

A great place to visit, an even better place to live

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People often cite northwest Guilford County's small-town feel and rural charm as the top reasons they choose to live in the area. Excellent public schools and low tax rates are another plus, as is the proximity to the Piedmont Triad International Airport.

Once primarily agricultural, the area's commercial backdrop has become much more diversified over the years and now includes a variety of offices, restaurants and retail stores.

Although many of the farms that once dotted the countryside have disappeared and been replaced with residential communities, some families have found ways to diversify their farming ventures and still make a living from the land; others have elected to leave their farmland undeveloped as their ancestors did – providing both history and continuity in an area that is rapidly changing.

Whatever drew you to this area, we're glad you're here and hope you'll enjoy the following overviews of our northwest towns and their history. (For facts and figures on the local towns, as well as contact information, see our local resource guide on page 32).

Oak Ridge

Once a rural farming community, Oak Ridge is now a growing town with many new residential subdivisions and a thriving business center. Several shopping centers and office complexes have sprung up in the town's commercial core, primarily along N.C. 68.

A local historic district was established even before the town's incorporation in 1998. As a result, new construction within the district must conform to historic development guidelines. The town's Historic Preservation Commission reviews construction design and signage within the district's boundaries and also pays tribute to notable sites through the erection of historic markers.

Oak Ridge Military Academy, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was founded in 1850 by 43 local families who wanted to ensure that their children received a classic education. Alumni Hall, its signature building, was constructed in 1914.

Several nearby historic homes were built by academy leaders, including Oakhurst, the elegant Queen Anne-style home on N.C. 150.

Among the town's more scenic attractions is the Old Mill of Guilford, which dates back to 1767. The current structure, built in 1818, has been the subject of many artists and

photographers. The mill, operated almost entirely by volunteers, produces stone-ground flour, cornmeal, oatmeal and grits – just as it has for 250 years. A gift shop sells its goods and other local products 364 days a year.

Ida Morton, 81, grew up in the town. “We had four grocery stores here in Oak Ridge. You could go to Whitaker’s store and buy a live chicken, fresh butter and ice,” she recalls.

The town had a barbershop at the academy; the barber, Mr. Sawyer, also did shoe repair, and his wife operated a tea room where locals could go for refreshment. Morton remembers going to Carolina Lake, near Oak Ridge Military Academy, for church picnics; there was a skating rink on N.C. 150 near Beeson Road.

“We didn’t have a lot of cars – people couldn’t afford them. This was a farming town,” Morton says. “We learned to skate and ride a bicycle on (N.C.) 150 – cars didn’t come by that often.”

Oak Ridge Horse Show, a community charity event started in 1945, is held each year over Easter weekend. Organized entirely by volunteers, the show has raised an estimated \$1 million since its beginning. That money has been returned to the community in the way of contributions to the Oak Ridge Fire Department and its ladies auxiliary, schools, Scout groups, civic organizations, local charities and historic sites. An estimated \$200,000 has been contributed to Oak Ridge Elementary School; the show provided half the money needed to construct the school’s gym.

Each Halloween, the Merchants Association of Oak Ridge sponsors the Great Pumpkin Event at the Oak Ridge Commons Shopping Center. Children and adults alike don costumes and vie for prizes. A pet costume contest, pumpkin carving contest and hay rides are also part of the fun.

The Country Fair, another community event also sponsored by the Merchants Association of Oak Ridge, has been held on the elementary school grounds for the last two years. The fair offers games, music, inflatables, a dunking booth and lots of food.

Stokesdale

Originally known as Green Pond for a swampy area in the vicinity of N.C. 65 and Ellisboro Road, Stokesdale’s original name was later shortened to Pond.

In 1886, the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railroad was built from Greensboro to Mount Airy and a station was built at Pond. In 1887, the town’s name was changed to Stokesdale. Various accounts say the moniker came from the name of a railroad executive, train conductor or the man who surveyed the area.

The railroad's influence on the town was great, and a small business district sprung up around the depot. Several of the buildings along the town's main street which were built around 1900 still exist.

Powell Shelton Sr., who has lived 58 of his 80 years in the town, says Stokesdale's downtown area once had a bank, several grocery stores, a barber shop, doctor's office, drug store, and service stations as well as clothing, hardware and furniture stores. The town even had a dance hall. Shelton recalls Saturdays when many residents would come to the business district to shop. Main Street was often the location of Saturday night singings or groups playing bluegrass music.

With the advent of large shopping centers and malls, "mom and pop" businesses in many cities and towns began to suffer, and Stokesdale was no different.

Although the town originally incorporated in 1907, it went bankrupt during the depression and its charter was revoked in 1971. Efforts to reincorporate in 1989 were successful, and although Stokesdale is the smallest northwest Guilford County town in terms of population, it is also the oldest.

Shelton, a town council member for 14 years who helped with the reincorporation, says the town has come far. "When we incorporated (in 1989), we had more miles of dirt road than all of Mecklenburg County, according to the DOT," he recalls. Shelton says he remembers when you could drive to Oak Ridge on N.C. 68 and rarely meet another car; today about 12,000 vehicles travel the highway through the town.

Today, the town's annual Christmas parade is one event that brings hundreds of local residents back to the downtown area. Organized entirely by volunteers, the event is everything a small-town parade should be. Main streets are closed and local politicians, marching bands, churches, Scout groups, civic organizations, youth groups, fire departments and businesses participate in the parade, tossing out candy to spectators along the way.

Private individuals have done much to revitalize the downtown area in recent years, and a group called Revitalizing Our Ancestors' Dreams in Stokesdale (ROADS) has recently organized and hopes to build on the concept even more. The group has applied to become part of the N.C. Small Town Main Street program; if accepted, the town would receive technical assistance from the state department of commerce.

Summerfield

Summerfield's history predates the Revolutionary War, when Charles Bruce, an important local figure, settled here. A patriot who helped recruit men to the Guilford militia, Bruce was elected as a delegate from Guilford County to the Halifax Convention in 1776.

Originally called Bruce's Crossroads, the town was renamed around 1812 for Rev. John Summerfield, a visiting evangelist who later relocated here.

Gladys Scarlette, 78, remembers growing up in what was largely a farming community. One of eight children, everyone was expected to pitch in. That included jobs such as churning, bringing in wood for the family's stove, drawing water from the well and emptying chamber pots.

Family members worked in tobacco as well as the garden. Canning helped preserve the fruits of their labor for later in the year, and Scarlette remembers her father purchasing pinto beans and sugar in 100-pound bags.

Once their work was done, Scarlette says children made their own fun. "Children had to use their imaginations – I think that was good for us." She remembers looking forward to days when the ice man would come. "We didn't own a refrigerator. If children were around, he would chip off little pieces of ice for them."

Summerfield incorporated in 1996 after citizens banded together to stop a commercial rock quarry from locating here. Soon after, the town voluntarily annexed several more properties, more than doubling its size. Concerned that they would be gobbled up by Greensboro, residents wanted a reprieve from the city's taxes, as well as a say-so in how their town was run.

After incorporation, the H.C. Brittain store, built in 1872, was donated to the town. Despite its deteriorated condition, the building was restored, largely through the work of volunteers. The Brittain Building now serves as Summerfield's town hall.

Summerfield residents look forward each year to celebrating their past and honoring those who helped establish the town. May brings the annual Founders' Day celebration, held on the grounds of Summerfield Elementary School. After a parade down Summerfield Road which boasts more than 200 entries, attendees enjoy games, rides, music, food, a car show and displays by local merchants, churches and civic organizations.

Summerfield is the county's third largest municipality behind Greensboro and High Point.

In the future, the face of the town will no doubt change substantially as U.S. 220 is widened and I-73 cuts a swath through it.

Although Summerfield has changed, Scarlette says some things remain constant. People still enjoy the rural atmosphere and the fact that it's not in the "big city," she says. But the lifetime resident says it's the people who make the difference. "Somebody said one time they thought Summerfield was the most caring place they had ever seen. If anybody ever needed anything, all they had to do was say so. I think the people here have always looked out for each other."