



Urbanna – A Gem Which Needs Some Polishing

She's tiny. She's very old. She's charming. She is much-loved. She started life in industry and then moved on to agriculture. Now, she loves visitors... tens of thousands of them every year... but she could use a bit of TLC.

Who is she?

She's the Town of Urbanna, situated in a bend on the (nearly) pristine Rappahannock River, about twelve nautical miles inland from the Chesapeake Bay in Tidewater Virginia. On July 17th, 1608, Captain John Smith (Yes! That one!) was stung by a stingray near the mouth of the river, but survived and ate that same stingray for dinner! Urbanna, the "City of Anne", was founded in 1680. At that time, Urbanna served as a port where hogsheads of tobacco from the colonies were loaded onto sailing ships for the journey to market in England. The Scottish Factor Store (1763), the Customs House (1758) and the famous Mitchell Map (1755) remain to remind us of those times so long ago.

Around the time of the Civil War, Urbanna evolved to become a hub for the commercial oyster industry. Chesapeake Bay Buy Boats, some of which remain today, served as sales points for the oystermen's bountiful harvests. By the 1960s, over-fishing, habitat degradation, and diseases had decimated the oyster population; however, scientific intervention, bed management and innovative seeding and farming techniques have revitalized the industry. Oysters are the stars, but blue crabs and numerous species of fish remain plentiful.

Today, the citizens of Urbanna, a town of around 500 souls, and surrounding residents, both year-round and summer, "born heres" and "come heres", share a downtown area of about four-square miles packed with delight. Her main streets, Watling, Cross and Virginia, run less than a mile in total (and there is nary a stoplight). History lives on in this national historic district in the Urbanna Baptist Church (1888), the Old Courthouse (1745), Lansdowne (1740) and many others. For the more modern-minded, she also boasts a pharmacy (with a soda fountain!), a grocery store, a liquor store, shops, galleries, a hotel, bed and breakfasts and a variety of restaurants and other amenities.

Urbanna's picturesque harbor serves as a stop-over for pleasure boaters traversing the Bay, "local" sailors seeking a quaint weekend getaway as well as a quiet, protected creek for kayakers and paddleboarders. Osprey and Great Blue Heron abound. Visitors by water find a selection of marinas, a gas dock, a pump out station, boat launch and most anything else they would need at the waterfront. They particularly enjoy the short walk to town where they can relax, eat, drink, shop and/or just take a stroll through Urbanna's rich history, taking advantage of the new Virtual Museum Walking Tour.

Urbanna is conveniently located between the Washington, D.C. area (about 2 ½ hours away), Richmond (about 1 ½ hour away) and Hampton Roads (also about 1 ½ hour away), making the trip easy and the visitor pool plentiful. Local volunteers stay busy year-round planning and executing events to attract them. The Chili Cook-off starts the year off in February followed by Farmers Markets each month from May through September. The intoxicating Cocktail Class Wooden Boat races can be found in the harbor in late May and then Arts in the Middle, a beautiful event located at historic Hewick, kicks off right after that. Scattered throughout the summer are the "Music under the Stars" outdoor concerts. The 63rd Annual Urbanna Oyster Festival, the official Virginia State Oyster Festival, is held the first weekend in November and attracts ... get this ... 50,000 to 70,000 visitors over a two-day period! The year ends with a town magically transformed for Christmas and the special events of the season, including the Christmas parade, the Open House Tour, a fashion show and a pet parade.

It is impossible to convey with these words, five photographs and a short video the charm and beauty of Urbanna as well as the opportunities to “refresh” some of the older buildings. Additional color and information may be found at <https://urbanna.com/index.php>, hosted by the Urbanna Business Association, while <https://urbanna.com/pages/urbanna-walking-tour.php> does just what it says: it takes you on a walking tour of some of Urbanna’s “must see” sites. Some of the shop-fronts and homes have become a bit faded over time. There are spots that are just ripe for a cute little Town Park. Street lamps and an appropriate theme for paint colors and awnings might be nice additions. A map is included as one of our photos to give you the lay of the land. Four photos of needed “makeovers” are included but there are many more. Some have been identified and we know that you will come with ideas of your own. Our video is narrated by our local historian and author, Larry Chowning, who grew up here, and is intended to give you a flavor for who we are, what’s great now and what could be even better with some creativity, love and attention. A visit to Urbanna would be worth your while to truly absorb her enduring magic.

She has a lot to offer for one so old and small. She’s a rare gem who could use a bit of polishing. Will you make her sparkle?