

Gracetown: from poor to middle-class

Once mostly black, the racial mix now is pretty evenly split and the number of homes has doubled.

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Used to be that you couldn't get a car into the tiny Gracetown community on a rainy day. Rain would turn the dirt and gravel roads into a thick mud soup.

Even on sunny days, few people ventured back into the primarily poor, black hamlet unless they lived there. There was no mail delivery. No trash pickup. No city water or sewer. No street lights.

Today, there's a buzz of activity in the growing, thriving neighborhood tucked between busy Independence Boulevard and the affluent Thoroughgood subdivision.

First, the city provided all the modern amenities. Then developers began snatching up unbuilt parcels and building modest to middle-income homes. White families are moving in. Many are military and have school-age children.

Just 10 years ago, the city said there were 65 homes in Gracetown and about 96 percent were black occupied. Sixty-nine percent of the land in Gracetown was undeveloped then.

Today, the number of homes has doubled and the racial mix is pretty evenly split. Vacant lots accounted for only about 35 percent of the land last year.

"It's almost completely developed and integrated," said Andrew Friedman, the city's director of Housing and Neighborhood Preservation. "That's success to me."

Twenty years ago, the city decided to invest in 12 low-income, mostly black neighborhoods, like Gracetown, that had been left behind by Virginia Beach's development boom. The city has spent more than \$50 million in federal and local funds since then to extend public water and sewer lines, pave dirt roads and rehabilitate housing in the neighborhoods.

"Our public investment made private investment possible. Public investment cannot sustain a whole neighborhood forever. New, privately built homes mean that people like the neighborhood and want to live there."

"A vital neighborhood is a place where people want to live and stay."

The long-time residents are pleased to finally have sewers as opposed to outdoor privies or septic tanks; city water as opposed to well water; and wide, paved streets.

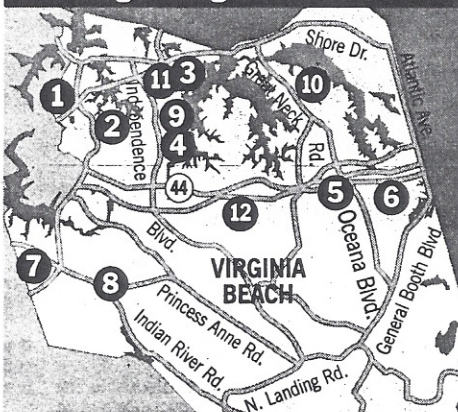
The newcomers, on the other hand, are not aware of the neighborhood's struggle and moved in expecting those basics. They say they settled here because of the affordable homes and excellent schools.



Staff photo by D. KEVIN ELLIOTT

Ten years ago, Gracetown was 96 percent black. Today, the racial mix is pretty evenly split — with many military families and school-age children.

The target neighborhoods



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

On a typical afternoon in Gracetown, you'll find children playing and riding bikes, adults walking dogs, older folks sitting in their yards on lawn chairs. On warm evenings, it's not unusual to find a dozen or so neighbors gathered together outside whiling away the

twilight hours.

Residents report little crime in this close-knit community. In fact, when a house was burglarized by a neighborhood boy, his father made sure his family made amends to the victims.

On a recent afternoon, John Het-

9 Gracetown



About Gracetown

- Houses at start: 65
- Occupied houses deemed uninhabitable: 4
- Population at start: 208
- Percentage of land undeveloped: 59%
- Work completed: Water, sewer, streets, drainage, housing
- Public money invested: \$2.8 million



This is the second of 10 profiles on the city's Target Neighborhoods. Next: A look at Lake Smith in Friday's Beacon.

new home for two years. "It feels like a little community on its own like it's not a part of anywhere else."

One of the men helping Hettel move was another sailor, Fernand Lightfoot, who bought his home six years ago.

"Our main reason for moving here was it's the cheapest housing in a real good school district," Lightfoot said.

New three-bedroom homes go for about \$80,000. The schools include Thoroughgood Elementary, Independence Middle and Cox High schools.

Taking a break from heavy lifting, Lightfoot wandered across the street to visit with 83-year-old Lou is Jefferson. A friend of Jefferson's had stopped by to prune a tree in his backyard.

Jefferson, for 40 years, has lived in a small, one-story house that the city helped rehabilitate. Nearby family still lives in the house in which he was born, which the city also helped rehabilitate.

Many of the Gracetown old-timers are related to each other, either by blood or marriage.

The city, among other things, replaced roofs and windows, installed heating systems and indoor plumbing and put vinyl or aluminum siding or brick facades on homes, with the help of grants and low-interest loans from state and federal sources.

Some homes were so dilapidated that the city demolished them and built the residents new homes. Res-

tel was loading his belongings into a moving van as the Navy was transferring him to Florida. Two neighbors, both black, were helping Hettel, who is white, to move.

"The worst thing is leaving this neighborhood and these neighbors," said Hettel, who rented a

Please see following page

SPECIAL REPORT: TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS



Staff photo by D. KEVIN ELLIOTT

Josephine Wright, 53, left, and her mother Mary White, 75, have lived in this house in Gracetown their whole lives. Both were born in the house that White's father built. Wright's husband, Donald, is civic league president.

Continued from previous page

idents estimated that the city built about five new houses. The Virginia Beach Community Development Corporation's records indicate it built another three homes.

The rest of the new homes were privately built.

With all the new development in the neighborhood, one of the things Josephine Wright, 53, had to get used to was ordinary suburban noises.

"I'd hear screaming and I'd go run to the window thinking something was wrong," said Wright, who's lived in Gracetown all her life. "But it was just children playing, which we never had."

Wright's home, one of the first Gracetown homes built more than 100 years ago by her grandfather, is somewhat secluded. It sits in the back of the neighborhood surrounded by some vacant land that her grandfather used to farm.

While the long-time residents for the most part are pleased with the changes in their community, they say it was not an easy road getting there.

"It's been a struggle, but a good struggle," said Donald Wright, Josephine's husband who is both civic league president and a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee that oversaw the city improve-

ments.

Improvements were slow in coming, Donald Wright said, which frustrated many residents.

"The city said they were running out of federal HUD (Housing and Urban Development) money," he said. "But why did they have to wait on HUD? Why couldn't they use city money? Anytime they want to do something in a black neighborhood, it has to be HUD money."

"We're not a welfare neighborhood. We're a working class neighborhood. We pay taxes like everybody else in the city, but we had to wait for HUD."

Still, residents aren't thrilled that they didn't get sidewalks as promised and curbs and gutters instead of swales (shallow grassy openings). And some say the streets are too high, causing their yards to flood during heavy rain. Some think the city owes them a traffic light at Independence Boulevard.

Some residents also weren't thrilled with the whopping increases in real estate tax bills. Two residents say taxes on vacant lots they own increased 20-fold in the last 15 years.

But that's directly tied to the assessed values of their land, which have increased proportionately, and that pleases them.

"It's the price you pay for improvements," Donald Wright said.

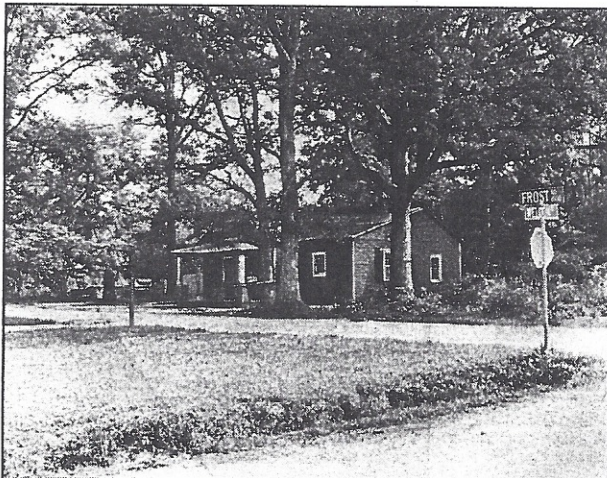


Photo provided by City of Virginia Beach

This 1987 picture shows the then-secluded nature of Gracetown — with dirt roads, no city water or sewer and no street lights.