

# P.O.R.T.S.M.O.U.T.H VIRGINIA



## Portsmouth's Olde Town Chronicles 300 Years of History

by Terry Conway

Climb aboard a lightship. No, not a spacecraft. These vessels enabled mariners to avoid dangerous shoals or gain safe passageway into harbors at night. First built in 1820, the ships are akin to lighthouses, with lights affixed to masts of ships anchored in strategic coves along the coastline for months at a time. Lightship *Portsmouth* served proudly for fifty years and then was retired and restored to its original condition.

The lightships are but a sliver of the nautical armada that passes through Portsmouth, Va., the deepest natural harbor on the east coast. Visitors can catch a glimpse of a majestic cruise ship or a mighty battleship making its way down the harbor to the nation's oldest shipyard. More than

80 Navy ships of the Atlantic fleet are anchored at the largest military station in the world.

In 1752, William Crawford laid out the seaport town, modeling it after its British namesake. Wide streets intersect narrow ones, dividing Olde Town into squares with names such as London, Glasgow and Queen. Rich in waterfront commerce, Portsmouth grew from the river inland where its earliest homes were built with high exterior staircases leading to the main entries.

Today Portsmouth stretches to 80 miles of waterfront property, attracting more than 12,000



*Portsmouth lightship*

you'll discover naval weaponry and artifacts from nine wars spanning more than 225 years.

The Patriot Inn Bed & Breakfast is an architectural gem snuggled in the Olde Towne historic district. The busy Elizabeth River waterfront is reflected in the old windowpanes just as it has been for more than 200 years. High Street is just a few steps away.

Visitors will find everything from quiet cafes specializing in freshly-baked pastries to a slew of upscale eateries offering some of the region's finest seafood dishes. Brutti's, an airy restaurant with high ceilings of pressed tin, with brick

pleasure boaters every year. Located at the zero mile-marker on buoy #36, Portsmouth maintains six commercial marinas. Most sit along the sweeping Elizabeth River that both divides and connects Portsmouth to its sister city, Norfolk. Virginia Beach is only 15 miles away, while it is a 90-mile drive from Richmond and I-95. Unlike many riverfront destinations, the daily life of the river is not lost behind the sprawl of high-rise structures. Olde Towne's waterfront comprises a seven-block section of High Street lined with antique shops, specialty stores, galleries and restaurants.

Gentle breezes rustle the ancient elm and oak trees of Old Towne as lights from boats on Crawford Bay and street lanterns lend a warm glow to the cobblestone streets. Nearby there is a scenic walkway on the banks of the Elizabeth River known as the Seawall. It's an excellent spot to check out the sailors competing in the "Race to Cock Island," the Pirates Jamboree, the Seawall Festival and Harborfest festivities.

Sign up for the Olde Lantern Tour, a twilight walking tour of the historic district hosted by lantern-toting guides in period attire. The one-hour tour gives visitors a taste of Old Towne's legends and folklore with the chance to explore the area's distinctive architecture styles, which include Colonial, Federal, Greek Revival, Georgian and Victorian.

The narrated Trolley Tour of Old Towne lasts about an hour with a route similar to the walking tour, and it includes a stop at Trophy Park, inside the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. Here

walls and floors of heart pine, offers delicious breakfasts served up with lovely Irish melodies by a guitarist and a pennywhistle player. Cock Island Bar & Grill offers sandwiches and light fare in a pub atmosphere that overlooks the Elizabeth River.

Foggy Point Bar & Grill, Olde Towne's newest waterfront landmark, boasts a varied menu elegantly prepared in a posh but casual setting. The entrees are themed from countries around the globe and feature fish and seafood delivered daily to ensure freshness and natural flavor. You can finish off the evening with en-



*Portsmouth is a great place to stop and rest along the Intracoastal Waterway at Mile Marker Zero. With the deepest natural harbor, boaters have easy access to the ocean and Chesapeake Bay.*

ertainment in their cozy lounge that also offers the finest imported cigars.

At the close of World War II, the Commodore Theatre was a showplace for entertainment. Nearly 60 years later, it has been reborn as the last of the downtown motion picture houses. With its eye-popping marquee, its 40-foot long Art Deco side murals, crystal chandeliers, and a THX Digital sound system, the Commodore doubles as a dining theatre. At cozy, soft-lit tables, you pick up the phone and ring the kitchen to place your order of casual dinner fare and drinks.

The NTELOS Pavilion is the latest addition



*NTELOS Pavilion, state of the art amphitheater, at Harbor Center.*

to the revitalized waterfront. A 3,500-seat amphitheatre, summertime shows in the tent-like structure of fiberglass and nylon have included Norah Jones, David Grey, Chris Isaak, Lyle

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Lovett and the Gipsy Kings. The food selections range from hot dogs to crab cakes to gourmet seafood.

Take an afternoon cruise on the *Carrie B.*, a replica 19<sup>th</sup> century Mississippi riverboat, where passengers gaze in wonder at the massive naval ships berthed at the Norfolk Naval Station. It is located on the eastern shore of Hampton Road, one of the busiest shipping crossroads in the world, where four rivers converge and the Intracoastal Waterway begins.

Extending four miles along the waterfront, the naval port facilities include seven miles of pier and wharf space. You glide past a huge

nuclear submarine in dry dock, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and amphibious craft to battleships such as the *USS Wisconsin*, which



Experience the streets of Olde Towne during a horse and carriage ride.

dwarfs them all. Its gun barrels reach 60 feet in length, capable of firing grim missiles the size of a Volkswagen 23 miles.

For more information go to [www.portsmouthva.gov/tourism](http://www.portsmouthva.gov/tourism) or call 800-PORTS-VA.

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