

NEIGHBORHOODS: NORFOLK FROM 1845 - 1887

In 1845, with a population of more than 10,000, Norfolk successfully petitioned to incorporate as a City. In 1847, funds were established for the building of a new City Hall and Court House. Two years later, the City Gas Works was established and lighting was installed for the first time. However, municipal water was not yet available, and Norfolk continued experiencing major fires in the commercial areas. It was not until the late 1850's that the Richmond legislature allowed the establishment of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad. As a result, Norfolk did not become a major business center prior to the Civil War, but remained a port city.

Slow growth of the economy had contributed to slow population growth as well. By 1850, however, the population had doubled. Of the 14,000 people residing in Norfolk, 4,300 were slaves, and an additional 1,000 were freed blacks. In June of 1855, the U.S.S. Benjamin Franklin, docked in the port of Norfolk. The ship brought along mosquitos from St. Thomas in the West Indies carrying Yellow Fever. A Norfolk crewman died of the disease in July, and by August hundreds of people were fleeing the city. Neighboring communities began imposing quarantines against Norfolk residents fearing the spread of the fever to their communities. At the peak of the epidemic, 100 people were dying a day within the City of Norfolk. It is estimated that over 2,000 people died during 1855. Norfolk did not regain its 1850 population level again until after the Civil War.

By the opening of the Civil War, Norfolk had become a moderate-sized city with substantial public and private buildings interspersed among more modest brick and wooden structures. Many citizens were relatively prosperous, although poverty was also common, especially among the freed blacks. During the Civil War, destruction was avoided by surrender to Union forces. Mayor William Lamb headed a group of citizens who surrendered the city to General John E. Wool. Prior to meeting General Wool, Mayor Lamb hid Norfolk's solid silver mace beneath a fireplace hearth. This action saved the historic mace from capture and possibly from being melted down by Federal Troops. Norfolk is believed to be the only city to have had a complete silver mace in its possession since Colonial days. Federal occupation for Norfolk citizens meant living under martial law for most of the period between 1862 to 1865. Daily life was disrupted as public and private buildings were confiscated for Federal use. Commerce and business in the city virtually shut down. A blockade of Union ships effectively prevented the shipment of goods to and from Norfolk. Norfolk was in an economic shambles by the end of the war.

Significant gains in land area and population began taking place in the 1880's. A major factor in this growth was the installation of a street railway system. In 1866 a franchise was granted to the Norfolk City Railroad Company to lay railway tracks along the city streets. The first tracks were installed on Main Street in 1869. As the rail line was extended to service outlying areas, the pace of suburban development quickened. Under the impact of the street railway and increased commerce, the downtown area began to expand. Residential areas as well as the commercial district were changed by the trolley system. Residents began moving to new developments outside the city and commuting to work. As these suburbs grew in size and population, they were annexed to the City of Norfolk.

The first in a series of Annexations took place in 1887. The Brambleton area comprised the two older suburbs of Mayfield, Georgetown, and the 245-acre farm of George Bramble. Residential building in this area had begun about 1870. By 1887 about 1,500 people lived there. In modern terms, the boundaries were: east from the 1845 boundary to the intersection of Corprew and Madison Avenues through the Norfolk State University campus, and south to the Eastern Branch of the Elizabeth River from Bagnall Road and Corprew Avenue.

Boroughs Established:

Brambleton

Moton Park

Norfolk State University

Ruffner School