

8-14-99

Moving to Richmond

In November 1971, Paul and I flew to Richmond, Virginia. We had driven through Richmond on U.S. Highway One several times in the past on our way to the District of Columbia, Baltimore, or New York City, but this was our first visit to the city. It was an exciting visit, for Paul had been asked to come for an interview at the four-year-old Virginia Commonwealth University, with the request that I come along with him.

Frank Brooke, Provost of the University, met us at the airport and took us for a brief look at the VCU campus on the way to our motel, the Holiday Inn Downtown, on Franklin at Belvedere. Paul would be busy all the next day with interviews. Dr. Brooke had arranged for me to have breakfast with a realtor friend and see the city and its housing possibilities in case we decided to move to Richmond. November is generally a slow time in the real estate business, and Frank said that his friend had arranged to spend the day with me. After a time, Paul and I both realized that we hadn't heard the man's name and asked what it was. Frank hesitated briefly and then gave us his name - Tom Jefferson - really.

Paul's interviewing day began earlier than my breakfast date. While I waited, I stood at our twelfth-floor window overlooking the Spring Street Prison, a white building I later identified as the Ethyl Corporation headquarters, and a bridge which held a slowly moving collection of bumper-to-bumper cars, an almost gridlocked morning rush hour. I resolved that, in the event we decided to come to VCU and Richmond, I would not want Paul to have to negotiate that traffic jam daily. I didn't realize then that I had expressed a typical Richmond sentiment about crossing the James River for any purpose, especially in order to get home every day. In Dallas we were a scant fifteen minutes from SMU, and I considered that a sufficient commute for anyone, even if I was not involved.

Breakfast with Mr. Jefferson was a pleasant experience; he was a charming young man, as a realtor should be. He was an excellent guide about a city that he clearly loved. I learned some of Richmond's history, visiting a number of landmarks about the city at the same time that he introduced me to various neighborhoods. At one point we crossed the James River on the Lee Bridge, the very bridge I had watched earlier, but no longer crowded with cars. He explained that there were then five bridges crossing the James River but that three, the Lee, Nickel, and Huguenot Bridges, served the bulk of the morning and evening rush-hour traffic. I was impressed with the hilly nature of Richmond and especially with the many large trees, two pleasant features conspicuously absent in my hometown, Dallas.

I enjoyed the exploration of Richmond but did not settle on any special residential area for our possible future home. The following three days were crowded with a variety of events. Paul was kept busy during the day with continued interviews for the position of Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, meeting with the chairpersons of all the departments in that School, with the main committees of the University governance, and with all the officials of the upper administration. Meanwhile, I was entertained in various

ways by the women of the University, i.e., the faculty and spouses, an interesting group. Among other events, we lunched in the old dining room of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, investigated the various shopping opportunities in Richmond's only mall, Willow Lawn, and visited downtown at Miller & Rhoads, Thalheimer's, and various elegant small shops. My almost exclusive association with women during the daytime was typical of the time, but I did meet men when Paul and I both were entertained in the evenings. One such event was dinner and a play at the Barksdale Theater, an impressively historic institution at the Hanover Tavern.

We left Richmond with a great many impressions to talk about on the flight back to Dallas and afterward. We soon decided that Paul would accept the offer, despite the anticipated trauma of uprooting two teenage sons. In February, 1972, we returned to look for a house. In the meantime, Paul had made a solo visit to Richmond. Among other activities, he had dinner at the home of a friend - south of the James River - and had been impressed with the hills and trees in the Stratford Hills area. I, however, couldn't help remembering all the cars piled up on the Lee Bridge. Tom Jefferson was again my guide, this time in his true capacity of realtor. We talked about our housing needs. I mentioned my prejudice against crossing the river, so he dutifully showed me houses only on the north side of the river. Several were appealing but not compelling.

One evening Paul and I rented a car and drove around the hilly, treed area that had impressed him. I, too, found the area beautiful. What Texan wouldn't be? I thought I'd lived among trees all my life, but few of them were very tall, certainly not comparable to the big oaks and pines I'd fallen in love with in Richmond. When I'd bicycled around our neighborhood in Dallas, I'd known from the effort it took that Dallas was far from flat. Those nice, gentle changes in elevation were real, weren't they? When I slightly relented about crossing the James River, Tom Jefferson showed me several houses, two of which I really liked. Those we showed to Paul on Saturday. Over lunch he indicated that he was especially impressed with one of my choices, although neither of us was overwhelmed. We realized later that we would have been as mildly hesitant about any place because buying a new house is such a big decision and we'd been happily living in one house for eighteen years. However, after lunch we signed the preliminary papers for our house.

On the entire flight back to Dallas we worried about the decision we'd made, citing the advantages and disadvantages, with me returning always to the location which would necessitate Paul's facing that traffic across the crowded bridges. His view was that it was his problem, and he thought he could handle it.

From February to May, Paul returned several times to Richmond to start getting into the problems he was anticipating from changing from a Department Chairperson to a University Dean. He returned to THE house, photographing its exterior and all the rooms inside. During that time, George decided to stay in Dallas, and Roland began wrestling with the troubling ideas of leaving the friends he'd grown up with. Finally, we sold our house, bundled ourselves and the dog into our cars, and set out. Roland was rescued almost immediately on our arrival when he met the girls next door, found a golf course he liked, and settled into a school as a senior instead of the junior he'd expected to be - all

those advance placement courses he had taken were handled differently in Richmond than they had been in Dallas.

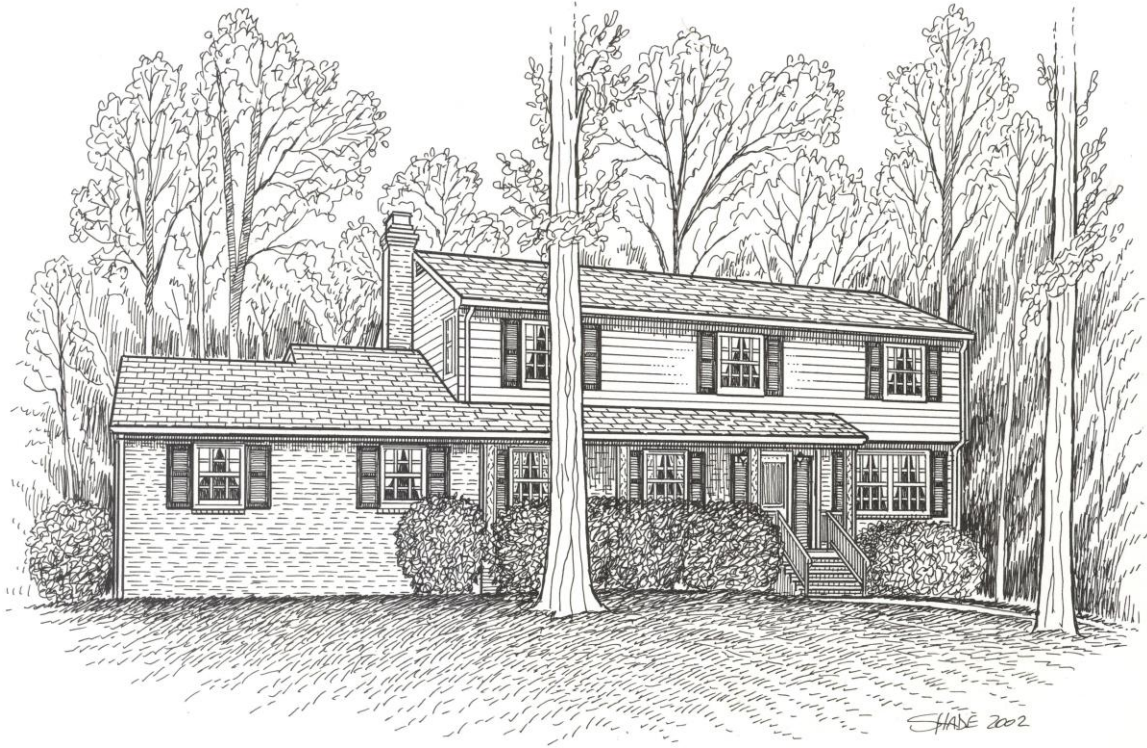


(Trees next door, and one of the girls!)

When we arrived in Richmond that June, Hurricane Agnes followed us into town. With the subsequent flooding of the city, closing many streets, Paul was unable to get to VCU, giving us some welcome extra days to get settled. When Paul did return to his work, he found, sure enough, that he spent forty-five minutes to an hour getting across the Huguenot Bridge, the Nickel Bridge, or the Lee Bridge. But by fall, the new Powhite Parkway opened, reducing his commute to little more than fifteen minutes. Moreover, a wider Lee Bridge and Manchester Bridge soon opened, further cutting down on traffic from our house to VCU. With the growth of south Richmond and Chesterfield County, alas, the crowding of the bridges is once again with us, but we're familiar with it now.

We loved our steep hills and towering trees. We soon couldn't understand Richmonders' lack of acquaintance with the beautiful Southside and their reluctance to cross the James. When the time came after a few years, we easily made the decision to retire in Richmond in our home south of the river. Twenty-seven years after hesitantly crossing the river, we can't imagine living anywhere else. We take pride in the growth of the city and of the University. We're home!





Sketch presented by Tom Jefferson.

