 69, suffered a mild heart attack and had to cut back on his part-time work. But neighbors in the Unison area are now working to help him retire his remaining debt as well as to do some much-needed repairs on his house. ■



the case, in 1874, Jacob Howard, now a former slave, bought a small tract of land on the 28 acres that William and Mary Stephenson purchased in 1861.

Howard would become one of the first African-American landowners in Loudoun County. Eventually there would be 11 original property owners in Howardsville. Not surprisingly, many residents of Howardsville continued to work on the land and in the houses of the big farms and estates surrounding it. For the intervening 140 years, this community has hung on through the adversity of Reconstruction and the Jim Crow eras. Amazingly, all but one of the current residents of Howardsville can trace their ancestry directly back to one of the 11 original lot owners.

Howardsville was an example of the extraordinary growth of farm ownership among the African American community from the 1870s through the first decade of the 20th Century. Recognizing this important connection to the past, Howardsville has recently become eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places<sup>3</sup>.

People talk about something being "written in stone". This is certainly an apt description of the connection between the Howards and the Unison area. Many of the stonewalls and the stonework on the houses in the Unison area have been built and repaired by generations of Howards. Based on the diary of Elizabeth Carter, it is clear that Jacob Howard was a skilled carpenter and stonemason. Upon Jacob's death in 1916, his son, Bishop Sr., set up his own stone masonry business, which was passed on to his son, Bishop, Jr., and onto his son, Charles Howard, who still

lives and works in this area.

Howardsville today faces many challenges. Younger generations have moved on and the older generations face increasing problems in maintaining their properties. A key problem is that many of the woodland lots that William Stephenson subdivided and sold to the founders of Howardsville do not perc. This wasn't an issue for the original homes in Howardsville, which were served by outdoor privies. Now, because of modern sanitation regulations, many of the previously used lots in Howardsville have been rendered unbuildable. Out of 15 lots in Howardsville, there are only five functioning drain fields. Most of these are older, built between 1960 and 2000, and none have a reserve drain field. Unless addressed, sanitation issues could render Howardsville virtually uninhabitable within the current generation.

Fortunately, there is some good news on the horizon. The Board of Supervisors of Loudoun County has recognized the historic value of Howardsville and have set aside funds to install a waste water collection and treatment system in the next few years that will, once again, make most Howardsville lots habitable and buildable. There are many hurdles yet to go in such a complex undertaking but, at last, the future seems brighter for this historic neighborhood. ■

<sup>1</sup>Howardsville. *The Journey of An African-American Community in Loudoun County, Virginia* is available for sale at the Thomas Balch Library in Leesburg or directly from the author at books.kevin@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup>Buttressing his case, Grigsby notes that Carter's father-in-law, Robert Carter III (1727-1804), freed nearly 500 slaves during his lifetime, which may have been the largest manumission in the United States until President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

<sup>3</sup>Howardsville already is located in two historical districts—the Beverdam Historic Roadway District and the Unison Battlefield.



This stone wall, which is on a farm in the Unison area, was recently built by Charles Howard, a fourth generation stonemason, whose great grandfather was Jacob Howard.

# Unison Heritage Day Revisited

*Spectacular weather, terrific food and great music made the 11th Annual Unison Heritage Day one of the best ever to visit with friends and neighbors from the community. Here are just a few of the colorful memories from the October 25 event.*



*Where else but Unison? A motorcyclist passes a horse calmly pulling its passengers past the hubbub and festivities at Heritage Day.*



*Enjoying the BBQ and oyster lunch (above) while listening to the bluegrass sound from the Willow Branch band (right).*



*From left: Howard Lewis, Kim Hart and Jay Zeiler Jr. dream about the Spring fly fishing trip to Mossy Creek that was up for bid at the Heritage Day live auction. Zeiler's father won the trip.*



*"Oyster Man" Joe Tippets' harvest from Southern Maryland is a much relished yearly event.*



*Outgoing Unison Preservation Society Secretary Owen Snyder, left, receives a plaque from UPS President Harry Bigley honoring Snyder's seven years as secretary and ten years on the UPS Board. Andrea Brown looks on.*



*Margo Bigley, 2, shows off her batch of balloons.*



*Under the hood: Bidders check out the drivability of the vintage Rolls Royce. A chauffeured drive and champagne picnic lunch were a featured auction item.*



*Bidders at the popular Silent Auction.*



## Unison Preservation Society Newsletter

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### How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.



### Board of Directors

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### Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters. This includes not only stories, photographs, family histories and diaries of long past Unison residents but also what is happening in today's Unison. If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at [unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org](mailto:unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org).



### Newsletter Design:

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# New Threat to Conservation Easement

By Mitch Diamond and Howard Lewis

As this newsletter went to press, reports of a new threat to the conservation easement program, which already protects so much of the land in the Unison neighborhood, surfaced in news reports and individual conversations with our state representatives in Richmond. We thought it was important to call this to the attention of the neighborhood since it may have a decided impact on future decisions to put land into conservation easement. Land already in easement does not appear to be affected by these proposals.

Landowners who put their property into conservation easement permanently give up the development rights to that land in exchange for federal and state tax benefits for a certain number of years. In addition, giving up development rights results in lower property tax assessments, which, in turn, reduces property taxes. The Governor and some members of the Virginia legislature want to curb the income tax benefits at the state level associated with conservation easement.

Several factors are driving these initiatives in Richmond. First, redistricting has reduced the influence of rural legislators and increased the clout of those representing urban and suburban districts. Second, the formula for allocating state funds for school districts favors those with lower land values. So, the reduced value of land in easement can skew funding to rural districts with large amount of land in easement. And finally, as at the county level, the state faces significant budget pressures and is looking for any revenue it can get its hands on right now.

Proposals to change the conservation easement program are all over the lot. The Governor wants to maintain the current \$100 million cap on the program but reduce the size of tax benefits to individuals. Others want to



**Above:** Green areas on this map of Unison indicate land in conservation easement.

cut the annual cap. And some are proposing to have easements lapse after a set amount of time. How all of this stew of different ideas will sort themselves out over the coming months is still very much up in the air, but we want to call this matter to the neighborhood's attention. The Unison Preservation Society will watch all of this very closely and report back as warranted.

What seems to be lost in these proposals is that protection of rural land **1)** benefits rural businesses, recreation, tourism and agriculture, which are important drivers for both the Loudoun and Virginia economies, and **2)** saves public funds because the costs of providing infrastructure and services to rural land is less than the tax revenues generated by this land. Thus, protecting rural and open land creates revenues and leaves more money in the treasury for residential areas.

Residents in the Unison area who are concerned about this issue should contact our State Sen., Jill Vogel, and our House Dels., Randy Minchew and Mike Webert, as well as Gov. Terry McAuliffe. All can be reached by email, phone or regular mail through their official Web sites. ■

Unison Preservation Society

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