



*Unison Preservation Society*

# NEWSLETTER

*Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Village and Countryside*

VOL. 10 • NO. 3 • 2023

• FALL •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

## Unison Under Threat—Then & Now

*By Jennifer Don and Howard Lewis*

### Then

In 2007, the Virginia Supreme Court overturned Loudoun County’s 50-acre zoning, which governed development at that time in the southwest corner of the County. Zoning around Unison immediately returned to three acres. On the day of the Court’s decision, a bidding war broke out among developers for a 90-acre parcel of land just to the west of Unison called Bloomfield Heights.

The developer who won proposed building a subdivision of 27 homes on this parcel. To say that Unison Preservation Society (UPS) sprang into action is an understatement. While the developer had a by-right to build on the property, UPS nonetheless challenged every aspect of this proposed subdivision. And there were lots of things to challenge—the use of non-conventional septic systems, the impact of the subdivision wells on neighboring wells, the destruction of historic stone walls along Bloomfield and Furr Roads, the line of sight for driveways entering these two roads, the impact of the subdivision plans on wetlands and whether that required review by the Army Corps of Engineers.

The list was an extensive one. We designated teams of three to four Unison residents to look into each issue and report back to a coordinating group. At the same time, UPS leaders met with every single member of the Loudoun Board of Supervisors as well as repeatedly with the Supervisor representing us at the time, Jim Burton. Long story short, the so-called Battle of

Bloomfield Heights went on for over a year, but eventually UPS won. Aided by the good offices of the late Doug Kemmerer and Vern Hosta, the property was bought by a former Unison resident and put into conservation easement. While all of this was going on, UPS was also deeply involved in the effort that led to the current 40-acre zoning in our neighborhood as well as leading a successful effort to rein in the use of non-conventional septic systems, which incidentally, at the developers’ behest, was overturned by the Virginia legislature in Richmond a few years later.

We are recounting this bit of history to remind everyone that UPS has had experience dealing with threats to this area’s rural character. Twenty-seven houses packed onto Bloomfield Heights would have certainly changed that. At the end of the fight, one Loudoun County Supervisor, who didn’t support our efforts, likened the UPS victory to the “mouse that roared.”

### Now

Development pressure certainly has been increasing in and around the Unison area over the past several years evidenced, for example, by a major subdivision proposal in nearby St. Louis, which UPS joined with other conservation groups in opposing, a 12-house subdivision proposal within the last year for a farm on Quaker Lane and the recent purchase by a developer of a nearly 60-acre parcel of land only a half-mile from the center of the village.

After a lot of negotiation over the last few

months, the developer on Quaker Lane agreed to sell the property to neighbors, with the land going into conservation easement, a move everyone in the community should applaud. While these negotiations were still underway, and there appeared to be a serious threat of cluster housing being built on this property, UPS, at considerable expense, prepared a Plan B in case things didn’t work out. This involved hiring lawyers and other experts, to make sure that every county, state and federal law and regulation would be followed. Also, while wells were being

## Join the Fight!

Please join the fight to save Unison with a contribution to the **Unison Preservation Defense Fund**. Contributions designated for this Fund will be used to fight encroaching development and help reach our goal of **\$150,000**. You can donate by scanning the QR code.



You can also visit our website ([unisonpreservation.org](http://unisonpreservation.org)) to learn more about how to contribute. If you would like to send a check please mail to **Unison Preservation Society, PO Box 606, Middleburg, VA 20118.**

**Thank you for your support!**

drilled on the proposed subdivision property, UPS hired an expert to monitor how this drilling might affect wells on neighboring properties. And, we helped generate over 20 neighborhood comments to the County expressing our concerns about the impact of the subdivision plans on the rural character of our community.

It is important to stop here for a second and take a closer look at cluster housing, which was part of the Quaker Lane subdivision proposal. Loudoun County permits cluster housing, which allows a developer to increase the number of houses on a lot beyond what would normally be allowed under 40-acre zoning if 70 percent of the land in a cluster housing subdivision is set aside. That's a very simple explanation of an extremely complicated subject that we don't need to go into detail here. Basically, if you hear the phrase, think: more houses. This is a really important point to keep in mind as we look at the possibility of more development around Unison, especially since several large farms in this area may change hands over the next year or so.

In regard to the 60-acre property half a mile from Unison, the developer, in a meeting with a several Unison residents, said that he plans to build only three houses on the property, which is allowed under an easement on this property that was set up in 1992. The easement is owned by Loudoun County. Permits to drill three wells have already been issued, but detailed plans for the subdivision have not yet been submitted to the County. UPS will be watching this situation closely and deciding how to respond when these plans are submitted.

### Next Steps

So, what should be the UPS response to increasing development pressure over the coming years? While we welcome the opportunity to discuss with anyone how to maintain the rural character of our village and the surrounding countryside, we think it prudent to take the following measures to help achieve this goal.



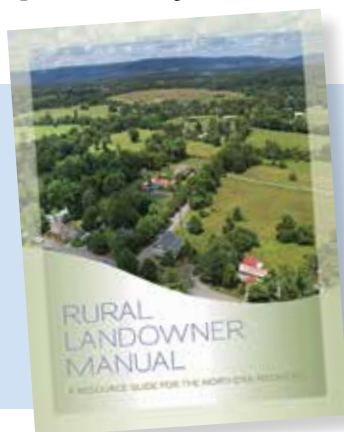
• **Preservation Defense Fund:** We have set up a defense fund to make sure we have a seat at the table, so to speak, about what sort of development is taking place in our community. In some cases, a developer may be able to build by-right, but we want to ensure that every county, state and federal statute and regulation is followed. This can involve hiring lawyers, soil scientists, hydrogeologists, wetland experts, and even historians when the property falls within the Unison Battlefield district—the steps we took in winning the battle of Bloomfield Heights as well as preparing for Plan B on the Quaker Lane subdivision.

A neighborhood association, with the necessary resources at its disposal to do the job, is better equipped to ensure we have a seat at the table than leaving it up to individual landowners who don't have the expertise or resources to deal with the complex laws and regulations governing development. UPS, in fact, was set up in 2001 to do exactly this—coordinate the efforts of the neighborhood to save the Unison Store, which was slated to be torn down. The Store is a great community asset but it cost a lot of money to save it back in 2001 and it will cost even more today to ensure that we continue to protect the rural character of this area, which is why we need support from a broad cross section of the Unison community.

• **Historic District:** While Unison has been recognized as a historic site at both the federal and state levels, neither of these designations provide any real protection for preserving the essential elements of what makes the village and the surrounding countryside historic. A historic designation for Unison at the county level, however, would provide a

legal tool to help preserve our historic homes, gravel roads, stone walls, view sheds and countryside that make this area so unique. This has worked in other parts of Loudoun County and is the reason why UPS thinks it is critical for protecting our community. We have already started the application process to designate a historic district that would include the village and nearly 3,000 acres of surrounding countryside. The only thing necessary to finalize our application for submission to the County for approval is a substantial show of community support, which is something UPS will be working on over the coming months.

• **Conservation Easement:** From the first UPS newsletter published in 2013 to the one published this past spring, we have consistently emphasized the importance of conservation easement as the best means for protecting our neighborhood. And, as noted in last spring's newsletter, we have seen progress on this front. Today, 22 percent of Loudoun County's 520 square miles is in conservation easement compared to 15 percent ten years ago. Most of this land is in the southwest corner of the County, with Unison sitting more or less in the middle. We've also seen progress in the Unison neighborhood itself but there is still a lot of land around here that isn't in easement. The decision to place property in conservation easement, of course, is a very personal one involving a lot of moving parts, but in the end, conservation easement is probably the only way to keep this place from turning into another Great Falls, Virginia. Nothing wrong with Great Falls. But try fox hunting there these days or going for a trail ride over open land or riding your bike on a back country road. ■



## A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

The image on the left is the cover of the recently released *Rural Landowner Manual*, which is a guide to help landowners in this area manage their properties and to find resources to help them in this task. Look at the photo closely. That's the village of Unison! If there is any truth to the saying that "a picture is worth a thousand words", this picture probably says it all in regard to what we're trying to do at UPS to preserve the rural character of our community. Copies of the manual can be downloaded from the Piedmont Heritage Area Association's website: [www.piedmontheritage.org](http://www.piedmontheritage.org). Hard copies of the report are also available.



# UNISON. HERITAGE DAY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2023



1. Old-time music by Hazel Raven Band.
2. Heritage Day is not just for adults.
3. Neighbors having a good time on a glorious Fall day.
4. Long time Unison residents Harry Bigley (l) and Kim Hart (r).
5. Philomont firefighters made their annual visit.
6. Silent auction items filled the inside of the old Unison Store.
7. Whitney Steve signals higher bid at Live Auction.
8. Howard Lewis (left) receives Unison Preservation Society 2023 Award from Jamie Steve (right).
9. David and Mary Ann Bell asking people to check their information on UPS mailing list.
10. Piedmont Fox Hounds make their usual Heritage Day appearance.
11. Joe "the Oyster Man" Tippett.
12. Joan Gardiner's honey stand with Shayla Reid and Ketsia Nyamuhindu.





## Unison Preservation Society Newsletter

Published by

The Unison Preservation Society  
P.O. Box 606  
Middleburg, VA 20118  
unisonnewsletter22@gmail.com  
<https://www.unisonpreservation.org/>

### Board of Directors

Jennifer Don, *President*  
Maria Eldredge, *Secretary*  
Roger LaRouche, *Treasurer*

Ron Blankenship  
Aubrey Hall  
Ryan Michels  
Gillian Sims  
Jamie Steve  
Chris Townsend  
Jeff Van Allen  
John Woulfe

### Advisory Board

Tim Bates  
Harry Bigley  
Steven Chase  
Jane Covington  
Julie Diehl  
Susan Ferster  
Kim Hart  
Caroline Helmy  
Robin-Eve Jasper  
Howard Lewis  
Tobin McGregor  
Gordon McKinley  
Zach Roszel  
Owen Snyder  
Linda Stuntz

### 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.

### Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters.

If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at

[unisonnewsletter22@gmail.com](mailto:unisonnewsletter22@gmail.com)



Follow Us!

### Newsletter Design:

Dara Bailey Design • Bluemont, VA  
[darabaileydesign@gmail.com](mailto:darabaileydesign@gmail.com)

Unison Preservation Society

P.O. Box 606

Middleburg, VA 20118

Non-Profit  
Organization  
U.S. Postage Paid  
Mr. Print  
Purcellville, VA  
20132

# Unison Heritage Day *By Bob Pettit*

An enthusiastic crowd of more than 200 gathered at the Unison Store to celebrate this year's Unison Heritage Day on November 4—almost exactly 201 years to the day after the Battle of Unison, which of course is part of the village's heritage. The battle took place between October 31 - November 2, 1862, in the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam a few weeks earlier.

The celebration also serves as a major fundraiser for the Unison Preservation Society, and this year's event raised nearly \$24,000 for UPS to help with the work of protecting and preserving the historic village of Unison and surrounding countryside. The money is raised from ticket sales, sponsorships and silent and live auctions. "This year Unison celebrated another great Heritage Day," UPS President Jennifer Don said. "The money we earn at this event is important, but what is way more important is the neighborhood getting together to have fun."

The fun was assisted by the traditional Heritage Day oysters-and-barbecue lunch, catered by Monk's BBQ of Purcellville, and Joe "the Oyster Man" Tippet. Desserts were provided by the Unison Methodist Church, with wine from Slater Run Vineyard of Upperville. And "high, lonesome" bluegrass was provided by Hazel Raven, a three-woman, Baltimore-based band "in the sister bluegrass tradition."

One high point of this year's event was the presentation of the second-annual Unison Preservation Award to Howard Lewis of Lazy Dog Farm for his commitment to conservation easement, restoration of grassland bird habitat, and for producing the UPS newsletter over the last ten years.

And, as always, the silent and live auctions were highlights. The highest bids went for a load of 18 tons of gravel—always needed by neighboring farms—and a Winter Comfort dinner for 12. Other popular items included a ride to school in a fire truck, donated by the Philomont Volunteer

Fire Department, a weekend at Deep Creek Lake, a Nats baseball outing and a guided fly fishing trip.

Unison's own Joan Gardiner, noted artist and apiologist, also offered artisanal Unison Honey and related items for sale, and the Land Trust of Virginia had a booth to provide landowners with information about how to permanently protect their properties through conservation easements.

In fact, one theme of this year's celebration was to raise awareness in the community about encroaching development—and to raise additional funds to protect Unison and the surrounding area. Heritage Day "was an opportunity to make people aware of the development threats to the Unison neighborhood," UPS President Jennifer Don said, "and thanks to a generous neighbor who put up matching funds, we are on our way to achieving our goal for the Preservation Defense Fund." As a result of Heritage Day and other efforts, the fund has raised nearly \$20,000. ■

## Cars and Cappuccino



The Mille Miglia is a car race that takes place in Italy every year. Some racing aficionados consider it to be the most beautiful car race in the world. On the Saturday morning of Heritage Day, about 25 classic cars participating in this year's Mille Miglia Warm-Up USA stopped in Unison for cars and cappuccino.

## Would You Like to Stay Informed?

If you would like to learn more about what the Unison Preservation Society is doing for you, please make sure you are on our mail and email lists so you don't miss any important announcements and special events in and around Unison. Contact us at [events@unisonpreservation.org](mailto:events@unisonpreservation.org). We would love to hear from you!