

Portsmouth historic districts celebrate centennial anniversaries

Country's early government-planned communities reach a milestone

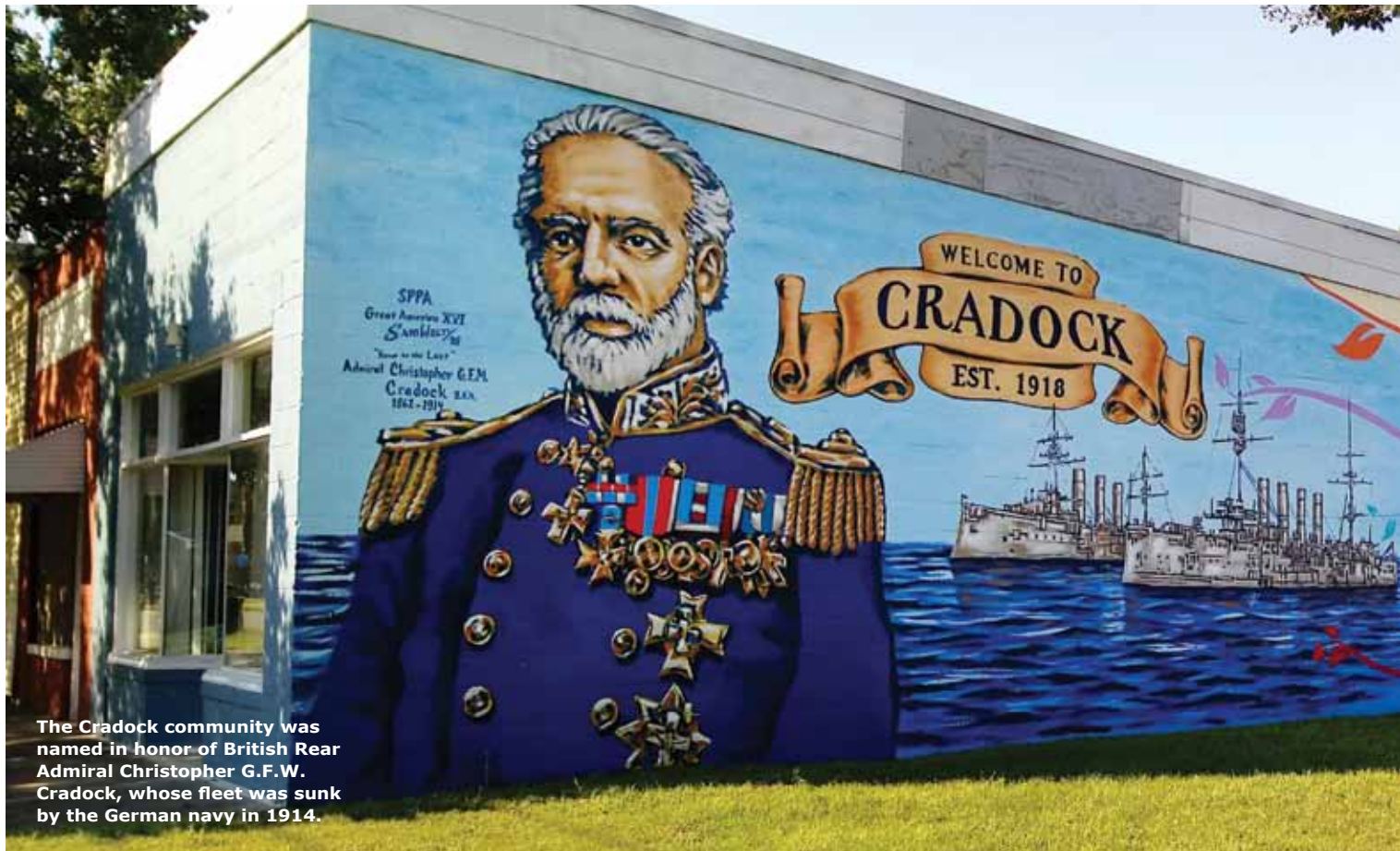
PORTSMOUTH IS RENOWNED for its diverse historic districts. Popular tourist attractions, each of them tell the story of the seafaring, shipbuilding city situated on the Elizabeth River. The city's oldest historic district, Olde Towne, was the first district established and represents Portsmouth's earliest surviving history. The city has six historic districts (Olde Towne, Park View, Port Norfolk, Downtown, Cradock and Truxtun) – all listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. Each community has distinguishing features such as distinctive architecture, cobblestone walking paths, ghost stories and gorgeous water views; however, the Cradock and Truxtun neighborhoods are the only 20th century districts currently listed in Portsmouth and date back to circa 1918.

The historic Cradock community celebrated its centennial anniversary this year in 2018. Cradock and Truxtun were among the first government-developed housing subdivisions designed for shipyard workers during World War I. The design concept, for both of these

planned residential developments, is known today as new urbanism. The communities were designed to be self-contained; a place where residents would live, easily commute to work, play and shop without having to venture too far from their own backyards.

A hundred years of wear and tear . . . a hundred years of housing a transient and ever-changing population, and a hundred years of human history can take a serious toll on a community. And, such is the case with both Cradock and Truxtun. So, here is a tale of two neighborhoods, originally created to be separate but equal, in close proximity to each other and how both have weathered a century.

“At its core, the Cradock neighborhood has everything a modern neighborhood is designed to include,” said David Somers, who serves as vice president of the Cradock Civic League. He also chairs the history committee and serves as the league's treasurer. He says the old neighborhood has been in decline since the 1970s. “Walkable streets, parks, a nature park nearby, designated bike lanes, an active civic



The Cradock community was named in honor of British Rear Admiral Christopher G.F.W. Cradock, whose fleet was sunk by the German navy in 1914.

Afton Square, the heart of the Cradock community, was the site of some of the anniversary celebrations.



league, schools and churches make for a quality neighborhood. But an increase in vacant properties, decline in homeownership, the loss of the high school, the flight of the key businesses, absentee landlords, aging structures, an aging demographic, etc. all have had a negative impact on the Cradock community.”

Despite the issues Somers cites, he sees a renewed effort to revitalize the neighborhood. “Engagement between the civic league and City of Portsmouth officials has increased. Over the past year, I have

seen some of the older homes brought up to code or demolished and rebuilt/remodeled and sold. The Portsmouth Redevelopment and Housing Authority (PRHA) has invested resources into the removal of blighted multi-family housing units, and our civic league began neighborhood improvements starting in the center of the community,” Somers added. Meetings between the civic league and a city-appointed liaison have had some positive results including improvements to the historic Afton Square – the heart of Cradock.

The Cradock Civic League was instrumental in planning and executing the community’s centennial celebration. “The Civic League took steps, as early as 2016, to improve the appearance of the neighborhood ahead of the 100-year mark.” Somers said the league partnered with Wheelabrator of Portsmouth and the City of Portsmouth to rehabilitate the gazebo in Afton Square, and beautify the surrounding landscape. Other improvements included work on a WWI memorial in partnership with Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 993. “A rededication ceremony for the memorial was staged and kicked off the centennial celebration. We created commemorative pieces that were presented to the commanding officer of the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, shipyard volunteers and Portsmouth Mayor John L. Rowe, Jr.” Other centennial observances and activities were held including:

- A short Cradock Historic District video
- Spring festival
- July Patriotic Salute and bike parade
- Come Home to Cradock (Cradock High School alumni event)

“Christmas in Cradock will be held in December (2018). Our current plan is to stage another event in the spring of 2019 to wrap up the year-long observance.” Somers noted that the events were well-attended, showcased the community’s connection to the shipyard and gained attention to the district’s history, its evolution and future.

When asked to describe his beloved Cradock, the civic league vice president said, “Cradock is a neighborhood in transition. It’s rich in history at the local, regional and national level. With the proper attention and investment, it will once again be the ideal place for families with all the amenities first envisioned by the district’s designers. Cradock’s final story has yet to be written.”

The Truxtun Historic District will observe its centennial in 2019. The 43-acre community of Truxtun, named for early naval hero Thomas Truxtun, was constructed between 1918 and 1920, and like Cradock was designed to be a self-contained pedestrian community.



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A predecessor of the new urbanism. Truxtun was the first wartime government housing project in the United States built exclusively for African-American shipyard workers and their families. Truxtun was built to accommodate the surge in the workforce as a result of WWI. The houses rented for \$17.50 per month payable to the federal government. In addition to the houses, the plans for Truxtun originally included a school, church, community house, garage and 35 stores. Only the school, Truxtun Elementary School, was actually built in 1920.

Wanda Watford Gardner, a former Portsmouth native, reflected on the years she spent living in Truxtun and the adjoining neighborhood Arcadia Heights. “I liked the sense of community family. Knowing and caring about your neighbors makes Truxtun special,” said Gardner. Chester Benton, president of Historical Truxtun Civic League, remembers fondly the old days of a bustling, participating village where teachers, doctors, lawyers and other professionals lived right next door. It was a place where children could play while they were watched closely by friends, family and neighbors. Benton reminisces about a time when a kid could walk a couple of blocks to get a haircut at the local barber shop or get takeout food from several different mom and pop outlets.

“I was born in Truxtun on Hobson Street,” said Benton, who serves as the general manager for radio stations WPCE/WGPL/WBXB . . . The New Christian Broadcasting Company. “In the 50s and 60s, Truxtun had it all. It was that village from the old African proverb. Families were very close and looked out for each other,” he



The Cradock Civic League and VFW Post 993 restored a World War I memorial in the community as part of the centennial celebration.

concluded. “I attended Truxtun Elementary School and remember many teachers and administrators including John Carey and Hattie Russell,” Benton reminisced.

Attorney Ann Gourdine, another life-long resident of Truxtun, said she spent her entire life in Truxtun – except for 13 years she spent seeing the world. She concurs with Benton’s assessment of the kind of community the old neighborhood was. “The land stays the same, it is the inhabitants that change. The character of Truxtun, in my childhood, was a nurturing place. Families in my immediate neighborhood kept an eye out for each other. I could safely play outside for long periods of time,” said Gourdine.

Benton says Truxtun began to decline in the 1970s when many families migrated to Cavalier Manor and other regions of the city and when so many of the businesses closed or moved. “Lucy Overton and Amanda Connor, members of the Old Truxtun Community League



The design concept for the Cradock and Truxtun communities reflect what is now referred to as “new urbanism.”



Both the Cradock and Truxtun communities were designed to be self-contained and encourage walkability.

and the Wilson Ward Civic League worked with city officials to maintain Truxtun’s identity and its viability as a great place to live,” Benton expressed. “The evolution of Truxtun has had its positive and negative periods,” Gourdine interjected. “Regardless of the economic, racial and other factors Truxtun was plagued with, things are slowly turning from the negative to the positive.”

Despite the dramatic changes over the decades, Gourdine believes Truxtun remains a very special neighborhood. “I love its close proximity to my job. I have jogged, biked or taken the bus downtown. The neighbors are welcoming, don’t mind the occasional loud party or clothes hanging on a clothesline,” she answered. “Truxtun is special, not only because it’s the oldest planned neighborhood for African-Americans in the U.S., but also because of the solid foundation (familial, educational, social) the community provided.” Gourdine also

noted that children from the old neighborhood were well-equipped to maximize their potential. She stated there are many generations of well-educated and accomplished professionals that came out of Truxtun Elementary School, which fostered an environment of excellence, steadfastness and thirst for knowledge.

The Historic Truxtun Civic League is planning a host of events in celebration of its centennial anniversary including:

- Truxtun Notes . . . series of 90-second radio vignettes
- Awards Dinner (February 2019)
- Historic Truxtun Memorabilia Exhibit (April – May)
- Truxtun Anniversary Weekend (May)

Notwithstanding the progression and/or regression that occurred in both Truxtun and Cradock, and no matter the reasons behind the phenomena, the federal government’s original concepts for these two historic communities remain unchanged. Two neighborhoods, different from one another, each unique. Wholly contained communities designed to enable residents to interact, commute to and from work easily, take leisurely strolls around the community for both pleasure and exercise, and shop for grocery or get a haircut right in the neighborhood. Sounds like the formula for the best kind of neighborhoods.

Despite their longevity, community dreams unrealized and explosive transitioning over the years, Cradock and Truxtun are still very much alive, thriving and inching toward major comebacks. Stay tuned.

Sources. Information was drawn from interviews with individuals and from the historic sections of two city of Portsmouth publications: Cradock Historic District Design Guidelines (<https://bit.ly/2IZij1h>) and Truxtun Historic District Guidelines (<https://bit.ly/2J0njGe>).



About the author: Sharon Riddick Hoggard is the marketing manager in the city of Portsmouth’s Department of Marketing, Communications and Tourism.



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