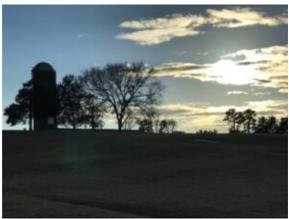




## Why Northerners Love Halifax County



Story by John Theo Jr  
Photos courtesy of the Library of Virginia

When one thinks of northern transplants living in the south, word associations like retirement and Florida may come to mind. Other phrases like lower-cost-of-living or job-relocation sometimes correlate with North and South Carolina, but what brought a northerner like me to South Boston, Virginia of all places?

In early 2017, the fast pace of life, poor weather, and exorbitant cost of living contributed to my family leaving Massachusetts and moving to Halifax County to purchase a small business. The middle-class dream of leaving the workforce and starting up your own business is nearly impossible in the northeast due to massive start-up costs. My wife and I wanted to find a place we could spend more time together as a family; somewhere with a lower cost of living, and a location where we could see ourselves living long term. We prayed about the list and searched as far west as Arizona and as far south as Georgia, but kept coming back to Southside Virginia. Halifax County offered a middle-class family like ours the ability to purchase Cozy Cave Self Storage and fulfill our dream of not just owning a business, but the real estate to go with it.

I thought we were an anomaly moving to the countryside of Virginia, but I found out there was an entire subculture of northerners living in this area, primarily from Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York, as well as Amish from Pennsylvania. I created a Facebook page titled, "Northerners living in Halifax County and Southside, Virginia".

When I first moved to South Boston, an older gentleman barged into my Webster Street office one morning and called me the "Y" word. He stood in my doorway and said, "You Yankees come down here and try to change everything."

"Sir," I said, "I assure you. I am not here to change anything."

After a few exchanges, he eventually calmed down and left. I was sympathetic, on some level, with his concern. Too much change is one of the factors that drove me south. The Massachusetts town I grew up in was the quintessential Norman Rockwell hamlet. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the town had just finished its slow progression from a farming community into a quiet suburb, complete with adorable gift shops, an old-fashioned pharmacy, a local fruit market, and town butcher. As a young boy, I'd ride my BMX bike into town to pick up comic books at the newsstand before starting my paper route. I'd deliver newspapers to adorable quiet neighborhoods with manicured lawns and flower beds.



Boston Harbor at sunset.

That idyllic town is no more. It has evolved from a rural suburb into a full-blown city. Today, nearly every square inch is covered in asphalt. The annual 4th of July fireworks, which were second only to those of the city of Boston, had to be canceled due to all the condominiums jammed in around the park. It's not just the landscape that has changed, either. Taxes are through the roof, as well as traffic and the pace of life. I would never let my children ride a bike through that town today, for fear of them being run over by a speeding car.

I'm not alone in my mourning. My neighbor, Andy Mayo, moved to Halifax County last year from the Southshore of Massachusetts. He also talks of his childhood hometown's landscape changing. While the Southshore of Massachusetts has not changed as radically as the Northshore where I'm from, we both lament the skyrocketing cost of living up north. Twenty years ago, in Massachusetts you might have two parents working to get ahead. Today, you need two incomes just to survive. It's nothing to pay \$450,000 to \$600,000 for a three-bedroom home with less than a half-acre of land. Also, figure on your annual property taxes being somewhere between \$6,000 and \$10,000 for that home, depending on the town you live in.

I've met several people living in Halifax County who are from New Jersey and New York. They have similar stories. There are parts of New Jersey and New York that dwarf the property numbers mentioned above. When I spoke with these people, terms like lower cost of living, slower pace of life, more freedom, and the ability to purchase land were reasons they moved to Southside Virginia. All of them are appreciative to be here and are not looking to change things.



People say Florida is the "north of the south," but in reality, Virginia is the one southern state that has the most in common with the north. Andy Mayo can trace his ancestors back to the Mayflower. One of his ancestors was the first pastor of Boston's Old North Church (the famous church where the lanterns were hung to signal Paul Revere; one if by land, two if by sea). We often sit in my office talking Colonial history, which is as big a deal to us northerners as it is to Virginians.

On April 19, 1775, the British were coming to confiscate the patriots' firearms in the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord and we responded with a southern colloquialism to, "Go back over yonder where you came from." Virginians also take pride in their history and don't take lightly to people telling them what to do. Consider 1861-1865.

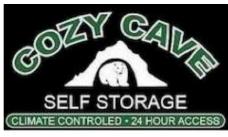
Other amazing connections between the two states include: Jamestown, Va. was settled in 1607 followed by Plymouth, Mass. in 1620. The Revolutionary War started in Massachusetts in 1775 and ended in Yorktown, Va. in 1781 (although not ratified until 1783). Much of the architecture in Richmond, Alexandria and Washington, D.C. is similar to what you will see in Boston. Geographically, Virginia has mountains and countryside similar to the landscape in Western Massachusetts. Virginia also offers a gorgeous eastern seashore which is a lot like Cape Cod and Cape Ann.

Even the state mottos mirror a similar level of liberty and machismo. The Virginia motto is easily the most famous in the union with, "Sic Semper Tyrannis," or, "Thus Always to Tyrants." Massachusetts's lesser-known motto is, "Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem," which translates to, "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty." In southside Virginia, liberty is part of the air you breathe, God is still part of the culture, and it is reminiscent of stories I read of long ago New England. In hindsight, I think this is part of the reason why I felt so connected, so quickly, when I arrived in Southside Virginia.

My wife jokes that my office on Webster Street has turned into an old-time barbershop like you might see in Mayberry. On any given day there's someone in here chewing the fat, talking God, politics, and weather, or Andy and me reminiscing about Massachusetts history, or our beloved Boston Red Sox. I obviously don't speak for all northern transplants living in the area, but the people I know are here to assimilate and not to disrupt. We appreciate Halifax County for its weather, the quality of life, and especially the kindness its people have shown us.



John Theo Jr. is relatively new to South Boston but not new to writing. He has authored several books and penned many articles. Hyco Lake Magazine is thankful to share his perspective on our community. Please welcome John and get to know him better by going to [JohnTheo.com](http://JohnTheo.com), visit him at [Cozy Cave Self Storage & More](http://CozyCaveSelfStorage.com) at 306 Webster Street, South Boston, Va. 24592 or give him a call at (434) 579-2856!



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