



I. OLDE TOWNE: HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE





This 1892 bird's eye view of Portsmouth shows commercial and military waterfront operations as well as the railway lines that served the port. The growth fueled by these activities spurred new residential development at the outer edges of the city which can also be seen in this view.

A. Brief Overview of the City and the Historic Districts

1. General Portsmouth History

The City of Portsmouth is a deepwater port located on the Elizabeth River in the Tidewater region of Virginia. It is considered a part of the harbor and population center known as Hampton Roads, the nation's thirty-third largest metropolitan statistical area. Its roots as a transportation center, a constant throughout the city's history, began when Adam Thoroughgood established a ferry connection between Portsmouth and Norfolk in 1636.

The town of Portsmouth was not formally established and platted until 1752 when Colonel William Crawford gave approximately 65 acres of his plantation land. Over the next 250 years, the city grew to its present size of 26 square miles. The first shipyard, "Gosport," was established south of town in 1767 and began Portsmouth's long association with naval history.

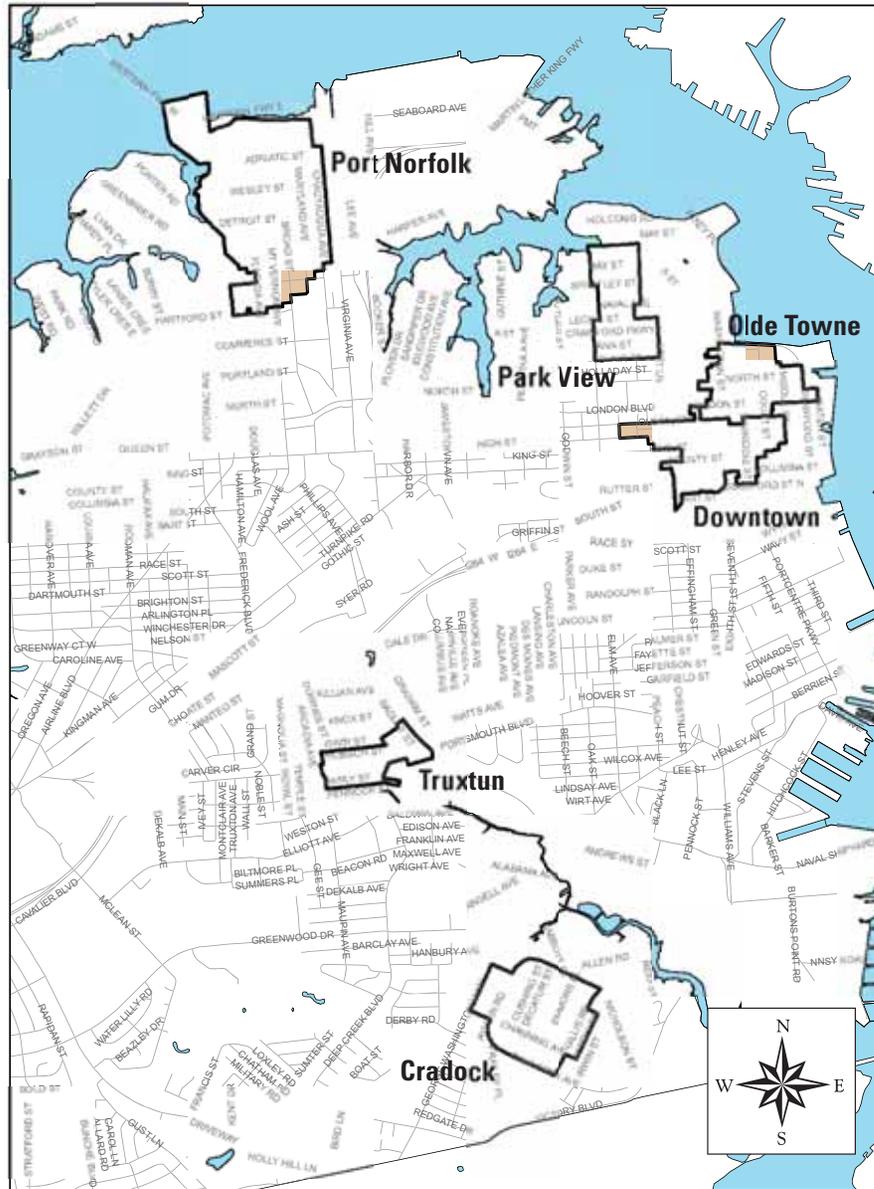
Named for the famed English port, Virginia's Portsmouth is home to many of the United States' maritime firsts. These include the first federal shipyard and drydock in the nation and construction of the first ironclad ship,

first battleship, and first aircraft carrier. At least one source cites Portsmouth as having one of the greatest concentrations of architecturally significant buildings between Alexandria and Charleston. Portsmouth's current historic districts are representative of its long association with transportation and shipbuilding. Each represents an era in the development of this old and important Virginia city.



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Portsmouth's historic districts are distributed throughout the city. Olde Towne, Downtown, Park View and Port Norfolk are located close to the water in this port city. Cradock and Truxtun, the city's two planned developments for shipyard workers, were located on the outskirts of the city in the early twentieth century.



A. Brief Overview of the City and the Historic Districts *continued*

2. Portsmouth's Historic Districts

Olde Towne was the first established historic district in the city. It represents the town's earliest surviving history and is the only example of an early townscape in the Hampton Roads area. Portsmouth's other residential historic districts have their own stories to tell as well.

Port Norfolk and Park View were both developed in the closing years of the nineteenth century as Portsmouth assumed the position of a regional transportation center. These streetcar suburbs, built on former farmland, provided a healthful and attractive living condition for the middle-class workers involved in the growing shipping and railroad industries taking Virginia products to far-distant ports.

Cradock and Truxtun are the only twentieth-century districts presently listed in Portsmouth and date to approximately 1918. Both were built as projects of the U.S. Housing Corporation to house shipyard workers during World War I. They are significant as they are among the first government-funded and planned communities in the country. The design concept of these districts reflect what we today call "new urbanism," a wholly contained community where



The Benthall-Brooks Row in the 400 block of Crawford Street is characteristic of Olde Towne Portsmouth's Greek Revival residential architecture of the early nineteenth century. The house to the left retains its original portico while the house to the right has a two-bay porch with Victorian influences.

residents could live, play, and shop within an easy commute of the workplace provided by public transportation.

The newest historic district in the city is the Downtown Portsmouth Historic District that encompasses the original town plat. Most of the buildings date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of rapid growth for the city. Unlike the other listed districts that are residential in nature, this district is mainly commercial and anchored by the city's main street, High Street.

The buildings in this district represent a variety of service-oriented uses and diversity of ethnicity and religion.

Individually listed properties also contribute to the overall understanding of the development and history of the city. Landmark religious and municipal institutions include Trinity Episcopal Church and the Old Portsmouth Courthouse. Those that represent Portsmouth's long marine and transportation history



Olde Towne retains much of its original character and architecture, as evidenced by the repetition of stairs meeting the sidewalk in this current street view.

include Drydock Number One, the Portsmouth Naval Hospital and the Seaboard Coastline Building. More modern entertainment culture of the twentieth century is represented by the Commodore Theatre. These individual properties help to complete the picture of Portsmouth's past.



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An 1886 aerial view from Edward Pollock's *Sketch Book of Portsmouth* looks northwest from the foot of Columbia Street (Crab) towards the Olde Towne Historic District.

B. Olde Towne Historic District Character

1. General Olde Towne History

The history of the Olde Towne Historic District is the early history of the City of Portsmouth. A ferry connection between Portsmouth and Norfolk existed as early as 1636 although the town was not platted until 1752. In that year, Colonel William Crawford gave 65 acres for the establishment of the town.

The 20 blocks that comprise the Olde Towne Historic District are located in the northeastern section of the city and overlook Crawford Bay. The early townscape was laid out based on a grid

pattern, with wide and narrow streets alternating and quarter block lots laid out in squares. The four corners at High and Court streets were reserved for public use such as a courthouse, market, jail and church and are included in the Downtown Portsmouth Historic District.

Eleven years later the town was extended to a half-mile square, more than double its original size, through the annexation of the land west to Chestnut Street previously owned by Thomas Veale.

The oldest historic district in Portsmouth, Olde Towne was placed on the National Register in 1970, preceded by local review that began in 1967.

In 1983, the boundaries of the district were increased to include a late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century residential neighborhood including a row of five houses historically occupied by African-American residents. The extension also includes the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the first church built by and for African Americans in the city and home to the oldest black congregation in southeastern Virginia.

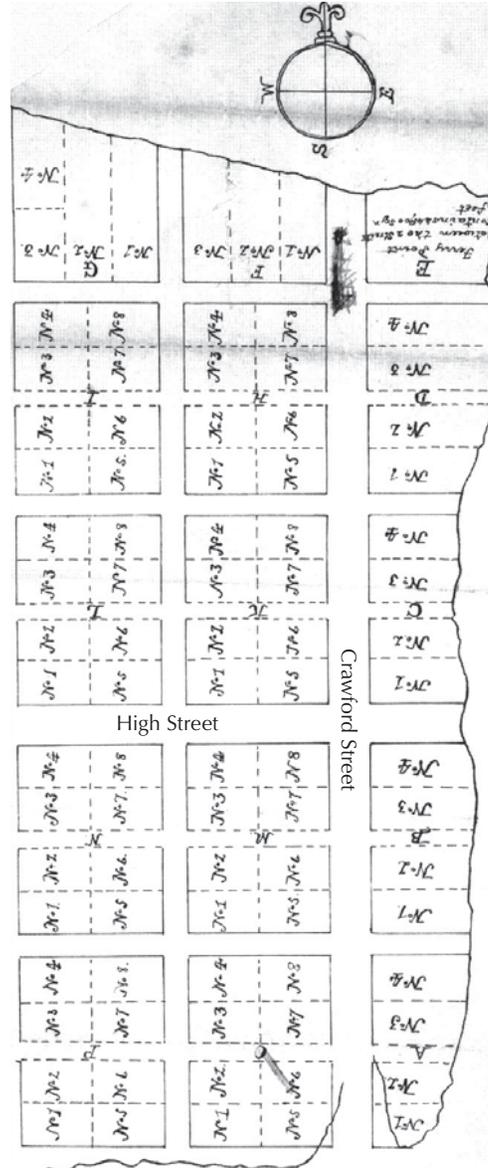


2. Streetscape Character

Granite curbs and early brick or stone slab sidewalks define tree-lined streets. More narrow east-west streets and wider north-south streets follow the original grid pattern of the city. Densely built townhouses that face the street are set close together on narrow lots and reinforce this neighborhood's urban presence. Curb cuts are rare due to the compact arrangement of lots, leading to street parking on both sides of the street where the width allows. The historic appearance of the district is strengthened in areas where the utilities have been placed underground.

3. Site Character

The narrow lots, shallow setbacks, and densely developed lots that are characteristic of the Olde Towne Historic District leave only minimal side or rear yards. These verdant spaces are often separated from public improvements by wood or iron fences while the houses themselves directly engage the sidewalk or street.



The surveyor's map of the 1752 original plat for the town of Portsmouth is shown above.



Mature street trees accent medians, plantings strips, and other public spaces throughout the district.



This brick sidewalk is laid in a historic herringbone pattern and edged with a granite curb.



Brick was an earlier street paving material in the district and is often well-preserved under modern paving as shown here.



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The Greek Revival style Armistead House at 406 Court Street is a good example of an early freestanding frame dwelling in the district. An Italianate full-width porch was added at a later date.



This image of steps of the circa 1826 Butt House at 327 Crawford Street (demolished), shows a Greek Revival style lintel over the basement window and highly refined Flemish bond brick work.

B. Olde Towne Historic District Character *continued*

4. Architectural Character

The architecture most identified with the 70-acre Olde Towne Historic District is the two- or three-story, brick or frame townhouse on a high English basement and detailed in either the Federal or Greek Revival style. These residences are set close together and brick and frame construction are found in equal numbers.

Olde Towne retains the most significant collection of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century architecture in the Hampton Roads region. As a Virginia port city, it is only rivaled by Old Town Alexandria in its historic integrity.

The basement houses of Portsmouth were designed to withstand frequent flooding. This lower level housed kitchen and dining areas, as most lots were too small for kitchen dependencies. Entry to the elevated main living areas was by way of a long flight of steps (usually wooden) from street level.

Numerous post-Civil War and early-twentieth-century structures are compatible in massing with the earlier styles and serve to unify block facades.



This Queen Anne townhouse at 218 North Street displays the high level of ornamentation synonymous with the Victorian period and stands in contrast to the restraint of earlier styles in the district.



C. Olde Towne Architectural Styles

1. Federal

Federal style houses in the Olde Towne Historic District are constructed of brick or frame and are noted for their above-ground basements. Identifying features of the Federal style may include gable roofs, semicircular fanlights over the front door, sometimes as part of a larger door surround with a pediment and sidelights (in some cases extended to form a small entry porch or portico). The cornice band will often be accented with dentil molding. Windows provide symmetry to this style and are horizontally and vertically aligned and never placed in pairs. The double-hung wooden windows typically have six panes per sash with thin wooden supports between the panes.



Details such as the cornice with dentil molding, small-paned, double-hung sash windows, a semi-circular fanlight over the paneled door, and a pedimented portico are hallmarks of the Federal style as seen in this townhouse illustration.

This Glasgow Street residence incorporates portions of the 1780 City Market building. Small-paned windows capped by jack arches and an entry surround composed of an elliptical fanlight and sidelights are Federal style details.



This Federal style house retains its nine-over-nine light windows on the first level with smaller six-over-six windows above. A rectangular light over the paneled door and weatherboard cladding on the first level are also character-defining features of this style.





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The low-pitched gable roof of this townhouse, the horizontal banding between floors, and six-over-six windows (in openings larger than seen in the Federal style) capped by pedimented decorative crowns are elements that define the Greek Revival style. A classically detailed portico is also seen on many examples.

C. Olde Towne Architectural Styles *continued*

2. Greek Revival

The Greek Revival style townhouse in the Olde Towne Historic District is often constructed on an English basement following the precedent established by the earlier Federal style. Cornice lines, doorways, porch columns and windows can often distinguish Greek Revival examples. A wide, typically unadorned board below the eave often accentuates the main roof line as well as the porch roof.

Many doorways are capped by a rectangular transom and often framed by narrow sidelights. Greek Revival doors, whether a single door or a pair, often have fewer raised panels than earlier styles leading to a more vertical appearance. Porch columns, whether round or square, are often derived from the simple Doric style and omit fluting in the column shaft.

Windows retain the same pane configuration as in the Federal style but can often be distinguished by their larger openings and stylized decorative crowns.



A Greek Revival style temple front adorns this multi-family structure. The full-height entry porch is supported by smooth Greek Doric columns and the pediment and cornice are accentuated with modillions.



3. Italianate

Italianate style houses are usually two- or three-story structures and are characterized by low-pitched roofs with widely overhanging eaves that appear to be supported by decorative carved brackets. Tall, narrow windows are often capped by crowns or masonry lintels on the first level and may be arched on the second level. These windows give Italianate houses a definite vertical orientation. This style also introduced the use of segmentally arched window tops and the frequent use of windows in groupings.



A Federal-style frame dwelling received an Italianate update with the installation of brackets at the cornice line.



A tall, narrow window bay provides a strong vertical orientation for this Italianate townhouse. Other features of the Italianate style include overhanging eaves supported by decorative brackets, two-over-two, large-paned, double-hung sash windows, and double entry doors. The arched entry portico with bracketed cornice is also typical of this style.



This view shows a brick Greek Revival structure that received an Italianate facade. The side elevation retains the small-paned windows with decorative lintels indicative of the earlier style. The Italianate facade has a two-story bay, larger two-over-two windows with arched openings, and a bracketed cornice.



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The Second Empire style is characterized by a shingle-clad, third-story Mansard (dual-pitched) roof typically punctuated with dormers on the steep slope. Molded cornices usually frame the roof above and below. The eave below the lower cornice is commonly decorated with brackets. This style borrows many of its details from the Italianate style including window trim and decoration, door and porch styles.

Arched, paired, two-over-two windows are accented on the first floor by molded brick hoods and on the second floor by a continuous band of projecting brick that wraps the building below the bracketed eave.

C. Olde Towne Architectural Styles *continued*

4. Second Empire

Second Empire houses in the district can be identified through their unique Mansard or dual-pitched hipped roof shape. The steeply sloped lower roof is punctuated by dormer windows and bounded by molded cornices both above and below. Further embellishment is achieved through the mounting of decorative brackets below the eaves. Aside from their distinctive roof shape, that served to reduce the visual mass of a third story, these houses are stylistically similar to the Italianate style.





5. Queen Anne

Queen Anne houses in the Olde Towne Historic District can often be identified by a more irregular shape than seen in previous styles. A variety of textures and materials, combine with bay windows, or towers and are used to avoid a smooth-walled appearance in some designs. A number of Queen Anne structures in the district incorporate a partial-width, one-story porch or portico into their facades.

Many examples of this style can be divided into two sub-styles on the basis of their decorative detailing; either spindlework, also known as “gingerbread,” or free classic that employs classical details often associated with the Colonial Revival style.



The Queen Anne style seen in Olde Towne often features a low foundation and horizontal massing. The end bay may be accented with a two-story tower with a turreted roof and brackets commonly adorn the cornice. Porches commonly feature sawn wood work ornamentation.

6. Colonial Revival

A number of dwellings in the Olde Towne Historic District display elements of the Colonial Revival style. The hybrid Shingle-Style/Colonial Revival employs the asymmetry introduced in the Queen Anne style with many classical features commonly associated with the Colonial Revival style wrapped in wood shingle cladding, the hallmark of the Shingle Style.

In other examples, simply massed gable-roofed houses employ details such as Palladian windows, classical cornices, and pedimented porticos indicative of this style.



This Shingle Style house combines the asymmetrical massing, large-paned, and bay windows of the Queen Anne with the Ionic porch columns, pediment, and modillions characteristic of the Colonial Revival style.



A Colonial Revival townhouse reflects the raised basement prevalent in earlier styles in Portsmouth. One-over-one double-hung sash windows, a Palladian window, and classical portico provide simple character-defining elements.