

SPECIAL REPORT: TARGET NEIGHBORHOODS

# Rural life keeps families in Mill Dam

Unlike other areas, the small neighborhood includes several families who have lived there for generations.

BY MARY REID BARROW  
STAFF WRITER

When John Haynes moved back to his family home in Mill Dam in 1975, the water oak sapling that his father had planted in the back yard had grown healthy and strong.

Today, the big oak could be a symbol of the strength of Mill Dam, a small neighborhood of 100 or more folks off Mill Dam Road near its intersection with Great Neck Road.

Unlike many other Beach residential areas, several families who live in Mill Dam have been there for generations. They lend their neighborhood a stability that is rare in a town where residents come and go at a rapid pace and there are few natives.

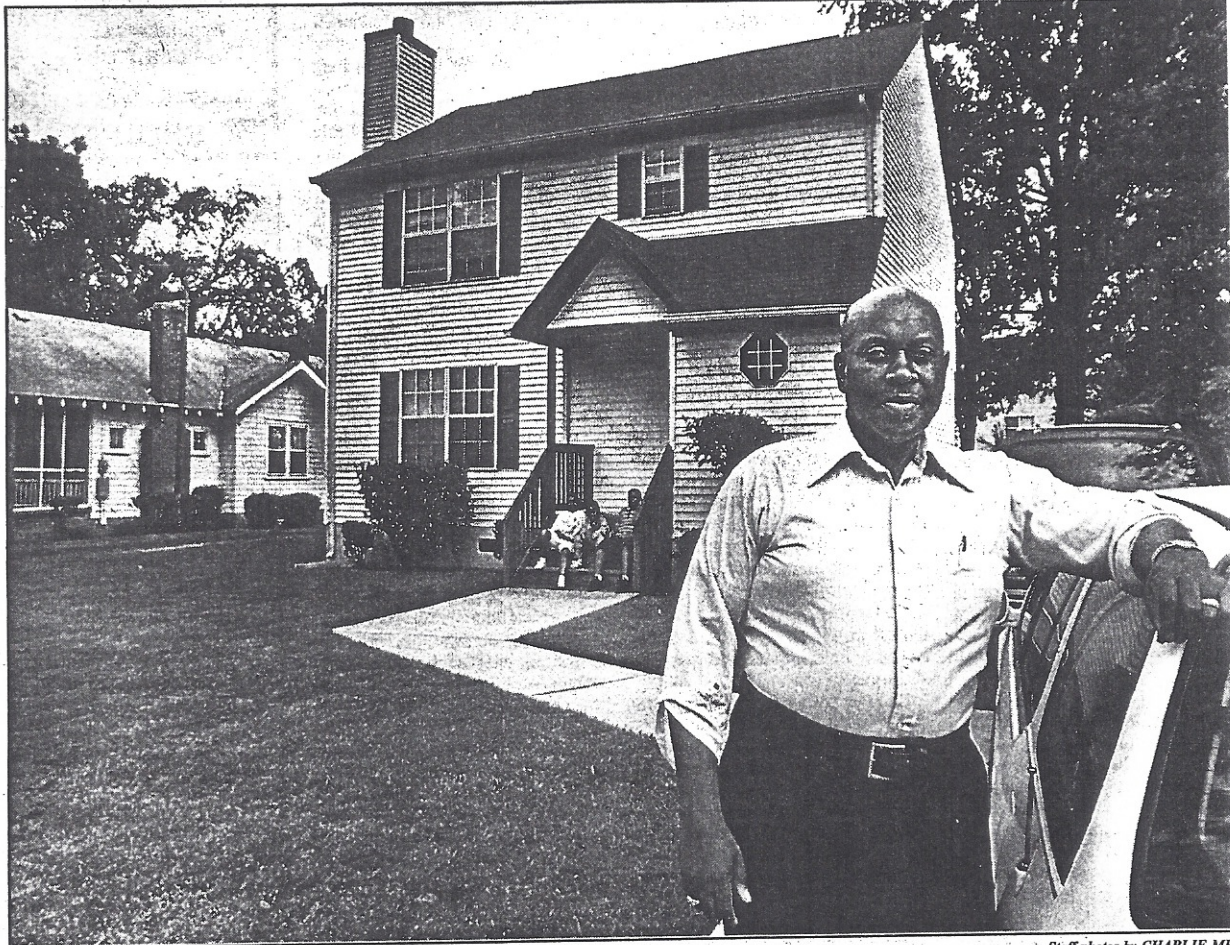
Twenty years ago, the city decided to invest in 12 low-income, mostly black neighborhoods, like Mill Dam, that had been left behind by Virginia Beach's development boom. The city has spent more than \$50 million in federal and local funds since then to extend public water and sewer lines, pave dirt roads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

Despite some new residents and homes that came as a result of redevelopment and regardless of the proximity of busy Great Neck Road, Mill Dam is a peaceful place that seems miles away from the hustle and bustle of suburban Virginia Beach. The neighborhood's longtime residents have maintained a semblance of the pastoral life that's been characteristic of Mill Dam since it was established before the turn of the century.

Mill Dam was settled in the late 1800s by black families from all over the area. The land was mostly cropland then, and early residents all made their living through farming. Haynes' grandparents came from as far away as the Eastern Shore to live in the little Princess Anne County neighborhood.

Even when Haynes moved away and went into the Army as a young man, he was determined to return to Mill Dam one day. "I wanted my children to have the same upbringing I had, the country environment," he said.

Two decades ago, when Haynes came home, the country environment was more pronounced than it is now. Haynes recalled he even had a rural address: "Route 1, Box 255, London Bridge, Va."



Staff photos by CHARLIE MEYER

John Haynes, whose grandparents settled with other blacks in this rural part of then-Princess Anne County in the 1800s, returned to that same neighborhood to raise his family in 1975. On the steps of his home in the 1500 block of Mill Dam Road are three of his children, Ginovia, Jo'sef and Pa...

Haynes carries on the rural tradition by raising corn, string beans and other vegetables in his yard, as do some other neighbors.

When Haynes moved back, he remodeled his family home next door for an aunt who still lives there today. It became more expensive to maintain the old house than to rebuild it. Now he has a new house on the same site.

"That's where redevelopment helped me out," Haynes said.

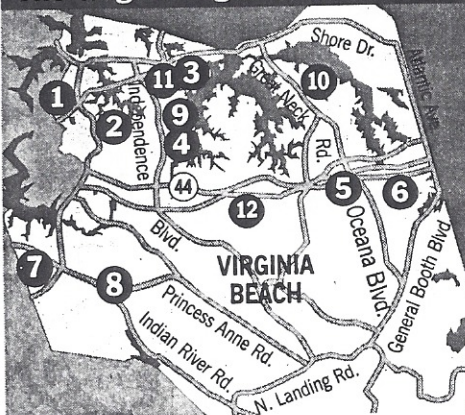
Haynes, who is a bus operator for Tidewater Regional Transit, is president of the Mill Dam Civic League. He admits he wasn't much in favor of some aspects of the neighborhood preservation program.

"It costs us more money for water," he said. "But the convenience of it has been good. I was one of the ones who said we didn't want city water, but I didn't have a choice and it really has been good."

Some will tell you they don't like the taste of city water. Neighbor Vassie Ferebee drinks only bottled water these days, she said.

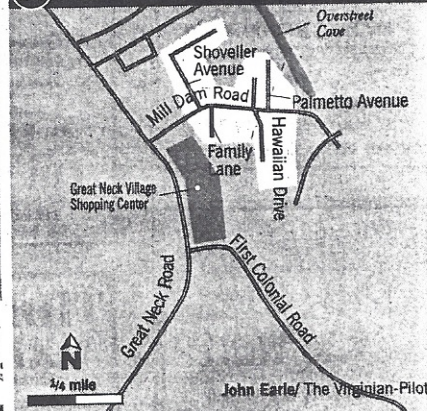
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## The target neighborhoods



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

## 10 Mill Dam



### About Mill Dam

- Houses at start: 35
- Occupied houses deemed uninhabitable: 3
- Population at start: 112
- Percentage of land undeveloped: 44%
- Work completed: Water, sewer, streets, drainage, housing work completed.
- Public money invested: \$1.7 million



This is the seventh of 10 profiles on city Target Neighborhoods. Next: A look at Doyletown in Wednesday's Beacon.





Staff photo by CHARLIE MEADS

**This four-generation family still lives side by side in Mill Dam on Family Lane, the name they chose for the street. They are (from left): Lucille Grimstead with her granddaughter Gwendolyn Askew, her daughter Mae Frances Forbes and her great-granddaughter Christe Askew.**

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Other than the drinking water, there are no complaints. The dirt lanes have been paved. Many existing homes were rebuilt or renovated and the whole neighborhood was connected to city sewer lines. Since the work was completed, new homes have been begun to crop up, particularly along Shoveller Avenue.

"But everybody who has moved here is real nice," Haynes said. "It's been a pretty stable neighborhood. Most everybody is a churchgoer. That's what has maintained the quality of life and the peace we enjoy."

What has changed the most is the increasing commercial development along Great Neck Road and a portion of Mill Dam Road, where a small group of offices and a townhouse complex now stand. The neighbors are determined that no high rises, no apartments and no office buildings will encroach any further on their neighborhood.

"We are still maintaining our quality of life in the midst of development," Haynes said.

"Newcomer" Gwendolyn Hogue echoed the thought. She moved to Mill Dam in the early 1950s. She looks after her grandchildren every day while their

mother is at work. "It's real quiet," Hogue said, "a good place to raise children."

Mae Frances Forbes' family, like Haynes', is another long standing presence in Mill Dam. In fact, five generations of Forbeses have helped to make Mill Dam the stable neighborhood it is.

"The old home place was right over there," Forbes said, gesturing toward the other side of the street.

Owned by the oldest generation, now deceased, the old home is no longer standing. But on Forbes' side of the street, three families, representing four generations still live side by side.

At least one child in each generation, as he or she grew up, built a home near their parents. When community development funds paved their street, Forbes and her relatives were given the option to name the road. They settled appropriately on "Family Lane."

"We are a friendly neighborhood," said Forbes' mother, Lucille Grimstead, who moved to Mill Dam when she married in 1935. "We all love each other."

Haynes said that the majority of residents are happy.

"We've really been blessed," he said. "We're not rich, nowhere near rich, but we have a good life here."



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