

The History of Our Church and Community

The Oaklette Historic District was listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) in 2003. Portions of the text below were adapted from a copy of the original nomination document. [†] Adaptation copyright © 2011, The Gombach Group.

Description

The Oaklette Historic District is an example of an early 20th century planned, [streetcar suburb](#). Like in most early 20th century suburbs of the city of [Norfolk](#), Oaklette was located on one of the many radiating streetcar lines from Norfolk and on one of the numerous waterways defining Norfolk's boundaries. Oaklette is a peninsula bound by Indian River, a tributary of the Elizabeth River, and its marshlands, and Indian River Road, which connected the late 19th century town of Berkley and Princess Anne County. Oaklette is defined by large-scale single-family dwellings of frame construction dominating the waterfront and smaller Bungalow and Colonial Revival dwellings located on the landlocked parcels. The earliest houses were constructed before World War I and were primarily occupied by families associated with the development of the early community and Oaklette church. World War I necessitated the construction of additional housing in the Norfolk/Portsmouth area, which is evident in the second wave of construction within the Oaklette district in the 1920s-era Bungalows. Later development primarily occurred during the post-World War II era found in the brick Ranch houses. In addition there has been late 20th century development on vacant lots and redevelopment of larger waterfront house sites into subdivisions. Oaklette retains its early 20th century character and street pattern and overall has good integrity. It meets National [Register](#) eligibility under the context of Community Planning and Development. The Oaklette Historic District encompasses 80 acres and contains 56 resources.

Detailed Architectural Description

The plan of the Oaklette Historic District is based upon traditional gridiron city planning developed in the 18th century. The Oaklette Historic District is bound on the south by Indian River Road, from Berkley, formerly Washington Point, south of Norfolk east to Norfolk County. The Oaklette Historic District is bound on the north and east by Indian River, a tributary of the Elizabeth River. Tidal flats and the adjacent Kemp Landing development are located to the west.

The original development plan subdivided the southernmost inland lots with larger lots along the waterfront. The first plan of 1904 shows lots of 100 feet wide and 208 feet deep. The lots were oriented north-south with 100-foot frontage on Webster Avenue, Seneca Avenue and Indian River Turnpike, later renamed Indian River Road. Lots that had been previously sold for the establishment of the Oaklette Methodist Episcopal

Chapel in 1884 extend from Indian River Road to Webster Avenue mid-block between St. Lawrence [Drive](#) and Oaklette Avenue, and were shown within the plan.

The original plat extended to the lots north of Seneca Avenue leaving the prime north lots bound by Indian River open. The lots to the east of Oaklette Avenue were divided to allow house sites to take advantage of the prime waterfront. There are two streets located south on the east and west sides of the peninsula. The orientation of these streets and the location of the cross streets at the south end of the plat are attributed to the desire of the property owners to have the maximum number of saleable waterfront lots.

By 1905 further subdivision of the lots was made with 25-foot frontage and addition of Maple and Elm Avenues to increase saleable parcels. The depth of the lots had changed to 100-feet, which was a standard found in other suburban planned communities of Norfolk.

The Norfolk City and Suburban Railway had been established in the neighborhood in 1904 and traveled east from Washington Point along Webster Avenue, turning south on Oaklette Avenue to Indian River. The streetcar line ran from Washington Point to Indian River Park, a pleasure ground established in Norfolk County southeast of Oaklette.

Development in Oaklette had first occurred by the Hare descendants after the death of Mathew Hare. The original Hare house was located on a parcel north of the planned community on what later became the Colonna property. The Savage tract was also located to the northeast corner of the planned development. The Colonna tract remains in its original state, while the Savage tract has been partially subdivided and new houses have been developed to the south of the original dwelling.

Most houses constructed during the period of significance were constructed between 1905 and 1915. An early dwelling is 3420 Indian River Road. Constructed in 1901 adjacent to the church, it is two-stories with a central entrance. Colonial Revival elements and proportions dominate the building. It is similar in size to other large-scale houses found on the waterfront sites.

The waterfront houses are the most notable in the Oaklette Historic District. The Savage House at 824 Oaklette Avenue was constructed in 1915-1919 at the north end of Oaklette Avenue. It is 2-1/2-stories with [Queen Anne](#) and [Colonial Revival](#) details. A similar house also owned by the Savage family is located to the south on a waterfront site. 915 Oaklette Avenue is similar in form and style. These are the largest remaining waterfront houses located on the east side of Oaklette Avenue.

The west side of the community is dominated by [Craftsman Bungalow](#) dwellings constructed in the early 1920s. The best examples can be seen in the grouping of

Bungalows constructed by the Colonna family at 3408 and 3440 Seneca Avenue. They are simplified and one-story with wood shingle siding.

In addition to dwellings within the Oaklette Historic District is the unique Colonna family houseboat or hunting lodge (3346 Seneca Avenue). The lodge was pushed inland during a hurricane in 1933 and was permanently placed at the west end of Seneca Avenue. It is two-stories encircled by porches. The boat is accessed via a small wood bridge.

The Colonna property (800-831 St. Lawrence Avenue), which dominates the Oaklette Historic District on the northwest end, is a remnant of the original estate. The expanded Caretaker's House remains as well as the horse barn. The site remains mostly open with small farm buildings.

Other dwellings were constructed in the 1920s and early 1930s which are similar in style, form and massing to the earliest dwellings. Later development used modern materials and construction methods, in addition to new building forms.

The addition of post-World War II-era Ranch style houses on vacant lots is seen in three adjacent dwellings between 828 and 832 Oaklette Avenue. They are brick with hipped roofs and are a single-story.

With its variety in property forms, the Oaklette Historic District has good integrity, which makes it eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Place under Criteria C for Community Planning and Development.

Significance

The Oaklette Historic District is an example of early 20th century suburban development surrounding the city of Norfolk. Norfolk's growing population during the first half of the 20th century created a necessity for housing. Numerous suburban developments were planned to accommodate the increased need. The expansion of Norfolk's streetcar lines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries facilitated the development from 1900 to 1920 by making communities accessible to the urban core. Most of Norfolk's suburbs were developed along the radiating streetcar lines in the surrounding counties. Oaklette was first planned by the Hare family who had inherited the family property who intend to capitalize on the streetcar line that was under construction through the community. It was eventually developed by a group of investors seeking to take advantage of the waterfront property on the south side of the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River and the streetcar line that opened in 1905. The district thrived until World War I when streetcar serviced ceased on the line. Development slowed, with a brief resurgence in the 1950s and dwelling additions in the late 20th century. The community was primarily attractive to both developers due to its extensive waterfront and close proximity to the urban core.

Oaklette — Early Years

The land on which the Oaklette Historic District is located was once the estate of Mathew Hare. In 1869, Hare had purchased the lands from Colonel William Etheredge for \$6,000.00. According to the deed of record, the property was named "Oaklette" and was comprised of 85 acres more or less.[1] The name "Oaklette" first appeared in 1843 on the land transfer from Thomas Tatem to John Hope. According to the deed of record, Tatem's wife, Mary, had inherited the property.[2] Upon Mathew Hare's death, the land was willed to his descendants who divided and sold parcels in sections between 1883 and 1920.

In November 1883, the descendants of Mathew Hare sold a parcel of land for \$1.00 to the Trustees of the Oaklette Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church, South for "a place of Divine Worship for the use of the ministry and membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South." [3] The trustees of the church were Joseph B. Doughty, James H. Whitehurst, George R. Hare, William H. Merton, and Arthur J. Newton.

The church's organizer was Miss Fanny Whitehurst, daughter of James Whitehurst. She was concerned over the lack of religious training that was available in the immediate area. Her desire for a church was so strong that she used the old kitchen of the family house, which was located on the current site of the church, south of Indian River Road. She used the kitchen from 1880 until 1883 when the Hare family descendants deeded a parcel on their land for the construction of the church. Their only demand was that the church be named "Oaklette" to honor their donation. The church building opened in 1884 and was located on Indian River Road in a grove of oak trees at the intersection of St. Lawrence Avenue.[4]

A parsonage was constructed on the adjacent lot in 1899. The two buildings along with a one-room schoolhouse, which had been constructed on site just shortly after the Civil War, rounded out the pre-1900 grouping of buildings. The buildings remained on site until 1931, when a fire broke out in the parsonage and it was destroyed. Fortunately, the church was spared great damage and could be repaired. A new parsonage was built, which still remains at 3422 Indian River Road.[5]

In August 1895, Jonathan Pierson made an application for a post office at Oaklette. His application included the proposed names of Avery or Page. According to the application, the mail was supplied from Norfolk six times per week.[6] The addition of the post office to the early community had benefits for its potential development. The location of the post office at the Indian River Turnpike Bridge, which dated before the Civil War, also provided a center for the convergence of the local population. This was additionally anchored by the Oaklette church and school.

The Indian River Turnpike was originally a dirt road paved with oyster shells. This was typical during the 19th century since it could be resurfaced with shells from the plentiful

oyster population in the brackish-water tributaries and creeks. The Indian River Turnpike Company was formed in 1878 to collect tolls for the wood drawbridge.[7] The road was the main east-west route that led from Berkley at Washington Point and Norfolk to the south in the area of Great Bridge and Norfolk County.

The Consolidated Turnpike Company of Norfolk, Virginia acquired the company in 1900 as a part of an Act passed in 1899-1900 by the Board of Public Works in [Richmond](#) to consolidate various toll companies and standardize rates for traveling. Consolidated Turnpike acquired a number of toll roads and bridges including the Norfolk and Princess Anne Turnpike Company, Tanners Creek Draw Bridge Company, Eastern Branch Turnpike and Toll Bridge Company and Indian River Turnpike and Toll Bridge Company.[8]

What was perceived to be an easy resolution to the standardization and improvement of toll roads and bridges soon proved difficult as the Consolidated Turnpike Company fell into receivership in 1903. The receivers operated the company until 1905 when Consolidated Turnpike Company was declared unfit to collect tolls by a Norfolk County judge. The reorganization of the company was made by March and toll collection resumed. The tolls were finally abolished at the bridge in 1913, when bridges and roads were transferred from private ownership to the local government.

Joseph Paxson, Oaklette resident, was the toll collector and bridge tender at the bridge until 1913. He saw the improvement to the bridge from a wood draw to an iron swing bridge in 1905. He also witnessed the continuation of the trolley service or streetcar service across the bridge in 1905.[9]

In 1904, the Hare descendants officially platted a portion of their property dividing it into parcels, which they filed in Norfolk County. They were trying to capitalize on the growth of suburban developments that had begun to appear in 1890. Since the streetcar tracks were under construction through the property, they would be able to take advantage of the convenience for residents to travel to the nearby cities.

The plan that the Hare descendants submitted was comprised of inland lots divided by cross streets and two major north-south streets, which maximized the salability of the waterfront parcels. This was common in the Norfolk region as seen in plans by numerous local developers, such as Bellamy and Hough and the New Norfolk Company. Roads were constructed to run parallel to the waterfront maximizing waterfront real estate. The lots were usually larger, while inland lots were smaller and the density was higher.[10]

In 1905, a number of parcels were sold from the Hare descendants to C.W. Pierson. Lots were between \$200.00 and \$400.00 depending on width.[11] Other lots were sold directly to Oaklette Realty and Investment Corporation, which had been formed in 1905.

Like the Hare descendents, Oaklette Realty wanted to take advantage of the growing streetcar suburban development occurring in outside of the city of Norfolk. The success of Norfolk's first suburb Ghent, which had been planned in 1890, was a benchmark that other developments used as a model. Like Ghent, Oaklette had prime waterfront real estate and streetcar access to the city. It also afforded the serenity of the countryside since it was primarily located in an undeveloped area.

Streetcar Suburbs

The streetcar ushered in the second stage of suburbanization of the United States' landscape. Suburbanization evolved from the ability of wealthy Americans who were able to commute into the densely populated cities from remote towns that were becoming popular on the outskirts of cities in [Chicago](#) and [New York](#). This ideal became the prototype for suburban planning and ideas of model living by the middle classes. With the advent of the streetcar in 1888, the ability for middle America to realize the dream of more pastoral settings became a reality.[12] Open land in surrounding areas of densely populated cities became prime breeding ground for planned suburbs.

The first groups to suburbanize were the middle and upper-middle classes. The first suburbs are defined by larger lots and houses, such as the Ghent neighborhood in Norfolk, which was Norfolk's first planned suburb. Shortly after its formation in 1890, other suburbs were developed following the streetcar lines that radiated from the city center.[13]

The streetcar's advantages to the average commuter were defined by the ease and speed at which the suburbanite could travel into the city to shop, work and commune. The average travel time to the city from the suburbs via streetcar was between 10 to 30 minutes.

The streetcar suburbs were planned with easy access to the streetcar line. The average foot-travel time for individuals to a nearby streetcar line were between 5 and 10 minutes. The suburbs also continued the gridiron plan found within cities, which maximized land area usage, and formed a familiar street system for residents.

Another factor in the rise and popularity of the streetcar suburb was the freestanding house. The freestanding single-family house was considered to be the alleviation of the densely populated city, and the improvement of life through the improvement in environment. This became most attractive to the working classes that were confined to the less desirable areas of the inner city. The suburban ideal was also marketed to this class through more modest scale houses and slightly more dense suburban communities. Though these communities were denser than those of the upper to middle classes, it still afforded similar benefits even without larger lots.

An engineering improvement in the construction of houses is also believed to have benefited the rise of the suburbs in the United States. The balloon-frame method of construction invented in the 1830s proved to be a cost-effective means of house construction. The system was based upon a light framing method of wood using 2-by-4-inch studs nailed together, which distributed the weight of the building to the various areas of the frame. This system was also much cheaper and is believed to be as important to the development of the suburbs as the streetcar, since it reduced the cost of house construction and allowed the average family to afford a freestanding house.[14]

Oaklette — Creation of a Norfolk Suburb

The Oaklette Realty and Investment Corporation was formed in August 1905. Its officers are listed as Isaac W. Paxson, President; Alfred Y. Paxson, Vice-President; C.W. Pierson, Treasurer, Secretary, and General Manager; Jonathan W. Paxson, Director; and Pascal W. Paxson, Director.[15] Their purpose was to buy and sell parcels of land, and build houses for sale. They limited their saleable lots to 5 acres.

Joseph Paxson was the bridge tender for the Indian River drawbridge just east of the Oaklette neighborhood.[16] The post office was located at the crossing, and by 1900, Joseph Paxson had become postmaster.

On December 29, 1904 the Norfolk Suburban Railroad had completed the trolley line between Oaklette and Washington Point, which continued to Norfolk. The opening of the trolley signified Oaklette's connection with the city. The 4-mile trip to Norfolk took only 1/2-hour and trolley service ran every hour. The last car left Oaklette at 6:30 p.m. for its end station at Washington Point.[17]

In addition to the connection to Washington Point, the streetcar enabled Oaklette residents to have access to the ferries, which connected Washington Point with Norfolk and Portsmouth. The ferry service, which terminated in 1955, ran continuously between the three points. Since Oaklette was 5 miles from the cities, the streetcar became an important link to the urban center.

This was short-lived as the streetcar ceased operation in the late 1910s, stranding the residents from their primary connection to the city. Their fortitude was not lost in this drastic change. In 1917, the Indian River Transit Company was formed. Officers included S.S. Paxson of Oaklette and A.W. Kemp from the adjoining community, Kemps Landing.[18] The transit company was organized to provide a transportation service via automobile or carriage between Indian River and Norfolk. This early form of taxi service provided residents with additional means of transportation, but the cessation of the trolley curbed additional development of Oaklette until the World War II period. This was evident from Joseph Paxson's diary, which states most houses were constructed between 1895 and 1920 with most constructed in the period of 1905-1915.

Upon the dissolution of the streetcar line, Oaklette had once again become a fringe area without public transportation and was dependent on property owners to provide their own means of transport. This slowed growth and development, which allowed the original large lots to maintain their size and the community to remain in a less dense state than those who were developed along the remaining streetcar lines. Examples of these types of developments can be found in Norfolk such as [Lafayette Residence Park](#), [Colonial Place](#) and [Riverview](#), which are all listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Colonna Estate

In 1879, Charles J. Colonna founded a shipyard on the south side of the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River in 1920.[19] The shipyard is still active today and remains in the Colonna family.

Captain Will Colonna purchased the prime 20-acre site at the head of St. Lawrence Drive where he constructed his 16-room house.[20] Colonna's house was a large Colonial-Revival inspired building using Colonna's extensive ship-related knowledge as inspiration for architectural details. The house used ship sources for the staircase and ship's knees under the roof eaves. The house burned twice in 1923 and in 1925. The 1925 fire led to the demolition of the building due to the extensive fire damage.[21]

In addition to the house, Captain Will constructed numerous structures for the entertainment of his children. Still on site is a rock igloo constructed of ship ballasts. He also constructed a rock basket out of ballasts. Upon acquiring the grounds, Colonna landscaped the property by planting 101 pecan trees in a grid pattern.[22] The family collected pecans every year, which became an annual family event.

After the demolition of the Colonna house, the family moved into the Caretaker's House located on the west side of the estate. The house was expanded at the north and south ends to accommodate the family. The horse barn was also converted to use as a residence for the sister of W.W. Colonna.

In April 1923, Clarence Russell Hare sold three parcels to B.O. Colonna on St. Lawrence Drive. They were listed as 100, 101 and 102, where 953 St. Lawrence Drive is presently located.[23] According to the Colonna family history, the original house lying on the Colonna property was moved to St. Lawrence Drive after the completion of the Colonna House in 1920.[24] The house dated to 1910, and was built on the site of the original Hare house. According to Joseph Paxson's diary, the Hare house burned in 1910 and was replaced with the house now located at 935 St. Lawrence Drive.

In addition to the buildings constructed for the family, Colonna also constructed a number of modest Bungalow style houses at the south of the property, which he rented. The houses line the north side of Seneca Avenue and were constructed prior to

the final demolition of the family house. The houses were rented to middle- and working-class families, who worked for the surrounding industries, such as the Ford Truck plant which had opened in 1921. Most of the houses on Seneca Avenue are still owned by the Colonna family descendants.

In addition to the rental property, the Colonna floating hunting lodge or houseboat is also located within the Oaklette boundary. According to Will Colonna, the floating lodge was constructed by Captain Will in 1927 and was towed to Blackwater, North Carolina by tug for annual hunting trips. In 1933, a hurricane tore the lodge from its mooring in the creek adjacent to the property and pushed it into the tidal flats that had become flooded. Upon the water receding, the lodge was landlocked and could not be moved to deeper water. The lodge was moved further inland and a dike was built to prevent further harm. It has remained in its present location since.[25]

The Colonna property remains in the Colonna family and is primarily rental property. Most of the grandeur of the original estate is gone.

World War II — Mass Suburbanization to Today

The increase in population in Norfolk and Portsmouth seen during the World War II period was due to military presence and the mobilization of a work force to support the war effort. This dramatic increase in the population had a resounding effect on suburban development. An increase in the amount of housing needed to lodge the wartime workforce, led to the subdivision of existing suburban development planned during the period between 1900 and 1930. Numerous suburban communities were also developed at this period, along with shopping centers and other commercial cores.

Oaklette's building continued into the 1920s with modest bungalows constructed on various lots throughout the neighborhood. Building had ceased just prior and during the World War II period in Oaklette as large parcels were held within families. This caused many lots to remain open until the post-World War II period.

During the 1950s, families subdivided parcels or sold off smaller parcels, which fueled building in Oaklette. The period of the 1950s reflects increased development of house sites and construction of Ranch style houses. Norfolk saw increased suburban development in the 1950s with the creation of additional suburban development that was delayed due to the World War II. Numerous new neighborhoods were carved from vacant lands north and east of the city.

In 1955, the Oaklette Methodist Church, which had been established in Oaklette at the turn of the 20th century, constructed a new building.[26] With the existing site unable to sustain the growing congregation and needed space, the church moved to a location on the south side of Indian River Road, on the Whitehurst land. The original church remained on the site and was used as a community center until it was demolished in

the late 20th century. The parsonage remains and a new house was constructed on the site.

Norfolk County also faced changes in the 20th century with the formation of the city of Chesapeake and numerous annexations of land by the city of Norfolk. Norfolk sought to increase its borders and systematically annexed portions of Norfolk County from the late-19th to mid-20th centuries. In 1963, the city of Chesapeake was formed from the remaining lands of Norfolk County.

In 1989, a former house that sat on the east side of Oaklette Avenue a 12-acre site was burned. The site was an ideal parcel for development due to its waterfront location and width. In 1998, a new cul-de-sac development of 11 houses was built. The threat to the historic integrity of the neighborhood of new development on the large waterfront lots is constant due to ownership changes and current zoning regulations.

Conclusion

Oaklette remains a desirable community for middle-class families today and many of the descendants of the original families reside within its boundaries. Due to its architectural and planning integrity, the Oaklette Historic District meets National Register criteria for Community Planning and Development.

Endnotes

1. Norfolk County Deed Book 91, 305-306.
2. Norfolk County Deed Book 68, 282.
3. Norfolk County Deed Book 129, 177-178.
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7. Cross, 108.
8. Walke and Old, Attorneys and Counselors at Law, "Letter to Board of Public Works, Richmond, Virginia," August 23, 1900.
9. Paxson, Joseph P., "Diaries", Chesapeake, VA: Ann Harris Early, 1899-.
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11. Norfolk County Deed Book 296, 382-383.
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13. Tracerics.

14. Ames, 28.
15. State Corporation Commission Records, Book 57, 345.
16. Cross, 108.
17. Paxson, Joseph P., "Diaries", Chesapeake, VA: Ann Harris Early, 1899-.
18. State Corporation Commission Records, Book 97, 153.
19. Cross, 99.
20. Cross, 135.
21. Colonna, W.W., Jr., *Colonna Papers: histories involving Colonna family mainly Tidewater area, State of Virginia, U.S.A./[compiled by W.W. Colonna, Jr.]*, Norfolk, VA: Colonna's Shipyard, Inc., 2000, 13.
22. Ibid., 7.
23. Norfolk County Deed Book 531, 351.
24. Colonna, 7.
25. Cross, 142.
26. Ibid., 147.

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