Ghent is a beautiful historic neighborhood in Norfolk that reflects a refined middle and upper class citizenry through architecture and European flare. As I visit and read about Ghent’s history, I wonder what factors contributed to the “Europeaness” of Ghent’s development.

Ghent’s development is derived from the nationality of its principal investors and real estate developer from the Netherlands. As Ghent developed into a suburb the street names seemed to show European ideals of aristocracy and American patriotism as evidenced by the later renaming of the western Smith’s Creek branch to The Hague. And Ghenters began “playing European” with debutante balls or cotillions, yacht clubs and regattas. Was this done on purpose or is it common to upper-class suburban neighborhoods in that day?

**European Investors and Management**

Aldoph Boissevain an Amsterdam investor in the American economy was a major financier of the Ghent community in 1890. Mr. Boissevain’s banking background and personal lifestyle can be said to have molded Ghent into a model of an eclectic Europe. Mr. Boissevain began Adolph Boissevain & Co, an investment banking firm, to introduce American shares in the Amsterdam stock exchange in 1875. He then founded Blake, Boissevain & Co with a businessman (Blake) in New York. They operated in New York and London. Mr. Boissevain began subsidiary real estate companies in Norfolk, Virginia. The Norfolk Company, the Ghent Company and the Portsmouth Company managed the development of Ghent from 1890 to 1907. The Blake, Boissevain & Co. banking firm financed railroad and other real estate development in
America, specifically targeting redevelopment from Virginia to Ohio. Ghent was created as a result of Mr. Boissevain’s investment in the Norfolk & Western Railray in Virginia. An Omaha article in 1902 refers to Mr. Boissevain as “the great Dutch owner of American railroad property.” Blake, Boissevain & Co railroad investments involved the Norfolk & Western, Canadian Pacific and the Union Pacific. Boissevain & Co was domiciled in Amsterdam while Blake, Boissevain & Co domiciled in London.

This background information led me to believe that Mr. Boissevain was a major international entrepreneur with a lucrative European company capable of financing the development of a suburb in Norfolk. He was obviously influential to the American financial markets but also brought European modern technology and investment in the telephone, electrical services into the new Ghent suburb that made it more attractive.

The Norfolk Co. was a subsidiary of Blake, Boissevain & Co. and was run by J.P. Andre Mottu. Mottu born and educated in Holland began working as Boissevain’s eyes and ears for the Norfolk Company and oversaw the development of Ghent in 1890 as bookkeeper. After 1890 he was the general agent for The Norfolk, Ghent and Portsmouth Co. Mottu in 1892 caught Boissevain’s entrepreneur fever and began his own investment banking and real estate company Mottu & Co.

According to his obituary he was very influential and widely known as a businessman and investment broker and very influential in Ghent’s residential development. He seemed

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1 At least according to Amy Yarsinske book, “Ghent: John Graham’s Dream Norfolk, Virginia’s Treasure”. I found historic newspapers that mentions Mr. Boissevain’s railroad and real estate endeavors as far as Canada and Omaha. 
4 Virginia Pilot. “J.P.A. Mottu Succumbs To Heart Attack”, August 19, 1934.
5 Ibid 3
6 Ibid 4
focused on business and civic interests like Belgian orphans during World War I. He created The Belgian Orphan Fund and solicited the help of the Women’s Auxiliary of the Navy League to help with his fund and efforts in Norfolk. He led the city of Norfolk in relief efforts and food supply for the people suffering from German troop invasion in Belgium. Mottu was decorated by King Albert of Belgium and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. He also served as a Belgian agent for the Norfolk, Ghent and Portsmouth Companies and on the boards of real estate and insurance organizations and a member of the Chamber of Commerce.

Mottu’s company Mottu & Co also developed part of Ghent. His home was a popular estate in Ghent at the time although it was an agrarian style home. Mottu bought Colley Farm and developed real estate on Pembroke Ave. He renovated the Colley home at 617 Pembroke Ave to Mowbrary Arch and across The Hague and maintained a small farm. The house was originally built by a farmer, Mr. Dehny in 1850, abandoned, used as a hospital then occupied by the Colley family. The Colley family fell ill of yellow fever with only one survivor. In 1890 the Norfolk Company purchased the Ghent farm and Mr. Mottu purchased the Colley farm situated within Ghent. The small plantation grew vegetables, and raised poultry and cows. The animals provided eggs, milk, cream and butter. (Public Ledger, 1912) After Mr. Mottu died in 1934, it seems the house was possibly left unattended and unoccupied again. The Norfolk directory shows Johanna Mottu living on Fairfax Ave in 1935. Her obituary said the apartment building on Fairfax was owned by her family. As of now the property where the house was located is Pembroke Towers more than likely the result of urban renewal in the 60s and 70s. I believe Mottu had the most real estate influence in Ghent’s development seeing that he oversaw all its

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8 Virginia Pilot. “J.P.A. Mottu Succumbs To Heart Attack”, August 19, 1934.
operations since the beginning along with investment from his own company.\textsuperscript{9} This financial leadership is different from influencing neighborhood design or architecture however; it lends me to believe that Mr. Mottu could have had some influence in architectural design or the choice of architects.

Ghent’s development was attributed by some of the old-time Ghenters to Mr. Mottu.\textsuperscript{10} So was Ghent’s European style influenced by Andre Mottu? Did he purposely create European style within the community to reconnect to home? Was he involved in the details of European architectural style?

Norfolk was as a prosperous city by the year 1900 according to a newspaper from Baltimore Maryland titled “Norfolk, Virginia Remarkable Growth within the Past Few Years”.\textsuperscript{11} It goes own to give short summaries of different aspects of Norfolk’s growth including most popular people, businessmen, industries etcetera. In the article, Ghent was described as being one of the most beautiful suburbs anywhere. One of the reasons for Norfolk’s success could be Mr. Boissevain’s investment in the Norfolk and Western Railway, later changed to the Norfolk and Western Railroad once Boissevain reorganized the business. The local Norfolk newspapers attributed much of Norfolk’s growth to this railroad restructuring, which encouraged economic growth and population growth with the spurring of new suburbs like Ghent. I did not find evidence that Boissevain invested in any other city where he financed railroad companies except Norfolk. However, one town in Manitoba, Canada was so grateful for Boissevain’s involvement that they named the town after him. So why did he choose Norfolk? I suspect it was purely

\textsuperscript{9} Yarsinske, Amy Waters. (2006) \textit{Ghent: John Graham’s Dream Norfolk, Virginia’s Treasure.} Charleston, SC. History Press
\textsuperscript{10} Tunstall, Robert B. “About the history of Ghent,” Virginian-Pilot, March 18, 1951.
\textsuperscript{11} The Sun. “Norfolk Virginia Remarkable Growth within the Past Few Years Baltimore Capital Aided,” December 18, 1900. America’s Historical Newspapers.
speculative investment as Amy Yarsinske suggests in her book, or maybe with his awareness of industry and technology he believed Norfolk would be a major city with the railroad, the port and the navy yard to attract business and industry.

**European Lifestyle/Ideals**

Of course during the nineteenth century, old European medieval and Romanesque styles were thought to be a reflection of one’s stature in society, intelligence, virtue and morals. The culture also implied that the Greek and Egyptian revivals were anti-Christian and some and favored Gothic and Romanesque architectural styles instead according to some historians. As you can see in Ghent all European styles were included even though “pagan” revival styles were still quite popular in their day. The grandeur of Old European architecture was reserved only for the wealthy industrialist or “men of imagination”.  

By the time Ghent was built, European architecture styles were available for not only the wealthy but for the middle class too. A part of America’s fascination with Europe came from an influx of medieval history being taught in American schools in the 1870s, so by the 1880s medieval history was common knowledge and the impetus for architect’s eclectic interests in architectural styles in America. Americans were intrigued by their ancestry and thought learning about medieval history could help them understand their role in America and make productive decisions. Architects already had a broad interest in medieval history added to their library of knowledge and encouraged them to be more creative with their art. Americans took pride in their ancestry and externalized the attitudes and tastes of ancient Northern Europe to build racial pride in the midst of social and racial integration in the new America. The “men of imagination”, that is men of industry and business began telling their own heroic stories of triumph, success and honor in the style of the homes and

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extravagant lifestyle. The wealthy, however, were targeted by historians and writers of their
time via published literature as a way to pay tribute to their ancestors and express their ideals
through lifestyle and art. The exterior and interior of your house spoke of your honor, integrity,
valor and virtue. It was the measure of your social standing. In Robin Fleming’s article in the
American Historical Review in October of 1995 quotes “A house is the shape which a man’s
thoughts take when he imagines how he should live. Its interior is a measure of his social and
domestic nature and its exterior, of his esthetic and artistic nature. It interprets, in material form,
his ideas of home of friendship and of comfort. Thus the choice of medieval inspired
architecture was not seen simply as decision dictated by fashion but was viewed instead as an
indication of its patrons’ values.”

Ghent residents were not disinclined to flaunting their own success and creativity in
many of the popular styles of their day. There is no one single style in Ghent; most houses have a
combination of at least two or three styles done by different architects. They range from Queen
Anne, Colonial Revival, Georgian Revival, Federal, Gothic Revival, Beaux Arts, Dutch Queen
Anne, English Tudor, English Half Timber and Italianate Townhomes (Yarsinske, 2006). The
owners were directly involved in the creation of their homes with their architect since the home
was a manifestation of their integrity. Styles also represented a stately, majestic and beautiful
place to come home to after all the striving to fulfill life’s desires along with silver maples and
magnolias draping the streetscape and a cool breeze from The Hague. Perhaps Ghent developers
decided to keep up with the romantic European theme as a way of preserving their European
roots and their own racial and religious pride with the medieval history awakening of the time.14

Historical Review. Vol. 100, No.4, pages 1061-1094.
14 Ibid 13
Society

How much fun were Ghenters having far out in the suburbs? How do they entertain themselves? As of 1897 one Ghent resident complained to a Norfolk Dispatch reporter about how boring Ghent was and that it was too far away from downtown where business and city life thrived.\(^{15}\) The report never mentioned the name of the person who complained. The actual building for social events was not built until 1903, so one would have to go downtown to be entertained or have a social life. Did Ghent residents come together at all to socialize? Or maybe since there was no “community building” in the neighborhood people would only meet occasionally for house parties or dinners.

The Ghent Club was a club house in the Ghent community organized by the leading Jewish businessmen in Norfolk.\(^{16}\) These men were a part of The Norfolk German Club. This club began in 1868 by a group of German immigrants who wanted to continue their cultural tradition of dancing.\(^{17}\) The club provided entertainment, leisurely and sport activities, professional resources and a library for reading available for members. They produced extravagant balls, dances, bowling tournaments, pool tournaments and allowed other organizations to rent space to hold their own conferences or events.\(^{18}\)

The development of Ghent catapulted the Ghent Club’s membership numbers and participation. In 1870 debutante balls introduced young women in society. As Ghent grew between 20 to 25 young ladies were introduced to society with a host of dancing couples. Before the Ghent Club was built in 1903, the balls were held at the Montefiore Hall, in the Masonic Temple then finally they built a country club in the Ghent suburb. The Ghent Club was located

\(^{15}\) Norfolk Dispatch, November 11, 1897
\(^{16}\) Public Ledger. “New Ghent Club Nearing Completion”, May 13, 1905
\(^{17}\) Sargeant Memorial Room, German Club File, Norfolk Public Library
on Olney Rd across from Stockley Gardens. The Balls normally commenced at 9:30pm and ended at 1:00am the next morning. It consisted of an hour break from dancing and fine dining. The grandest dance was held in November every year. The November balls were the coming out parties for a few chosen young ladies.¹⁹

Membership or access to the club was assigned on three levels. Class A, B & C. It is not clear what privileges were permitted on each level however from letters to the board of directors I have gathered some assumptions. Class A provides the most access with full membership. Class A members most likely are adults over the age of 18 and pay an annual or monthly fee for membership. Whether this was per person or per family, I’m not sure. They were able to attend the elaborate masked balls. Class B for women is described as girls from 16 to 18 years of age whose parents are likely to already be members and under age 18 for young men. These are attendees and are not permitted to attend balls except maybe with prior permission. It may be partly due to their youth since the balls begin at 9:30pm. Although, was there a case when the Class B women and men attended a ball as spectators not realizing the limitations of their membership. No one in authority realized this since they did not make themselves noticeable. In February of 1907 only six young ladies were classified as Class B and requested to have their privileges extended since the young men they were courting would be able to become full members but have no one their age to socialize and dance with at the balls. The secretary Moe Levy, an attorney, vouched for the young ladies and young men and forwarded a letter of recommendation to the officers and board of directors. Class B attendees had parents who were already members or had access but parents were not members. Upon them attaining their majority they either had to pay full membership if their parents were members or they could not

become a member or have access when they reach adulthood because their parents were not members. Another letter was sent by Mr. Levy asking permission on behalf of the Class C members, under 16, to be allowed to have their own dance party since they were not allowed to attend other masked balls. Mr. Levy requested they start at an earlier time since they were young and that they were willing to pay $25.00 to rent the space and would charge .50¢ per person. They requested refreshments of meringues, cakes and lemonade. This particular request was for the night after the Opening Ball on November 7th 1906 for Monday November 11th 1906.20

The Ghent Club was not exclusive to Germans or the Jewish community. It involved mostly the elite residents of Ghent and other influential members of the city who may not have necessarily lived in Ghent. In fact membership nationality mirrored that of German immigrant social clubs in the Netherlands. And after the second half of the nineteenth century many Jews were attending German clubs who would have otherwise been ousted from gentile social scenes. Many of the German clubs, intended to unify Germans in the Netherlands, was attended by other groups of people and other church denominations like Calvinists, Protestants and Catholics. Opening their clubs to other groups of people encouraged “Germaness” and “the love of Germany” during a time of German societal instability.21

A few of the officers and board members of the Ghent Club actually lived across the bridge in the Atlantic City region. The president Benj F. Hofheimer was a manager at Hofheimer Brothers & Company a shoe store. He lived on Pelham Place. This was not in Ghent. Vice President Moe Levy who was secretary before was an attorney and notary and lived on Holt Street also not in Ghent. Secretary Jacob S. Heller was the vice president of the Virginia

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20 Sargean Memorial Room, Ghent Club, German Club, Norfolk Public Library
Paper & Box Company and lived in Ghent on Olney Road. Two of the board of directors lived in Ghent, another one, I’m not sure since there were two David Margulius in the directory, and one lived in Ghent and the other in Atlantic City. The forth board of director Mr. Ed Rohr was a proprietor for The Boissevain; I believe that was an apartment building. At least two Ghent developers were members of the club Richard Tunstall of the Norfolk Company and Mr. C. S. DeWitt of Mottu & DeWitt Company. Mr. DeWitt was also from Belgium and Mr. Mottu’s partner in a real estate and investments business separate from The Norfolk Company. According to one of the newspapers, they served as chaperones and dancers for the Debutante Balls. A 1910 New York Times article spoke of the elaborate dances at the Ghent Club in Norfolk and was considered “attractive features of the social season” for Army and Navy officers.22

On May 9th 1967, The Ghent Club’s, known by this time as The Hague Club, west wing dance hall caught fire and was burned. The west wing was destroyed but the other part of the building looked structurally sound from the photos. However, the entire building had to be demolished because the smoke and smog damage was so bad throughout the remaining of the building. According to Mr. Hitchings, a local historian and librarian in the Sargeant Memorial Room at the Norfolk Public Library, he remembers when it caught fire and believed there was a ball that very night. On the other hand the newspapers do not mention a ball on that night but do say that same day City Council approved a land use permit that would allow construction of medical offices on the site and the demolition of the building. The fire happened at 3:14pm during the day; as a matter of fact the City Council was still in session when they got word of the fire. There was no insurance on the building and fire inspectors suspected arson or possibly foreplay by children in the area since the building was vacant. The building was sold by the

owners and stakeholders of the Ghent Club on May of 1965. It was not being used since another 
fire that destroyed part of the building on November 24th 1943. The Ghent Club was then used 
as a funeral parlor by H. D. Oliver Funeral Home according to an advertisement on April 30th 
1967 then obviously vacant again in May of that same year. The place where the Ghent Club 
was located is currently an empty lot located across from Stockley Gardens on Olney Road.

**Street Names**

One of the more noticeable European influences is the naming of the streets giving 
homage to European ideals and European men of influence and affluence in Virginia. Street 
naming was also reserved for influential men of Virginia in general related to colonial Virginia 
and the current developers of the new suburb telling of the different backgrounds of the Ghent 
planners relating the area to a certain ideal. Are there any commonalities between the European 
ideals and American ideals behind the street names? Who are the people behind the names and 
do they foretell who should occupy the streets of Ghent? The French began communicating 
political agendas by way of naming streets and squares after heroes or ideas of the French 
Revolution. Street naming can be used to set a certain ideal in the fabric of a landscape and thus 
in the minds of residents as a reminder of authority, history and influence.23 (Azaryahu, 1996)

The first street name for Ghent was Botetourt Street, where the old Drummond Bridge 
was rebuilt and renamed Ghent Bridge. Botetourt Street was named after Norborne Berkeley the 
Baron de Botetourt or better known as Lord Botetourt of England. Lord Botetourt was a 
governor in Virginia from 1768 to 1770. His patronage for England is attributed to his 
abrogating the Virginia General Assembly who resolved to impose excessive taxation to England 
and the sending of criminals to England for trials. He was honored as an equitable governor

and Space, volume 14, pages 311—330.
resolving the conflicts between the American colonies and England\textsuperscript{24}. The naming of Colonial Avenue could have been used to imply or play with English roots of hegemony over the specific territories which speak of power and authority and could also serve as a reminder that the state has overcome their rule. It gives the impression that Ghent will be “colonized” by European aristocracy and American heroism. Thomas Fairfax 6\textsuperscript{th} Lord of Fairfax was a baron who came to Virginia to personally inspect and protect the land he inherited from his grandfather Culpeper. He was respected by his modest lifestyle, peaceable nature and for being the only English peer to live on his land in America so much so that the Tory did not attack his land. Fairfax was unpretentious about his wealth contrary to the ostentatious homes of Ghent.\textsuperscript{25} I believe he was remembered to represent the part of English rule that was fair, rich and respectable in Virginia during a time of political upheaval against the English. Fairfax Avenue was changed from Mary’s Avenue in 1901. Mary was the sister of John Graham the civil engineer responsible for planning Ghent. I believe this change was part of an effort to give the names a greater sense of power, authority and heroism. Mary is personal and sentimental only to John Graham and could easily disassociate residents from a theme of aristocracy the visionaries wanted to commemorate. Of course Boissevain Avenue was named after Adolph Boissevain who was “the Great Dutch” financier of Ghent. Mowbray Arch, I suspect, could be relating to the English born oil refiner and inventor of explosives George Mordey Mowbray. Mr. Mowbray was the first to launch the oil refining business in America and progressively invented explosives generally the first to use explosives for tunneling. His reputable nitroglycerin explosives were used to construct the


Canadian Pacific Railway in 1881. The Canadian Pacific Railway later received investment money from Adolph Boissevain to allow it to be traded on the American Stock Exchange. There is a possibility that Mr. Boissevain had business dealings with Mr. Mowbray since he was a well known chemist in Europe and America. Mowbray could have also had business relationships with Mr. Frederick J. Kimball, one of the Norfolk Company’s incorporators of Philadelphia and the president of the Norfolk & Western Railroad Company.

The street names do not fully communicate European aristocracy or dominion but is characteristic of the idea that Europe and America were working together in unison to build a better America or at least a richer America. It is symbolic of successful business and industry, American patriotism and European influence.

The Hague

The Hague was referred to as the “Venice of America” by a Norfolk Parks and Forestry superintendent. European old-world styled houses along a small water body does give Mowbray Arch and The Hague a beautiful European setting. According to Reuss, Europeans thought “water enhances the beauty of the built environment and promoted civic pride”. Also according to Braunfels only the upper income residents were legally allowed to have their houses built along the canal with picturesque views of the water in the Netherlands.

Approximately 40 percent of the Netherlands is built on polders making it vulnerable to

28 Ibid 27
flooding, similar to The Hague in Norfolk. Another commonality shared is water technology used to build man made polders to develop upon and the land and is celebrated as man conquering nature. Of course until a flood comes to destroy it. Most of the polders in the Netherlands are natural but some are created by sophisticated water management systems making the Netherlands leaders in water technology and systems. The Hague in Norfolk was also filled and shaped into a pretty arch for aesthetic purposes. A third common trait is the prestigious houses built along the water. This adds to the view given only to the privileged. Another European quality is that high income people are synonymous with yachting. It is a mark of high society in England. Ghenters played European in this way also by using The Hague to “play” on their yachts and go on short expeditions and enjoy yacht parties and yacht clubs. Only The Hague was not reserved only for Ghent residents but boaters from Texas would come into port and enjoy the European scenery along their journey. According to Yarsinske, the number of yachters would increase every year.

The naming of the part of Smith’s Creek to The Hague was commemorating the home of Mr. Boissevain. Having a better understanding of street names as a way to build upon an idea or political agenda, renaming the part of Smith’s Creek connected with Ghent, allowed the residents or local authority wanted to continue with a European aura to go along with it’s scenic views and named it The Hague. The Hague is not located on a body of water but a canal was built with a flow of water into the city allowing for water views from government buildings and upper income housing along The Hague. The Hague in the Netherlands means “hedge” or also called Gravenhage meaning “the count’s private enclosure”. The land was originally hunting ground

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for the counts of Holland. In Norfolk it could be thought of as the Ghenters private “European” getaway, since no other section of Norfolk is as beautiful. The entire city of Norfolk seemed proud as prestigious guest were welcomed and honored at The Hague. The Hague was the government seat of the Netherlands and the most influential city politically, economically and in international law. It was also the commercial district of the Netherlands. It seems the Ghenters wanted to associate themselves with aristocracy, power, and economic and political leadership. So maybe the original naming of the streets worked? The Hague in Norfolk was also used for the gathering of celebrations and regattas, a European influenced rowing race.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the initial European influence results from the name Ghent as in Ghent, Belgium. This began the journey that kept the torch running once Adolph Boissevain decided to invest in residential real estate development. Boissevain’s Dutch roots influenced the naming of a street after him, a man who inspired natives who knew of his wealth, social status and economic abilities. Boissevain was the inspiration of renaming the west arm of Smith’s Creek, The Hague. The Ghent Club, initiated by the German Club is very similar to the clubs in the Netherlands. They are German in orientation but open to everyone and the membership consists mostly of other religious or non German groups. Street naming preserve ideals as it commemorates people of greatness in the past. Street naming is a way to communicate an idea and build a mentality around that idea thus reminding residents of European aristocrats, people of power and wealth. Street naming here assigned residents of influence and affluence to reside in the suburb. Lastly, The Hague is reminiscent of Europe in that they are both related to

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reclaimed land in the Netherlands, prestigious homes built along the water, and Norfolk wants to be associated with industry and prosperity. We can see here how Ghent is connected to Europe mentally and how those thoughts translated to certain actions to promote and idealize Europe.
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