



## Historic property on Elizabeth River's Western Branch becomes first conservation easement in Portsmouth

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PORTSMOUTH, VA – Thanks to the vision and perseverance of Mary Johnston and her sister, Dr. Frances Johnston Beck, on Nov. 3, 2020, a rare, undisturbed five-acre parcel of land on the Western Branch of the Elizabeth River became the first land conservation easement in Portsmouth.

The sisters grew up on several acres of land that have been in their family for almost a century. Their ancestors and the original land owner share a common history that dates back more than four centuries. The first landowner, Cornelius Lloyd, became the first Commissioner of the Revenue of Norfolk County in approximately 1634. He was also a member of the first Virginia House of Burgesses. Three hundred years later, the sisters' grandfather Hugh Johnston and father Hugh W. Johnston were two of the last Norfolk County Commissioners of the Revenue before the county was completely absorbed by other cities in 1960.

But this point of land features something perhaps more important than its history. The site is one of the few with natural habitats located within an intensely developed, urban area in the City of Portsmouth that had been carefully cultured by the sisters' parents, Hugh and Frances Johnston, throughout their tenure of ownership from the 1930's until their passing in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is also one of the last undisturbed pieces of land on the Elizabeth River, where ninety percent of the shoreline and watershed have been developed and redeveloped, paved, filled in, or bulkheaded. The wooded land is a legacy the parents of the three Johnston sisters (Frances, Mary and Susan Johnston Bradshaw) wanted to preserve.

The five acres were once part of a much larger parcel owned by the Johnston family. Recalls Mary Johnston, "When the home I spent my teen years in was sold and destroyed, and the field in which I kept my horse was plowed under for a condominium complex, I started to think of a way to save the property we now have." Dr. Beck emphasizes that it was their mother, also named Frances Johnston, who planted many of the trees and shrubs that are now on the property and shaped it into its current presentation until arthritis prevented her from taking care of it. Her daughters carried on that careful tending.

Through an agreement reached Nov. 3 between Mary Johnston and Frances Johnston Beck and the Living River Trust, the remaining five-plus acres became the first conservation easement in Portsmouth that will forever preserve and protect in perpetuity the conservation values of the property. The two sisters still own the property but the Living River Trust will ensure protection of the property from development.

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Adds Dr. Beck, “It has been a 20-year-long effort to honor our parents’ request that our ‘home’ be preserved and protected from division and development. It was not until we found the wonderful folks at the Living River Trust that we were able to make that request come true. We are forever in their debt and thank them for their understanding of and commitment to our wishes,” she emphasizes.

The conservation values of the property include tidal wetlands, riparian buffers, a small tidal tributary and even a protected oyster bed mapped in 1894 by what is now the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. The property provides woodlands and shoreline wildlife habitat that helps protect the water quality of the Elizabeth River and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay, since the river is a tributary of that important estuary. This small yet incredible ecosystem is an ecologically important habitat for marine and estuarine species contributing to the health of the seafood industry in Virginia. The family hopes that this first easement will become a model for similar properties on the river.

The Living River Trust is one of the few land conservation agencies in Hampton Roads that welcomes even the smallest parcels of land. Although the five acres seem small compared to other land conservation initiatives that look for hundreds if not thousands of acres, this precious parcel is priceless because, even after four hundred years, it remains in a relatively natural state with more than one thousand linear feet of shoreline along the Western Branch of the Elizabeth River.

The importance of even this small parcel became clear during one of the Living River Trust site visits: dolphins swam upriver and a bald eagle flew overhead as Mary and LRT board members and staff looked out from the bluff overlooking a view that would have been seen by Native Americans and early Americans, even Captain John Smith had he sailed that far up the river.

“We are very thankful that Ms. Johnston and Dr. Beck recognize the important role that preserving open space plays in strengthening and developing our community,” stated Rob Robins, chairman of the Living River Trust.

**For more information, visit the Living River Trust website [www.livingrivertrust.org](http://www.livingrivertrust.org) and follow them on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#). You may also contact John Harbin, LRT Administrator, at 757.500.4579 or 757.869.2839 (cell).**