PROFILE: LANC suen COUNTY, PA

Rural landscapes and bounteous farms are everyday pleasures for urbanites who savor a more relaxed pace alongside the largest Amish community in the U.S.

> BY CANDYCE H. STAPEN

ANY A PENNSYLVANIA SOUVENIR PRINT CAPTURES a landscape of cornfields, cows in pastures, and plows pulled by teams of draft horses handled by farmers with long, black beards, straw hats and suspenders. In Lancaster County, that country scene is not mere nostalgia, but rather a snapshot of daily life so current that you could post it on Instagram.

In the south-central section of the state, Lancaster County beats as the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, a region populated by descendants of German and Swiss immigrants who arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries. Among the settlers were followers of Menno Simons, known as Mennonites, and of Jakob Ammann, later called Amish.

Even though forms of worship differ among those two denominations as well as the Brethren, another local sect, all three are Anabaptists, a group believing members must choose as adults to be baptized into the faith. In broad terms, the Amish live the most conservative lives of the three, especially the Old Order Amish who dress in "plain" clothing, and eschew electricity as well as other modern conveniences.

The Amish buggies pulled by high-stepping horses serve as the iconic symbol of traditional Lancaster. The group arrived in the region in the 1720s and now number about 30,000, making Lancaster County the oldest and largest Amish community in the U.S.

Since many — certainly not all, though — of the Pennsylvania Dutch still work the land, fields of corn and alfalfa along with acres of lettuce, broccoli, peppers and sweet potatoes lace the region. Lancaster, the largest city with roughly 60,000 residents, is the hub, and interspersed with farms and silos are small communities, such as Ephrata, Strasburg, Bird-in-Hand, Landisville, New Holland and others.

"We are right near a farm," says Sue Schneider, 57, who moved from Rochester, NY, in September 2012 with husband Steve, also 57, to Ephrata, about 15 miles northeast of Lancaster. "I love hearing the buggies outside, the clip-clopping of the horses' hooves."

For the retired schoolteacher and Steve, who still works part time for IBM, the
The rural landscape proved a big draw. "The suburb we came from in Rochester had 100,000 people when we were born there," says Steve. "By the time we left, it had about three times that population. The expansion was severe. We saw the land become absorbed by progress. I prefer a smaller, friendlier and less trafficked community."

Ephrata, with only about 13,500 residents, has a vibrant downtown with buildings dating to the mid-1800s, old-fashioned streetlights and colorful landscaping. Roads in the surrounding countryside lead to several 19th-century covered bridges, some still in use. The Schneiders bought in Home Towne Square, a 55-plus community with about 40 properties now and 300 planned by developer Landmark Homes.

For Steve, friendlier also translates into safer. In Rochester, the Schneiders installed a security system in their home. "When we were discussing the house in Landmark," Steve says, "we asked for a security system, and they thought I was insulting them. When you hear how safe the area is from so many people, it makes you feel comfortable."

Sue adds, "I fell in love with the quaintness, the quiet, and I love the Arts and Crafts style, country-looking homes. When we saw the spec homes at Landmark, we were impressed by the quality. This was the third house we had built, so we knew what to look for. The furnishings were upscale, the woodworking was finely done and we had the ability to tweak the plan."

They were looking for an active-adult neighborhood. "Moving here from Rochester, we wouldn't know anybody," she says. "In a 55-plus community, it would be easy to meet people." Among their newfound friends were their next-door neighbors, who had grown up only two miles from Home Towne Square.

"They took us on a Sunday drive around the area and showed us the restaurants and markets they like," Sue says. "Since they knew I was a music teacher, they asked me to join their church's bell choir."

The grazing pastures for dairy cows and the cultivated fields symbolize a relaxing pace of life, especially for work-weary urbanites.

"People want to move here because of the landscape, the farming and the Amish," says Bill Remorenko, an agent with Highland Realty Group in Lancaster. "Because of these things, people perceive a peacefulness and a slower pace of life, especially when compared to Philadelphia, DC and New York City."

The bucolic vistas appeal to Judy and Dan Van Buskirk, who retired to Lancaster County from Valley Stream on Long Island, NY, in August 2012. A former receptionist at a veterinarian hospital, Judy, 65, says, "I like seeing the animals. I like the country feel. I was sick of living in the city. Two blocks from our community is a farm. When I go from my home to the post office, I pass cows and horses."

Beyond soothing scenery, the farms yield real bonuses of savory food for all area residents, not just the growers. Farm-to-table fare, all the rage in urban enclaves, has long been a lifestyle here. In the city of Lancaster, Central Market reigns as one of the country's oldest farmers markets. For more than 275 years, a market has stood in the center of town. The facility morphed from a simple, open-air venue of carts and wagons to a basic shed in 1757 to a larger addition in the late 18th century that may have contained more than 400 stalls offering fresh meats, vegetables and breads.

Inside, the current redbrick Romanesque Revival structure completed in 1889 is a feast for your senses and your palate. Walk in one area and the aroma of fragrant flowers fills the air. Pass another stall and catch the pungent smell of feta cheese or the comforting whiff of just-baked bread and pastries.

Depending on the season, you can buy fresh cabbages, broccoli, cucumbers, lettuce and other vegetables. Kauffman's Fruit Farm sells apples, cherries, pears, peaches and plums. The German Deli fea-
tures: sausages, mustards, spaetzle and fried herring, and Long's Horseradish has been selling its products here for more than 60 years. You can snack on soft pretzels from Pretzels on Market; hot dogs, corn dogs and bratwurst from Nye's Sandwich Haus; as well as potato knishes, pastrami sandwiches and stuffed cabbage from Steeplechase Jack's Jewish-style deli.

Along with easy access to fresh food, Lancaster's rural setting affords plenty of outdoor recreation. "I like to canoe and camp and combine that with a fishing trip," says Dan, 69, who was a mechanical designer for the aerospace industry. "In New York, I belonged to Trout Unlimited. There's a branch here that focuses on conservation and stream renewal. In New York, the organization had more of a fundraising purpose. Here, I am more involved in stream work."

He has gone fishing in the Yellow Breeches Creek and in Clark Creek on the banks of the Susquehanna River. Harrisburg, the capital, is on the Susquehanna 42 miles to the northwest, forming the top of a triangle with Lancaster east of the river and York to the west, 27 miles apart.

Remoreenko helped the Van Buskirs find a single-family home in Landisville, a village of fewer than 2,000 on the northwest edge of Lancaster. Judy says her husband didn't want an age-restricted community. "He likes the sound of kids, the feel of a regular community of people of mixed ages, not just retirees," Judy says, noting that he plays ball with the little boy next door. "I want to see young people jogging, bicycling and not just be with older people. You have to be with young people to help keep your mind active."

While visitors and newcomers expect the pastoral surroundings, they're often surprised by Lancaster's more sophisticated side.

"I never realized that Lancaster had so many cultural opportunities," notes Chris (Christine) Neperud, 64, a retired schoolteacher from Columbia, MD, who relocated with husband Peter, 61, a former mathematician, in November 2011. They bought a home in a community called Traditions of America at Mount Joy, roughly 15 miles northwest of Lancaster.

"We joined a group at Traditions of America that gets season tickets to the Fulton Theatre (in Lancaster)," says Chris. "We go to matinees and the shows we used to see at the Hippodrome Theatre in Baltimore."

The Schnedlers liked the American Music Theatre's Christmas production as well as the vivid portrayal of biblical stories at Sight & Sound Theatres a few miles southeast of Lancaster, near Strasburg, a charming community with 18th-century homes, historic taverns and unique shops. Most visitors are drawn here by the Strasburg Rail Road, which runs steam trains on short scenic trips, and other rail attractions, including two museums, one a toy train collection.

Besides theater, Lancaster features a growing arts presence. Because a dozen plus galleries have debuted along North Prince Street in the last few years, those blocks are now nicknamed Gallery Row. The abundance of places to browse makes shopping fun as do the changing exhibits.

Artist Freiman Stoltzfus at his namesake gallery is likely to display works relating to Lancaster city, including pieces that combine maps with town images and other local scenes. In his Franz Fox Studios & Gallery, Fox often features both Impressionist-style landscapes and large abstract canvases of oil and acrylic with pen and ink that he dubs "neoplasticity." Karen Anderer, owner of the CityFolk Gallery, offers a
lively mix of folk art, illustrations and antiques that might include tables, garden figures or old lanterns.

The galleries plus a crop of independently owned stores landed Lancaster among the nation's top 25 metropolitan areas with vibrant local (nonchain) retail, according to Civic Economics and the American Booksellers Association's

In addition to a mix of rural bounty and urban opportunities, Lancaster also comes with a prime mid-Atlantic location. "There's an Amtrak station, so I can easily get to Philadelphia and to New York City," says Chris. By train, it's slightly more than an hour to Philadelphia and between two and a half and three hours to the Big Apple. By car, it's about two hours from the Washington area.

Like many retirees, Chris and Peter sought a place within an easy drive to see their children and grandchildren. "We took a map and drew a circle, making a radius of about a two-hour drive so that we could get back to family near Columbia. We have two children there, one in Catonsville, Maryland, and one in DC," Chris says. "We wanted to stay away from the I-95 corridor because of the congestion and also didn't want to have to deal with the traffic going across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Lancaster is the perfect location."

- After looking at various 55-plus communities for seven to eight years before retirement, the Neperuds settled on Traditions of America at Mount Joy, an 85-acre development with a clubhouse. Noting they wanted a single-family home, Chris says they chose a two-bedroom, two-bath model on one level. "The builder was flexible and allowed us to customize things to our lifestyle. We enclosed the living room and made it into an office. We extended the back of the house to turn that into a living room," she says.

2011 survey. Some prime examples are spread along Queen Street. In Mommalicious, look for vintage '50s suits and hats. At Then & Again Antiques, browse the costume jewelry and other treasures along narrow aisles. Need knobs for an old cabinet, door pulls for your period townhouse or a claw-foot bathtub? Then poke through Building Character, with architectural salvage among offerings in its eclectic collection of shops. And visit the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen's store for handmade scarves, rocking chairs, ceramic bowls, quilted wall hangings and much more.
Population: 523,594 in the county, with 60,058 in the city of Lancaster and 13,505 in the borough of Ephrata. The county has numerous small towns and villages, within a few miles of each other.

Location: In south-central Pennsylvania, the county is the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, known for its Amish population. York and Harrisburg, the capital, are nearby. It's roughly 90 minutes west of Philadelphia, two hours northeast of Washington and three hours southwest of the New York City metro area.

Climate:
January: High 38°/ Low 22°
July: High 85°/ Low 64°

Average relative humidity: 70%
Rain: 43 inches annually
Snow: 32 inches annually

Cost of living: Average

Housing cost: The median sales price of homes in Lancaster County was $167,000 from January through November 2012, according to the Lancaster County Association of Realtors.

Sales tax: 6%
Sales tax exemptions: Groceries, clothing, prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines.

State income tax: It's a flat rate of 3.07% of taxable income.

Income tax exemptions: Social Security benefits and private and public pensions all are exempt from the state tax.

Estate tax: None

Inheritance tax: The rate is 4.5% for lineal descendants, 12% for siblings and 15% for other heirs; spouses are exempt.

Property tax: In Lancaster County, taxes vary by township, running about $15-$40 per $1,000 of assessed value. The rate is $40.75 in Lancaster city and $24.20 in Ephrata Township. Taxes on a $167,000 home would be about $6,805 in Lancaster city and $4,041 in Ephrata Township annually.

Homestead exemption: In Pennsylvania, primary residences are eligible for some property tax relief. Renters and homeowners ages 65 and older with annual income of less than $35,000 for owners and $15,000 for renters are eligible for a property tax rebate of up to $975.

Religion: The “Pennsylvania Dutch” are Anabaptists, denominations that include Amish, Brethren, Mennonites and United Zion. The Anabaptist population in Lancaster County is approximately 55,000 or 10% of those declaring religious affiliations. About 51% of the residents, however, say they are unaffiliated. The county has more than 100 churches. Harrisburg has about 10 Jewish synagogues plus an Islamic Society and several mosques.

Education: The Pathways Institute for Life-long Learning offers two terms a year with extensive courses in Lititz, a few miles north of Lancaster. In Exton, 40 miles east of Lancaster, the Other Lifelong Learning Institute at Widener University has two semesters annually with courses, luncheon speakers and social events. Franklin & Marshall College, a liberal arts school, and the four-year Pennsylvania College of Art & Design are in the city of Lancaster, and Millersville University, a public liberal arts school, is on the outskirts of Lancaster at Millersville.

Transportation: Major east-west routes are Interstate 76, the Pennsylvania T pike, running across the northern edge of the county, and U.S. 30, the Lincoln Highway. To the west at York, U.S. 30 connects with I-83, which provides major access to the Baltimore-Washington area. The Lancaster Airport at Lititz offers connections to the Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport. From Lancaster city, it's about 30 miles to the Harrisburg International Airport and 70 miles to Philadelphia International Airport. Amtrak trains and Greyhound buses stop in the city, and Red Rose Transit has bus service in Lancaster county and county.

Walk Score: Lancaster has an overall walkability rating of 79 out of 100, or "very walkable," according to WalkScore.com. Neighborhoods will vary.

Health care: In downtown Lancaster, Lancaster General Hospital is a 640-bed facility with a range of services, including cardiology, emergency medicine, oncology, orthopedics and rehabilitation. Also in the city, the 214-bed Lancaster Regional Medical Center, an affiliate of the Penn State Hershey Cancer Institute, has cardiac, neurologic, orthopedic and other care. Emergency, cardiac and robotic surgeries are provided at the 148-bed Heart of Lancaster Regional Medical Center in Lititz, also connected with the cancer institute. The 130-bed Ephrata Community Hospital has acute rehabilitation and emergency care.

Housing: Lancaster County has a wide range of housing options. In Mount Joy, Traditions of America at Mount Joy, (717) 492-4529, is a 55-plus community with a clubhouse and pool. New single-family homes range from $224,900 to $379,900. On the outskirts of Ephrata, Home Towne Square, (717) 283-5750, an active-adult development by Landmark Homes, offers a clubhouse and walking and hiking trails to complement new single-family homes priced from $247,000 to $307,000. Charter Homes & Neighborhoods' 55-plus Heritage Strasburg, (800) 325-3030, is conveniently located adjacent to Strasburg's main street, with walking trails connecting the 28-acre property to town. New single-family homes range from $224,900 to $294,900. Five miles south of Lancaster, Willow Valley Retirement Communities, (800) 770-5445, is a continuing-care retirement community with independent-living apartments, townhomes and villas, personal care, skilled nursing and memory support. Depending upon the type of refund plan residents choose, entrance fees range from $73,500 to $428,500. Monthly fees start at $1,237. In New Holland, 13 miles northeast of Lancaster, Garden Spot Village, (717) 355-6000, is a nonprofit, fee-for-service continuing-care retirement community, offering apartments, cottages and carriage homes. Residences start at $80,900 and go into the $300,000s. Rentals: The median monthly rental price for a one-bedroom apartment is $900 and $930 for a two-bedroom unit.

Visitor lodging: At the 63-room boutique Lancaster Arts Hotel in downtown Lancaster, rooms feature original artwork, primarily by Pennsylvania artists, from $149. (866) 720-2787. The Cork Factory Hotel at Urban Place is part of a mixed-use facility fashioned out of Lancaster's former 19th-century cork factory, from $109. (717) 735-2075. The Lancaster Marriott at Penn Square downtown has rooms from $139 in winter and $169 the rest of the year, (717) 239-1600.

Information: The Lancaster Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Where to Retire magazine), 100 S. Queen St., Lancaster, PA 17603, (717) 397-3531 or LancasterChamber.com. Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau (Where to Retire magazine), 501 Greenfield Road, Lancaster, PA 17601, (800) 723-8824 or PADutchCountry.com.
Residents peruse Lancaster’s art offerings during a First Friday event downtown.

factors. “Our taxes in Rochester were about three times what we pay here,” says Sue. “Also, the state tax on goods is less than in New York. Here, there’s no tax on clothing, and gas is about 25 cents a gallon less than in New York.”

Lancaster also offers good value on resale homes in neighborhoods of all ages. Remorenko estimates that those house prices are 10 to 15 percent lower than the highs before 2008.

“Most of my clients do not want to go into the 55-plus communities because of the restrictions as to the type of home and rules,” Remorenko says. “They want a smaller house that’s a step down from the big house they have.”

For a home in good condition, but not new, with three to four bedrooms, two to three bathrooms, a two-car garage, on a quarter or half acre, prices range between $200,000 and $260,000, he says. Taxes run about $3,200 to $4,200 a year.

For the Van Buskirks, the move from Long Island has worked out well, with an extra perk. “Everyone’s so friendly,” says Judy. “In October we went to a festival at a brewery in Lancaster. All of a sudden, the man next to my husband starts talking to him and comparing types of beers. Here, people are always willing to talk to you. I love the Lancaster area. It’s just heaven.”

Candace H. Stapen of Washington, DC, writes and publishes travel guides for apps, including DC With Kids, Boston With Kids and NYC Family Guide, all by FamilyTrips.