Wading Between Two Titans

Episode 1: Port City, from Generation to Generation

Transcription

Adrian: [00:00:00] (in a car) So Mrs. Johnson owns this house. She owns this property.

Google Maps: Your destination is on the right. (Sounds of keys and door as Adrian gets out of the car)

Adrian: (walking down a street) Um, it's like a mix of houses. Some of them are kind of that like four apartments in one building. And then the other buildings are these like nice little colonial style single family homes, pointy roof. They're all vinyl.

And here we are. I'll ring the doorbell. (dreamy synth starts. Adrian's voice is no longer outdoors; they are speaking more quietly, directly into the mic.)

I was on the way to visit with Ms. Sharon Johnson of Norfolk, Virginia, to ask her about her family home.

Sharon Johnson: My grandfather built this house. He said, 'I'm building it for my daughter got nine kids, and I don't want them to ever not have a place to live.' (laughingw) And so that's what this [00:01:00] house means. From generation to generation, that the Hicks will always have a place to stay.

Adrian: Sharon Johnson grew up in Norfolk, Virginia. She still lives in the house her grandfather built in the 1950s.

Sharon Johnson: He was a contractor. He used to tear down houses and build houses. He built this one. Let's see

(footsteps cross the room, blinds come up) The last roof you can see. When I was five years old, I played in the sand that they put down--

Adrian: (in background) Wowwww!

Sharon Johnson: -- to build that house. That was our property. My grandfather property leaded all the way over to the roof of that house.

Adrian: Ms. Johnson's home is only blocks away from Booker T Washington High School, a historic African American school and community center.

Norfolk is one of half a dozen cities in Virginia's most populous region, Hampton Roads. It sits on the southern corner of Virginia's east coast, right down at sea level where [00:02:00] the human and the ocean meet.

(sound of beach waves and dreamy synth) You have to cross water to get to Norfolk. There is the vast opening of sparkling tributary waters where the James River meets the Chesapeake Bay. There's (seagull cries) seagulls. People with boats in front of their house. It feels like a beach town. Somewhere people's grandparents retire to. Sunny and nautical, but without the pretentiousness that seaside cities sometimes have.

It's industrial, not a Palm Beach or a Cape Cod. It feels like a home town on the water.

Sharon Johnson: Every time it rained in this neighborhood, it flooded. And I was lucky. And my grandfather, he was smart cuz he built this of bricks . I grew up in this neighborhood. We used to swim home from school. Several times out of the week we swim [00:03:00] home and we thought it--

Adrian: Swim? Like swim??

Sharon Johnson: Like, yeah, little kids. Water.

Adrian: (Quietly) Oh my God.

Sharon Johnson: Walking home to water.

Adrian: (ocean wave crashes and music in background) The ocean is Norfolk's greatest ally and worst enemy. It bore enslaved Africans to the city shore and hit them as they escaped bondage. The ocean supports the region's biggest industry, naval defense. And the ocean creeps into the homes of Norfolk residents, as well as the Naval Station, the largest in the world-- threatening livelihoods, histories and futures.

Two shadows cast by giants fall over in Ms Johnson's family home. Though the flooding in her neighborhood has improved due to city interventions in the past decade, she's now shadowed by the risk of development and resulting gentrification.

This is Wading Between Two Titans from the [00:04:00] Repair Lab. (organ joins background musice)

We are an initiative from the University of Virginia focused on racial justice and climate change. The two titans we're wading between are sea level rise and the housing crisis. I'm producer Adrian Wood. I'm a white, trans, queer, millennial; sound artist, gardener, and community member.

I don't live in Norfolk. Matter of fact, residents had to teach me to pronounce it. It's spelled N O R F O L K. But I've been instructed to pronounce it Norfolk. Though really, people from different parts of the city say it different ways. Even though I don't live in Norfolk, I've seen the kinds of flooding that Ms. Johnson is talking about.

The floods that visited her Norfolk neighborhood regularly continue to disproportionately affect Norfolk's Black residents. Due to climate change, in Virginia, we're dealing with more and more flooding, displacement from hurricanes, even rain bombs.

Skip Stiles: Virginia has the [00:05:00] highest rate of sea level rise on the East coast.

Adrian: But it's different in Norfolk. (music stops)

Andria McClellan: Let's start off with the fact that Norfolk has 144 miles of coastline. Norfolk and our region is second only to New Orleans In terms of flood risk.

Monet Johnson: We drownin'.

Sharon Johnson: We drownin'. People are living in filth. And walls peeling, rust in the bathtubs, water that ain't running right.

Adrian: These are some of the voices that we'll get to know over the course of this series.

Andria McClellan: Outside of the large, more catastrophic storms, nuisance or sunny day flooding occurs regularly. So when you have that and you have precipitation events that we're seeing-- these rain bombs, excessive rain, more frequent as a result of climate change. It is literally the perfect storm.

Adrian: The ways that Norfolk deals with the effects of climate change and sea level rise are felt differently among different communities in the city. Proposed [00:06:00] solutions threatened to reinforce racism.

Johnny Finn: Norfolk is about 44% white. It's about 40% Black, and it's about 20% poverty rate.

Skip Stiles: Not everyone is gonna be able to live with the water, and then you get into some very difficult choices about who gets to live with the water and who doesn't. So there's a whole lot of equity issues that are gonna come up really, really quickly.

Andria McClellan: You know, at some point there will be people who ([will be]) protected and there will be people who won't.

Kim Sudderth: I just bought a house. I'd hate for the property values to be diminished because, you know, holy crap, we're not gonna protect this, this property.

Vincent Hodges: Water's taken care of at the speed of redevelopment. Water is taken care of there at the rate of convenient displacement. Otherwise, they make it inconvenient for you and they'll flood you out.

Adrian: People in Norfolk are working to build safe, healthy, and dignified housing in the places where they live and hope to remain. They're experiencing the same housing crisis as the rest of the country right now. [00:07:00] Sky high rent, evictions, poor quality public housing, and a lack of effective solutions from the government. In the past, Norfolk set historic precedence around neighborhood engineering and displacement. Now, other cities in and beyond the US are looking at Norfolk's response to sea-level rise.

Kim Sudderth: If we are to save our city, we're gonna have to throw everything at it.

Adrian: Through this series, we'll investigate how sea-level rise, racism and housing are intertwined in coastal Norfolk, Virginia. You'll hear from scholars, advocates, elected officials, and residents about the past, present and future of housing in the Mermaid City.

Kim Sudderth: What are the people who currently live here gonna do? Between the water... and the housing crisis... just wading between two titans.[00:08:00]

Adrian: Episode one is a deep history of Norfolk as a port city, and what that offered and didn't offer in terms of employment and housing for Black people from the colonial era up until the turn of the 20th century.

(music and waves in backgroundww) Norfolk is not an island, but it feels like one. Water curls around the city like a snail, forming a natural harbor. Several streams and rivulets flow into the city's center, and all of the land is within 12 feet of sea level. That's a big part of Norfolk's flood risk. There's water everywhere-- and there always has been.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander: The early town of, of Norfolk, it was --as most sea towns-- a nasty place to be. Rough and ragged, slow to develop. Because the focus was about the waterways and transporting goods, as opposed to [00:09:00] developing an infrastructure to support all of that.

Adrian: Cassandra Newby Alexander is an endowed professor of Virginia Black History and Culture at Norfolk State University, a historically Black university founded in the early 1900s.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander: The waterway patterns always result in the area flooding. The town of Norfolk, that was originally an Indian town of the Chessipeans. So the little town was called Skiog, and that was essentially where MacArthur Mall is located today. It's a piece of land that is high ground. (chuckling) By high ground, you know, it's at least 12 feet above sea level.

Adrian: The Chessipeans were already gone from the area by the time the English arrived. Records show the first free Black people in the area only a few years later, including Anthony Johnson, who bought his freedom from indentured servitude in 1621. He started a tobacco farm of his own.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander: Were [00:10:00] there free Black communities throughout Hampton Roads? The answer is yes. There were pockets of free Blacks everywhere. In fact, there were some people who had never really been enslaved. And then of course they had children and their children's, children's children continued to be free. In the earliest days of Norfolk, many of those free Black families lived intermingled with other groups in the town.

Adrian: They lived with the flooding and its byproducts, just like Norfolk residents do today.

Tommy Bogger: Many Blacks lived in tenements along the docks, very undesirable, damp, muddy, and damp. It was a very unhealthy area to live in. It

was always a marshland. It was a very, very undesirable, unhealthy place. Also, and epidemics would prove that, that the death tolls would be high in those areas for Blacks.

My name is Tommy L Bogger I'm presently serving as the acting dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Norfolk State University.

Adrian: [00:11:00] According to Dean Bogger the rest of Virginia looked down on Norfolk in the early days of the United States, pre-revolution.

Tommy Bogger: They always detested the Norfolkians because local soil was not very conducive to cotton growin', so from the very beginning, Norfolk developed an economy very different from that of the rest of Virginia. And Norfolk had always been so much cut off from the rest of the state by water.

Adrian: A different economy in Norfolk meant different paths within the institution of slavery. In the time between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, Norfolk's trade-based economy was useful for Black people living there for several reasons.

Tommy Bogger: Slavery tends to break down in the city, and that was true for just about every city in the South, but especially for those thrivin' cities, to have a lot of trades in which Blacks could make a good livin'. Norfolk, thank goodness, had the shipyards. [00:12:00] Norfolk was one of those cities in which there were many opportunities for enslaved persons to gain extra work, and over a period of time they were able to purchase their freedom.

Adrian: Between the 1780s and 1850s, a scarcity of housing in Norfolk actually improved living spaces for some Black people. Prominent white families, for instance, didn't have a lot of room to house enslaved people. Though they might have owned land, their lots were limited because Norfolk was just too swampy. So enslaved people went out on their own and found places to live within the Black community.

Tommy Bogger: And Blacks were very happy to do that. That would give them some sense of privacy away from their owners, away from the watchful eye of their owners. They were able to build up their sense of community and social activities.

Adrian: The city's relationship to water also supported Black people's lives, from pre-revolution up until the Civil [00:13:00] War, through employment opportunities in the merchant marine industry.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander: You had blackjacks. These African American men who were operating as seamen. So what we call merchant marines today.

Adrian: This is Professor Newby -Alexander again.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander: And they were coming in and out. Some were part of the British naval vessels coming in and out, or on French ships coming in and out.

Adrian: Of all the different kinds of maritime labor available to Black people in Norfolk during this time, being a sailor offered the most relative freedom. Sailors could buy their own labor, begin to accumulate capital. Many supported families back on shore. This led to many households being run by women while the men were away on the high seas. There was also something of a quote-unquote "colorblind" culture in sailing that valued experience over race. Sometimes Black sailors received equal pay to their white counterparts. If they were more [00:14:00] experienced, sometimes they would even be paid more than white sailors.

There were a lot of Black sailors. It's estimated about 20% of seamen between 1700-1820 were free Black men. About half of that number were sailors, not fishermen or longshoremen. John Thompson was one of them. In his 1853 memoir, he wrote about how he escaped enslavement by pretending to be a sailor and getting employed on a whaling ship as a steward, a kitchen worker.

John Thompson (read by Marcus Anderson): I became very seasick and the captain now came into the cabin, very angry and said to me, 'What is the matter with you?' I told him I was sick.

'Have you ever been at sea before?' He asked. I told him I never had, upon which he asked how I came to ship. I answered,

'I am a fugitive slave. I thought I would go a whaling voyage as being the place where I stood least chance of being arrested by slave hunters.'

This narrative [00:15:00] seemed to touch his heart, for his continus at once assumed a pleasing expression. Thus, God stood between me and him, and worked in my defense.

Adrian: Through that experience, later in his life, Thompson became a very accomplished sailor.

For the same reason traders and merchants valued the area, Norfolk in its surrounding region were a key point in the Underground Railroad. It was a nexus for northern and southern states.

Tommy Bogger: Regardless of how bad the situation was for Blacks here in Norfolk, this was utopia for enslaved people in the outlying counties.

Adrian: This is Dean Bogger from Norfolk State, again.

Tommy Bogger: You see, runaways in the rural counties were always being suspected of hiding somewhere in Norfolk.

Adrian: Norfolk's position on the water was in some ways a boon for Black people living in the city. Norfolk's position on the water was also a weakness for the plantation system, because [00:16:00] enslaved people used it to run away. (Mysterious sounds in background, quiet water soundse) The countless creeks, streams, and rivulets that crisscrossed the city made it possible to steal away on a boat, or slip into the water in the night.

Almost 100 years before John Thompson wrote those memoirs about being a Black jack on the high seas and being caught seasick by the captain, in 1778, Ishmael was one of those people. This newspaper advertisement in the Virginia Gazette speculates that Norfolk may be his destination

Virginia Gazette: Run away. A very likely Negro man named Ishmael, 27 or 28 years old, very Black, and bred to see by Cornelius Calvert. It is very probable he may change his clothes and make for Norfolk, as he wants much to get on board some of the ships of war.

Tommy Bogger: Not only did they seek refuge among these slaves and free Blacks in Norfolk, but for many they saw it as a [00:17:00] temporary situation where these same enslaved persons and free Blacks would eventually help them book passage to the north by sneak them on boat one of the numerous ships leaving the Norfolk harbor. Yes, Yes.

Adrian: Black sailors helped run away slaves and fugitives escape, but it was a serious risk for everyone involved. In this 1939 interview, formerly enslaved Hampton Roads resident Fannie Nicholson recalls:

Fannie Nicholson (read by Barbara Faison): Some of the slaves was put in wooden boxes and was sent by the boat to the Yankees. Some of 'em, they never got there. Because if a master went on the boat looking for his slaves, the people

had to dump 'em in the water to keep the masters from getting them. Then too, some of 'em died in the boxes before they reached the Yankees. (sad, quiet mysterious music)

Whether as sailors, draymen, their [00:18:00] onshore families, runaways, fishermen, or marine merchants. Black people's relationship to water in Norfolk bore lingering elements of the importance of water and the ocean in African spirituality. Most new enslaved Africans landing in Virginia between 17 and 1800 were from Angola and the Congo.

There were many Africans and African Americans who trusted the sea so deeply, they chose to commit their bodies to it rather than be enslaved. For example, an enslaved person named Tom attempted to return home two and a half years after landing on American soil. He sailed into the Atlantic on an open boat in 1761, and that's the last that was heard of him. (shaker sounds, quiet musicw)

For cultural reasons and spiritual reasons, as well as [00:19:00] the growing economic and racial dynamics, Norfolk was a unique place for African Americans before the Civil War. It made employment more accessible for free Black people living in the area. It made housing more accessible for enslaved Black people living in the area.

And at the same time, the area grew in value to the US government as it began to expand its Navy. The history of the US Navy, and Naval Station Norfolk in particular, carries some complex intersections with the history of race in the US. Today, Naval Station Norfolk is the largest in the world. But before the Civil War, the US Navy was very small. Very small. With most statesmen being like,' Why would we try to compete with European Navies? They are so big and old, and we are so small and new..." but one loud proponent was Secretary of the Navy, Abel P Upshur, who lived in Virginia's Eastern Shore, Norfolk's [00:20:00] rural neighbor to the north. In the mid 18 hundreds, Upshur wanted to expand the Navy to grab Hawaii, extract resources from South America and police Africa.

John Quincy Adams opposed this, writing in 1842:

John Quincy Adams: This sudden Virginia overflow of zeal for the patronage of the Navy comes reeking hot from the furnace of slavery. 'Tis a wholesome stream from a polluted fountain.

Adrian: In the next 20 years leading up to the Civil War, the growth of the US Navy went hand in hand with practices that exploited Black labor, including slavery and Jim Crow employment that kept Black workers in the hardest, most dangerous and lowest paid positions.

Very early into the Civil War, the Union took control of Norfolk for its Navy yard, which is now Naval Station Norfolk. This presented a major opportunity for Black people in the area, including enslaved folks, fugitives, refugees, and free people. Because enlisting in the Navy doesn't just mean a [00:21:00] job. It is also obliged to feed, clothe and house you. And if you're lucky, you're family too.

Charles Grandy escaped slavery during the chaos of the Civil War's outbreak and was literally picked up on the side of the road by the Union Army, where he chose to enlist.

Charles Grandy (read by Marcus Anderson): I was in the army. I warn't neah no fighting. I was a cook for a white army. Didn't see but one or two colored soldiers during the whole war. Then I get tired of the field. Always running and never get no rest. So I 'listed to Navy one year. They pay you $6 a month in the Navy, cause you get your clothing and board.

Adrian: Black men have shown up in the Navy since the American Revolution. Black women, not until much later. After reconstruction, Black men were only allowed to be cooks, stewards or coal heavers. African American [00:22:00] representation in the Navy dropped way down until almost a hundred years later. (light drums in background, musical transitione)

Though Naval Station Norfolk is a major force in the city today, residents report that they haven't been very involved in the housing and flooding conversations. So for now, we'll move on from the Navy and we'll look briefly at housing and land for Black people in Norfolk, from Reconstruction onward, when many Black people moved to Norfolk as part of the great migration. Here's Charles Grandy again.

Charles Grandy (read by Marcus Anderson): After the war, nobody owned the n*****s, so they all come to Norfolk, look like to me. Hundred hungry and without house to sleep in was walking round, begging. The army fed a lot of them, but they couldn't feed all. We used to steal bread and stuff it in our shirts when we come off duty. [00:23:00] When we get out, we would give it to the hungry women and babies. Lawd, they didn't have no food atall. Women and children used to die two and three a day from being hungry.

Adrian: In the wreckage of Reconstruction, many people were starving because they no longer had access to means through which they could provide basics for themselves, like food and shelter. Basics that perhaps had used to be provided by their previous owners during enslavement. White backlash against Black Americans during Reconstruction ensured that Black people would not be able to access the economic growth that they needed.

And after Lincoln's presidency, the federal government started giving land back to former Confederates. And there were a lot of those in Hampton Roads. Matilda Carter, a formerly enslaved woman in Hampton Roads, recounted in a 1939 interview:

Matilda Carter (read by Barbara Faison): After Lincoln, Johnson went [00:24:00] in office. Things sho' change then. Johnson gave them rebels they land back and gave them all dey privilege they had befo' de war. One day, a committee o' three men came 'round. 'Twas Jeff Sinclair, a big old red rebel; Reverend Taylor, he was the most powerful colored man in town; and a officer, too. These men went to all the Negro houses. Mine too. And made them people sign a paper saying dey property wasn't deirs. Dey couldn't buy it, so dey had to pay $10 a year for rent, for living on the land! Reverend Taylor was there to make them folks sign. What he said to a Negro was law.

Adrian: (sounds of backwards music) It was only 15 years after this interview with Matilda Carter was recorded in writing by a Works progress Administration interviewer, that Sharon Johnson's house (dreamy synth sound from beginning) was built by her grandfather.

Sharon Johnson: My grandfather built this house.

Adrian: He built it in 1954. And just like Matilda Carter's land was seized, Sharon Johnson's [00:25:00] home is also under threat of being taken from her. It's as if nothing has changed, but the vessels that carry these threats.

Sharon Johnson: Every day, somebody wanna buy this house. I get a letter in the mail or a phone call.

Everybody want to be close to town now, but this was always a middle class Black neighborhood.

Adrian: In 2021, the city of Norfolk constructed a major storm water intervention in Miss Johnson's neighborhood. It's really helped prevent the flooding. City improvements like the storm water project have raised the value

of Ms Johnson's home. They've also made Black neighborhoods like hers a target for developers.

Sharon Johnson: Okay. The flooding. The flooding, they spent the last year working on the street and they said that our water would be better. They tore the street, they tore up the grass, (quiet voice in background: Tore de neighborhood up...) they tore, they tore the creek.... Since they left, I haven't () seen the flood.[00:26:00]

Adrian: Monet Johnson is the other voice in this conversation. She's Ms Johnson's granddaughter, and lead organizer for environmental and housing justice with New Virginia Majority.

Monet Johnson: My grandma's house, she's like in between the two circles of downtown and midtown. I, I'm sure one day she's gonna wake up, her house is gonna be like on a flatbed truck, like, 'Get this outta here. (snickering) We need this land, lady.'

They're revitalizing everything. Which means, tear down. Turn it into something else.

Adrian: We'll hear more from her in future episodes. (background music starts again) Next time on Wading Between Two Titans, we'll learn more about the marks of Norfolk's segregated housing in the 20th century, and its relationship to recurrent flooding.

Paul Riddick: I'm 74 years old and have lived here my entire life. When anybody asked me about living in Norfolk, my response is, I've only lived where white folks have allowed me to live.

Adrian: How [00:27:00] racialized fear became embedded in Norfolk's real estate market.

Paul Riddick: Norfolk has a very, very dismal, unpopular history of gentrifying communities.

Kim Sudderth: 'The neighborhood is not adversely affected by the adjacent Negro section.'! (cackling)

Monet Johnson: 'Just displace people, we'll figure it out later. '

Adrian: And all about one policy with a notorious legacy that continues to limit options for Black people seeking relief from flooding in Norfolk.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander: What really hurt African Americans was when the federal government stepped in and instituted essentially redlining. That's what hurt. African American communities then were put in harm's way.

Jackie Hope Glass: Systems had their foots on our necks, and we were not able to build in the same way other folks were.

Adrian: Find us online at twotitans.org . T w O T I T A n s.org.

This episode was written, recorded, produced, [00:28:00] edited, mixed, mastered, and hosted by me, Adrian Wood.

Show Art by Adrian Wood. Music by sugarlift.. Reggie Reisa Harrison on djembe and percussion.

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John Quincy Adams and the runaway advertisement in the Virginia Gazette were read by Jeremy Albret. Thanks for listening. (wave sound crashing)