

Clifton: 19th Century Town With 20th Century Traffic

Louie Estrada

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Travis Worsham of Clifton in his Heart and Hand restaurant, which has served some prominent diners.

Where We Live

Clifton: 19th Century Town With 20th Century Traffic

By Louie Estrada
Washington Post Staff Writer

On a small blackboard hanging outside the rustic general store, Tom McNamara writes the day's weather forecast and the coffee of the day.

It's quiet now, with a few customers stopping in for Colombian coffee, breakfast burritos and a few sodas at the luncheonette. McNamara has operated in rural Clifton for the last six years.

Come rush hour, though, the streets, which are lined with restored Victorian storefronts and houses built in the late 1800s, will be jammed with bumper-to-bumper traffic, turning the calm community into a corridor of exhaust fumes, irritated commuters and frustrated residents.

"It's only during those rush-hour

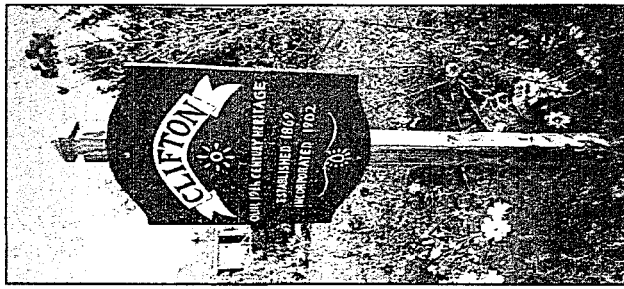
times that the small-town feel is crushed," said McNamara, a former J.C. Penney Co. executive who moved here with his wife six years ago and soon thereafter bought the general store. "But, I also have another perspective—the traffic does bring in some customers."

Traffic has been on the minds of Clifton's 225 residents and those in surrounding areas as the population continues to grow in southwest Fairfax County and neighboring Prince William County.

A recent study by the Virginia Department of Transportation found that 16,250 cars pass through Clifton's main streets every day, according to Mayor Jim Chesley.

"And we only have two main streets," Chesley said. "Clifton is a small historic town and, within cer-

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A sign in a small park takes note of "Our 19th Century Heritage."

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Clifton Has Small-Town Warmth, Big-Time Traffic

CLIFTON, From E1

tain hours, is overrun by traffic, spoiling the quality of life, tearing up the streets and making it unsafe to walk."

Chesley doesn't blame the motorists, but notes that Clifton is centrally located among the sprawling planned developments of elaborate homes and receives a lot of cut-through traffic from Prince William County.

Laid out on one-quarter of a square mile, Clifton is a collection of 63 turn-of-the-century houses standing a few feet from the streets. Some are surrounded by well-kept yards and white picket fences, and have wooden plaques providing brief historical descriptions.

The Harris House, not surprisingly, was built by the Harris family in 1830, according to the plaque hanging on a post in the front yard. The home is one of the two oldest in the town.

The old homes were rescued from destruction during a restoration period in the 1960s. With plans to turn Clifton into a tourist attraction, developer A. Frank Krause Jr. began buying property in the community, which is 28 miles southwest of the District. But residents opposed major changes, favoring a return to its past.

Today, one of the few signs of modernity are the colorful swings and slides in the wide back yards, also a hint of the many young professional couples who have moved here to capture a quaint, small-town way of life.

The homes range in price from about \$280,000 to \$350,000, according to Donna McGrath, an agent with Century 21 Real Estate in nearby Centreville. There are, however, some small homes in need of substantial renovations that sell for well under that, McGrath said. Just outside of town, much larger homes worth \$500,000 and up are perched on rolling, wooded lots.

Clifton includes a community gazebo, a town hall, a fire station, a cluster of antique and craft shops, and a couple of prominent restaurants.

Across the street from the general store is Heart in Hand, a 100-seat restaurant operated by Clifton residents Travis and Suzanne Worsham. Nancy Reagan and columnist George Will occasionally could be seen dining there together in the early 1980s.

"We were drawn here by the atmosphere," Suzanne Worsham said. "We both like antiques, and the period in which these homes were built."

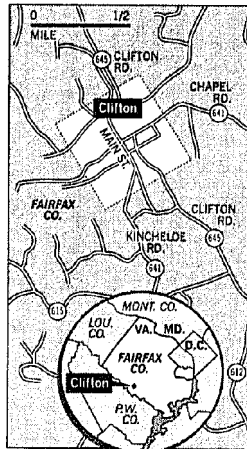
A block away from Heart in Hand is the Hermitage Inn, a restaurant that serves French, Mediterranean and California cuisine. The restaurant is in a restored hotel frequented long ago by presidents who journeyed to what was then a distant retreat from Washington.

To maintain the character of Clifton, which has been named a state and national historic landmark, there is a community architectural review board that monitors home and commercial remodeling. Limitations on new sewer linkups also restrict construction within town limits.

For all its control over the town itself, Clifton has watched helplessly as developments, albeit often on five-acre tracts, sprout in the surrounding hills along the winding narrow roads, contributing to the traffic running through Clifton's narrow streets.

Chesley said a six-member joint committee of Fairfax County and Prince William County residents has been created to find ways to alleviate the traffic problems. Some options include a train stop near Clifton and a bypass around it, Chesley said. Trains run through the town now, but haven't stopped there since 1938.

As for new roads, new construction is unlikely under tight county and state budgets, Chesley said. Clifton Road, which bisects the town, has been named a scenic byway, protecting it from expansion plans. Help



BY BRAD WYK—THE WASHINGTON POST

will come when the Fairfax County Parkway, a few miles east of Clifton, is opened next year, he said.

Amid the traffic, residents here said they are working hard to maintain a close-knit community where parents watch out for each other's children and volunteerism thrives.

Every October, local community groups stage Clifton Day, a festival of food, arts and crafts. This year's event attracted a crowd of 25,000, Chesley said.

Chesley, who works at the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Bethesda, bought a house in Clifton in 1976. "It reminded me of my hometown of Fredericksburg, before it, too, began to grow," he said.

"Clifton has a rich history as a place where Washington's elite traveled for a retreat, to get away from the heat. I guess that is essentially what we are doing today," he said.