

Hilton Village: An enduring sense of place for 100 years

Designed as a planned community for shipyard workers during WWI, Hilton Village continues to attract working families.



By **Mark St. John Erickson**

At a Glance

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In the months after America entered World War I in April 1917, few places saw such dramatic change as Hampton Roads.

Though already home to the Army's biggest coastal fort and the Navy's most vital shipyard, the region was reshaped by the birth of pioneering Langley Field in Hampton and a mammoth new naval base in Norfolk.

Then there was the new Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation in Newport News, which drew hundreds of thousands of soldiers from across the country for the war in Europe, plus thousands of additional officers, men and women to run the giant staging camps and keep the pipeline flowing.

More change swept through the Norfolk Navy Yard — which added not just one but three new dry docks — and the nation’s largest private yard in Newport News — which ramped up to meet contracts worth \$2 billion in today’s dollars.

So feverish was the pace at Newport News that its ranks of shipbuilders rocketed from 7,600 to 12,512 during the war, while the city’s population city leapt from 26,246 to 47,013.

Yet even after erecting a small city of tents and barracks and opening his home to boarders, shipyard chief Homer L. Ferguson couldn’t hire the thousands of extra hands he needed.

Not until he dressed down a Senate subcommittee in early 1918 did Washington grasp the depth of the housing crisis, leading in hours to the funds for historic Hilton Village.

Designed and built for workers, the pioneering neighborhood was the first federal housing project — and 100 years later it has been cited by planners and architectural historians as a landmark achievement.

“Newport News was just so fortunate that all these visionaries showed up and made something like this happen,” says John V. Quarstein, author of two new books on the groundbreaking streetcar suburb.

“These were forward-thinking people — all trying to create what they saw as a perfect place to live.”

Wartime crush

Just how many people swarmed over Hampton Roads during WWI may be impossible to calculate, but some sense of the overwhelming tide of soldiers, sailors, airmen, shipbuilders and construction workers can be seen in the following numbers:

Nearly 800,000 men moved through the staging camps of the HRPE, with some 275,000 passing through Camp Stuart in Newport News alone — making it the nation’s biggest single embarkation camp and requiring the labor of more than 6,000 builders before some 300 barracks were completed, the Daily Press reported.

More than 6,000 other builders toiled to complete the giant black powder and shell-loading plant at Penniman near Williamsburg, the paper noted in May 1918, and sharp-eyed soldiers could look from its wharves to the distant York River anchorage of the Atlantic Fleet, where dozens of ships trained more than 45,000 sailors.

At Norfolk Army Base, more than 9,000 workers labored on the new HRPE piers, while some 3,000 others erected the warehouses and barracks of the HRPE’s aviation staging area at Camp Morrison in Newport News, the newspaper reported

Some 3,000 more converted the run-down buildings of the 1907 Jamestown Exposition into the first structures of the giant new Naval Operating Base, Hampton Roads, but it still required thousands more to build the city of barracks needed to house the first training class, which numbered nearly 10,000 sailors and then climbed to 13,000 just a month later.

By the war's end there were enough barracks at Sewells Point to house more than 34,000 people.

At the Norfolk Navy Yard, the number of shipbuilders exploded, vaulting from 2,718 to 11,234 — with thousands of additional workers called in to construct the huge new dry docks and wartime improvements, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum Curator Diane L. Cripps says.

“One could earn twelve dollars a day with no experience,” recalled novelist Thomas Wolfe in 1929, when he drew upon his wartime experiences at Langley and Newport News for his famous book, “Look Homeward, Angel.”

“One could assume the duties of a carpenter with only a hammer, a saw and a square. No questions asked.”

Housing crunch

That huge influx of people made housing not just scarce but almost impossible to find, forcing the Newport News yard — like the Army, Navy and many contractors — to resort to temporary barracks as well as three sprawling tent colonies raised along Washington Avenue.

“Hot-bedding” became a standard practice among boarding-house matrons and landlords eager to exploit the unending shortage of rooms, Quarstein says, describing how some tenants would climb into a bunk not long after its previous occupant got up.

“People who had never before thought of taking in any roomers or boarders could not resist this opportunity,” the city's Municipal Survey reported in 1919.

“Every little shanty became a habitable home and a veritable gold mine to its owner.”

Even before America entered the war, Ferguson was building houses, too, starting with dozens for black shipbuilders and then adding 75 for white employees, reports E.O. Smith in “History of the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company: From October 1880 to Dec. 31, 1934.”

Then the yard bought 92 existing homes for use as rentals, converted a new drafting annex into a 116-man barracks and turned a Buckroe Beach hotel into a shipbuilders' hostel.

Still, it wasn't until his testy appearance before a Senate shipbuilding subcommittee on Jan. 8, 1918, that Ferguson convinced the government to fund a bolder and more far-reaching solution.

“It is just as necessary for the government to build houses for shipyard workers as it is for soldiers. It must do it if it wants to get ships,” he said, describing how the housing crisis had kept him from hiring 5,000 sorely wanted builders.

“If housing is needed that badly, the government can get the money within 48 hours ... it can get it before you leave the city,” Virginia Sen. Thomas Martin replied, according to the Daily Press.

“Then I’ll stay,” Ferguson said. “I’ve been trying for nine months to get housing at Newport News and have talked to government officials until I am sick.”

High ambition

In reality, the shipyard chief had done much more than talk before his Washington, D.C., visit.

Aided by famed city planner and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. — who had helped build a pioneering Garden City development in Queens, N.Y. — he’d already laid the groundwork just north of the yard for a massive new housing project.

By January 1918 his hand-picked planning team was so far advanced that he optioned a 200-acre tract chosen for its level open ground, proximity to the yard and access through a planned extension of a city trolley line along what it now Warwick Boulevard, Quarstein says.

Noted town planner Henry Vincent Hubbard came highly recommended by Olmsted, who had helped his former student obtain a prominent position at Harvard more than a decade earlier.

Massachusetts architect Joseph D. Leland III had an outstanding reputation, too, and after his departure to head the Labor Department’s new housing bureau he was seamlessly replaced by Francis Y. Joannes, a New Yorker whose skills ranged from prominent rehabilitation and Garden City projects to such landmark structures as the Justice Department building in Washington, D.C.

Engineer Francis H. Bulot was the least-known member of the team, but the fact that so much expertise was assembled from the beginning distinguished the project as “an outstanding innovation to the new city planning movement,” Hubbard later wrote.

The cooperation of an architect, engineer and town planner “is an ideal one,” he explained, “reflecting as it does the three great requirements of any such development: beauty and utility of houses and public buildings; adaptation of public utilities to use, to local conditions, and to the consideration of the economy; and beauty of ground and adaptation to topography and to the life and growth of the community.”

Hired in October 1917, the trio rejected the idea of tenement or temporary housing early on, reflecting

Hubbard's conviction that it would be "little better than scrap" when the war ended.

By Dec. 24 they were making plans for what Hubbard described as "a complete town; proper houses, rightly situated and arranged; roads, water, sewage, fire protection, stores, markets, churches, schools, theaters, club houses, parks, playgrounds, play fields and so on.

"Any government industrial housing which does not find all these things already provided must provide, and if necessary, pay for them itself," he wrote.

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"And that made it a model for other projects."

Masterful plan

The author of a pioneering 1917 book revered as "the bible" of landscape design, Hubbard reshaped the Darling Tract simply but effectively, using a single main street as the spine of the development and then adding a series of smaller, more intimate side streets that unfolded to form distinct parts of the neighborhood.

Varied lot sizes and setbacks added to each street's character, avoiding sameness in favor of personality.

"This was the latest thinking, but it wasn't a high-brow thing. A lot of it is very straightforward," says architect Jeff Stodghill, who's lived and worked in Hilton for 27 years.

"It's a masterful scheme of streets that uses very simple ways to set the houses off and create these welcoming vistas."

Joannes was "fabulously skilled," too, Stodghill says, and his carefully constructed alphabet of design variations connected all the structures yet still treated them as individuals.

Steep-pitched slate roofs inspired by the traditional English cottage united them all, but variations in their

rooflines, cladding, height and orientation of the lots gave them a uniqueness that defied the tract-housing approach.

That effect was multiplied by well-orchestrated walkways, driveways, porches and entrance doors as well as the decision to mix duplexes and row houses among the detached single-family structures.

Inside the relatively small footprints, Joannes laid out the rooms, doors and windows thoughtfully, too, teasing out a greater sense of space by making the interiors function at an unusually high level.

“When you walk into one of his houses, the doors are always in the right place. The windows are always in the right place. So from a design and comfort standpoint, everything works,” Stodghill says.

“These things don’t just happen on their own. They come from very refined and well-thought-out plans.”

Indoor plumbing, electricity and sewer were not new in 1918, he adds.

But integrating them into nearly 500 relatively humble houses made Hilton stand out from the start.

“The houses were designed from the outset to meet the incomes of skilled shipyard workers,” he says.

“And all the amenities they had at this modest scale was pretty unusual.”

Landmark status

Hilton wasn’t the only Hampton Roads housing project sparked by WWI.

The government built both the Cradock and Truxton neighborhoods in Portsmouth for Navy shipbuilders along routes served by streetcars, notes “Buildings of Virginia: Tidewater and Piedmont,” a 2002 study published by the Society of Architectural Historians.

It also constructed the Riverside Apartments in Newport News, where four giant blocks designed by Johannes provided one- and two-room apartments within walking distance of the shipyard gates for nearly 2,000 workers.

Still, the pioneering project at Hilton ranked as the first of its kind — and it quickly became a benchmark for other wartime housing developments across the nation.

Cited in later years by both the SAH and the American Planning Association — which named it one of the nation’s “10 Great Neighborhoods” in 2009 — it joined the state and national landmark registers in the late 1960s.

In 2011, the former chief of the National Park Service’s Historic American Buildings Survey singled it out in Old-House Journal as “the first — and possibly best — federally funded housing development in American history.”

What’s so remarkable a century after it started, Stodghill says, is how quickly even this landmark project was driven by the wartime housing crisis.

Three months after Ferguson appeared before Congress, laborers began clearing the wooded tract, and by July 4, 1918, the shipyard chief was presiding over the formal opening of the first houses, the Daily Press reported.

“They built the whole thing in less than a year,” Stodghill says. “It’s phenomenal when you realize how fast it all happened.”

Equally impressive is the decisive role Ferguson played in elevating the character of Hilton for his workers, Quarstein says.

Though speed was crucial, the quality of life was vitally important, too, prompting him to sign on some of the nation’s leading planners.

He also weighed in along the way, asking them to talk to the shipbuilders’ wives and use their input.

“Whatever you could do to make your workers better — that’s what Ferguson was about,” says Quarstein, a longtime former resident of the neighborhood.

“He knew the importance of investing in people — because that’s how you attracted and retained the best workers.”

Upcoming events

John V. Quarstein will sign copies of “Hilton Village: America’s First Public Planned Community” 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dec. 16 at The Mariners’ Museum Gift Shop, 100 Museum Drive, Newport News (757-596-2222) and 2-5 p.m. Dec. 17 at the Hilton Village Woman’s Club, 18 Main St., Newport News (757-596-3722).

More events are planned for 2018, including a centennial celebration in July. Stay tuned for more Daily Press coverage.

ONLINE: Go to dailypress.com/history to see archival photos and video on Hilton Village

Erickson can be reached by phone at 757-247-4783.

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