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Kick Back and Come South to Live

You'll find the relaxed, small town atmosphere of the South hard to pass up.

BY DIANE SILCOX-JARRETT

A QUAIN DOWNTOWN in Benson with a feel of 60 years ago, a heritage center in Smithfield with enough genealogy material to make any family historian happy, local actors and actresses in Garner recognized for their plays by "Spectator Magazine", an action packed baseball tournament in Fuquay-Varina, a beautiful downtown starting up in Holly Springs, and new businesses springing up in downtown Clayton. It almost makes you dizzy thinking about how much there is going on in southern Wake and Johnston Counties. And the greatest thing about it all is everywhere you go you'll find a small town atmosphere which is hard to pass up in this fast-paced world. Take a deep breath, relax your mind, shake off that stress from the workday and come find out what hundreds have learned in the past several years. That there is some magic going on in this corner of the Piedmont and it's yours to enjoy.

Located along the Coastal Plain-Piedmont fall line, Johnston and Wake Counties trace their history back to colonial times when European settlers and their African slaves began pouring in from the Carolina coast and the Virginia Tidewater

to claim lands seized from the Tuscarora Indians.

John Lawson, an English surveyor and botanist, was the first person to write in any detail about this area. Traveling through with Indian guides in February of 1701, he penned in his journal, "We had now lost our rapid Streams, and were come to slow, dead Waters, of a brown colour, proceeding from the Swamps...

The brownish water that Lawson described was the Neuse River whose slow waters quenched Lawson's thirst and still today provides a major water source for much of the region. In the three hundred years since Lawson wrote about southern Wake and Johnston Counties people still come from other places to call the area home.

When asked, "Why live here?" Garner Town Manager Mary Lou Todd says a family can have it all. "People who like the small town atmosphere can have that with uptown conveniences. Garner is an open

community with something to offer everyone," she adds. Todd, herself, has lived in this area since the early 1960s. "I lived in a white farm house on Highway 401 where there now is now a T.K. Tripps," she laughs. "The growth in this area in the last ten years has been unbelievable. We have nine housing developments in construction phase now in Garner. The nice thing about

it is you can find any kind of house you would want from starter homes to larger homes on big lots. The real estate has really boomed."

But it is not just the booming real estate that makes folks want to live in Garner. There is the new White Oak Shopping Center with many major chains moving in. For those interested in the arts, Garner has much to offer. The Garner Arts Association has classes for all ages in areas of from violin to water coloring.

The Garner Towne Players are known for their productions and were voted by

Take a deep breath, relax your mind, shake off that stress from the workday and come find out what hundreds have learned in the past several years.

"Spectator Magazine" as one of the top ten local theater production companies in the Triangle. And don't leave out the local high school. Garner High School students have been known for years for their outstanding performances. Last year their production of "Children of Eden" was full of talent and captivated the audiences. You just might see a few of those young people on a larger stage in the not so distant future.

And in the not so distant future you might see some of the young people playing professional baseball that have participated in two Amateur Athletic Union

Baseball Tournaments in Fuquay-Varina. "The tournaments are sponsored by the South Wake Youth Baseball Association and are for youth ages up to high school," says Megan Henderson, executive director of the Fuquay-Varina Chamber of Commerce. In the past year two tournaments have taken place; one in April and the other in September. Thousands enjoyed the tournaments which included 50-60 teams. Many of the games were played on the recreation and parks fields in Fuquay-Varina. "The tournament in the spring brought in \$265,000 to Wake County and



\$125,000 to Fuquay-Varina," explains Jonathan Randall, who is a coach and board member of the South Wake Youth Baseball League. "The tournament in September was even larger. It has really made a huge impact."

Another thing that is making an impact on Fuquay-Varina is its growth in real estate. "Our number of residential permits has grown in the past year. In 2001 we had 199 permits and this year we have had 299 permits," says Henderson. There is also commercial growth in Fuquay-Varina with chains such as Ruby Tuesday and Walgreen making plans to come to town. "All this growth is really bringing about a lot of changes," she adds.

One thing that residents in southern Wake County don't see a lot of change in is school relocation. Wake County Board member, Amy White, says redistricting students in southern Wake County is small compared to other areas of the county. "Our students and parents can feel more stable in their schools," she says. "The schools also tend to be smaller and not as crowded," adds White. "The school's administrators are friendly and welcome any perspective students and parents to visit."

Open and friendly is how Lenita Gilreath, executive director of Holly Springs Chamber of Commerce sees where she calls home.

Gilreath, has been watching Holly Springs take off in the past several years. "Location has really helped us," says Gilreath. "We are accessible from I-40, U.S. 1 and U.S. 64. In November of 2002 the 55 bypass will open and enable RTP and Raleigh workers to commute more quickly. It will take a lot of the traffic problems away from Main Street and help bring more business to town."

Downtown is something that the citizens of Holly Springs are creating on their own. "We are making sure it has an old

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fashioned feeling. The new buildings will have an old-fashioned downtown flavor and the town hall will have a clock tower," says Gilreath. "We want it to be inviting to everyone."

Many people have already found Holly Springs to be inviting. Its population has been growing steadily since 1994, when the first boom came with the development of Sunset Ridge. Sunset Ridge, a golf course community, is a big draw for Holly Springs and has been voted as the Best Overall Designed Community in the Triangle.

"We are the fastest growing town in

North Carolina," says Gilreath. "We are very proud of that fact," she adds.

Johnston County is proud of the fact it is one of the fastest growing counties in North Carolina. Ten municipalities are in Johnston County: Benson, Clayton, Four Oaks, Kenly, Micro, Pine Level, Princeton, Selma, Smithfield, and Wilson's Mills.

Smithfield was the first to be incorporated in 1777. At the time it had a population of 400 in its village. As of the last census it has a population of 11,510. Smithfield, the county seat of Johnston County and the oldest and largest town, is

the home to the Johnston County Heritage Center. In the late 1990s the county commissioners of Johnston County recognized a need for a history museum and also wanted to expand the collection of papers in the Johnston County Room of the library. The Heritage Center is located in the old First Citizens Bank building, built in 1913. The second floor of the building is set up as a library where people can come and research family history. "Johnston County is one of the oldest counties in North Carolina. A lot of people come from all over the state to look up their family history here," says Todd Johnson, director of the museum.

Not far from Smithfield is the town of Benson. Located at the intersection of I-40 and I-95, Benson is becoming to be known as an ideal place to hold a conference. The town has built a conference center, which can accommodate 200 people. "We have a smaller facility in the historic Preston-Woodall House which holds 100 people," says Debra Carter, executive director of the Benson Chamber of Commerce. "It also serves as a bed and breakfast."

The main thing that gives Benson its charm is the thriving and historic downtown area. The downtown store fronts are inviting to those who take the time to stroll and enjoy the feeling of stepping back in

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time. "We believe two reasons the downtown is prosperous are the traffic that comes off of I-95 and community pride."

The downtown area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Future plans include upgrading the sidewalks by lining them with crepe myrtle trees and adding old-fashioned street lights, planters and benches. "It will be the type of place everyone will love to come," says Carter. One of the reasons the downtown is getting a face lift is because of an Appearance Commission made up of private citizens who care about the commun-

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ty. With just over 3,000 people living in Benson, it is truly a small town able to keep that down home feel.

Just down the road from Benson is one of the fastest growing sections of Johnston County known as the Greater Cleveland area. This area is located on Highway 42 and Highway I-40. Ten years ago only a few business were located there. Now it boasts

businesses that range from home supply stores to a coffee shop. There are also numerous restaurants, both locally owned and from national chains. Because of increased growth, the Greater Cleveland Chamber of Commerce was forced to convert from a volunteer organization to now having a paid staff. "In January of 2002 we had fifty-three members in our chamber,"



says Linda Radley executive director of the chamber. "In October of this year we have 92 members." With the growth of the Highway 42 and 40 interchange, the development of housing surrounding the highways has escalated in the past several years.

Teresa Langdon of Remax Realty says the growth has been incredible and anyone who wants to live in the area can find a home to fit their needs. "We have homes starting in the \$90,000 range on up to the \$300,000 range." She adds that the size of the lot is also an option. "If you don't want to take time with a yard there are lots starting at 1/3 of an acre, but there are lots available with well over an acre."

Who decides to make Johnston County their home? "We get a lot of people who want to move out of Raleigh that work in downtown Raleigh and the RTP. Also, there are many who are relocating to the area from out of state," she adds.

John Amon with Broadmoor Subdivision has also seen home sales soar. Broadmoor offers homes in the \$160,000 to \$300,000 range. He sees people coming into the area because of convenient location of the elementary, middle and high schools. "They are all so close together and are fantastic schools. The new high school, West Johnston, is state of the art."

Clayton is another community feeling growth from highway 42 and I-40 as well as US 70. Barry Woodard, president of the downtown development association and long time Clayton resident, says the combination of newcomers and the natives are what make Clayton unique. "Our downtown is vibrant, but with a cozy atmosphere," Woodard says. "We really get to know each other and the newcomers have come in and added a nice touch to our town. With the combination of the two our quality of life has improved dramatically,"



he adds. The downtown development association was appointed by the town of Clayton to oversee programs such as renovations, the awning program and the revitalization of the downtown. "We have 97 percent occupancy of rental property downtown," explains Woodard. "It has grown beyond anybody's expectation." There is a broad range of shops to choose from in Clayton and you can find almost anything that might strike your fancy from enjoying a nice meal at the local bistro, or taking your time choosing some pictures from an art gallery.

Along with location, selection, and schools, the rural character of the area attracts many people. Highway 50 that connects the southern Wake to Johnston County will take you through some beautiful countryside and also to Chadbourne Subdivision. Chadbourne, which was developed by Ken and Reid Stephenson, has a special place in the heart of the two men. The land they now build houses on was once their family's farm. "We grew up here in the 1860 farmhouse that still stands," says Reid. "My parents bought the farmhouse in 1943 and grew tobacco, grain and raised livestock." What once was farmland has been changed to an all brick subdivision with custom homes and rolling country landscape.

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Also along Highway 50 is Ken's Produce which has been owned and operated by Ken Walker since 1970. Ken's is the home to a pumpkin lighting and also a corn maze that attracts visitors from all over the country every year. "Living in this area is the best of both worlds," says Walker. "Everyone still has a friendly feel about them. There is a high quality of life." Walker emphasizes how the location is near the beach and the mountains. "The beach is only a couple of hours away and you can get to the mountains in just a little more than that. Convenience is one of the main things that make this a great place to call home."

As you can tell southern Wake and Johnston Counties have much to offer and those who have found the magic of the area are more than happy to stay. Why not? You can have a latte, find your way through a corn maze, stroll through several quiet downtown areas, or go to a play. But one of the favorite things that people in the area prefer to do is to kick back and relax, shake off the stress of the day and enjoy that southern charm that works its magic on all who live there. ■

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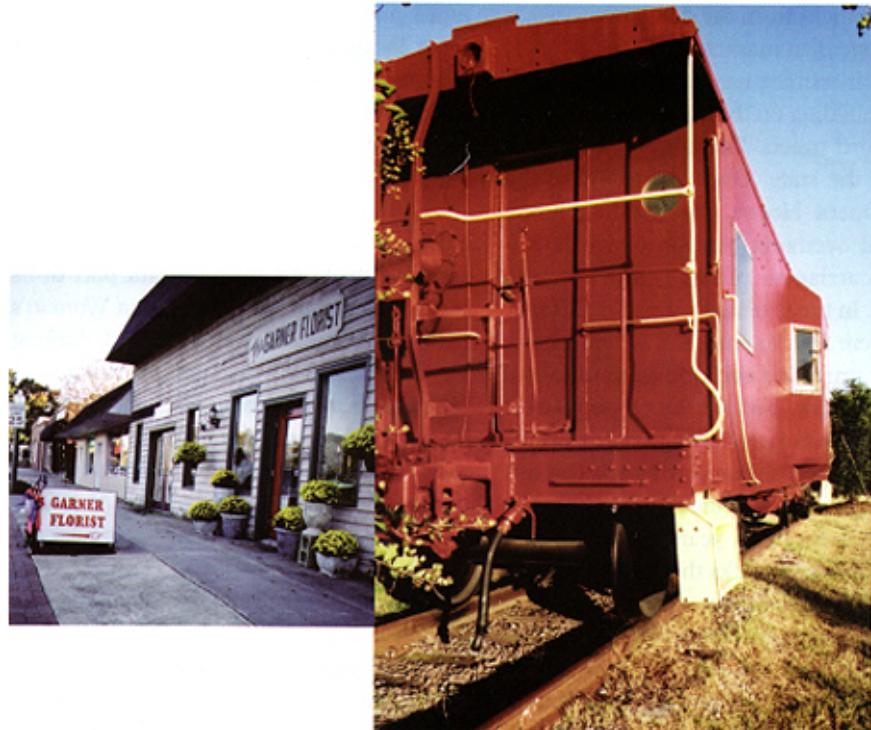
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Garner: Small-town America At Its Best

DIANE SILCOX-JARRETT

CHILDREN CHASE each other through the summer grass, waving American flags in their hands; the smell of hot dogs and fried chicken fills the air, along with patriotic tunes from the bandstand; friends call out to each other to share some pie or iced tea; a fireworks display covers the sky. It's enough to make any heart swell with pride.

This is small town America at its best. This is Garner.

When you ask anyone in town what makes it unique, the one thing they all agree on is that it still has that small-town atmosphere of neighbors helping neighbors — even though Garner is growing as never before.

For many years, this southern Wake town was a farming community, with not much more in its downtown than a grocery store and a drug store with a doctor's office on top.

"I remember when going to Raleigh was a major undertaking for us," laughs Clarence Holder, who has lived all but a

few years of his life in Garner. "Now many businesses are coming to us." Holder is owner of Huckleberry's Friends, a child-care business.

Recent rapid development brought Garner Town Square several years ago, 450,000 square feet of retail space with chains such as Target, Blockbuster, Home

Depot and a United Artists Theater. Now, on the eastern edge of town at the intersection of Interstate 40 and U.S. 70, the 500,000-square-foot Phase I White Oak Crossing

Shopping Center is bringing more national chains, such as Kohl's and BJ's (both already open), plus the planned Dick's Sporting Goods, Barnes and Noble, and numerous others.

In Greenfield Industrial Park, near White Oak Crossing, the Swedish manufacturer of Pergo flooring recently expanded its manufacturing and moved its distribution center to the park.

"Growth is here," says Dale Bouldin,

president of the Garner Chamber of Commerce. "But we have been able to control it."

If location is one of the most important parts of real estate, Garner has the handle on that. In fact, Garner's location is one of its attractions for its approximately 20,000 citizens.

"We are only 10 minutes from downtown Raleigh, the BTI Center and many Broadway plays," says Bouldin. Also, Garner is just two to three hours from the beach and a little more than three hours from the mountains. The two major highways, I-40 and U.S. 70, place the town only 30 minutes from the Research Triangle Park, and this has made it a popular home to commute from.

Garner has taken much of its land and built parks. One of the most popular is Lake Benson Park. The 68 acres provide a beautiful setting for concerts, picnics and walking trials. On most Saturday and Sunday afternoons, families are cooking hot dogs on the picnic grills, flying kites in the open fields and enjoying the playground areas or the trails that surround the park.

Lake Benson is home to the Garner

Garner has taken much of its land and built parks.

One of the most popular is Lake Benson Park. The 68 acres provide a beautiful setting for concerts, picnics and walking trials.

Independence Day Celebration, which takes place on the evening of the 3rd of July. Cherry Gay, event coordinator, says that since 1994 the park fills to capacity with as many as 15,000 people. The North Carolina Symphony plays, and there is a spectacular fireworks display at the end.

"It is the largest single event that takes place in the town," says Gay. "The setting is perfect, and the feeling is so hometown."

The town also owns 96 acres of land across from Lake Benson Park. Town manager Mary Lou Todd says, "There are a lot of wetlands on the land, and we hope to use it as a place to do nature studies." The tract also may become home to a community center.

If you enjoy the arts, then the Garner Arts Association will have something to interest you.

"The main purpose of the Arts Association is to foster, preserve and stimulate cultural arts in our community," says Ester Aichner of the association. Classes are one of the main focuses, with a menu ranging from violin and voice to water colors and oil painting.

"We also have several plays a year, including a Christmas Pageant and a

spring play, which is more of a fairy tale," she says. "These plays allow all ages to participate, from 5 years on up to adults."

Garner's theater talent is not limited to the Arts Association. Garner Senior High School is known for its theater and choral department. Last year the students performed

"Children of Eden," which left the audience amazed and wowed by their talent. The Garner Town Players also add to the local talent, recently performing "My Three Angels," and "Driving Miss Daisy." The theater group has been voted one of the top ten community theaters in the Triangle by "Spectator Magazine."

Empty nesters aren't left out, either. The Garner Senior Center, located in downtown Garner, has programs "from A to Z," according to Tory Blackmar, director of the center. "We have any type of fitness program you could ask for," she says. "We have low impact aerobics, toning with weights and Tai Chi."

The center offers book clubs, trivia competition and cards.

"We also take trips," she says. For residents who can't drive, a van is available for pickup.

There is a push to preserve the history and atmosphere of downtown Garner. Cathy Behringer, president of the Friends of Historic Garner, says her group wants to keep the charm of the area alive.

"Garner was chartered in 1905 and started as a railroad stop with a cotton gin located near the downtown. The town built up around the railroad," she says.

Old Garner Road, which parallels the railroad and runs beside the downtown district, was the first paved road in North Carolina, she says. It was part of the road that connected Raleigh to the coast.

In the late 1980s there was a push by residents to save the original old school, located on Old Garner Road, from being torn down. The group succeeded and now Garner Historic High School is home to the town's auditorium and senior citizen housing units. In recent years 20 houses have been restored or renovated on Main Street.

Garner's housing market has kept pace with growth in its hometown businesses and amenities. Families are drawn to the fact the yards in Garner in general are bigger than in most other areas of Wake County, giving children space to play, says Bouldin. For those who are just starting out or scaling down there are many developments of smaller homes. For those who are in the middle of raising a family with children, larger family homes are available. If it's an estate you want, you can have that in Garner, too.

The golf course community of Eagle Ridge brought a different type of life style to town several years ago.

"We saw the growth potential in Garner," says Polly Jenkins of Wakefield Communities.

Location again is a key to Eagle Ridge's success.

"The Beltline is eight miles from us, and downtown is 15," says Jenkins.

"I also have customers tell me they chose the area because it puts them closer to the beach. They say by living here they can take half an hour off their trip," she laughs.

Homes start at \$120,000 and range to \$400,000, with more than half having a golf course view. "We have large sidewalks so the kids can ride their bikes, walking trails, tennis courts and a pool," Jenkins says. "The way the development is laid out lets you know you are a part of a community and makes you feel welcome." ■



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