

## Finding Warrenton

BY NANCY E. OATES

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Sometimes a house surprises you. Sometimes a town does, too. When it comes time to find a place to retire, experienced house hunters know to scout the location as well as the house.

Retiring to a circa 1760 fixer-upper in a rural village in France sounded more idyllic than it turned out to be for Renate Hall and Joan Arbutnot. The two had lived in various large cities around the U.S. and Europe during their careers with an airline. Retiring to a quiet, uncomplicated life held appeal. Their level of fluency in French got them through the basics but not into in-depth conversations, and the education level and sophistication of the villagers was not what the two were used to. They began looking for historic homes along the East Coast of the U.S.

The Internet gave them plenty of leads, but the scouting visits were crucial, Hall said.

### Is a Mayberry-esque town right for you?



Whitsome House

"We'd find beautiful pictures of an old house with wood floors and intricate moldings, but they don't show you the Jiffy Lube across the street," Hall said. "A lot of the houses weren't maintained or the neighbor-

hoods did not keep up with the way they used to be."

Tired of looking at houses and being disappointed, they almost blew off Warrenton. But their flight back to France didn't leave Raleigh until that night, so they drove up to the Warren County seat where they'd book-marked some houses.

They began their day checking out the town. They walked through downtown to look for boarded-up storefronts — a sign that the town might be in economic decline, a deal-breaker for them — sought out a library, another requirement, and stopped in at a local store to chat with the shop owner about what it was like to live in the town. They talked with someone at town hall and learned of the town's economic development panel that works to attract new business to town. They observed the many churches, found out about volunteer opportunities and saw beautiful places to walk their dogs.

"We covered the entire town, and decided we liked Warrenton very much," Hall said.

They met up with their Realtor, Paul Setliff of Re/Max City Centre in Raleigh, who has several historic property listings in Warrenton, about 60 miles from Raleigh, and Louisburg, about 30 miles closer in.

"I've shown these historic houses to people from out of state and from Raleigh or Cary, folks who are retiring or work from home or commute part time," Setliff said. "It's a lifestyle choice. You do get more for your money in Warrenton and Louisburg than in Raleigh."

Hall and Arbutnot wanted a historic house with at least three bedrooms on acreage with a pastoral view, no more than an hour's drive from an international airport. Setliff showed them the houses they had picked out, then he suggested Tarwater House, circa 1850, with two bedrooms on an in-town lot with a view of other houses along the street. They walked in and knew it was their next home.



Green-Parker-Tarwater House

## WARRENTON

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“Most folks are interested in how the house feels, how the house lives, whether it works for them,” Setliff said.

David and Evelyn Woodson, looking ahead to retirement, knew they wanted to leave the hustle and bustle of Washington, D.C., after careers in the military and as civilians working for the Navy and the Security and Exchange Commission. Though still some years away from retirement, they knew the market was right to invest in their next home. They wanted a house on the water within driving distance of the D.C. area, where their son lives, a little land and at a good price. A historic home wasn't among



307 Church St.

their criteria — they'd always lived in newer homes — but historic homes kept popping up on their search results. Touring some tapped David Woodson's latent interest in history, and “historic house” edged out “view of the water” on their wish list.

“We fell in love with the style, architecture, grandeur and the history behind them,” he said.

Over the next eight months, the Woodsons spent their weekends on the road, driving as far away as north Georgia to stake out an area and visit the historic houses they'd found online.

“Some of the pictures on the Internet were 10 or 15 years old,” Evelyn said. “When we saw the houses, they were falling down.”

When they saw a house they liked, they explored the town, its amenities and crime rate. They narrowed their search to two houses: David's favorite in the college town of Murfreesboro that would enable them to rent out rooms to students, and Evelyn's choice in Warrenton, a 15-minute drive from Lake Gaston. While they were drawing up a list of pros and cons for

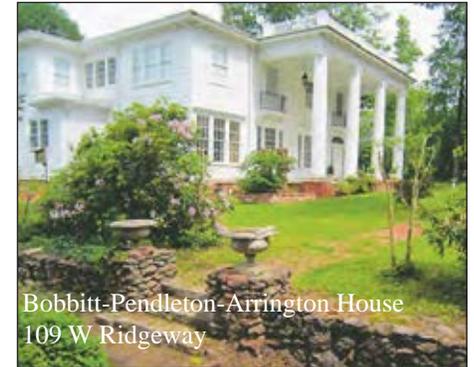
each property, David's father found himself a house in Warrenton. That and the moldings, medallions and history of Whitsome House in Warrenton sealed the deal.

“It's the smallest community we've both lived in,” David said. “But there's still civilization around us. The basics are there, and we've already made some friends, quite a few, really, given that we're still part-timers.”

The Woodsons are doing much of the work themselves to update — the carriage house had to be reframed to support an automatic garage door — and restore. Previous owners had but a 1970s kitchen in their 1820s house. The Woodsons have pulled up the linoleum laid over the hardwood floor, uncovered the brick fireplace hidden behind sheetrock, and removed the drop ceiling that lowered to 10 feet the original 14-foot ceiling.

“The previous owners must not have watched HGTV,” Evelyn said. And Preservation Warrenton may not have been as vigilant 40 years ago. Now the organization takes its oversight responsibility much more seriously. Preservation members come out to see the property discuss materials before giving permission for refurbishments. Arbutnot said her fireplace mantel has a protective covenant on it, but she appreciates the scrutiny.

“It's great, because that's how they keep this town looking so good,” she said. “The town has a very large historical district. Most of the houses have been kept up.”



Bobbitt-Pendleton-Arrington House  
109 W Ridgeway

Historic tax credits help with renovation costs. Still, maintenance to historic houses doesn't come cheap. “If something happens, you have to restore the thing to what it was,” Arbutnot said.

But that doesn't detract from their lifestyle. They've met interesting people who have lived much of their lives elsewhere before coming to Warrenton; they have season tickets to the symphony in Raleigh, an hour and a quarter drive away; and they're learning to understand the deep Southern accent.

“We were quite fortunate,” Hall said, “to find a house we really liked in a town we really liked.”

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