

Beechwood first settled by freed slaves

The oldest resident, Leola Ames Williams, is kin to almost everyone on her street.

By MARY REID BARROW
STAFF WRITER

Beechwood, a small Bayside neighborhood tucked between First Court Road and Northampton Boulevard, stands as living testament to more than 100 years of black history in this area.

Settled by blacks in the late 1800s, it became the first real home for families who were struggling to put down roots after hundreds of years of the rootlessness of slavery.

Leola Ames Williams, 83, the oldest resident in Beechwood, heard her community's story straight from the mouths of her Ames grandfather and grandmother, who were among the neighborhood's founding members.

Williams was born in Beechwood, was raised in the neighborhood by her grandparents and hasn't left to this day.

It is one of 12 low-income, mostly black neighborhoods that the city decided 20 years ago to invest in after these areas were left behind by Virginia Beach's development boom. The city has spent \$50 million in federal grants and local funds to extend public water and sewer lines, pave dirt roads and rehabilitate housing in the neighborhoods.

Even with the redevelopment efforts, Beechwood virtually has been immune to the changes that have followed in the other targeted neighborhoods. Few new residents have moved into Beechwood, and businesses have not followed the improvements like they have in other areas.

Before Williams came along, both her grandparents were working as sharecroppers at Church Point Farm, which is now the Church Point neighborhood across the road from Beechwood. The Ames family lived in one of a group of tiny homes built for sharecroppers in the vicinity of what is Bayville Park today.

A benevolent man named W.D. Wettmore, as Williams recalls it, owned what is now Beechwood. He sold the families land in the late 1800s, Williams said.

"Poppa said it cost \$35 an acre, I think," she went on. "My grandfather was coming out of slavery and Mr. Wettmore felt for the blacks."

And they called their first real neighborhood "Beechwood" because of the trees, she added.

To this day, Williams said, she can look up and down the street and see homes where nieces and cousins live. She is kin to almost everyone on her street. Everyone that is, but neighbor James C. Ar-



Leola Ames Williams, 83, who was born in and still lives in Beechwood, says redevelopment just made a nice, quiet neighborhood even better. Staff photos by CHARLIE ME

not and a few other newcomers.

An Arkansas native, Arnold bought a lot in Beechwood in 1961. He liked the convenience of Beechwood because he was stationed at nearby Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base and attended Morningstar Baptist Church.

Morningstar is one of Beechwood's anchors. Even when it was a tiny white frame church, it marked the entrance to First Court Road, Williams recalled. And almost everyone who lives in Beechwood attends the church.

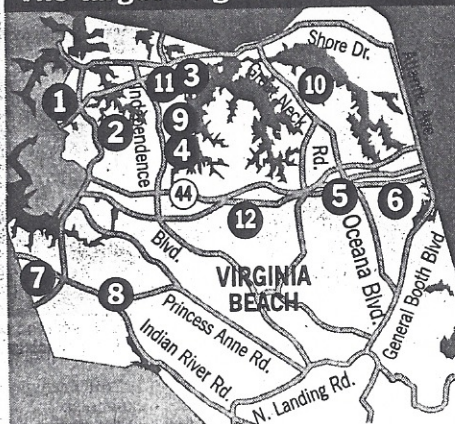
Like Williams' family, Arnold put his roots down in Beechwood. He built the home where he would live when he retired from the Navy in 1965. And that same year, long before the words "neighborhood preservation" were heard, Arnold also purchased a second lot and built another house, which he rents to white tenants.

As far as most Virginia Beach residents go, Arnold qualifies as a longtime member of the community. Arnold, Williams and their 100 or so neighbors are what makes Beechwood one of the more stable residential areas in the city.

"It's a nice neighborhood. We

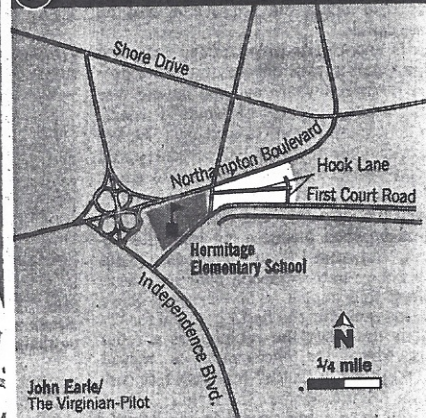
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The target neighborhoods



- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| 1 Burton Station | 7 Queen City |
| 2 Newsome Farm | 8 Newlight |
| 3 Lake Smith | 9 Gracetown |
| 4 Reedtown | 10 Mill Dam |
| 5 Atlantic Park | 11 Beechwood |
| 6 Seatack | 12 Doyletown |

11 Beechwood



About Beechwood

- Houses at start: 30
- Occupied houses deemed uninhabitable: 2
- Population at start: 90
- Percentage of land undeveloped: 31%
- Work completed: Water, sewer, streets, drainage, housing work completed.
- Public money invested: \$1.6 million



This is the sixth of 10 profiles of city's Target Neighborhoods. Next: A look at Mill Dam in Sunday's Beacon.

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never had any trouble," Arnold said. "Nobody's rowdy."

Although Arnold is from Arkansas, he is carrying on one early Beechwood tradition. He is one of the last neighbors to raise fruits and vegetables the way everyone there did years ago.

Although Arnold works as a furniture upholsterer in Norfolk, he also tends to a big vegetable garden from which he sells collards in the fall, and he raises a crop of sweet potatoes on a neighbor's land.

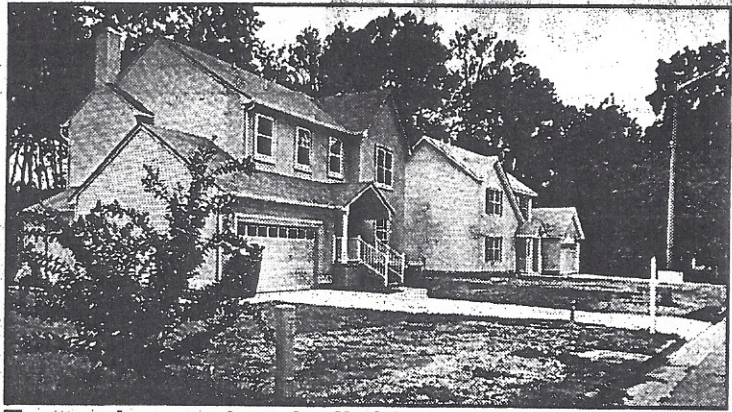
In the old days, all Beechwood residents made their living farming, Williams recalled. Residents carried their produce to the Norfolk market by horse and buggy. Almost every house also had hog and chicken pens out back.

Even as late as the 1960s when Arnold arrived in the neighborhood, Beechwood addresses were rural route numbers in Bayside. "It was just country then, Princess Anne County," he said.

"A couple of trailers were back here," he added, pointing to a wooded area toward Northampton Boulevard. "And our road was a dirt road. When they paved it, they named it Hook Lane."

That's because Hook Lane, Beechwood's main road, makes a "hook" from First Court Road around and back to First Court again.

Though community development funds paved Hook Lane, brought in sewer and water, and helped rehabilitate more than half the houses, it didn't drastically change Beechwood's appearance.



These new homes are located on Hook Lane, Beechwood's main road, which "hooks" from First Court Road around and back to First Court again.

The traffic on Northampton Boulevard and the manicured lawns of Church Point seem far removed from the interior of the neighborhood. The oldest house in Beechwood, a typical Princess Anne County farmhouse built in the 1800s, still stands, although with vinyl siding. Arnold's plots of tilled land and the huge trees, some of them beechwoods, still lend a rural flavor to the neighborhood.

The big difference, Arnold said, is in the amount of everyone's water bill, a shock to folks used to free well water. On the other hand, Arnold's old well still serves to water his crops.

Changes in the infrastructure has not really altered Beechwood's character either, even though some new houses have been built along Hook Lane and First Court Road.

"The neighborhood hasn't changed much," Williams said. "We always had a nice quiet place. Never had any crime. Redevelopment just made it better."

James Arnold, an Arkansas native, bought a lot in Beechwood in 1961. His plots of tilled land — and huge trees, some of the beechwoods — still lend a rural flavor to the neighborhood.

*Staff photos
by STEVE EARLEY*

