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WELCOME TO

Portsmouth

AN EPICENTER OF AMERICAN HISTORY WITH A VIBRANT, MODERN FLAIR.



n this guide, you'll learn about Portsmouth's legendary landmarks, Naval past, lively restaurants and bars, and scenic riverside activities. But first I'd like to highlight our city's most appealing attraction: our diverse, dynamic people.

Virginia's historic seaport® has a population of nearly 100,000 but retains small-town charm. On the Portsmouth side of the river, locals tend to be more

easygoing, and many of the steady influx of Navy, Coast Guard, and shipyard workers come from even smaller towns, creating a youthful melting pot and unpretentious camaraderie.

Portsmouth is renowned for its creative community, which has produced national treasures like Grammy winner Missy Elliott, comedy icons Wanda Sykes and Patton Oswald, and acclaimed fashion designer Perry Ellis.

Portsmouth has also produced intellectual giants like George Teamoh, who was born into slavery but secretly taught himself to read and write. After the Civil War, he was elected to represent Portsmouth in the Virginia Senate in the first election allowing African American voters. Similarly, I.C. Norcom emerged from slavery to attend Harvard and Yale before becoming a founding teacher and principal at Portsmouth's first Black school in 1883. Norcom inspired generations of students there until 1916, when, upon his death, the school was named in his honor. Read about other Hometown Heroes inside.

You may not think of a historic Navy town as a bastion of social progress, but consider this: when President Truman integrated the military in 1948, Portsmouth was given a head start of almost two decades on racial inclusion that didn't take root in other parts of the country until after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Similarly, when President Obama repealed Don't Ask Don't Tell in 2011, recruits from every corner of America stationed in Portsmouth learned tolerance and embraced diversity in a way that made everyone here feel welcome. We hope to welcome you next!

As you read ahead and learn about the wide variety of entertainment and experiences Portsmouth has to offer, please keep in mind that it's our gregarious, warm people that may leave the most lasting impression.

Very sincerely, Mayor Shannon Glover











■ Shopping on High Street

Olde Towne

ortsmouth's hub is Olde Towne, the most eclectic walking district in Hampton Roads, an architectural wonderland bordered by bustling marinas along the Elizabeth River.

Stroll the tree-lined brick sidewalks and behold pristine Colonial homes, Gothic, Greek Revival and Romanesque mansions, Baroque churches, and ornate Victorian townhouses with lush gardens. Olde Towne boasts the largest variety of period properties between Alexandria and Charleston! The breathtaking architecture, waterfront parks, and pulsing bars and restaurants draw both local day—trippers and international tourists.

Olde Towne is where you'll find America's oldest Naval shipyard and hospital, Mile Marker Zero on the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, the Renaissance Portsmouth-Norfolk Waterfront Hotel, and Atlantic Union Bank Pavilion, a riverside amphitheater hosting the biggest names in rock, rap, country, and jazz.

& drink!



▲ Speakeasy dining at Still

Portsmouth is a one-of-a-kind dining destination - meaning you'll find an abundance of locally owned independent eateries to suit every taste.

Olde Towne

A popular place to start your journey with a jolt is The Coffee Shoppe on High Street, a locally owned cafe which also features cocktails and music some evenings, or Cure Coffeehouse.

Take in a game while dining at Roger Brown's, a sports bar and restaurant founded by the local NFL hero himself, or at one of the other popular sports bars like Olde Towne or Public House or Griff's.

Enjoy worldly tapas and signature cocktails at Still, upscale American fare at Gosport Tavern or District, and top notch seafood at the family—run Lobscouser or Fish & Slips in the marina, where you'll get a bird's eye view of the busy harbor.

Try Bavarian cuisine at the picturesque Bier Garden, which pours over 300 international beers, Mediterranean fine dining at Café Europa, hand—made Detroit style pizza at High Street Pizza & Pour House or New York style pizza and Italian fare at Gino's. Don't miss the plant—based soul food at Beyond Vegan Cell Food or international delights from Thai Basil, Bangkok Garden, Cancun Fiesta, or Guad's Mexican restaurant.

Looking for someplace to dine and unwind at night? Check out the food and music scene at Baron's Pub, Longboards, Stellar Wine, and Roger Brown's. Sunday night, Gosport Tavern is known for live jazz and on some Sunday afternoons, you'll find a Celtic group playing at Legend Brewing Depot.





Eat beyond Olde Towne!

Less than three miles from Olde Towne is charming Port Norfolk, where locals flock to the Pizza Box or Twisted Pig Ale and Smokehouse – renowned for its in–house smoking process and for its nightly entertainment.

Head to Midtown to enjoy fine Italian dining at Amici's, American Fare at Hometown Diner or the Corner Café, and some of the best soft—serve ice cream ever made at Rick's Frozen Custard. A little farther down High Street is Churchland where you'll find JoJack's Espresso Bar, Bubba & Frank's BBQ, Gourmet Burger Bistro, and a local favorite called The Barrel.

Many of our chef-owned restaurants have been serving for more than 30 years, but Portsmouth's restaurant scene continues to grow. For the latest information, see the dining pages on the Visit Portsmouth website or stop by the Portsmouth Welcome Center for a Restaurant & Retail Guide.

Local Craft Beers

Portsmouth is home to four local breweries. MoMac Brewing in Churchland, named for the famous battle between the Monitor and Merrimack that took place just off the city shoreline, brews a variety of regular and seasonal ales. Also in Churchland, and just across the street, is the recently opened Harbor Trail Brewing Company. And in Olde Towne, Legend Brewing Depot offers one of the best waterfront views in the area while Post—Secondary Brewing Company (opening fall of 2022) occupies a nice location on historic High Street. Check out the tasting room, food offerings, and live music at all of these Portsmouth treasures.

▼ The New Kern Building c.1912







Experience Olde Towne's charm on one (or more) of these 30-minute walking tours:

The Seawall Stroll takes you along our beautiful waterfront and highlights Portsmouth's maritime and Naval history.

The Architecture Walk meanders through Olde Towne's picturesque streets to showcase mansions, townhouses and churches spanning three centuries.

The Underground Railroad Tour reveals Olde Towne's fascinating role as a hub for enslaved people escaping to freedom by stowing away on northbound ships with covert help from locals.

The Public Art Walking Tour brings you to a variety of murals, sculptures, and other installments.

For a more comprehensive, 3-hour look at Portsmouth's remarkable past, experience the **Path of History**



▲ Spanish American War Monument

Walking Tour (brochures available at the Portsmouth Welcome Center.

Want to bike instead? Rent from Cycle Classics on High Street!

Learn more about all our walking tour opportunities at VisitPortsVa.com/walking-tours

Experiences

Enjoy dinner and a movie at the Commodore Theatre, an Art Deco movie palace Built in 1945, as the influx of WWII workers created a boom for Portsmouth nightlife, the beautifully restored Commodore remains a top attraction. Pick up the phone at your elegant table, order food, beer or wine, then sink into your plush seat to watch a first—run film on the 42—foot screen. Named for Commodore James Barron, a local veteran of the War of 1812, this theater, with its massive murals depicting Virginia's history, is on the National Register of Historic Places. 421 High Street I commodoretheatre.com I 757—393—6962

Watch your kids' imagination take flight at the Children's Museum of Virginia Kids love ever—changing exhibits they can touch, push, play with and figure out! And the planetarium programs will transport your whole family from Portsmouth to far away planets and solar systems. 221 High Street | childrensmuseumvirginia.com | 757–393–5258

Visit a major hub of the Underground Railroad: Emanuel AME Church Founded in 1772, the AME is the oldest African American church in the area, where word would pass about which northbound ships might hide runaway slaves. It was constructed by free Blacks and enslaved workers with secret alcoves in which slaves could hide, and a hidden water duct in which they could crawl to freedom via the Elizabeth River. The church retains its original stained glass windows and hand—carved benches and pews. 637 North Street | 757–393–2259

Relive history with Mary Veale and the Colonials. Feeling adventurous? Take an Olde Towne walking tour with lively characters from Portsmouth's colorful past, and learn their impact not just locally but on American history, through stories and song. portsmouthliving history.com | 757–705–8130



▲ Commodore Theatre

▼ Children's Museum of Virginia







▲ Lightship Portsmouth

Take in an exhibit at the Portsmouth Art & Cultural Center Housed in the 1846 Courthouse, the center features a revolving series of sculptures, paintings, and performances. The adjacent Gallery Shop offers a variety of works by local artists. 400 High Street | Portsmouth artcenter.com | 757–393–8543

Step back in time at the Hill House Museum Built in 1825, this four-story English basement home, originally constructed in the Federal-style, is Olde Towne in a microcosm. The townhouse features original decor and heirlooms of families who lived here in the 19th and early 20th centuries – left in place as if time stood still. 221 North Street | thehillhousemuseum.org | 757–393–0241

Do a deep dive into history at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum Built just after WWII, this fascinating museum chronicles 250 years of America's oldest naval shipyard, from major battles and weapons to evolving uniforms and equipment. 2 High Street | Portsmouthnaval shipyardmuseum.com | 757–393–8591

Climb aboard the Lightship *Portsmouth* Built in 1915, this ship served for half a century as a beacon that helped mariners avoid dangerous shoals off the coasts of Virginia, Delaware and Massachusetts. Now it's a museum that reveals the lives of the sailors stationed aboard through artifacts, uniforms, and photos. Intersection of Water Street and London Street | portsmouthnaval shipyardmuseum.com | 757–393–8591

Be a speed demon at LeMans Karting Experience the thrill of authentic racing & laser tag! From high speed indoor karting on a challenging quarter mile track to laser tag and RC Cars, LeMans delivers exhilarating indoor entertainment. Private meeting space for small groups, or take over the facility for birthday parties, social gatherings, or corporate events. Catering available. 2882 Airline Boulevard | 757–606–1776

Try your luck at River's Casino Coming in 2023, River's Casino Portsmouth opens with an exciting array of table games and slot machines, taking gaming to a higher level. In the months to follow, construction continues, adding a complete entertainment destination featuring a diverse mix of restaurants, entertainment venues showcasing top-rated performers, and eventually a new full-service guest hotel.

activities Nutdoor



▲ Portsmouth City Park

Ride the Paddlewheel Ferry Enjoy a breezy ride across the harbor on the Elizabeth River Ferry – a service which has been running since 1636! This trip aboard a paddlewheel is a fun and affordable way to see the Portsmouth waterfront or visit Norfolk.

Charter the Carrie B party ship This authentic replica of a 19th century paddlewheeler is an ideal way for your large group or corporate party to enjoy the harbor, the Portsmouth and Norfolk skylines, and notable sites along the Elizabeth River. Take in the views from the open air upper deck or from the air-conditioned galley with bar and food service. Operates rain or shine, docking at High Street Landing or North Street Landing near the Renaissance Hotel. carrieb.com / 757-393-4735

Boat, golf, play tennis, picnic, or ride the Pokey Smokey at City Park. The crown jewel of Portsmouth's outdoor space, City Park features the only American Foot Golf League certified course in the area, along with a 9-hole executive golf course, lighted driving range, and natural putting course. If you're traveling with your boat, put in at City Park and travel around the world. It's a beautiful place to picnic along the waterfront with first-come-first served small shelters or reserve a large shelter and make it a party. Kids will love the top of the line playground equipment and the Pokey Smokey, a scale replica steam locomotive offering rides around the park. Portsmouthparks.com



Portsmouth Mural



Hike and bird watch at Paradise Creek Nature Park Less than ten minutes from Olde Towne, features two miles of handicap—accessible trails through restored wetlands and forest. The new Towne Bank River Playground and its new Tree Hinge exhibit were named among the best sites in the state to observe wildlife (Virginia Bird & Wildlife Trail), frequent outdoor programs and free kayak launch. 1141 Victory Blvd / paradisecreekpark.org / 757-392-7132

Paddle or hike through Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve Rent a kayak and enjoy a scenic two-mile tidal inlet with its expansive salt marsh brimming with geese, opossums, deer, foxes, bald eagles, egrets, and turtles. Hike over three miles of trails through a riparian forest filled with pines and hardwoods and a meadow of native wildflowers and grasses. Just eight miles from Olde Towne. 4510 Twin Pines Road / hofflercreek.org / 757-686-8684

Wing It through Portsmouth on this unique mural tour Support Portsmouth Public Art produced ten colorful murals of wings located throughout the city that make ideal photo opps. Whether you feel angelic, proud, or just dream of flying, we invite you to interact with art and create lasting memories of your visit. portsvacation. com/winging-it-through-Portsmouth

Take a Different Kind of Art Walk (or Ride) High Street is the center of the Cultural Arts District and home to murals, sculptures, and more. Download the art scavenger hunt guide and Walk Your Art Out! On the second Saturday of each month, spring through fall, take a guided bike ride and Bike the Arts! Or, keep the kids occupied on a hunt for the Toads on High Street. https://portsvacation.com/arts-entertainment/

Play 18 holes on a Curtis Strange Signature Course Bide-a-Wee is Portsmouth's municipal golf course and open to the public. This par 72 course features bent grass greens, narrow and challenging fairways lined with majestic pines, and a number of picturesque lakes and ponds throughout the course.

Elizabeth River Ferry



PHOTO BY KEITH TOLER

Storical

overview

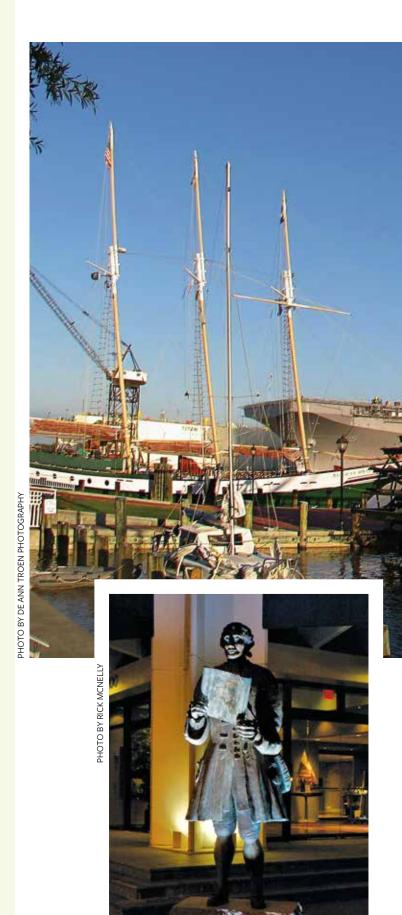
nce home to the native Powhatan, Portsmouth was first scoped out by English settlers in 1608. The deep harbor and abundant hardwood trees made it an ideal shipbuilding site; thus the land was granted by King James to shipbuilder John Wood. In 1636, the ferry service to Norfolk began – one of the first public transportation systems in America – and it still runs today!

The Towne of Portsmouth was officially founded in 1752 by Colonel William Crawford, who built a church, a market, a courthouse, and a jail at the broad intersection of High and Court Streets. The strategically located seaport made Portsmouth a pivotal hotspot throughout American history.

During the Revolution, General Cornwallis and Benedict Arnold occupied the city and made it a headquarters for thousands of British troops. Soon after the British were defeated at Yorktown, the fledgling United States Navy turned Portsmouth's Gosport Shipyard into the country's first Navy Yard.

At the outset of the Civil War, the Confederacy controlled the shipyard and converted the USS *Merrimack* into the ironclad CSS *Virginia* – the first ironclad warship – for the Battle of Hampton Roads. The battle drew global attention and prompted naval forces around the world to upgrade their wooden fleets to steel. Soon after, the Union occupied Portsmouth, and because of the valuable shipyard, the city rebounded from the Civil War more easily than most Southern cities.

During WWI, orders to build the first battleships and armed cruisers caused Portsmouth's population to double, resulting in the creation of two of America's first planned suburban communities: Cradock and Truxton. And in 1919, the shipyard began converting the collier *Jupiter* into the USS *Langley*, America's first aircraft carrier. In the lead—up to WWII, Congress passed the National Recovery Act and the shipyard built and launched nine destroyers between 1934 and 1939.



Statue of Col. William
Crawford







PHOTO BY DE ANN TROEN PHOTOGRAPHY

These war years marked Portsmouth's heyday, as the city teemed with stately hotels and theaters, packed nightclubs, restaurants, and department stores, and more than a few salty tattoo parlors and bars.

But in 1952, the Downtown Tunnel opened and siphoned off the throngs of motorists who used to hang out in Olde Towne awaiting the car ferry. As in the rest of America, the postwar years in Portsmouth saw an exodus of residents to the suburbs, causing businesses to flee along with them. Many of Olde Towne's grand mansions had been chopped up and turned into rooming houses for war workers, but it was too costly for owners to refurbish them. In the 60s and 70s, Olde Towne, like so many urban centers, began a downward slide into decay.

Olde Towne's resurrection began in the late 80s. Urban pioneers bored of the suburbs were drawn to the historical walking district and began rehabbing the houses. In 1989, the Commodore Theatre was brought back to its Deco splendor and reopened, as was a brick walled bar across the street called Baron's Pub. Both still thrive today, and their success brought in a steady flow of other businesses, remaking Olde Towne as a historic hub with modern style.

Hometown

celebrities



▲ LaShawn Merritt

Portsmouth is not only the birthplace of the U.S. Navy but to icons of music, fashion, sports, art, comedy and politics.

Missy Elliott, born at Naval Medical Center Portsmouth in 1971, is a five-time Grammy winner who has sold over 30 million albums and was the first female rapper inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Missy didn't forget her roots: in 2019 she came home to donate \$25,000 to her alma mater, Woodrow Wilson High School.

Tommy Newsom, born in Portsmouth in 1929, played saxophone in the Air Force Band and toured with Benny Goodman before joining the NBC Orchestra, which he frequently led on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. Nicknamed "Mr. Excitement" by Carson as an ironic take on his low–key persona, he was often a foil for Carson's humor. Newsom won two Emmy awards and recorded several albums before returning to Portsmouth, where he died in 2007.

Bill Deal & the Rhondels, formed in Portsmouth in 1959, blended soul and beach music to score three Top 40 hit singles in 1969.

Ruth Brown, the original "Queen of R&B", was born in Portsmouth in 1928. Her father was a dockhand and choir director at Emanuel A.M.E. Church, where Ruth got her start as a singer. She earned 14 Top Ten pop hits in the early years of rhythm and blues, starred in numerous Broadway productions, and was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1993.





Roger Brown, born in nearby Surry County, was an NFL star throughout the 1960s, when he played defensive tackle for the Detroit Lions and L.A. Rams. Part of the AFL's iconic Fearsome Foursome, Brown retired in Portsmouth, where he opened Roger Brown's Restaurant and Sports Bar, which remains the most popular eatery in Olde Towne.

LaShawn Merritt, born in Portsmouth in 1986, excelled in athletics at Woodrow Wilson High School. He pursued track and field and went on to break records as a champion at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, where he was named the ninth fastest runner of all time.



Patton Oswalt, Emmy and Grammy winning comedy and TV star, was born in Portsmouth in 1969. His father was a Marine Corps officer who named him after General Patton.

Wanda Sykes, Emmy-winning writer, stand-up comic and TV star, was born in Portsmouth in 1964.

Ralph Wolfe Cowan, raised in Portsmouth in the 1930s and 40s, served as an Army paratrooper before becoming an internationally acclaimed portrait artist. His subjects included Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Carter and Reagan, Mikail Gorbachev, the Sultan of Brunei, Tony Curtis, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley – for whom he was the only commissioned artist whose portrait was allowed to hang in Graceland, as well as in the National Portrait Gallery. Cowan's life and work are the subject of the 2015 documentary *The Last Old Master*.

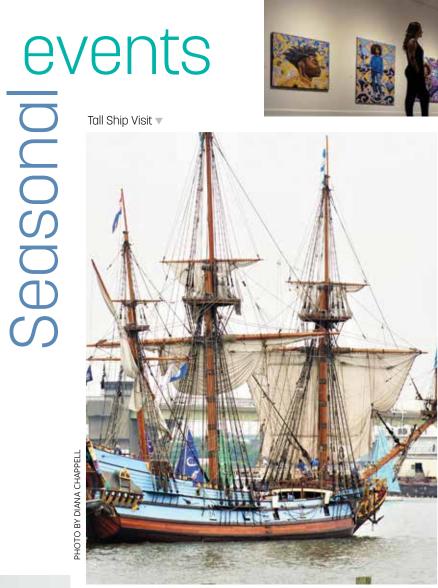
Perry Ellis, born in Portsmouth in 1940, worked in the Coast Guard before moving to New York and becoming a global fashion powerhouse and one of the most successful menswear designers of all—time.

■ Wanda Sykes



PHOTO BY DIANA CHAPPELL





▲ Portsmouth Art & Cultural Center



▲ Buffalo Riders





▲ Cycle Classics' Penny-farthing.

■ Atlantic Union Bank Pavilion.



Outlying Neighborhoods

Park View - Located behind the Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, this historic community developed late in the 19th century as a streetcar suburb offering attractive living conditions for middle class workers involved in Portsmouth's growing transportation industry. While there is no retail in this neighborhood, visitors today enjoy shallow setback homes, mature trees, and the well preserved character and architecture from back in the day.

Port Norfolk - About three miles from Olde Towne, Port Norfolk is another federally designated historic district developed late in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a streetcar suburb of Portsmouth. The 175 acre parcel faces the Western Branch of the Elizabeth River at the north end and is anchored by a small retail district in the center of the neighborhood. Shallow setbacks, mature tree-lined streets, and a variety of Queen Anne, American Foursquare, Colonial Revival, and Bungalow architectural styles define the neighborhood.

Midtown/Victory Crossing - This bustling retail corridor less than five miles from Olde Towne features a number of small business and chain retail stores along with a variety of local and national restaurants. Portsmouth's Maryview Hospital, Bide-a-Wee Golf Course, City Park, and a number of older, established neighborhoods anchor this community.

Cradock - Four miles south of Olde Towne, Cradock was developed by the U.S. Housing Corporation in 1918 to meet the wartime needs for housing shipyard workers. One of the first federally funded planned communities, Cradock's 310 acre tract is designed in the shape of a ship's anchor with two main thoroughfares and a small, centralized commercial area called Afton Square. Mature Crepe Myrtles and a variety of architectural styles can be found throughout the community.

Truxton - Five miles from Olde Towne, the federally designated historic district of Truxton was the very first wartime housing project constructed exclusively for African American workers and their families during WWI. Architecturally, Truxton is known for a prominence of Jerkinhead roof, or clipped gable roof structures.

Churchland - Churchland is an outer Portsmouth suburb located across the Western Branch of the Elizabeth River. The many neighborhoods throughout Churchland support a variety of restaurants, shopping and entertainment venues. Churchland is about six miles north of Olde Towne on High Street (US 17).



here

Setting

Visitors to Portsmouth fly into Norfolk International Airport (ORF), drive in on Interstate 264, or sail along the Elizabeth River to Mile Marker Zero of the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, the starting point for boaters heading to Florida.







to stay

Where

The Renaissance Portsmouth-Norfolk Waterfront Hotel is a state-of-the-art hotel popular for conventions, corporate meetings, and riverside dining.

Travelers on a budget often stay at the Quality Inn & Suites Olde Towne or other budget friendly properties around the city. There are also numerous Airbnbs for every taste, whether taking over an entire historic home or simply renting a room.

Boaters can choose from a variety of full-service marinas offering transient overnight slips and amenities. For short term docking, boaters may moor at High Street Landing for no charge.

Itineraries are a great way to plan your visit. Find a selection of curated 48—hour itineraries under Plan Your Visit on our website.





VISIT ON OUR WEBSITE AT VISITPORTS VA.COM