

WHERE WE LIVE

HOMES FOR SALE

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Dukeharts Creek provides a buffer zone between Glenn Gass's house and the Potomac. His wife's ancestors were among the first English settlers in the state.

In Colton's Point, Celebrating Md.'s Earliest History

By ANN CAMERON SIEGAL
Special to The Washington Post

Family lore and state history take center stage in Colton's Point, a tiny waterside community at the end of Route 242 in St. Mary's County.

Glenn Gass, 56, jokes that his ancestors were relative newcomers, arriving from Germany in 1860 to make their living as merchants and watermen. With a multitude of cousins and uncles still living in Colton's Point, Gass family reunions are weekly events.

It's his wife's ancestors, the Cheselidnes, who were the real old-timers. They arrived on the Ark and the Dove in 1634, when those two small ships landed at St. Clement's Island, just off the point, bringing the first English settlers to Maryland.

Getting to Colton's Point is far simpler today. Picturesque, two-lane country roads wind past long-established Southern Maryland farms and the occasional roadside produce stand. Upon entering the community, life's pace slows with the speed limit. The only rapid activity is that of cottontails dart-

ing across your path.

"Four cars out here is a traffic jam," said Sharon Farley, who moved to Colton's Point seven years ago from Silver Spring.

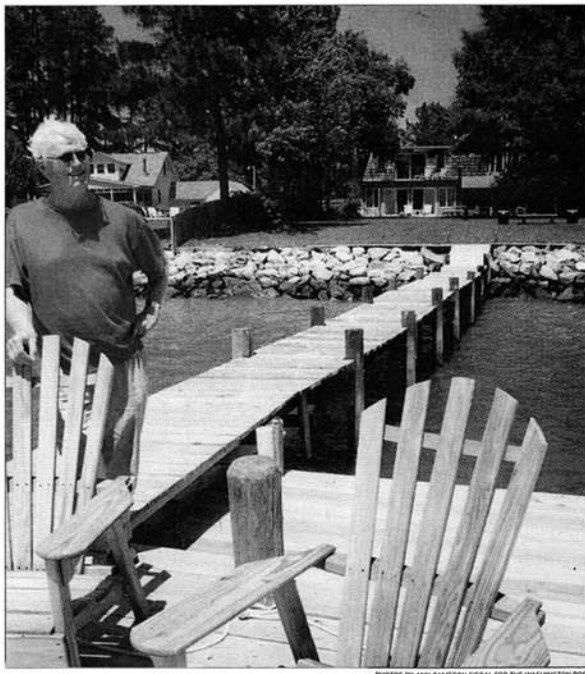
Farley, who runs an online bookstore, fell in love with an old house on St. Patrick's Creek. "It was fate," she said — her husband's family is Irish.

Although she is what locals call an "incomer," Farley found that blending into a community of large extended families was not difficult. "Where people are scarce, they're more valuable," she said.

Farley quickly adapted to a lifestyle far different than the one she left behind. "I asked the guy who cuts the grass what to do about a groundhog problem," she said. She was surprised when he answered, "Are you a good shot?"

In Colton's Point, almost every path leads to the water, so children become boating experts long before they get driver's licenses. Their watercraft are more likely to be kayaks and jet skis, though, rather than the flat-bottomed skiffs of their parents' youth.

Former marina owner Bob Kopel, 73, said of his teen years: "The creeks were so full of



Ray Hiebert and his wife spent weekends at Colton's Point for 15 years. Now they live here.

seaweed you could scuff up soft-shell crabs with bare feet dangling from the boat. You had to watch out for the snapping turtles, though."

The origin of the community's name is an unverified local legend. R. Johnson Colton, the first postmaster, is said to have won the acreage in a poker game in the 1800s.

John Colton, vice president of government affairs for the Maryland Forests Association and R. Johnson Colton's great-grandson, said it's possible. "I come from a family of card players," he said. A generation later, his grandfather supposedly won a house in nearby Clements the same way.

Colton Point's street signs immortalize former and current residents. There's Ed

Brown Road, Richard Wilson Lane and Dave Bailey Road. When Hilda Beach found a house along Beach Road in 1975, she recalled, she threw her hands up and exclaimed, "I've got my own road!"

The post office, first established "up the road" in 1878, opened in its present location in 1936. It's about the only business in the village, aside from a somewhat dingy convenience store with a bar next door and two marinas nearby.

Residents don't stop by just to drop off mail. They often bring treats to share and then linger to tell stories or discuss local news. With a steady stream of customers

See COLTON'S POINT, G2, Col. 1

COLTON'S POINT



BY GENE THORN
THE WASHINGTON POST

BOUNDARIES: Zip code 20626 boundaries, at the southern end of Maryland Route 242.

SCHOOLS: Dynard Elementary, Leonardtown Middle and Chopticon High schools.

HOME SALES: In the past 12 months, three houses have sold at prices from \$110,000 to \$649,000, according to Juliet Brown of Jobin Realty. One house is under contract, listed at \$125,000. Three houses are on the market at prices from \$425,000 to \$1.2 million.

WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE: Post office, St. Clement's Island-Potomac River Museum, numerous creeks, small sandy beach.

WITHIN 30 MINUTES BY CAR: Leonardtown, hospital, library, shopping.

WITHIN AN HOUR BY CAR: Lexington Park, Patuxent River Naval Air Station, historic St. Mary's City and St. Mary's College of Maryland, Solomons Island.

State History Takes Center Stage in Waterfront Town

COLTON'S POINT, From G1

neither goodies nor tidbits of information stay shelved very long.

Donna Byrd, the community's postmaster, moved her family to Colton's Point 15 years ago from Fort Washington, taking small jobs in the area to get to know people. After a year as the postmaster's relief, she was offered the job full time.

"Living here is like being at the end of the world — happily," she said.

New development in Colton's Point is severely limited because of the Chesapeake Bay's critical area regulations. The distance from shorelines and the amount of impervious surfaces are strictly monitored. Older structures were grandfathered in.

The pride of the community is the St. Clement's Island-Potomac River Museum, which offers an extensive look at Maryland's early history and sponsors festivals throughout the year.

Seasonal weekend water taxis shuttle visitors from the museum to the 40-acre island — one-half mile off shore and dominated by a 40-foot commemorative white cross — so they can walk in the footsteps of Maryland's founders on land where the first Catholic Mass was held in the English-speaking colonies.

Now a state park and federal nature preserve, the island is only one-tenth the size it was in Colonial days. For a while, it seemed as if St. Clement's Island would disappear com-

pletely, but in 1968, Maryland's 7th District Optimist club initiated the annual Blessing of the Fleet ceremony there. They now work with the St. Clement's Hundred, a local preservation society, to protect the island.

Today, osprey nest boxes, interpretive signs, nature paths and thousands of black-eyed Susan plants draw visitors. Plans are underway to rebuild the Blackstone lighthouse, which served as a navigational aid from 1851 to 1932 and was de-

stroyed by fire in 1956. Hurricane Isabel in 2003 uncovered part of the structure's foundation.

Sheila Gibbons Hiebert, president of the Friends of St. Clement's Island and Piney Point Museums, and her husband, Ray, were enticed to make the 90-minute trek from Washington to Colton's Point 18 years ago by a three-line newspaper ad.

Weekenders for 15 years, they have now settled into full-time mode, but they still make frequent trips to the District to attend the theater.

On each trip north, they take a bit of Colton's Point with them — the drinking water. "We have fantastic

water here," said Ray Hiebert, referring to well water drawn from an aquifer that he said runs about 800 feet deep.

As he stood on his dock, gazing at a peaceful river scene, Hiebert, former dean of journalism at the University of Maryland, said, "I can see a time coming when we won't go back."

The annual Potomac Jazz and Seaford Festival will be held 4-10 p.m. today at the St. Clement's Island-Potomac River Museum, 38370 Point Bridge Rd., Colton's Point, Md. Call 301-769-2222 for information.