BLEMONT PHOTOS: WIB MIDDLETON

BLUEMONT: A World Apart

BY PETER WEEKS

As I approach the Blue Ridge Mountains from eastern Loudoun County on busy Route 7, I'm barreling down the highway with commuter traffic until I begin the slow climb up towards Snickers Gap.

Turning left onto Clayton Hall Road and descending around a sharp corner, it feels like I am entering another world—a world more tranquil and welcoming than the one I left behind. And then I see the sign: "Welcome to Bluemont." My shoulders relax and the feeling of coming back home fills me every time.

Bluemont, a tiny hamlet nestled under the Blue Ridge, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One of its founding fathers, William Clayton, built a stone mansion in 1797 that I pass by on my right when I reach the intersection of Clayton Hall Road and Snickersville Turnpike.

It's not just its history that harkens back to the earliest settlements in Virginia, but the character of the people who have inhabited the village over generations: friendly, self-reliant, ready to lend a hand to a neighbor. A bit of Mayberry with real-life Andy's, Opie's, and Aunt Bee's.

Across the street from this intersection, the wood-clapboarded Bluemont General Store stands sentry, shaded by an ancient oak tree. The store has been a mercantile landmark since 1846. Passing through its entrance door evokes simpler times when greetings and a warm smile marked familiarity. Shelves of canned goods saddle up to, well, saddles, beside coolers of ready-to-scoop ice cream, bottled (!) milk, fresh farm eggs, and pies.

Above: The Bluemont General Store, 1846; opposite page E. E. Lake Store, 1901, and the Bluemont United Methodist Church, 1851.

More on the ancient oak: Bluemont was honored this year by the Arbor Day Foundation as a "Tree City USA" in recognition of its commitment to maintain and expand her tree canopy.

Proceeding along the Turnpike, the homes that line the street are handsome and cared for, with wide porches for visitors

Early photographs show horses and wagons on hard-packed dirt (or mud) roads. It wouldn't be until the 1930s that Snickersville Turnpike was paved.

More on Snickersville Turnpike: The first toll road in America (admittedly a bad precedent), it was an important passage for over four centuries to deliver goods from the port of Alexandria, for early pioneers heading westward, and for the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War.

Just a block down the Turnpike stands the E.E. Lake Store which decades earlier provided agricultural supplies to surrounding farms. Bluemont has been primarily an agricultural community during its existence, the fertile soils of the Piedmont producing corn, wheat, and grazing land for cattle (both beef and dairy). The store boasts being the only general store in Virginia still in its original condition. The wood counters, shelves, and two large display bay windows appear as they did over one hundred years earlier. Fittingly, it is now home Sundays to the Bluemont Farmers Market.

In an adjacent section of the Lake Store, formerly the old post office, the Plaster Museum of Bluemont Heritage has opened. Honoring the Plaster family who have played a prominent role in Bluemont for generations, the museum preserves historical artifacts and records in an online archive. Following the success of its Civil War exhibition last year, this year's theme is "Education in Snickersville/Bluemont in the 19th & 20th Century." Open Sundays.

Upstairs, the original dance hall and platform stage says something about village life: they knew how to let their hair down! Tiny Bluemont had not one, but two dance halls, the other in a building across the street.

At the same corner intersection is Railroad Street, named for an event that literally transformed the village: the day the trains came to Snickersville/Bluemont, July 4, 1900.

More on Snickersville: Bluemont before 1900 was called Snickersville after Edward Snickers who ran a ferry across the Shenandoah and other commercial activities. Well, the railroad had expressed interest in extending the train route that already ran from Washington to Round Hill. To further entice railroad officials, some villagers thought a name-change and a bit of cash would seal the deal, and "Bluemont" sounded just right. And so the resort era began as visitors left steamy, hot Washington seeking the cool breezes on the Blue Ridge.

Elegant hotels and modest boarding houses opened their doors to the influx of tourists who were met at the station with horse and buggy to their lodgings and excursions out into the country. Alas, the railroad and the resort era, and the prosperity it brought, passed in 1938 with the popularity of automobile travel.

A short distance past Railroad Street on the Turnpike is the old stone United Methodist Church that was erected in 1851 and, across the street, the Bluemont School in 1921 (the present Community Center). A total of five schools, public and private, have educated children at various locations in the village since the early 1800's.

Bucolic vistas begin to open up as I continue south on the

Turnpike and to my left is Plaster's Field, which every September becomes a field of cars bringing people to the renowned Bluemont Fair. The 51st Bluemont Fair was postponed to 2021 because of the pandemic. The Fair draws thousands of visitors who delight in its old-fashioned country fair atmosphere: music, food, pony rides, artisanal crafts, children's games, and much more.

Nearby, Great Country Farms, the Bluemont Vineyard, and Dirt Farm Brewery are popular destinations, particularly on weekends. The idea of reverting to a Turnpike toll road to fill village coffers briefly crosses my mind.

Further along the Turnpike, heading south towards Philomont, stone walls and post and rail fences frame wide stretches of open pastures. Miles and miles of unpaved roads branch out deeper into the area surrounding Bluemont. Unchanged over the centuries, some brought farmer's crops to mills, while others traced Indian hunting trails.

Life now in Bluemont has come full circle. The boom and bust of the resort era has been replaced by steadier commerce, mostly agriculturally based: vineyards, cideries, and craft breweries alongside thriving equestrian and cattle businesses. The challenge for Bluemont will be to retain its sweetness and pastoral views well into the 21st century and beyond.

Peter Weeks lives on the Blue Ridge overlooking Bluemont. He is President of the Bluemont Citizens Association and President of Friends of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

UNISON: Claiming Its Heritage

BY MITCH DIAMOND

Unison, the southernmost of Loudoun's Quaker villages, is located in southwestern Loudoun, between the towns of Middleburg and Round Hill. The village is surrounded by open fields, woods, horse and cattle farms and historic farm houses with views of the Blue Ridge visible from its tree-lined unpaved roads.

The village was settled in about 1740 by Quakers who had migrated down from Pennsylvania, via Maryland and across the Potomac to the fertile farmlands of Northern Virginia. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, after the Revolutionary War, the village became a local center for Methodists. Unison (then called Union) grew rapidly as the County's agricultural economy blossomed. In 1813 the village of Union was officially established by the General Assembly of Virginia, and in 1817 it changed its name to Unison as another Virginia village called Union had a prior claim.

Unison became an important center in its area of Loudoun County with schools, hotels, taverns, homes and numerous businesses and a fine two-story brick Methodist church built in 1832 by enslaved workers under the direction of William Benton, Loudoun's foremost architect.

In 1862, in the second year of the Civil War, Union and Confederate troops fought through the streets of the village as the huge Federal Army of the Potomac tried to cut off the Army of Northern Virginia from its sources of supply in Richmond after the terrible battle at Antietam. Loudoun's church became a Federal field hospital while a home across the road served the Confederate wounded.

Following the war, the village entered a long period of quiet stability. Through the middle of the 20th century, Unison maintained itself as a viable village with its own churches, general store, a famous saddle shop, and even a baseball team that played in the Loudoun baseball leagues. But, by the 1980s the town was in decline, too far away from the new highways that now carried the bulk of Loudoun's commerce and population.

By the 1990s the town had become little more than a sleepy residential enclave with only 50 permanent residents and 14 or so houses. The last retail enterprise, The Unison Store, a general store that had been in continuous operation since 1880, closed in August 1996.

In 2001 a local group of residents formed a 501(c)3 nonprofit group, incorporated as "The Unison Preservation Society," with their stated goal to help protect