

Windermere Narrative
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A new bridge over the Ashley River, the WWI Memorial Bridge, constructed of concrete and steel, was completed in 1926, allowing greater access from the West Ashley area to downtown Charleston and encouraging the growth of automobile suburbs.¹ Businessman James S. Simmons developed Windermere beginning in 1926, where it had the distinction of being the “nearest suburb” to downtown, with an advertised 2-5 minute drive.² Windermere was not the only subdivision in West Ashley; by 1930 there were five others. While most homes in the neighborhood were built after WWII, there were several homes built in the 1920s.³ The main architectural styles of Windermere are Tudor Revival, Minimal Traditional, Ranch, Colonial Revival, Georgian Revival, and Craftsmen.⁴ Suburbs were growing throughout the United States in the early twentieth century, and Charleston’s Navy Yard especially spurred rapid growth.

In 1890 Charleston received a contract for a naval yard, hoping to revitalize the economy that had suffered since the Civil War. Charleston Mayor J. Adger Smythe and Senator Benjamin Tillman lobbied on the city’s behalf. The Navy formally took possession of the property in 1901 and the first dry dock was completed in 1907. Just before World War I, there were 1,700 employees at the base. During the war a Navy training center, Camp Bagley, was established for basic training of up to 5,000 recruits at a time. Employment at the base peaked during WWI with 5,600 employees. The Navy Yard was now a major force in Charleston’s economy.⁵

¹ Robert and Company, “Area Character Appraisal: Old Windermere,” (Atlanta, GA: August 2009), 14.

² “Better Homes Exhibition is Visited and Revisited,” *Charleston Evening Post*, p. 5A, May 20, 1929.

³ Robert and Company, “Area Character Appraisal: Old Windermere,” (Atlanta, GA: August 2009), 15-16.

⁴ Robert and Company, “Area Character Appraisal: Old Windermere,” (Atlanta, GA: August 2009), 39.

⁵ “Naval Base History” City of North Charleston website,

<http://www.northcharleston.org/Visitors/Attractions/Greater-Charleston-Naval-Base-Memorial/Naval-Base-History.aspx> [Accessed May 25, 2017].

Between WWI and WWII employment fell to pre-war levels at the Navy Base. Officials considered closing the naval yard a few times during this period. The Great Depression hit Charleston hard, but good news arrived in 1933 with a new ship construction yard at the Charleston Navy Base. With the new production and rapidly increased employment (now 2,400 employees at the base), a housing shortage occurred in Charleston. In 1941, three apartment housing projects were built to accommodate the new employees. During World War II, employment for civilians and members of the Navy increased dramatically, and by 1943, there were 25,948 civilian employees at the Charleston Navy Base.⁶

The housing problem soon reached a crisis level, as it is estimated that 55,000 people migrated to Charleston during WWII. Even as early as 1930 the Board of Trade was helping Navy families find homes to rent, including ones in the Windermere neighborhood.⁷ Although Windermere was established before WWII, neighboring Byrnes Downs subdivision was the neighborhood highlighted in a 1948 article as a war-built housing project in St. Andrew's parish, speaking to the rapid growth of the West Ashley area in general. By 1948, residents in these suburban developments had every city convenience: a grocery store, dry cleaner, barber shop, laundry, post office, photography studio, bakery, hardware store, clothing shop, and a restaurant. At the time, they only lacked a branch bank and a motion picture theater, in terms of modern conveniences.⁸ The article was likely referring to South Windermere Shopping Center, as it is

⁶ "Naval Base History" City of North Charleston website, <http://www.northcharleston.org/Visitors/Attractions/Greater-Charleston-Naval-Base-Memorial/Naval-Base-History.aspx> [Accessed May 25, 2017].

⁷ "Housing Bureau Spends Busy Day: Board of Trade Aids Navy Families in Finding Homes for Stay Here," *News and Courier*, p. 10, Monday Morning, October 6, 1930.

⁸ "Do You Know Charleston? –Byrnes Down" *News and Courier*, page 10, Monday Morning, March 1, 1948.

one of the oldest in the state of South Carolina. There were other notable West Ashley shopping centers by the 1950s too—Avondale and St. Andrew's Center.⁹

Multiple newspaper articles and advertisements in the late 1920s highlighted what Windermere offered in terms of location and modern conveniences. A May 26, 1929 advertisement in the *News and Courier* especially highlighted ten advantages, including: concrete sidewalks, hard surface streets, fire hydrants, water supply (Windermere has its own large water tank), zoned residential, police protection, brick homes (attractive and reduced fire risk), no service charges from downtown Charleston merchants, no delays (only one bridge between Windermere and downtown), and owned and developed/financed by the same person (who uses local labor and materials), which allows a small down payment in cash and then the rest paid monthly like rent.¹⁰ In addition to these modern conveniences, the first home built in Windermere in 1927 was also the first all-electric house in St. Andrew's parish (West Ashley).¹¹ Developer James S. Simmons also planted holly trees, oaks, and palmettos when laying out the subdivision and encouraged a large set-back of houses on their lots to create beautiful front lawn spaces, something that is still an advantage in Windermere today.¹²

Two suburban neighborhoods were featured in the May 1929 Better Homes Week in Charleston: Riverland Terrace on James Island and Windermere in St. Andrew's Parish (West Ashley). The two homes featured in Windermere were a one-story brick bungalow (House No. 2) and a two-story brick house (House No. 1). Both model homes were fully furnished by local department and specialty stores and some even had separate two-car garages. The Windermere

⁹ Robert and Company, "Area Character Appraisal: Old Windermere," (Atlanta, GA: August 2009), 14.

¹⁰ "Advertisement: Read This List of Exclusive Windermere Advantages," *News and Courier*, p. 8B, Sunday Morning, May 26, 1929.

¹¹ Robert and Company, "Area Character Appraisal: Old Windermere," (Atlanta, GA: August 2009), 16.

¹² "Windermere, on Ashley, Undergoes Development: Residential Sections of Highest Class Are Being Arranged by James S. Simmons on Tract Near Concrete Bridge," *The Sunday News*, p. 2, Sunday Morning March 21, 1926.

model homes featured everything from furniture to rugs, draperies, window shades, linens, china, and utensils. One even contained a baby grand piano and a radio. Modern amenities were especially highlighted on these tours such as, built-in kitchen cabinets, electrical outlets, electric refrigerators, radios, built-in ironing boards and folding tables, cedar closets, running water in the kitchen, vacuums, and other new household devices.¹³

The six homes on the tours were visited by thousands of people during one week in May 1929. In a single day, even with inclement weather, more than 1,000 people toured the model homes.¹⁴ Better Homes Week began in 1922 as the culmination of the work each year by a national organization, Better Homes in America's efforts to promote home ownership, modernization, and beautification. Herbert Hoover was actually the head of the organization before becoming President. In subsequent years, the Better Homes Week moved around the state of South Carolina to surrounding areas like Kingstree (1930).¹⁵ The focus of Better Homes Week was on modernly-furnished homes at modest prices that the average consumer could afford.

While Windermere was and still is mostly residential, some commercial properties exist, especially along Savannah Highway. Stocker Manor, at the intersection of Stocker Drive and Savannah Highway served as tourist home (similar to a boarding or guest house) from the early days of Windermere until the late 20th century. Tourist homes like Stocker Manor were common along state highways during the early 20th century with the rise of the automobile economy, before national chain motels and hotels emerged.¹⁶ Another tourist home, the Windermere Guest House (later called Sires Guest Home) at 69 Savannah Highway, was advertised as "a home of quiet refinement with accommodations to fit your needs." There were nine other neighboring

¹³ "Charleston to Observe Better Homes Week; Houses Open for Inspection," *News and Courier*, p. 3A, Sunday Morning, May 19, 1929.

¹⁴ "Near a Thousand See Model Homes," *News and Courier*, p. 7, Morning May 22, 1929.

¹⁵ "Program Planned for Better Homes Week," *News and Courier*, p. 22, Sunday Morning, February 23, 1930.

¹⁶ Robert and Company, "Area Character Appraisal: Old Windermere," (Atlanta, GA: August 2009), 40.

tourist homes in 1950: Bootle's, Wilmar, Vagabond, McCay's, Boyd's, Oak Villa, Kennedy's, Ashley, and Moreland, all within a mile of downtown Charleston.¹⁷ The neighborhood of Windermere is still recognized today as a desirable West Ashley suburb, mostly due to the fact that its original fabric of tree-lined streets and attractive, modest brick homes is largely intact.

¹⁷ Donna F. Jacobs, *Images of America: West Ashley*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2012), 111.

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