

INTRODUCTION

A. General

Downtown Suffolk has a long and rich history that began in the early 17th Century. Rare for an American city are the number of historic buildings in Downtown Suffolk which reflect the City's development from colonial times through the Twentieth Century. Many of these buildings are now recognized within the Suffolk National Register Historic District designated by the National Park Service and by the Commonwealth of Virginia. Since 1998, the number of historic properties has increased with the recognition of the East Washington Street District (2002), the West End District (2004), the West End District Expansion (2004), and the Suffolk District Expansion (2004). Additional areas may be eligible for similar designation and should be studied further.

Historic properties with-in the National Register District are usually eligible for tax-incentive rehabilitation programs sponsored by the Federal and State governments. These programs can provide significant tax credits for qualifying rehabilitation work for income-producing properties as well as private homeowners. (See Chapter 9 for further information.)



North Main Street circa 1930

B. About the Guidelines

The original version of the Suffolk Historic District Guidelines (Guidelines) was published in 1990. It was subsequently updated in 1999 and expanded to address the commercial area more intensively. The Guidelines provide greater detail and direction for certain topics and concerns, which subsequently became issues over the last decade.

C. Purpose and Role

- *2026 Comprehensive Plan:* The recognition of the importance of historical resources to the character of the City of Suffolk was acknowledged in Chapter 5: Natural and Environmental Resources of the *2026 Comprehensive Plan*. In support of the recognition, Policy 5-4 calls for the preservation of the City's historic resources.
- *Unified Development Ordinance:* The implementation of Policy 5-4 can be found in Section 31-413 of the Unified Development Ordinance with the establishment of the Historic Conservation Overlay District. The purpose and intent of the Historic Conservation Overlay District is to recognize Suffolk's unique character and promote the conservation and preservation of the City's historic resources and properties. The role of the Guidelines in this effort is to provide a foundation for ensuring that buildings, structures, and signs, whether rehabilitation, revitalization, or new construction are architecturally compatible with the historic landmark buildings and structures within the Historic District.
- *Historic Landmarks Commission:* The Historic Landmarks Commission is established to serve as the review board for the administration of the Historic Conservation Overlay District. In support of this role, the Guidelines serve as the framework to guide the Historic Landmarks Commission in its review and deliberation of projects in the Historic District.

D. Organization

To guide the policymaker, property owner, developer, or interested citizen, the Suffolk Historic District Design Guidelines have been organized into the following chapters.

- Chapter 1, Suffolk's Historic Districts
- Chapter 2, The Historic Landmarks Commission and the Review Process
- Chapter 3, Planning a Project in the Historic District
- Chapter 4, Exterior Elements
- Chapter 5, Residential Building Design Considerations
- Chapter 6, Commercial Building Design Considerations
- Chapter 7, New Construction
- Chapter 8, Demolition or Removal of Buildings
- Chapter 9, Financial Incentives



St. Paul's Episcopal Church

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SUFFOLK'S DEVELOPMENT & PRESERVATION EFFORTS

A. Introduction

Consolidated on January 1, 1974, the present City of Suffolk is composed of the former City of Suffolk, the Towns of Whaleyville and Holland, and Nansemond County. Situated on the southern bank of the Nansemond River, the original settlement of Suffolk was located in approximately the center of Nansemond County.

The City's history began with the European settlement of Virginia. After an early reliance on agriculture and natural resources, the City grew into a railroad and shipping hub. Even so, the City has not loosened its ties to its agricultural heritage. During most of the 20th Century, Suffolk was known as the "World's Largest Peanut Market."



Riddick's Folley 1863

B. Early History

Beginning with the early 1700s, there was a growing need for warehousing along the Nansemond River to store the area's tobacco crop prior to transport. One such tobacco storage building known as Constant's Warehouse was built around 1720 on the east side of the Nansemond River near the intersection of present-day East Constance Road and North Main Street. As a consequence of the importance of this facility to the community, a number of individuals began to settle around the warehouse. Subsequently, in 1742, an Act of Assembly was passed to erect the Town of Suffolk in this location.



Riddick's Folley 1882

In 1742, the plans for the Town of Suffolk were laid out. Fifty acres in size, the plan consisted of four streets: Main and Back Streets were laid parallel to the river with North and South Cross Streets intersecting at right angles. The original plan remains evident today, as later expansions extended inland along Main Street in a continuation of the grid pattern. This area later became known as the "old town" section of the city.

As Suffolk's population grew, the area south of the original settlement developed along what is now North Main Street. In 1791, the town annexed 16 acres to form a new section known as "up town" and 33 half-acre lots were offered by John Granberry.

C. 1837 Fire

Many of Suffolk's original buildings were lost in the fire of 1837. Consuming both sides of Main Street from the present post office to the courthouse, the fire destroyed the courthouse and its records, the jail, and more than 130 other buildings. After the fire, "up town" began to supplant the river front, or "old town," as the commercial center of Suffolk.



Riddick's Folley Present

D. Post-Civil War

Following the Civil War, the railroad played a major role in assuring Suffolk's economic rebound. The construction of two new rail lines, the Norfolk and

Western and a local, small-gauge line called the Suffolk and Carolina, supplemented the Seaboard and Roanoke which had been built in 1835. As a transportation hub with ample rail connections, Suffolk was able to attract a variety of manufacturing interests. Peanut factories, an oyster-packing company, lumber mills, shirt manufacturers, and ice factories are examples of the types of businesses that thrived during Reconstruction.

As noted by historian Edward Pollack, the town's population doubled between 1870 and 1880. With the turn of the century, growth continued with the peanut industry emerging as the paramount industry in Suffolk. It was also during this time that much of downtown, the Pinner Street neighborhood, and the West Washington Street corridor were developed.

E. Architectural Styles

With its long history, it is only natural that diverse architectural styles are found throughout the older areas of the city. These styles range from the Federal and Greek Revival of the early 19th century to the Queen Anne, Bungalow and Colonial Revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, simpler vernacular Victorian houses can also be found throughout the Historic District. The earlier residences are generally found along the North Main Street corridor.



Chestnut Street

F. Preservation Efforts to Date

The City of Suffolk has been working for many years to recognize and maintain its heritage through the preservation of historic resources. This effort was acknowledged in 1987 when the City became a Certified Local Government (CLG) in recognition of the development of a strong and effective local management program for historic resources. As a CLG, the City is granted greater autonomy in managing its historic resources, as well as providing access to grant funding on a yearly basis for preservation-oriented projects.



Jefferson Lofts 2007

Through its CLG designation and active preservation efforts, the City has received funding and technical assistance from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the National Park Service for a wide variety of historic preservation projects and initiatives including:

- Survey of downtown and preparation of National Register historic district nomination, 1985.
- Architectural survey of the northern area of the City, 1987.
- Architectural survey of the southern area of the City, 1988.
- Development of architectural design guidelines for the Downtown Historic District, 1989.
- Public information program to publicize the Downtown Historic District and public design guidelines, 1990.
- Prepare nominations to the National Register for Historic Districts of Chuckatuck, Driver, Holland, and Whaleyville, 1991.
- Preparation of an archeological assessment, 1993.
- Development of a long-range preservation plan for the City, 1995.
- Expansion of the National Register District to include North Main Street to Constant's Wharf, 1999.

- Expansion of the Local Historic District to include the Washington Street Corridor roughly bounded by Causey Avenue in the west to County Street in the east, with Market Street and Smith Street/Jackson Street being the north and south boundaries; along with the Hill Street/Finney Avenue neighborhood, 1999.
- Nomination of the Professional Building to the National Register, 1999.
- Revision of the architectural design guidelines for the Historic District, 2000.
- Expansion of the National Register District to include the East Washington Street District (2002)
- Expansion of the National Register District to include the West End District (2004)
- Expansion of the National Register District to include the West End District Expansion (2004)
- Expansion of the Suffolk Historical District (2004)
- Nomination of the Obici House to the National Register designation (2003)



Train Station 2005

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