

FLORAL POINT AND HOFFLER CREEK, I

My mother, Margaret (no middle name) Ballard, was the youngest of six children, five girls and one boy, of Effie Toler Hathaway and John Wright Ballard. Effie grew up in White Stone, Virginia in a house called Enon Hall. She graduated from school as “a lady and a scholar”, and after making her debut at the Holly Ball in the Northern Neck, Effie accepted the offer of matrimony by John. She came to Churchland by horse and buggy with a man servant named Eddie Fox, who would always be called “Eddie Fox” or “Fox” but never “Eddie”. He continued to work for my grandmother for many, many years until his death. John did not bring his bride to the original home place on the farm built around 1850 by his mother Bette and his father Luther. Instead, in 1904 he built for her a huge Victorian manor house, and they called the farm Floral Point for the many beautiful things growing there.

My mother graduated from Sweet Briar College and married my father, William Lee Whitehurst, Jr., who was also the youngest of a large family in Norfolk and who was also a farmer like his father. My mother and father went to live in Virginia Beach, and my father commuted to work at his farms in Churchland and what is now Suffolk and Chesapeake until his death. One of his biggest farms is now the Pughsville interchange of I-664. I was an only child. Both of my father’s parents died before I was born, so the three of us, my parents and I, would always go to Floral Point for holidays and special occasions, and my mother and I would go more frequently than that just for visits.

It was a long and exciting trip, first down to 17th Street or Route 58 at the Beach and then west coming into Norfolk over the train tracks by the bread factory and the bottling works, past the bars of downtown Norfolk to the ferry at the Elizabeth River. This was where I felt it became particularly exciting. The ferry held about fourteen cars in two rows, and I used to pray we would not be either of the last two cars on. This was because I had observed that the ferry attendants put wood chocks the size of a deck of cards under one of the back wheels of each of the last two cars on, and then strung a wispy chain across the stern of the boat. There were two ferries plying back and forth across the river at all times, and they passed each other by what seemed to me a ridiculously narrow margin. For years I dreaded a collision where at least the last two cars on either ferry would be lost to the deep. That thought was so exciting that one Christmas where we were, in fact, last on I threw up all over my brand new beaver muff. Anyway, if we were fortunate enough to disembark in Portsmouth we would take High Street all the way to Churchland, turning right onto Twin Pines Road and on to Floral Point.

I never knew my grandfather as he died when my mother was two. The people living at Floral Point during my childhood were my grandmother, whom we all called “Mam”, my aunt Juliet Hawks who is still living and was 100 on March 1st, her husband Otis Hawks, their mentally and physically handicapped daughter, Joan, and Poochie, a Boston Bull Terrier. So my family would finally arrive say at Christmas. Despite his advanced age Poochie would be first at the door, but after giving us his “Oh it’s you again” upward glance would retreat back to his corner of the sofa in the living room. My grandmother would be in the rocking chair in the middle of the living room where she stayed unless she was sewing in a chair by the window, outside of which was a bird feeder where she could watch the purple finches, her favorite. Joan would also be in the

living room kneading a Life magazine in her hands which only lasted a couple of weeks before turning to pulp. Then she would switch to squeezing a coat hanger. Juliet would usually be in the kitchen. Otis often remained in the Hawks third floor apartment called euphemistically the "Attic".

So at Christmas there would often be some combination of my aunts and uncle and their spouses and children. It was exciting for me as an only child suddenly to be a part of such a big family. We would deposit presents under the pink Christmas tree (a requirement by Joan) in the parlor. Since we were arriving by dinner time, i.e., lunch, there would be already opened presents under the tree, most of which were my Aunt Juliet's. Having been a flapper bride, Juliet was forever a fashion plate, making all of her clothes herself. Therefore, Otis' gifts to her would always be something in the way of fancy underwear, night gowns, silk stockings in boxes, etc. I can remember thinking that if Otis would only give Juliet more sensible and substantial underwear she wouldn't need to get more every year.

Anyway Juliet would eventually come out of the kitchen with a big tray of champagne. The champagne had usually been anticipated as refreshment by the men in the family with something they kept in the cupboard in the pantry. Then there would be a game like guessing how many buttons were in a jar, and whoever guessed the closest would get a prize, and then all the rest of us would get prizes too. Then the adults would fall to discussing matters that we children didn't care about, mostly to do with the Churchland Baptist Church (Dr. Ailer this and Dr. Moran that, on and on). The children would go outside to play unsupervised because how for could we really get in scratchy wool leggings with big zippers up the sides. When my mother and I would go to visit Floral Point by ourselves during the pre-dinner Baptist conversation time, I would entertain myself by looking at the naked people in the old National Geographic magazines kept under a table in the living room while sucking on sour balls from a jar on the table top that people had brought to Mam as she was known to like them. She also liked those Stuckey's fruit jelly candies, but I was fine letting her keep those for herself.

At Christmas there would be quite a crowd of family around the enormous dining room table covered with yards and yards of Damask tablecloth and loaded down with about a ton of silver, the largest piece of which was a huge coffee pot. Hot black coffee was an entire food group at Floral Point. Of course at Christmas a children's table would have been installed in the dining room too. Eventually the turkey would come out of the kitchen and when Juliet would cut in to it, Joan, who loved moments of high drama, would always sing out "is it raw?" For dessert there was good news and bad news. Mam would have ordered up a pound cake from her relative Ruth Hathaway which was divine. She would have also asked for sea foam icing which she loved and everyone else hated so there would be big beige commas of icing left on everyone's plate. After dinner while the adults were still sitting around the big table swilling coffee, the children would quit the children's table and one by one slip under the big tablecloth to inspect and giggle about everyone's legs and shoes. My grandmother's ankles and shoes were by far the most examined as her ankles draped over the tops of her shoes like lids on jars. We also never gave up trying to ring a bell which was a lump under the carpet next my grandmother's right shoe. It should have sounded in the kitchen, but nobody ever came.

Now I will take you outside which was the real wonderland of Floral Point and is the current wonderland of Hoffler Creek. In the front yard there was a huge magnolia

tree I would “surf down”. I would climb to the top then jump off literally surfing down the branches to the bottom. Along the front of the yard was a hedge row. Mam was quite old when I was coming along so other than sitting in the living room or presiding at table, I don’t remember her ever doing anything except that I have one brilliant memory of the two of us going out to search for asparagus along the hedge row. At the time I thought that the garden seemed sketchy in design and ill kept. I now realize that the asparagus we were hunting were wild. Beyond the hedge row were fields separating Floral Point from the houses of “River Shore”. One year they were planted in winter wheat which I decided was great fun to trample through. The tenant farmer called my grandmother about the damage I had caused, and I awaited certain doom and dismemberment. Instead, everybody just had a good laugh about what a silly, old grouch he was. Adults were very mysterious and unreadable creatures back then. There was a lane down to the river shore. Along it grew hugely prolific pecan trees. You were not allowed to sit more than five minutes at Floral Point without shelling pecans. Along the lane was also the Scuppernong grape arbor. My mother used to tell the story about how she and her brother John would sneak out to climb on the arbor, although Mam had forbidden it due to the danger of bees. Their doom came when Mam discovered grape stains on the seat of my mother’s new, white, linen drawers that the traveling seamstress had just made. The seamstress came for about a week once a year to make mostly the family underwear. When she came she always stayed in a tiny corner room upstairs. The other fascinating little upstairs room was used entirely to store steamer trunks and other real leather luggage. It was a different age, and, speaking of which, at the end of the lane was the real river shore right off of which the Monitor and the Merrimac fought.

Now to the back of the property which is where all the real action was. There was a fence running behind the house from a corner in front of which was a spring house in which hung one petrified ham during my entire childhood. This fence ran to a garage where Eddie Fox parked a succession of black Oldsmobiles. I knew Fox had driven Mam from the Northern Neck to Churchland in a horse and buggy. Apparently some time before I was born he had moved on to driving cars. I suppose Fox did other things around the house and grounds, but he was invisible to me except as a driver. Every weekday he would get the Olds from the garage and drive it around to the front of the house where he would load Mam, Juliet, Joan, sometimes a visiting relative and Poochie. They would go to Churchland to get the mail at the Post Office, to motor a ceremonial lap around the Churchland Baptist Church cemetery and on to Spears’ Restaurant to buy a Coke. Then he would drive everybody back to the front of the house to offload. He would put the car back in the garage and then disappear. For years I thought it was so nice of Fox to let us ride in his car. While we are on the subject, Mam had other household employees. There was BeAtrice who was a fabulous cook. I remember most of all the little biscuits patted out on an old chipped white enamel table (probably full of lead paint) in the kitchen. I remember too the spare rib pies which were just what you are thinking: chicken pot pies made out of spare ribs on the bone instead, heavenly! The other long term employee is Lizbeth Loney who still lives just off of Twin Pines Road. I say is because, although Lizbeth is only ten or twelve years younger than Juliet, she still does a little laundry and so on for her. Juliet and Lizbeth have lived well over fifty years of their daily lives together, and they dearly love each other, even though neither would ever speak of it. Attached to the garage was a greenhouse already abandoned by my

childhood with most of the glass panes broken out. Mam loved camellias, and when she was younger experimented with crossing varieties. There were a bunch of her experimental camellias planted back behind here which, if this is not under water, I bet are still there.

Now through the gate into the crown jewel of the Floral Point experience, the chicken yard. My grandmother always kept chickens, or I should say she had chickens at her house because I never actually saw her “keeping” them. For one thing Mam wouldn’t eat an egg that had been refrigerated. Said that refrigeration just ruined the flavor. There were several exciting features of the chicken yard. One was the coop with its double row of roosting bars and at least twenty cubic yards of chicken - - - on the floor. Needless to say, the chickens were not disposed to nest and lay their eggs in there. Instead they chose the seclusion of the deepest, darkest reaches of the briar patches along the perimeter of the yard for this. It was dangerous to be the smallest, nimblest person at any particular time at Floral Point because it would only make sense that you would therefore be asked to go gather eggs. It was not a favorite assignment, but I would always console myself that I might encounter a snake and raise the alarm at which point Juliet would sail out of the back door with a huge shot gun and blow the thing to bits. Now that was a spectacle worth seeing. I can tell you there was zero tolerance for snakes of any kind at Floral Point, and I would doubt if they are even back to date. Also, in the middle of the chicken yard, was a pump. I learned how to prime it with water from the creek, and then I would pump and pump gallons of water running all over the place up from the ground just for the sheer exhilaration that a person, a child even, could do such a thing as draw water up from under the earth. Now for the creek itself for that’s what we’ve been getting to. The creek was one of the “fences” of the chicken yard. The creek had a muddy, reedy edge, and I can attest from my childhood observation that marsh land is the richest in life forms of any habitat. I loved the water birds that I have since learned were herons and ospreys. My favorite creatures however were a species of fiddler crab. They had one big claw on the one side of their bodies and a miniature claw on the other side. If you disturbed them, they would rush at you brandishing that big claw. Brave little souls, they amused me enormously. I hope they are still around somewhere.

I will close with one cute Hoffler Creek story. My grandmother “kept” ducks as well as chickens. Ducks are notoriously bad moms. They lay their eggs and then promptly waddle all over them with their big orange feet crushing the shells. So poultry husbandry at Floral Point called for giving the duck eggs to the chickens to hatch out, which they proficiently did. So the baby ducks would hatch out and imprint on the hen mothers and follow them all around everywhere until one inevitable day. Remember that I said one” fence “of the chicken yard was the creek? Well that was true for the chickens because as you know nothing makes a hen madder than wet. But as for ducklings, one fine day they are following mama hen, and she happens to go a little closer to the creek, and they all jump in. Needless to say the hens went nuts, furiously running up and down the creek bank clucking “You’re going to drown! You’re going to drown!” It sort of gives a new insight in to the whole Henny Penny and the Shy is Falling story.

Speaking of the sky falling, my grandmother and Otis died one right after the other, and it was impractical for Juliet and Joan to keep living at Floral Point. So about 1970 the house was torn down and the property sold to a developer. The developer went bankrupt and passed the property on to VDOT who wanted it for a borrow pit, hence

Lake Ballard. After they had gotten all of the fill material they needed from it, VDOT transferred title to the property the City of Portsmouth. The Foundation for a wildlife preserve there was formed and Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve is the rest of the story.

Floral Point was the enchanted time and place of my childhood that I will never forget, and I am so deeply grateful that this special place has been preserved to educate and enchant especially other lucky children.