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Passing of Northside fixture offers new look at old community

I recently had the privilege of attending a funeral service that opened my eyes to the passing of an era. The service took place at First Baptist Church on Rosemary Street to celebrate the life of Mrs. Effie Nunn Merritt. I had never met Mrs. Merritt, nor did I know much about her. But I know her son Jim,

Housing Matters



Robert Dowling

who grew up in the Northside neighborhood in the 1940s and 50s.

As most of you know, what we call the Northside neighborhood was one of the few places in Chapel Hill where Blacks were allowed to live. When Jim was growing up, the neighborhood was much less dense than it is today. Only Blacks lived in the rolling hills just blocks from downtown Chapel Hill and Jim knew every family.

In fact, apparently, everyone knew everyone else.

In those days, many Northside residents worked at UNC or Memorial Hospital. But they were not professors, physicians or administrators. They typically held lower paying jobs in construction, housekeeping or the UNC Laundry. The children attended the Orange County Training School (later Lincoln High School) and everyone attended segregated churches. All of these factors caused this to be a very close-knit community.

I felt privileged to attend Mrs. Merritt's funeral service, in part because as an outsider, I could witness and even feel the continuing closeness of that community. This service was a coming together of a community that clearly had very strong bonds and though sad at the passing of Mrs. Merritt, they were happy to gather together to celebrate her life.

Looking at the many photographs of Mrs. Merritt, that span many decades, I was struck by her dignity and grace. She appears as a distinguished woman who warrants respect in every single photograph. I then learned that she once served as a housekeeper in the UNC chancellor's house — where she was a beloved employee.

As I left the service and walked back to my car, I better understood the sense of loss that residents of Northside have experienced over the past three or four decades. Although segregation was wrong, it allowed its victims to establish bonds of community that are difficult to recreate today. But then I thought, wouldn't it be great if we could build those bonds in a mixed race, mixed income neighborhood. Wouldn't that be a wonderful place to live? A place where Mrs. Merritt would have been every bit as loved as she was in Northside.

Robert Dowling is the executive director of Community Home Trust. Reach him at rdowling@communityhometr.org.



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY NEWSTONE REALTY
A center prep island and breakfast bar make the gourmet kitchen easy for quick snacks. Adjacent breakfast and keeping rooms with 3-sided pier gas-log fireplace bring warmth to light and airy spaces.

The Eno calls from FoxBluffs

BY SALLY KEENEY
CORRESPONDENT

Before Mark Volpe retired in 2008 as an engineer from Cisco Systems, he began buying large tracts of land in northwest Orange County in 2000 and building a dream home — FoxBluffs — completed in 2003 on a bluff above the Eno River.

With attention to detail that is hallmark for most engineers and a determination to understand all aspects of a challenge, Volpe plunged into building by working with some of the best subcontractors and house designers in the Triangle. He is a licensed general contractor and home inspector whose company, Volpe Custom Homes, is now building custom homes on another large tract in northwest Orange County — Valley Wood.

Whether you think of it as a gentleman's farm or executive retreat, his dream home at 1717 Halls Mill Rd. where the East and West forks of the Eno River converge, is a world away from I-40, even though access to I-40 via Efland is just an 8 minute drive. Chapel Hill, Durham and Burlington are under 30 minutes away; Greensboro and Raleigh, 45 and 50 minutes respectively.

Shopping at Mebane's Tanger Outlet or the eclectic shops and restaurants in downtown Hillsborough are less than 15 minutes away. This enviable location

is also true for Valley Wood, which is a quarter mile from Halls Mill Road via Highland Farm Road in northwest Orange County.

But oh what a difference a short drive can make. For the past 11 years, Mark and Lori Volpe have been living in their antebellum manor at FoxBluffs, so named because Volpe means "fox" in Italian, and the house sits on a 70-foot bluff above the Eno River.

FoxBluffs is composed of several tracts totaling 58 acres, more or less, of which 24 are under conservation easement to protect the Eno. There is a private trail down to the river — walk, ride your horses or a golf cart. The property has a 60-foot equipment shed, another log shed and a gentleman's barn with workshop, kitchenette, half-bath, storage and two stalls that open to a 10-acre fenced pasture with cowshed and other out buildings.

"We love to go down by the river," Lori said. "We walk or take the golf cart to our picnic area. It's so beautiful. When grandkids come to visit, they love playing in the backyard and riding with Mark in the golf cart."

A large terrace with an outdoor kitchen overlooks the backyard which has massive rock outcrops that are usually seen only in the mountains. Views of the

SEE FOXBLUFFS, PAGE 2B



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY NEWSTONE REALTY
Laid on its side to show its beautiful flashing, the brick contrasts with the spindled banister and white coffered ceiling of the four-column front porch.

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