

Conversation with Juliet Ballard Hawks November 7, 2001



Photo: Monty Duvall, 1970

Juliet Ballard Hawks, born in 1908, grew up on a farm on the land that is now Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve. Her family owned the property from the 1850's to the 1970's. In this interview, Mrs. Hawks shares her memories of the land and of her life in the small Norfolk County farm community known as Churchland.

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JBH: You know, everything changes now. It used to stay so much the same.

In 1902, my father moved the old house that had been there and he had this one built.

We had acetylene lights, and we did have central heating. In our cellar, basement, we had a little steam engine that pumped our water up into a tank up high. That had to be higher than the third floor so that it would flow into the third floor. The water was actually pumped by that little steam engine.

Most of the house collapsed into the basement, but I have wanted to go back and see my mother's garden. Oh, she was flower hip. She had camellias that were tall as a tree, taller than this room, and I have wanted to know if they still exist. She was one of the first people around



Photos: Ashley Morgan, 2002

Some of Mrs. Ballard's garden plants still thrive in the forest.

to have camellias, and she just loved them. I never was particularly fond of them. They are a little stiff for me, I like a flower that bends.

AOM: As you were growing up, did you use the river and the creek much?

JBH: We used to love to go crabbing. My mother would go with us. All you had to do was walk along, and if the crab ran this way he was a hard crab. If he stayed like this, it was a soft crab, and all you had to do was reach down and pick it up. We would get hard crabs and steam them and pick them.

Sand bars went for almost a mile out. Of course, Hoffler's Creek had a channel, and the black folks would have row boats. They would go out Hoffler's Creek through the channel and out to what they call the Fishing Rock, towards the edge of the channel of Hampton Roads, at least a mile out, and they would fish. They would get quite a good variety of fish: croaker, trout, spot, and perch.

Oh, we went swimming. You know, there were sand bars out for about a mile and, it's a shame, it worries me a lot to think about what's gone, what's died. We had an oyster bed in Hoffler's

Creek and the people that lived on the farm, we had about 8 families of black people that lived on the farm and tended the farm, and that was called 'Round the Corner' and why I don't know. It was a sharp turn there where they lived, and their small homes were along there on Hoffler's Creek. That was where the oyster bed was.



Sections of the footbridge that spanned Hoffler Creek remain in the marsh.

We used to have a footbridge across here (Hoffler Creek) to go to the farm at the mouth of Hoffler's Creek. That was more fun. Just two planks and a crack in the middle, and you always felt like you were going to fall through that crack. That was when my uncle was farming both farms and you see he'd want his people to come over from Sugarhill, where they lived. People would come from the other farm, and they would cut through that walk, and, oh, you would save miles and miles. Just like my mother said, when she was first married, long before automobiles, she was so close to Mrs. Deans. Mrs. Deans was older, and my mother never knew how to cook. She said she'd see a row boat coming from the Deans' over, and she was so happy [because] she always knew Mrs. Deans was sending something good.

Many of the black people that farmed on our farm came from up there (Nansemond River area). They came down the waterways and farmed in Churchland—bigger jobs and more pay. I know we had a man named Will Hall who had come from there who was a manager when I was a child. There were no roads up in that area then; you came by water. The waters were your roads. As I say, and even across Hoffler's Creek, my mother would be there waiting for Mrs. Deans' good food to come across. I bet she was peeking out that window. And when I came along, there was a lot more traffic going out crabbing, and going out oystering, and going out fishing. It (water) was roadways until the automobile really came in.

AOM: Tell me about your father's farm.

JBH: Our farm was called Floral Point because it was almost surrounded by water—Hoffler's Creek around the back and side and Hampton Roads across the front. All the truck farms had names. Most of them shipped under names. You had a barrel and you had a stencil, that was copper. They would put the name on for shipping your packages, potatoes or kale or whatever it was. Ours was Floral Point.

When I was child, when they were farming and afterward until River Shore was developed, there were three lanes and cedars as a break. Your lane was on the shady side, the muddy side, of that row of trees because the trees are the wind break for that cut, the crops and things growing. There were three lanes—one lane just back of where the houses are on River Shore and then



Photos: Ashley Morgan, 2002

another one in the middle and then one nearer to where the lake is now.

There were lots of farm buildings. There was a big shed. Well, first place, there was a small house for the man that looked after the team—see we had mules, we didn't have trucks—they had mules and horses.

Pieces of farm buildings remain in the forest in the northwest corner of the preserve.

The horses were transportation. We had an old buggy house, and that had a carriage in it. I remember the horses well. We went to school by horse and buggy until my older sister was 12. When she was 12, she started driving us to school. You didn't have to have any license, and there were dirt roads, no traffic. Children learned to roller skate out there on that road, High Street. Somebody said, "Roller skate on 17, we only had a car every hour or so."

We had barns for the horses, barns for storage, the corn crib, the buggy house that had our buggy in it and the old carriage that we didn't use when I came along. And then there was a cellar, a potato cellar.

That was Norfolk County farming. In that period Norfolk County farmers were successful because of the steamboats that went out of Norfolk to northern ports. The only thing we really had to compete with was the Eastern Shore. Little gasoline engine boats, called truck boats, carried our produce to the steamboats in the Norfolk harbor. Everybody thinks the term 'truck boat' has something to do with a truck, but it didn't have anything to do with the automobile. Truck was the phrase for vegetables grown for market past what your individual needs would be, and so they were truck boats. People were very proud of truck boats.

Steamboats went from Norfolk carrying our produce north. We had two to Baltimore every day, one to Richmond, one to New York, one to Boston—it took 2 days to get to Boston. They carried our produce and got good prices for us. Norfolk County farmers got along real well at that time. Vegetables were perishable, but we could get them to market. The crops in the inte-

rior were cotton, tobacco, wheat—things like that that would keep. Our crops were vegetables because we could get them to market.

People from other farming areas in the United States would come to our region. They couldn't believe that we got rid of one crop and plowed it up and planted another one. They had to, even a lot of places out in the mid-west, have the fields lay fallow for a year before they could put in one more crop. And maybe a wheat crop is all for two years. And we would the minute you finished cabbage, you plowed it up and you planted peas probably. The only slack time was August.

We had a young minister at Churchland Baptist, and he said why did you have revival services in



Photos: Ashley Morgan, 2002

Old tractors and carts have become a part of the forest growing up around them.

August with no air-conditioning? And I said cause it's the only leisure time, the only crop on the farm then was hay. And that is another thing, they couldn't believe that our hay just grew. They thought the hay had to be planted. The hay just grew, and the only thing you did was pull weeds. And that's all the hands on the farm, as they were called, and people had [to do] was keeping the weeds out of the hay. And that was August.

Truck season, the main harvest time, they even had migratory workers to come at that time, that was July. And then August, when nothing in the world but the hay grows, you had to cut your hay, let it dry, and get that in. So that was leisure time.

Then by September you were plowing and planting again like kale and spinach and the green things that you have in the fall. Of course we had dry years, but we didn't use any artificial water. I know now they do, and we would have too if we could have.

In the fall, it would be kale and spinach and those things. In the spring, I know there was always one day in May, a happy Sunday, we had our first fried chicken. People didn't have fried chicken all year. Late spring we had the first fried chicken, the first new potatoes, and the first green peas, and that was a special occasion. And first strawberries and, if you were lucky, you

had strawberry ice cream, which I like to this day.

Then, a little before the Great Depression of the 30s and late 20s, railroads got the refrigerated railroad cars. They pulled produce from Florida, they pulled produce from California, and from Louisiana, and Norfolk County farmers were done for. We still did some farming, but, I mean, it wasn't like [before].

My father had died. We still lived on the farm. At that time, my cousin, Ballard Dennis, was farming it. When he died, my mother did not want it sold. She wanted to keep it. She didn't want anybody else to come in. Oh, she loved the land. And so that's when they decided they'd plant the trees. My brother planted those trees too thick. He got his information from the forestry people, but they were interested in selling the trees. They are entirely too thick, you can see it—they are all small.

We didn't really get electricity to the farms in the area until World War I, so that was in, I reckon, almost 1920, a little earlier than that. Ice was a problem when I was a girl before we got electricity. To get a block of ice—and that was another thing in May you had ice tea for the first time with the fried chicken, strawberries, green peas, and new potatoes, ice tea—because that block of ice, 300 lbs, was put on the streetcar in downtown Portsmouth, and came out on the streetcar to Churchland. A wagon met it there. The man driving the wagon and the nice, nice people on the streetcar helped get that block of ice onto it. Then, he drove it 3 miles down a dirt road to our house, went in our barn lot, and then he went down to the potato cellar. That's where this great big wooden box with sawdust in it was to put the ice. And by that time, it didn't weigh any 300 lbs, I can tell you. Then when you got ready to use it, somebody from the kitchen went down there and took an ice pick and picked off a piece and then washed it off, and then it was put on your table for your ice tea. So that was a process. My mother and my aunt never were interested in the new. They loved the old. I know when people started getting electric refrigerators in Churchland, they thought why. Anybody that had to do that to get a block of ice, but they did come around.

Electricity came along after World War 1, so it must have been when I was 8 or 9 when we got electricity in. We had to pay for our line from Churchland down. When VEPCO came along and took it over, we were delighted because we didn't have to keep it up. They paid us \$1, like Portsmouth paid the state \$1 for this (the preserve).

We had a streetcar. People cannot believe we had a streetcar to come to Churchland. The streetcar came across the bridge from Westhaven over to a point down there by the bridge, and then it came nearer to 17. It paralleled 17 from 3-stores, which was where Coleman's is now, into Churchland to the barn—a car barn, but it was not for cars. People thought the streetcar stayed there overnight, but it didn't; it stayed downtown overnight. It was where the horses stayed when you went to the streetcar. If you had a car, you drove on downtown, but most people had a horse and buggy and drove to the streetcar. And old Uncle Lodge took your horse, hitched it, and put it in the barn. You told him approximately what streetcar you were coming back on, and he would have it ready for you. But the car barn was for horses, not for streetcars.

Everybody was either a farmer or farm related. There were three churches and not more than two of anything else, except barns. There was Churchland Baptist, Centenary Methodist, and the black church, Grove Baptist. That's an old church—new building—but old church. Two grocery stores, two blacksmith shops, and one barrel factory, which was almost a cooperative. My cousin ran it, Streeter Wright. He had a little office there with the factory behind. It was quite a meeting place for all the men. A woman didn't dare go in there.

I remember when women were finally given the vote. The voting place was there (the factory). I remember driving my mother and my aunt, and I was very embarrassed that they were going to take advantage of voting the minute they could because so many women said it was a man's job and that they were not going to vote, but I knew my aunt and mother would. I drove them up there, and I remember it was unfitting for a lady to go in there. So they came outside, which certainly was not legal, with a ballot for my mother and a ballot for my aunt, two of the deacons from Churchland Baptist Church. That is where they had always voted, and that is where women had to vote.

AOM: When did your family sell the property?

JBH: In 1970. My grandfather and grandmother had the farm before my parents. I know it was before the Civil War because they saw the Merrimac and the Monitor fighting. I never knew my grandmother and grandfather; both were gone before me. My grandfather was Luther Wright Ballard, and my great-grandmother was from Churchland. Her name was Priscilla Bidgood, and she married William Ballard from near Franklin. How they met and married in the horse and buggy days, I'll never know, but anyhow. They lived right outside Franklin on a farm. When my grandfather was a year old, his father died. So she took her child, sold her farm up there, and came back to Churchland to her people. And she lived here. When my grandfather was 21, he married Bettie Wells, whose father was a Methodist minister in North Carolina. Then his mother bought him the farm from the Wise family. The Wise's, I believe, had owned it since it was settled and then my great-grandmother bought it for my grandmother and grandfather when they were married. They were both 21 years old. She was Bettie Wells, and he was Luther Ballard. They settled it, and then my father inherited it from his father.

The farm originally had the land that goes up to the house where Porter Hardy lived, and the one across the road there (Windy Pines) were part of our farm. And then you know it's a creek, an arm of Hoffler's that comes up behind there and used to be the prettiest roses throughout in those rushes, wild roses. And those two places had lots of trees, just natural trees not planted cedars. They had all the wildflowers you could name.

That's where there were so many trees, no houses, no farming, anything on that side. That was woods, not just a cedar lane, but natural deep woods. They had Indian pipe, turkey berry, trailing arbutus, wild ginger, and also mountain laurel, which is so pretty, and that was all along the creek, the creek that went up toward the back of the Trotman's house, which is still standing now. A lot of mountain laurel, and when that blooms it is so pretty. We had another thing that is unusual—galax leaves.



Periwinkle covers the forest floor in the area that was the Ballard family graveyard.

There were very few colorful trees because they were cedars planted for protection and a few pines that would just naturally grow most anywhere. What we called 'up in the woods,' which was behind the Trotman home which is now homes, had all variations of trees, and then across, nearer to Porter Hardy's corner, that had more colorful trees—the hardwoods. The others were cedar and pine.

We had a little inlet that went up behind the house. So we were surrounded by water except for here. I miss the water. You could find loads of different little sandy growing flowers: Adam's and Eve's

thread. See that was the sandy part, and they were flowers that were indigenous to sand. Oh, prickly pear and mimosa trees.

I see you have a Bald eagle here (at the preserve). Now awhile back they first came, and there were woods all around where River Shore is. They nested about in there (intersection of River Shore Road and Twin Pines). Well they were nesting there and as those folks on River Shore built they didn't like it, and they didn't come back. My mother was still living then, and she was so disappointed.

We used to have fishing hawks (ospreys) that lived in pine trees around here, and chicken hawks (peregrine falcons), too. And we raised chickens! After my father died, I was the one that learned to shoot first. I never hit a chicken hawk, but I've killed many an opossum. They would get in the chicken house, and they could get rid of 100 chickens overnight. They just slit their throats. They are ugly old things; I didn't mind shooting them. I would have hated in this world to have shot even a chicken hawk. All birds, I love, but not an opossum, no hesitancy.

We had crows, as I said we had chicken hawks, fish hawks. They had nests mainly up this creek (Hoffler Creek), eagle over there (River Shore Road), oh, of course, owls. One of the prettiest sights I ever saw was bluebirds coming back through. That was over on the Trotman's property on the telephone wires. We all had telephone wires then. And the males come back, migrate by themselves, and there were all these bluebirds sitting there on that wire. The red-winged black-birds are one of my favorites. When they migrate, it is nearly always the males. I don't mean solid, but mostly. And they will be down in the field feeding, and when they get up, you see that turn with that red wing . . . I remember the Great egrets. We had an old dead, tall stump in the yard, as big around as this rug, certainly, and owls had a nest in a hole in it. It was their home.

Now foxes, I've seen foxes there, but not too many. But do you know that down in our yard I never saw a squirrel? Now there were squirrels up in the woods, but I never saw a squirrel in our

yard. We had pecan trees that my mother had planted, and there'd be times she'd run out there shooing at them. I always wondered didn't somebody think she was crazy going 'Shoo, shoo, shoo,' but they were crows. Crows would eat our pecans. No squirrels. I never saw, and I was outdoors all the time, crazy as a nut. I loved outdoors. I never saw a squirrel down there. And I do miss the water here.

What they call Respass Beach Lane that was Georgia Road. Mr. Respass's family lived there. He was a watchman for oyster beds out there and had a little house at the edge of the channel. He was employed by an oyster company to look out for their beds. His family, his wife, his daughter, and son lived here, and that eventually evolved into Respass Beach. And when I was a child, before Mr. Respass came, it was the Deans' farm. It was Georgia Road when I was a child. Because the Georgia regiment was there during the Civil War. There was no way in the world they could get their soldiers home that died there. They died almost as much with diarrhea and such things as they did being shot. A lot of them, as they convalesced, would come over on the boat, and my grandmother would help them out. She kind of had a feel for it.

AOM: Old maps of the property show grave markers near Hoffler Creek.

JBH: That was where my grandmother and grandfather and all of them were buried and lots of black children, little ones that didn't live, you know. My family's cemetery was there (in the northwest corner of the preserve). When we sold the property, the man that worked with the undertakers said to move it. So my grandmother, my grandfather, and my uncle who were buried there have been moved to the cemetery up here (Churchland Baptist), but they were buried there. I know that my grandmother lost two or three, and it killed me that they couldn't find their graves. I mean we knew it was in a certain area, but the marker was gone. They often used wooden markers, sometimes even a pretty rose bush or something. I'm sure that it is in the part that's in Hoffler's Creek now. We moved grandfather and grandmother Ballard and Uncle Luther, but I am sure there are graves there because there is no way they could be identified.

AOM: Has the creek always been called Hoffler Creek?

JBH: I think so.

AOM: Do you know why?

JBH: It was a family name. So my mother told me, and I think she had it right. There was Craney Island Creek, then Hoffler's and Streeter and I was trying my best to think, I can't think of the next one. The Ames's lived on that creek and Mr. Taylor Carney had a farm on that creek. And then Bennett's Creek and then Nansemond River. Streeter Creek was named after a family, too. I believe all of them were. Now Craney Island Creek, of course, wasn't, but I don't know why they named it Craney Island. Those creeks were important to the Churchland farmers when they were farming because they could keep the boats inside, you know, in the creeks because that Hampton Roads can act up when it wants to.

You usually had three black men, a captain and his two assistants on the boat. It was so impor-

tant for ours, the tides, because ours would be out in Hampton Roads where all those flats were. The first thing in the morning they called the weather bureau at our house to find out the weather. The forecast was as good as today when they have all these electronics and everything. Our first boat was the Index. After my father died, my mother's brother had a boat made where they had come from up in the northern neck of Virginia. It was called the Lancaster after Lancaster County. The Lancaster didn't have a sail on it. It was supposed to be fast. Mr. Jim Carney had a boat called the Charlotte. She was supposed to be the fastest. It was quite a rivalry. Once or twice they had races. In August, they would take all-day picnics and go down to the Dismal Swamp's lake on the truck boat. I used to be on them sometimes when they had the races at fourth of July or later, but never got down to Dismal Swamp in one. But they would go down through the locks and all.

My mother and my aunt came from the northern neck, that little strip of land between the Potomac and the Rappahannock. George Washington and Robert E. Lee both came from there, so that made it good. After the Civil War, I guess the Yankees had gone through there and there was nothing left and nobody had any money. My grandmother had been educated, and she had taught my aunt. She had never gone to school with anybody else, and she had some distant relatives that had settled in the Churchland area. They knew she was supposed to be smart, so they got her to come down here and teach in the one room school. She, then, saved up her money, sent herself to Longwood, finished a two-year course in one, got honors, came back to Churchland, and taught at Churchland Academy. [She] saved enough money to send my mother to Longwood and sent my mother's youngest brother to William and Mary. He didn't finish, but she sent him for a couple of years. She never married, and she lived with us. I was in the middle of six, so she was almost my momma. My mother was busy with the three younger.

I went to the old Churchland High School, but the whole grammar and the high school were in one wood building. And we had 4 big rooms and the principal's office. And that housed from 1st grade through 11th. I remember Ms. Mary B. Ames, quite a good teacher and later a principal at Churchland. I remember she was my 3rd grade teacher, and she had 3 grades. She had the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, and taught all three in one room. And you did not misbehave while she was teaching one of the others, or you got it. It worries me that Portsmouth has such a poor reputation for its schools. That's a shame in this world.

I will be 94 first day of March, 2002. I'm older than anyone in my family has been, as far back as I know. I'm awful afraid I'll live like the Queen Mother's picture in the paper at 101, it makes me shiver. No way do I want to be any 101.

I love the fall. So many people think the spring is so much prettier, I don't. I love the fall. My mother said that fall was terrible; it was dying. It's not, it's bright and lively. I've been trying to think where I can get out in this pretty weather.