

Living Near Paradise

The Development of Land Uses in Cradock, Virginia along Paradise Creek



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Living Near Paradise
The development of land uses in Cradock, Virginia along Paradise Creek

Looking across Paradise Creek, smokestacks rise in the distance. Ducks have gathered just beyond the water's edge where the surface is unobstructed by marsh grasses and trees. The ripples break the dark surface of the water and reflect the hazy grey sky above. Dark shadows beneath the trees accent the vivid green vegetation. Yet, the orange smokestacks still puncture the horizon line through the dense trees on the far side of the creek. At low tide, the creek recedes to leave only a thick mud.

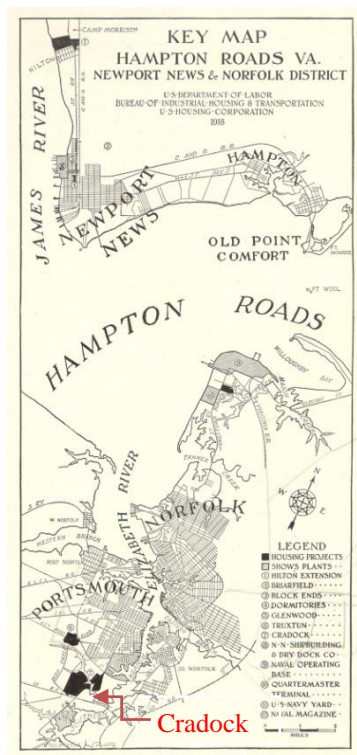


Figure 1

Paradise Creek, connected to the Southern Branch of the Elizabeth River in the Tidewater region of Virginia, is now the boundary between the neighborhood of Cradock to the south, and Norfolk Naval Shipyard and industrial facilities to the north. In 1918, Cradock was developed to house the influx of workers that were employed by the Shipyard.¹ The shape of Paradise Creek has remained relatively unchanged throughout documented history.² This creek ties local neighborhoods and industry along its banks to the long-standing tradition of travel by water throughout the lower reaches of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Farming activity is documented as early as 1863 along the banks of Paradise Creek,

while mills dot many of the small creeks along the Southern Branch much

¹ *Cradock Historic District Homeowner's Guide*. 1976?

Located in the Portsmouth Public Library Local History Reading Room.

² The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. *Paradise Found: Paradise Creek Restoration Plan August 1, 2003*. Portsmouth, Va. 2003. 4

earlier in the mid eighteenth century.³ The gradual introduction and expansion of industry in the area absorbed farmland for both housing and production facilities. The land was once heavily wooded, but farming and ship building have removed all of the original growth along these waterways.⁴ Only in the Great Dismal Swamp – just to the south – can one experience the dense and varied vegetation that grew in the southeastern part of Virginia. Although drastically altering the built environment, the construction of Cradock did not cause a definitive break with the historic uses of the land and creek. The activity along Paradise Creek is only one example of a trend that exists throughout the area known as Hampton Roads. The natural features of the land have continued to be a resource in the daily lives of inhabitants along Paradise Creek as a connective element to both the traditions of the past and the initiatives of the future, even in the wake of pivotal changes in the built environment.

Connected by Water

Although the built environment in Hampton Roads developed in the wake of European contact during the 17th century, Native Americans had been exploiting rivers and streams for transportation throughout the Tidewater region long before the passage across the Atlantic.⁵ The intricate system of rivers and creeks along the Bay was first created over 8,000 years ago from flooding caused by melting glaciers.⁶ During this flooding, the shoreline became irregular creating a web of rivers and creeks that reached far inland. The four main rivers in Virginia poured into the Chesapeake after its formation. The Potomac, the Rappahannock, the York, and the James connect to innumerable small creeks and rivers which make transportation on these

³ Stuart Barker. *Grist Mills of Norfolk County*. Great Bridge, Va: June 1994. 4 Filed in the Chesapeake Main Library Local History Reading Room in Great Bridge, Virginia.

⁴ The Elizabeth River Project. "History: Our Royal Past." *The Elizabeth River Project: Restoring the Elizabeth River through government, business, and community partnerships*. [online] <<http://www.elizabethriver.org/>>

⁵ William Tazwell and Guy Friddell. *Norfolk's Waters: An Illustrated History of Hampton Roads*. Sun Valley, CA: American Historical Press, 2000. 17

⁶ Ibid

systems possible. The Elizabeth River intersects the James River and the Bay at their most southern point before merging with the Atlantic Ocean. The three other tributaries lie to the north. The proximity of water throughout this entire region gave early inhabitants a means for transportation and survival, and the area along the Elizabeth River was inhabited by the Chesapian (Chesapeake) Indians well before the first Spanish explorers sailed into the Bay in 1561.⁷ By 1607, the entire region was part of the Powhatan Empire, and the Chesapeake paid tributes to Chief Powhatan.⁸ The political organization of these tribes extended from the Potomac River to the Great Dismal Swamp and as far inland as the fall lines of the four major tributary rivers.⁹ Settlements were mostly along rivers, and tribes were able to cultivate surplus crops to support the community.¹⁰ Chief Powhatan's seat of government was along the northern bank of the York River, and travel was crucial in order to rule over his large empire and ensure loyalty. The site, called Werowocomoco, also provided ample space along the bank of the river for canoes to bring tributes from subordinate tribes like the Chesapeake.¹¹

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Axtell, James. *After Columbus : essays in the ethnohistory of Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. 184-185

⁹ Axtell 185

¹⁰ William E. McNulty et al. *A World Transformed*. National Geographic Map Insert. Washington DC: National Geographic Society, May 2007.

¹¹ William E. McNulty et al. *1607: When Cultures Collided*. National Geographic Map Insert. Washington DC: National Geographic Society, May 2007.

The English settlement of Jamestown in 1607 took place during the height of the Powhatan Empire.¹² Rivers continued to be the primary avenues of transportation during the English development of the Tidewater region. Rather than orienting life towards a road, homes and businesses were directly connected to the waterways by placing their front facades towards the river, the trend established by the Chesapeake and Powhatan Empire through the orientation of their settlements. Westover, Shirley, and Berkeley Plantations on the James River, just to the northwest of the Elizabeth, were meant to be seen by those passing by on boats. The heavy cultivation of tobacco required that docks be constructed to load hogsheads onto ships that would carry the cash crop to England for sale.¹³ Eventually the draft of ships became too great to travel up the rivers to individual docks, and a center for commercial enterprise began to develop closer to the mouth of the James at its

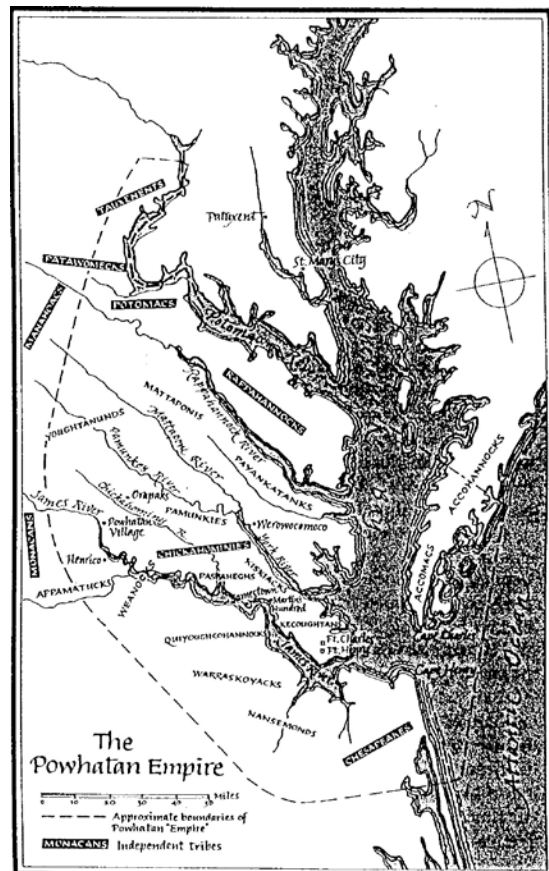


Figure 2

¹² Ibid

¹³ Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982. 27-29

intersection with the Elizabeth River.¹⁴ The cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth formed on opposite sides of the Elizabeth, taking advantage of proximity to the sheltered harbor. The rural land surrounding these two cities became Norfolk County, and was a mixture of agriculture and industry.¹⁵ Gosport, an area just below the colonial boundaries of Portsmouth, was developed by Andrew Sprowle in 1767 for ship building and maintenance.¹⁶ Tobacco cultivation did not last long in the region as the natural harbor was adapted for industrial purposes and the surrounding land was cultivated in food crops.¹⁷ Grist and wood mills developed along the Elizabeth while the Gosport shipyard grew.¹⁸ Grist mills were built first to keep up with the demand for corn and grain by the increasing population in the area.¹⁹ As the area grew, wood mills developed. The Great Dismal Swamp just to the southwest had been discovered by William Drummond in 1665, and the Southern Branch of the river was the most direct connection to the resources of the swamp, such as juniper and cedar.²⁰ Mills at each creek could take advantage of the proximity of raw materials.²¹ Along the Southern Branch, the Gosport Shipyard and the mills continued to be dependent on the water for both their daily operation and transportation of goods.



Figure 3

¹⁴ Robert W. Lamb. *Our twin cities of the nineteenth century: (Norfolk and Portsmouth) : their past, present and future*. Norfolk, Va.: Barcroft, 1887-88.87

¹⁵ Col. William H Stewart. *History of Norfolk County, Virginia and representative Citizens*. Chicago: Biographical Publishing Company, 1902. 156

¹⁶ *Norfolk Naval Shipyard History*. [official military website] <<http://www.nnsy1.navy.mil>>

¹⁷ Stewart. 157

¹⁸ Barker 1

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Amy Yarsinske. *The Elizabeth River*. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2007. 228

²¹ Raymond Harper. *Norfolk County*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2000.

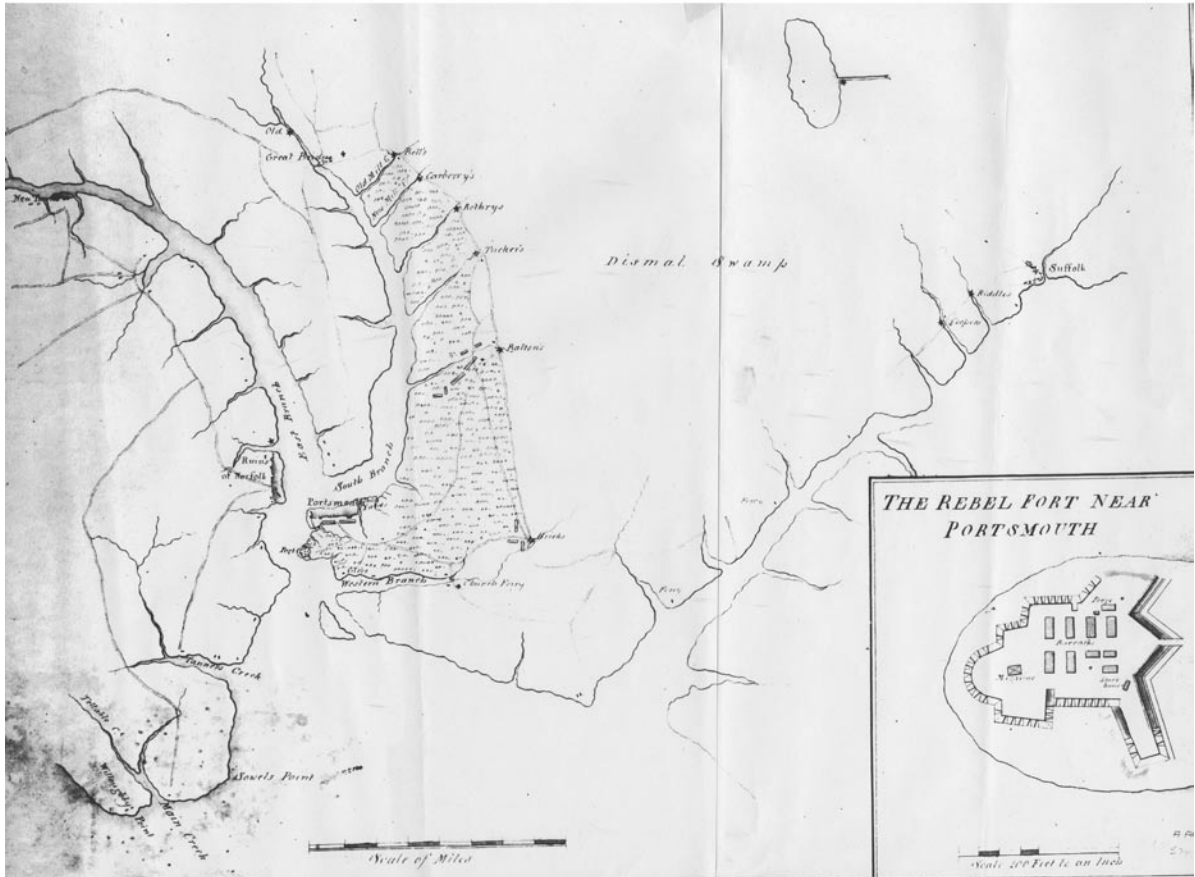


Figure 4

The earliest depictions of Paradise Creek on the western side of the Southern Branch come from military sources. Two maps, one made after the burning of Norfolk in the Revolutionary War and another surveyed as a result of Civil War skirmishes across Hampton Roads, show a geography that is relatively unchanged in the intervening century which separates the two documents. Although the detail varies significantly between the maps, the path of Paradise Creek appears to have been relatively unaltered over time.²² According to the pre-1779 map, mills were located along all the creeks on the western side of the Southern Branch, except for Paradise Creek and Back Creek.²³ Although mills were located in tidal marshes, Paradise

²² The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. *Paradise Found: Paradise Creek Restoration Plan August 1, 2003*. Portsmouth, Va. 2003.

²³ *The Rebel Fort Near Portsmouth*. Circa 1779.

Found in the Norfolk Public Library Local History Reading Room map collection.

Creek may not have been able to support a mill because of its low water level even during high tide.²⁴ The same map indicates a roadway that linked all of the creeks together near the location of the mills. This road runs beyond the most inland point of Paradise Creek, leaving water as the only efficient means of transportation. During colonial period, Paradise Creek appears to have been relatively remote and possibly forested.

By the Civil War era, the details of the geography and land ownership are depicted in greater detail.²⁵ The Roanoke and Seaboard Railroad now cuts through the Dismal Swamp towards Portsmouth, and clusters of farm sites along waterfronts and roads pattern the landscape. Paradise Creek is still unlabeled, but the surveyor recorded farms belonging to the Barkley, Owens, Edwards, and Petam families. There are two Barkley lots located in the proximity of the future site of Cradock along Paradise Creek, and both indicate homes that are within a short walking distance of the creek. The road depicted in the Revolution era map still connects all the mills, and driveways link the Barkley properties to the only depicted land route. Drawing from the changes between the Revolution era map and that from the Civil War, the Barkleys may be the first family to have improved the land along that section of Paradise Creek. During the late 1800s, local produce from farms like the Barkley's accounted for a significant portion of the exports from Norfolk County through Portsmouth and Norfolk.²⁶ The practice, known as trucking, began in Hampton Roads around 1844 and continued well into the twentieth century.²⁷ There were enough families farming near the Barclay property to organize a school, located in the 1862 Civil War map. However, the location of a "Poor House" near the school demonstrates that this area still had a level of economic problems that necessitated the organization of such a

²⁴ Barker 2

²⁵ Lieut. Oscar Soederquist. Military Map of Suffolk and Vicinity for Brig. Gen. E.L. Viele. 1862.

²⁶ Stewart 156

²⁷ Ibid

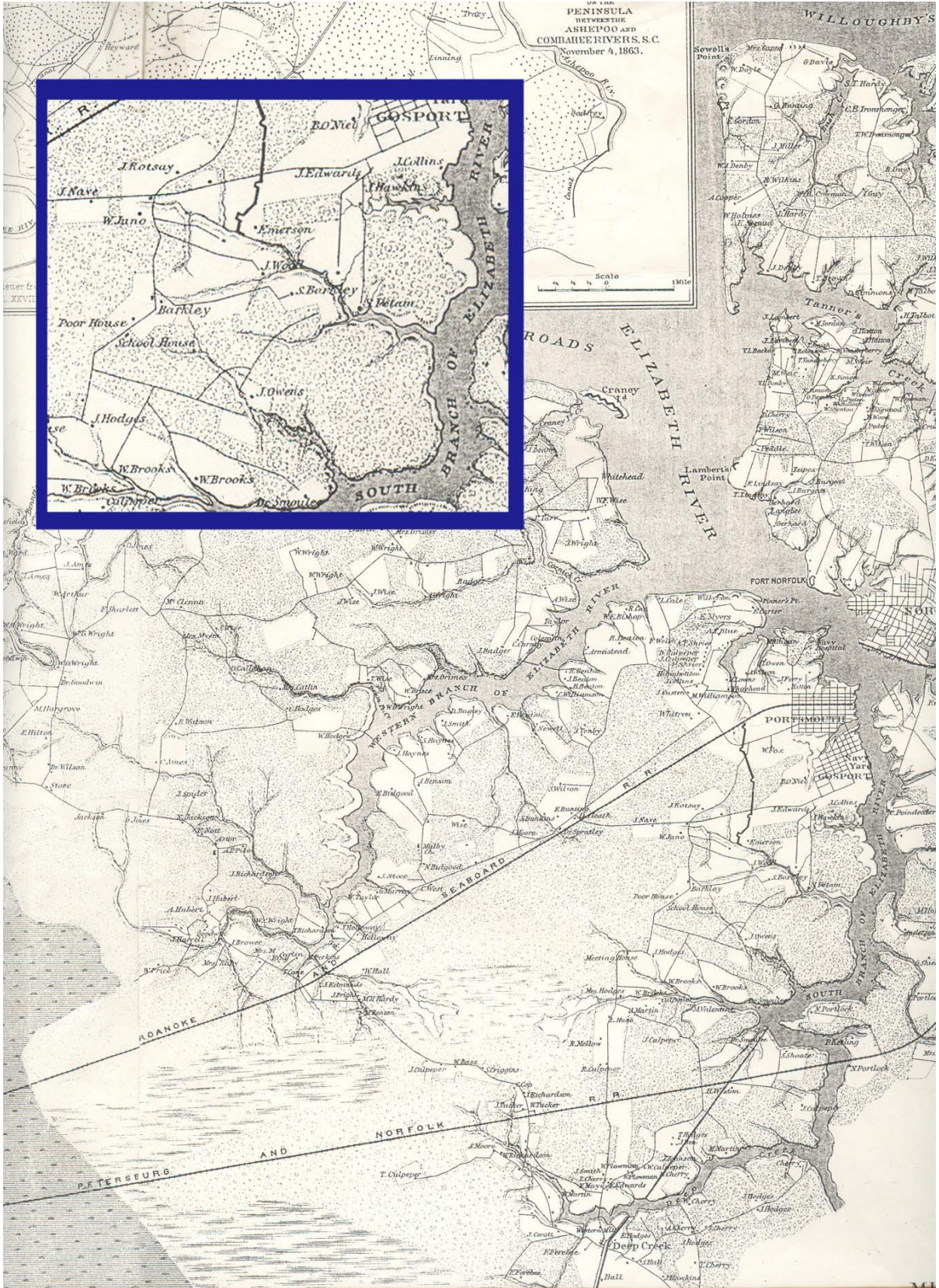


Figure 5

facility. Even with the development of institutions along the main road, an author of Norfolk County history in 1902 states that:

The county is penetrated by several arms of the sea, - Tanner's Creek, Broad Creek, Mason's Creek and Deep Creek, - which with the three branches of the Elizabeth River, - the "Eastern Branch," "Western Branch" and "Southern Branch," - and the North West River constitute a very fine water system, and places each farm in Norfolk County within a few miles of water transportation, insuring to the Norfolk County farmer the cheapest transportation in the world.²⁸

Although increasing development had brought a land route for transportation of goods, water still provided a vital link among farmers to the rest of Hampton Roads.

The first map to label Paradise Creek is a plat within a deed dated to 1883, although oral histories suggest that a farm named Paradise Plantation existed on the site during the colonial period and gave the creek its name.²⁹ The plat depicts the land exchange between a Mr. Starke to William and James Maupin for sixty-six acres. The acreage is surrounded by *S.Barclay*, the same family that was indicated in the Civil War map, while the northern boundary is the labeled Paradise Creek.³⁰ Other sections of the Barclay farm were sold off during the intervening years leading to the federal purchase of the land to create Cradock. William and James Maupin continued to acquire land along Paradise Creek after the initial 1882 purchase. The Barclay property was divided, most likely among siblings, before 1888 when the final section of the original Barclay farm was sold to the Maupins.³¹ The consolidated land was renamed Afton Farm and appears in several surveys done before the purchase of land to build Cradock in 1918.³² Similar transactions had taken place just below Afton Farm on the land known as the

²⁸ Ibid 22

²⁹ Norfolk County Deed Book 117 page 82 and, The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. *Paradise Found: Paradise Creek Restoration Plan August 1, 2003*. Portsmouth, Va. 2003. 3

³⁰ The spelling of the Barkley family name changes over time. Other spellings include Barklay and Barclay.

³¹ Norfolk County Deed Book 112 pages 92-95

³² Norfolk County Map Book 16 page 2, Map Book 13 page 73, and Deed Book 452 pages 591, 594

“Bain Tract” that was renamed Prospect Farm under the ownership of John T. Griffin.³³

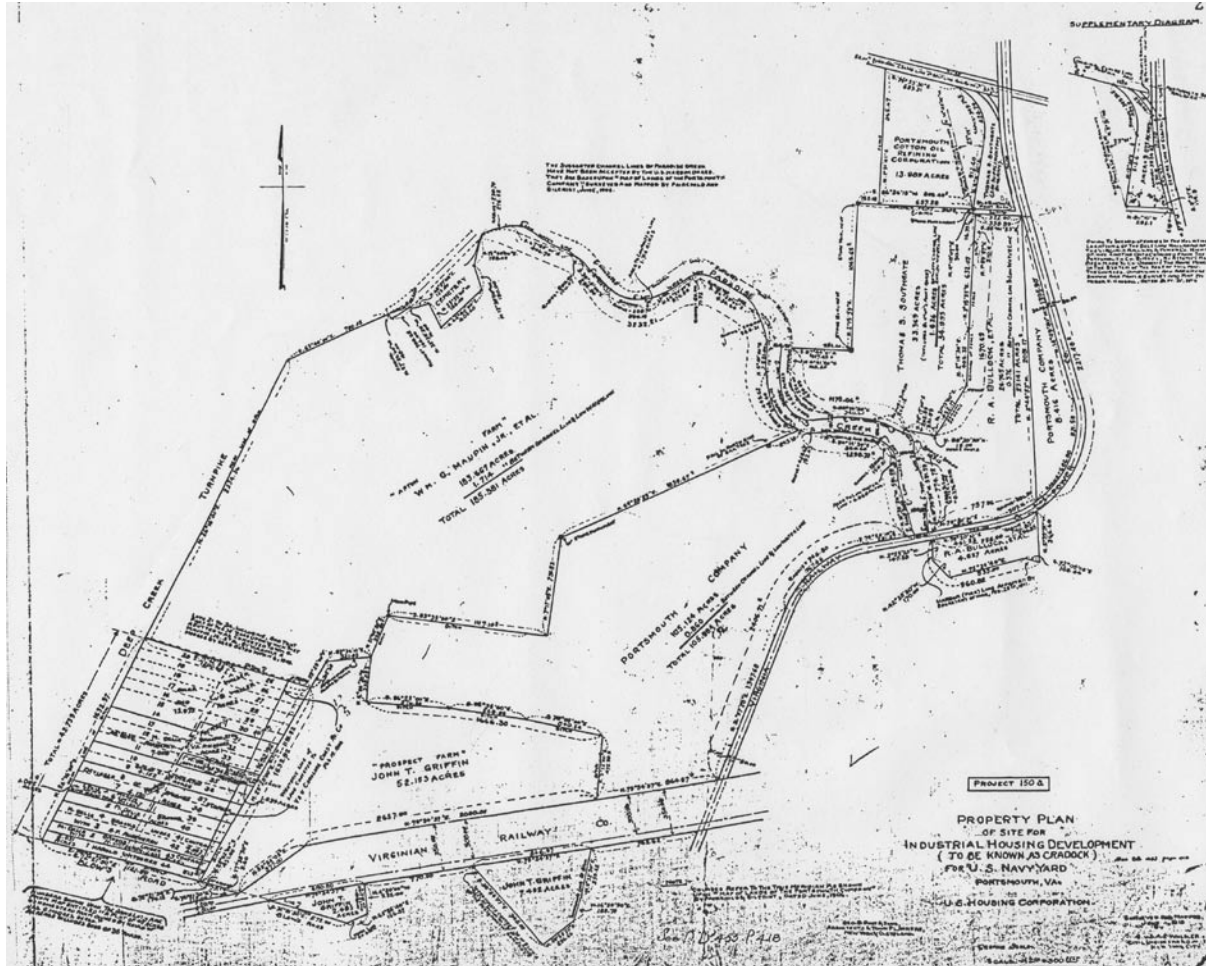


Figure 6

During the era of farm reorganization in the late 19th century, the Portsmouth Company, a land speculation and development firm, began gradually purchasing land along the western bank of the Elizabeth River.³⁴ The Portsmouth Company was part of a much larger firm based in Philadelphia which had other local branches across the Elizabeth River in Norfolk and the upper class Ghent neighborhood, located just beyond the commercial center of the city of Norfolk.³⁵ Upon the purchase of land along Paradise Creek, the company’s ownership extended into

³³ Norfolk County Deed Book 225 pages 364-370

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Yarsinske, Amy Waters. *Ghent: John Graham’s Dream, Norfolk, Virginia’s Treasure*. Charleston: The History Press, 2006. 21, 56-58 and Norfolk County Deed Book 255 page 364

portions of the creek itself.³⁶ The Portsmouth Company gave significant right of way to the Riverfront Railroad Company and, later, the Virginian Railway Company.³⁷ The railroad had divided the land between St. Julians' and Paradise creeks to the east and west, and much of the eastern portion along the shoreline of the Southern Branch was owned by William Schmoele.³⁸ The land purchased included rights into sections of the creek as well.³⁹

At the beginning of World War I, the three prominent land holders remained William and James Maupin, John Griffin, and the Portsmouth Company.⁴⁰ The fluctuations in population as a result of the war-time demands on the shipping industry and the United States Navy, who now operated the Gosport Shipyard, gradually brought more people into Hampton Roads and increased the demand for housing.⁴¹ The federal government began planning communities to support the extra personnel. The land around Paradise Creek was in close proximity to Norfolk Naval Shipyard and within a few months of the initial bill authorizing the expansion of government housing across the country, the land was surveyed for an 'Industrial Housing Development' that would later become Cradock.⁴²

The Federal Intervention

As people came in the area during World War I to work at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, just a few miles north of the neighborhood, the federal government began to respond with new housing projects. Two sites were chosen along Paradise Creek. One, Truxton, became African-American government housing, while Cradock was the Caucasian counterpart.⁴³ Cradock, which

³⁶ Norfolk County Map Book 2 page 68

³⁷ Norfolk County Map Book 4 page 47

³⁸ Ibid 364-5

³⁹ Norfolk County Map Book 7 page 69, and Map Book 2 page 68

⁴⁰ Norfolk County Map Book 16 page 2

⁴¹ *Cradock Historic District Homeowner's Guide*. 1976?

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ United States Housing Corporation. *War emergency construction (housing war workers) : report of the United States Housing Corporation*. Washington : Govt. Prtg. Off., 1919. 270

was planned on the southern bank of Paradise Creek, was organized with the homes facing away from the creek, although a significant portion of the land along the creek was a planned park.⁴⁴ However, once on site, the builders felt the creek was "...a serious problem, because though the creek is very attractive at high tide it is largely a mud flat at low tide."⁴⁵ In an area known for its waterways and shipping industry by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the builders of the Cradock neighborhood chose to ignore the muddy little creek and its connection to the larger network of waterways throughout the Hampton Roads area. For the first time, land routes dominated the transportation system along Paradise Creek.

In 1918, when construction was beginning for Cradock, industry had just begun to creep down to the northern bank of Paradise Creek.⁴⁶ The Norfolk Naval Shipyard also purchased land from William Schmoele who had owned several tracts of land along the western portion of the Elizabeth River's Southern Branch, including a section just to the north of Cradock.⁴⁷ The land on the northern side of Paradise Creek allowed for facilities expansion during the early 20th century.⁴⁸ Initial plans for the Cradock community incorporated a park and curved roads along the northern boundary of the community. Cradock was planned instead around a central commercial lot, called Afton Square, which also featured a small park for the residents.⁴⁹ Three main roads serve as arteries through the grid layout. Afton Parkway is the main entrance

⁴⁴ United States Housing Corporation. 273

⁴⁵ United States Housing Corporation. 272

⁴⁶ Norfolk County Map Book 16, page 2

⁴⁷ *Norfolk Naval Shipyard* [official military site] <<http://www.nnsy1.navy.mil/History/ROOTS.HTM>>

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

⁴⁹ United States Housing Corporation. 272

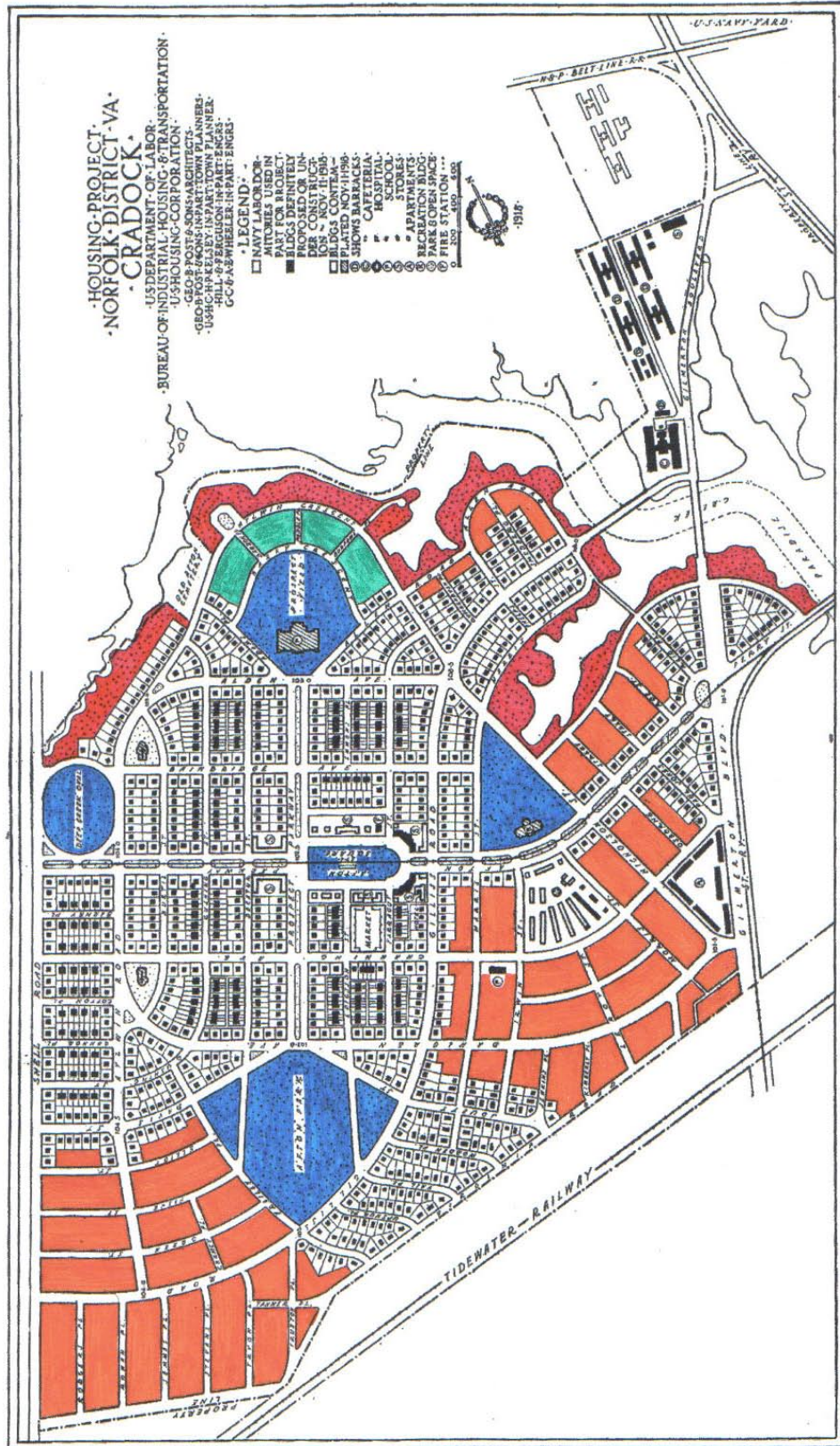


Figure 7

into the neighborhood as well as the primary east west artery. Deep Creek Oval Park is just north of the entrance to Afton Parkway from Shell Road, the existing highway to the west. Afton Parkway then travels through the neighborhood by Afton Square, and intersects with Gilmerton (now Victory) Boulevard. Gilmerton connected across Paradise Creek to Norfolk Naval Shipyard. The two north-south principle roads, Prospect Parkway and Gilliss Road, terminate at other critical features of the neighborhood plan. Gilliss Road connects Shell Road to the pedestrian bridge over Paradise Creek towards the Naval Yard property. Prospect Parkway terminates at both the northern and southern end in parks. To the south, Afton Park is the largest in the community and divides the impermanent worker and family housing from the planned permanent buildings.⁵⁰ Prospect Field forms the open space behind the community school on the southern edge of the property. Although original housing corporation plan calls for two semicircular roads between the creek and Prospect field to accommodate four more blocks of housing (indicated by the green highlighting in Figure 7), the road which was to define the boundary of Prospect Field and the three radial streets dividing the land into blocks was among the few omitted during the initial building period in 1918. As a result, Prospect Field increased in size and is now bounded by Aylwin Crescent, the street that travels along much of Paradise Creek. The use of Prospect and Afton in several street and park names commemorates the Afton and Prospect farms that existed on the property in the decades before the government began the development of the neighborhood. The creek bank remained largely undeveloped according to the original plan, while just to the south the United States Housing Corporation and the architects in charge of the project, George B. Post and Sons, built the majority of the permanent housing.⁵¹ Homes were first built between the new central commercial center, the highway forming the

⁵⁰ United States Housing Corporation. 273

⁵¹ Ibid 272

western boundary, and the school at the northern end of the neighborhood.⁵² These locations were all convenient to the new trolley line that took workers to and from the shipyard.⁵³ In order to quickly house the expanding population before the planned structures could be built, “ready-cut” houses were installed in several blocks on the southeast boundary of the property between Virginia Road and Afton Park. These manufactured homes were placed on fifty foot lots that became typical throughout the entire neighborhood.⁵⁴ The permanent houses had varied plans to create a pleasing affect in the neighborhood, which included apartment buildings along with single family houses. The planned community had a density higher than that of the surrounding Norfolk County, but was less dense than nearby Portsmouth City.⁵⁵ The federal ownership of the

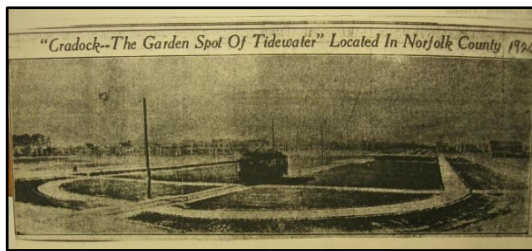


Figure 8

property, along with the ads, boasted that this was “The Garden Spot of the Tidewater” created a distinct identity to the neighborhood that recognized the differences of the neighborhood from both the city and the county.⁵⁶ Cradock was an escape from the city that

still provided all modern conveniences available in the late 1910s and 1920s.⁵⁷ Cradock, named in honor of British admiral Sir Christopher Cradock, was to be a self contained community which needed little connection to the city of Portsmouth. Schools, churches, businesses, and sewage pumping stations provided the residents with all the amenities of a small town.

⁵² 1920 Sanborn Maps

⁵³ 1920 Sanborn Maps

⁵⁴ *National Register Nomination: Cradock, Virginia*. July 1969. [online]

<<http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/register/Cities/Portsmouth/>> 2

⁵⁵ *Ibid* 4

⁵⁶ Freed, John Freed, James. *The Ship's Bell*. Vol 2. Manuscript. 1926-1928. October 1928

There are no page numbers, so the date of publication or authorship will be used for reference instead 1919 or 1918 newspaper clipping, located in the file boxes at the Portsmouth Local History Reading Room

⁵⁷ United States Housing Corporation. 285

This independent spirit intensified during the federal freeze on construction in the neighborhood. Over a thousand homes were planned for Cradock during World War I, but when the project ended abruptly with the Treaty of Versailles only seven-hundred and fifty nine homes had been constructed.⁵⁸ The presence of so much open space within the community created a tradition of appropriating vacant lots for both public and private uses within Cradock, independent of the planned intentions for the land.⁵⁹ Although some sections of the neighborhood grid had been left open in plans to allow for later construction, the relative density of homes within the built sections of Cradock contrasted sharply with the large open spaces left by the post-war freeze on building.⁶⁰ Jobs at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard were cut from 11,234 in 1919 to 2,538 in 1923, just above the pre-war employment level and the surplus population dependent on those jobs moved elsewhere.⁶¹ As a result, the United States Housing Corporation began the process in 1920 of privatizing Cradock as the community was too expensive to operate.⁶² The small town model became even more important during the transfer of ownership to residents living in the neighborhood. With several failed appeals to join both the city of Portsmouth and Norfolk County in the years after World War I due to the medium-level density of the area, Cradock was left to operate itself for two years, earning the name “Orphan Town” among local newspapers.⁶³ The community attempted to become an independent town during

⁵⁸ Freed references gardening throughout the 1926-1928 newspapers and recollections in *The Ship's Bell*

⁵⁹ Author's observation from *The Ship's Bell* collection, and personal interviews with current residents.

⁶⁰ 1920 Sanborn Map

⁶¹ *Naval Shipyard* [official military site] <<http://www.nnsy1.navy.mil/History/ROOTS.HTM>>

⁶² Horner, Guy T. *Statement of Facts Relating to Cradock, Va (US Housing Corporation – Project 150a) Submitted by the Citizens' Council of Cradock & The Cradock Utilities Co. Inc. through Guy T. Horner, Counsel.* 20

⁶³ Newspaper articles found in the collection at the Portsmouth Public Library Local History Reading Room, Cradock Information Boxes. And *Cradock Historic District Homeowner's Guide.* 1976?



Figure 9

the privatization phase, but was unable to do so.⁶⁴ Both the city of Portsmouth and Norfolk County turned down their requests to be annexed.⁶⁵ For the city, Cradock approximated rural density and the county believed that the community was too urban to fall under their jurisdiction.⁶⁶ Until 1922, when Norfolk County finally accepted the annexation request, Cradock was forced to run itself without formal organizational support.⁶⁷

The events spanning 1920-1922 left a legacy for the neighborhood. Although Cradock became part of Norfolk County, residents still perceived their location as isolated from the local governments.⁶⁸ By 1928, the business district, then called *The Crescent* and bordered Afton Square, was a viable center that included a grocery store, doctor's office, post office, and drug store.⁶⁹ The trolley line, which began operation during 1918, continued to provide direct connection from the neighborhood to the Navy Yard and other industry. The pedestrian bridge across Paradise Creek was still standing.⁷⁰ All of these functioning elements preserved the independent town aura that surrounded Cradock even after annexation. Given that the area was also less dense than Portsmouth, unimproved property provided opportunities for locals to extend their land use to other lots. Some like the Freed family, who lived on 59 Bainbridge Avenue and wrote the *Ship's Bell*, a community newspaper distributed in the late 1920s, planned to "...rent a bit of land and have a real garden...."⁷¹ In a better documented case of appropriating land for agricultural use, a man decided to test the viability of a second growing season in the Portsmouth area by planting a late crop of corn on a lot near Afton Square.⁷² Mr. Freed reports testing

⁶⁴ Homer. 10-12

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid. 12

⁶⁹ Freed, John. *The Ship's Bell*. Vol 2. Manuscript. 1926-1928. 11 February 1928

⁷⁰ 1920 Sanborn Map

⁷¹ Freed. July 26th

⁷² Ibid. November Gossip 15th and 23rd of the month

several ears of corn to verify that the experiment was working and noted that “This ‘noble experiment’ will furnish the planter with a couple of dozen ears of corn and some shocks of fodder, and experience. It has been a very interesting study.”⁷³ Young people also used the land for Boy Scout adventures and gathering places.⁷⁴ The woods used by the Boy Scouts were those between Harris and Irwin Streets, three blocks to the southeast of Afton Square.⁷⁵ The neighborhood was surrounded by portions of woods in undeveloped lots which provided a sense of protection against possible explosions at the St. Julian’s Ammunition Depot and the Navy Yard.⁷⁶ The woods were a barrier that could catch any ‘missiles’ coming from those bases.⁷⁷ Those who lived in Cradock may not have viewed the creek with as much scorn as the architects of George B. Post and Sons during the early construction of the neighborhood. In fact, the creek was mentioned as an asset. John Freed wrote that “A trip to “town” on the trolley is an inspiration to the nature lover. Afton Woods, the sand flats, the winding Paradise Creek...”⁷⁸ Like the woods, the creek was a protective barrier from the industrial activity around the neighborhood.

During this period, even though the large scale farms had been eliminated by the creation of Cradock, an interest in an agrarian past persisted. Both of the main roads in Cradock, Afton and Prospect Parkways, had been named after the Maupin and Griffin Farms.⁷⁹ Maps denote the Barclay family cemetery even in plans created by the United States Housing Corporation.⁸⁰ Although many of the people who lived in Cradock were not originally from the immediate area,

⁷³ Ibid. November Gossip 23rd of the month

⁷⁴ Ibid. November Gossip 10th of the month

⁷⁵ Freed, John. *The Ship’s Bell*. Vol 1. 11 Nov 1928

⁷⁶ “Ammunition Depot Rocked by Blast; Cradock Terrified” *The Portsmouth Star*. Portsmouth, Va: 27 July 1928

⁷⁷ Ibid. and Freed, July 1928

⁷⁸ Freed, *The Ship’s Bell*. Vol 2. 10th November Gossip

⁷⁹ Tradition in the neighborhood is that the main roads were named after the previous farms, and deed research revealed that Afton and Prospect farms existed on the site before Cradock.

⁸⁰ United States Housing Corporation. 273

these indications of an earlier era persisted in creating an awareness of the local past. Farming continued, although on a smaller scale. The land was a resource rather than simply a foundation for the built environment that the federal government had planned. Trucking gardens were popular, and those who used their backyards or extra lots for trucking gardens were participating in the same commercial enterprise as the earlier farms.⁸¹ The gardens were named, quite literally, from the process of selling goods to the local vendors who drove their trucks all over the area to gather fresh fruits and vegetables for sale elsewhere. The earlier era of trucking that began in 1844 was similar, but depended on water routes for transportation.⁸² Seeds were most likely bought in the cities; Mr. Freed kept a catalogue from the Williams Seed Company in Norfolk.⁸³ A photograph of the Williams Seed Company storefront in Norfolk demonstrates the target market for the store. Although there were still considerable farms within Norfolk County, the display shows a well dressed woman sowing seeds mock patch of earth. The display apparently focuses on the domestic



Figure 10

practicality and potential profit of cultivation, and given that trucking gardens were a development of backyard scale gardening, the store recognized a viable market of which Cradock was part.

By the second wave of development in Cradock during World War II, backyard cultivation and recreational activities had transformed the formalized agricultural and transportation uses of Paradise Creek and the surrounding land. Residents now used the natural

⁸¹ Freed. Vol 1. 11 February 1928

⁸² Stewart. 156

⁸³ Freed. Vol 1, Spring 1928

landscape for informal activities. Areas along the creek and in the northeastern section of the community between Afton Square and Gilmerton Boulevard still retained the vacant lots that were typical earlier in the century.⁸⁴ The creek banks and open lots became the gathering places for high school students, people seeking cool water during the hot summertime, and those interested in exploring the undeveloped land.⁸⁵ Through these informal activities, the neighborhood appears to have not lost the awareness of their proximity to Paradise Creek. Even though the homes planned by the government, and those built in the decades after, faced the roadway rather than the creek, this development merely indicates the changing utilitarian value of the vacant land and creek rather than the demise of their importance.

During the 1940s and 1950s Cradock became the independent community that George B. Post and Sons had envisioned nearly two decades earlier, although now dependent on the automobile instead of the trolley. The increase in the Norfolk Naval Shipyard workforce as a result of World War II drew people into the area once again after the struggles following World War I.⁸⁶ The trolley service had ended around 1934, leaving cars and buses as the only sources of transportation in and out of Cradock.⁸⁷ The former trolley line left large grassy medians along Afton Parkway, and the increased vehicle traffic required more parking spaces to be constructed in Afton Square. A second school, James Hurst, was built

⁸⁴ 1920 and 1920-1950 Sanborn Maps

⁸⁵ Stephens, Glen. *Cradock High School: Home of the Admirals* [alumni website] <<http://www.cradock.org/>>

⁸⁶ *Naval Shipyard* [official military site] <<http://www.nnsy1.navy.mil/History/ROOTS.HTM>>

⁸⁷ Tony Kelly. [personal interview] Cradock, Virginia. 20 October 2007

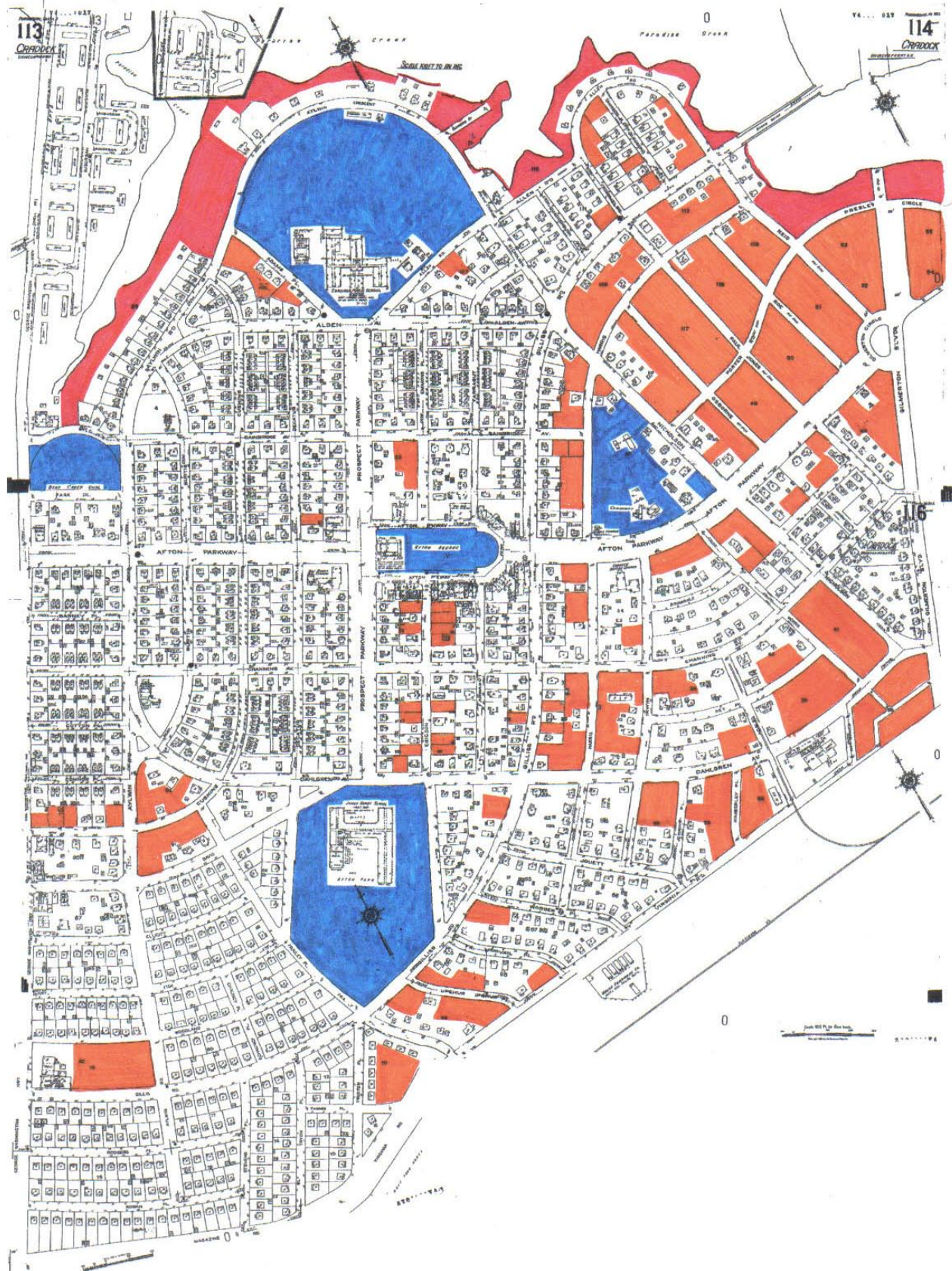


Figure 11

in 1942 to accommodate the increasing population of children in the area.⁸⁸ The school was built on Afton Park. At that time, what remained of Afton Park was “heavily wooded.”⁸⁹ By 1954, a new high school across George Washington Highway (formerly Shell Road which connected all the mills during the early history of the area) was built.⁹⁰ This became the new Cradock High School while the former high school building housed lower grades.⁹¹ The large numbers of children in the neighborhood gave rise to a youth culture that centered on the local



Figure 12

business in Afton Square and the gathering places along the creek. Summers were spent wading in the water, catching crabs and muskrats along the banks, and enjoying movies in the Afton Theater, in the commercial center.⁹² The Shipyard had extended its facilities to the northern bank near the Elizabeth River, while homes were being built along the southern

bank.⁹³ While some parts of the creek were gathering places, sections along Aylwin Crescent now included homes that had the creek as part of the backyard. This play between public and private space also took place just behind a store facing George Washington Highway between Gilliss and Woodland streets.⁹⁴ The lot, one of the few vacant on in the western portion of the neighborhood, was used for community gardening space while the road frontage gave access to the privately owned store.⁹⁵ Even though Cradock was finally functioning much as the planners

⁸⁸ *Portsmouth Public Schools: James Hurst Elementary*. [official website for Portsmouth city schools] <http://pps.k12.va.us/schools/elementary_schools/james_hurst/default.aspx?id=1550>

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

⁹⁰ Stephens. <<http://www.cradock.org/>>

⁹¹ *Ibid*

⁹² Kelly and Wyatt

⁹³ 1920-1950 Sanborn, and *Norfolk Naval Shipyard History* <<http://www.nnsy1.navy.mil>>

⁹⁴ Kelly

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

had intended, the appropriation of property continued to define among residents interaction with the local landscape.

The Creek Reclaimed

In 1960 Cradock was annexed to the city of Portsmouth.⁹⁶ In the latter part of that decade, the neighborhood began a decline that has centered on the business in Afton Square. By 1978, two competing neighborhood shopping centers were either drawing businesses out of the Cradock commercial area or creating duplicate stores that offered a more diverse assortment of goods.⁹⁷ During this time, the story of the creek and vacant land seem to continue as they did during and after World War II, but these issues were overshadowed by the decline of Afton

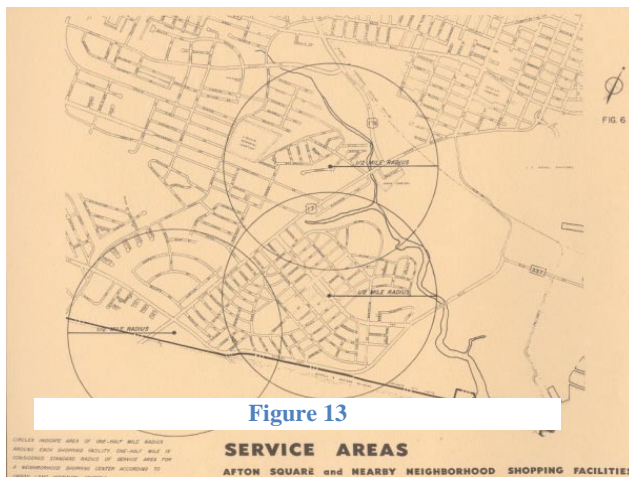


Figure 13

Square. As the planned heart of the community, most of the revitalization efforts have focused on that section. The earliest concentrated effort took place in 1978 when the Portsmouth City Planning Office recognized the hardship caused by the new shopping centers.⁹⁸ Efforts immediately turned to restoring the

neighborhood to the original plan created by George B. Post and Sons, the plan that only came into fruition in modified form by World War II.⁹⁹ Few changes described in the plans were used in Afton Square. However, the emphasis on “green space” in the plan was the first indication of a shifting aesthetic of planning for the neighborhood. Rather than landscape interaction being an

⁹⁶ *Cradock Historic District Homeowner’s Guide*. 1976?

Located in the Portsmouth Public Library Local History Reading Room.

⁹⁷ Office of Dan E. Griffin, Architects, AIA, Ltd. *Afton Square Study*. Portsmouth, Va: Office of City Planning, May 1978. 12

⁹⁸ *Ibid*

⁹⁹ *Ibid*. Figure 2

entirely informal activity within the community, the plans from the 1978 study incorporate landscaping and trees into the concerns of altering the buildings on the Square.¹⁰⁰ A map of the 1918 plan, drawn by Dan E. Griffin Architects for Portsmouth City Planning, includes swaths of green that connect the main thoroughfares, Afton Parkway and Prospect Parkway, with the Square, parks, and the bank of Paradise Creek. Part of Prospect Field, behind the site of the 1918 Cradock High School, returned to proposed space for development, even though the land use since the construction of the community had lent itself to recreation for the school.¹⁰¹ The plan ignores the uses of land by residents that had developed since 1918. By the 1970s, those leading revitalization efforts had chosen the original construction intentions and appearances as the historically important aspects of Cradock, rather than the economically viable and more populous decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Afton Parkway, while having large areas of open grass, is important within the community because it has historically connected the residents to jobs and resources in

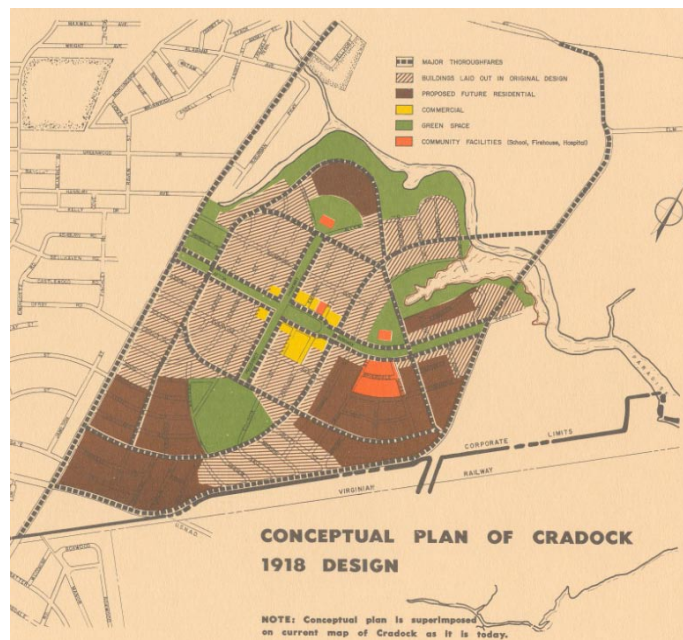


Figure 14

Portsmouth. Likewise, Prospect Parkway provides the north-south connections within the community. Although originally planned as a park, the land along Paradise Creek has a developmental history that is aligned with the growth of the neighborhood and the use of vacant

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Afton Square Site Plan

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Figure 2

or backyard lots for truck gardens. The urge to restore the area to mimic the 1918 proposal ignores the growth and change of Cradock.

Formal interest in the creek has continued to change and develop since the efforts in the 1970s. The Elizabeth River Project began in 1991 to address the pollution that plagued the river.¹⁰² The group adopted a “one creek at a time” plan that would tackle the pollution problem by starting at the level of the creeks which feed into the branches of the Elizabeth.¹⁰³ The environmental concerns were combined with the decline of the river’s historic uses. Oysters were no longer healthy or prominent in the ecosystem, while fishing and crabbing were restricted due to low populations and levels of contaminants within the seafood that are harmful to humans.¹⁰⁴ Industrial activities such as ship maintenance and depositing of waste materials, like storm water and sewage, had become the exclusive value of the water in the wake of intense pollution.¹⁰⁵ Restoring the health of the river led to a vocal recognition that each creek was connected to the larger system, and the larger problem of pollution, in the waterways of Hampton Roads.

Conclusion

Rivers and streams weave throughout the texture of the landscape in Virginia. Beginning in the western mountains, the rivers that spill into the Chesapeake Bay provide vital connections from the wealth of the Bay and the Atlantic Ocean to the waterways of the Commonwealth. Of these intersections of river, bay and ocean, the Hampton Roads area has developed a complex relationship with its transportation resource, the Elizabeth River, and its tributaries. Its black

¹⁰² *The Elizabeth River Project: Explore Our Royal Past*. [online] <<http://www.elizabethriver.org/History/History.htm>> Part of the official website for the Elizabeth River Project

¹⁰³ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁴ The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. *Paradise Found: Paradise Creek Restoration Plan August 1, 2003*. Portsmouth, Va. 2003. <<http://www.elizabethriver.org>> 2

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*. 7

waters are a sign of the pollution problems that continued industry have wrought on the natural landscape. Yet, the river continues to efficiently serve its transportation role for countless ships involved in commercial transport, naval operations, and ship maintenance. Paradise Creek is part of the legacy of the Elizabeth, and connects the Cradock neighborhood along its banks to the historical trends of the region. The independent spirit that has characterized Cradock began with the early phases of farm development in the area. Water transportation provided a means for people to link their farms to the larger communities at the mouth of the Elizabeth, and these transportation links continued to connect the neighborhood to the rest of Hampton Roads. As the water became a secondary resource, the creek and vacant land became a place of informal recreation and agriculture. The neighborhood began to become active in reversing the decline of the 1960s and 70s, and an interest in the creek was revived.¹⁰⁶ The neighborhood formed a Civic League, an alumni group for the Cradock High School (which was closed in 1992), and numerous groups advocating for the neighborhood against proposed trash dumps and ethanol plants.¹⁰⁷

This neighborhood is not defined by the conditions of the shops in Afton Square. Two schools are still in full operation, and the streets are filled with children once the bell rings at the end of the day. The recreational value of the creek had gradually declined due to the pollution of the river, and the involvement on the part of the neighborhood to help clean the creek not only speaks to concerns of health and ecology, but also to the traditional place of the creek within the community.¹⁰⁸ The creek has suddenly become symbol of the push to revive the center of Cradock and make the neighborhood a safe, desirable place to live for newcomers to

¹⁰⁶ The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. *Paradise Found: Paradise Creek Restoration Plan August 1, 2003*. Portsmouth, Va. 2003. <<http://www.elizabethriver.org>> 14-17

¹⁰⁷ Cradock Civic League. *Historic Cradock* [online]<www.historiccradock.org>

¹⁰⁸ The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. 17

Portsmouth.¹⁰⁹ The local pre-school, Cradock Christian Academy, is involved with sampling and monitoring the creek water for pollutants for the Elizabeth River Project, a non-profit group advocating and organizing the cleaning of the river.¹¹⁰ Members of the Civic League are involved as well, and Paradise Creek is the first creek to undergo restoration as the Project hopes to clean the river “one creek at a time.”¹¹¹ The involvement and activity of the community is not apparent in the business district, but takes place in the homes and surrounding landscape. Although the business district was the emblem of vitality within the memory of many of the long time residents, the creek has returned as an emblem of the connectedness of the community to the Elizabeth River and the Hampton Roads region.¹¹² Paradise Creek and the land near its banks, which were once crucial to the development of farms on the site, have again become formally important within the existing Cradock neighborhood.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 18

¹¹⁰ Somers, Laura. [personal interview] Cradock, Virginia. 20 October 2007

¹¹¹ The Elizabeth River Project, Team Paradise. 25

¹¹² Author’s observations from Somers, Wyatt, and Kelly interviews 20 October 2007

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