

The Virginian-Pilot

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Massive Waterside letters coming this week will alter Norfolk's skyline

By Jordan Pascale
The Virginian-Pilot
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Workers discuss moving the 15-foot "S" for the Waterside sign on Monday, April 10. Waterside District is set to open in May 2017.



L. Todd Spencer | The Virginian-Pilot

Fifteen-foot tall letters that will spell out the word W-A-T-E-R-S-I-D-E. are being staged, April 10, 2017, near the Waterside District. The letters will be put in place on top of the roof, facing Portsmouth visible from across the Elizabeth River.



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NORFOLK

Fifteen-foot letters are going up on the roof at Waterside District this week – a decidedly throwback type of signage for a modern venue.

Visible from Portsmouth across the Elizabeth River, Norfolk’s skyline will be altered as the word W-A-T-E-R-S-I-D-E will be 120-feet wide and lit in red.

But the retro-style sign, popular in the early 1900s, won’t be neon – it’s a new type of technology called iFlex LED tubing, which looks like neon but is easier to maintain.

The letters weigh from 750 pounds for the “I” to an even ton for the “W.”

The first three aluminum-bodied letters arrived Monday. Starting Thursday, four men will work on placing the letters on a 20-foot tall steel structure on the roof. Testing of the lights will follow.

Waterside District signs



Jordan Pascale | The Virginian-Pilot
Workers discuss moving the 15-foot "S" for the Waterside sign on Monday, April 10.



Jordan Pascale | The Virginian-Pilot
Fifteen-foot letters rest on the ground near Waterside District on Monday, April 10, 2017. The letters will be installed on the roof this week.



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The Waterside District letters don't use neon, but rather a new technology called iFlex LED tubing.



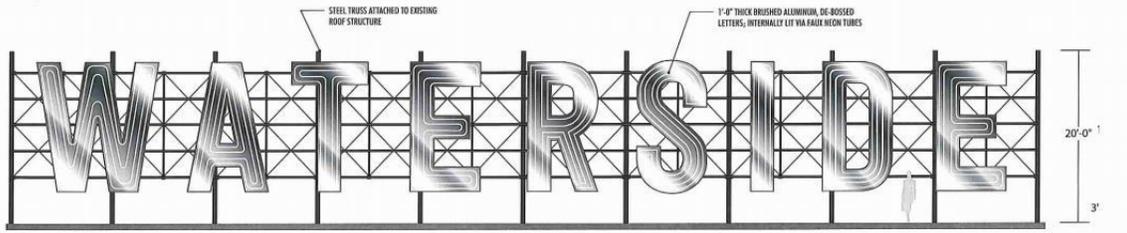
Jordan Pascale | The Virginian-Pilot

Three 15-foot tall letter rest near Waterside in Downtown Norfolk on Monday April 10. The letters will be installed on the roof of the new Waterside District this week.



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This rendering shows the scale of the sign. A human silhouette stands between the D and E.



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Waterside has a variety of signs, including painted on signs like this one for the Market.



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Waterside has a variety of signage including painted on signs like this one for the Market.



Jordan Pascale | The Virginian-Pilot
Waterside has a number of different signs including this painted mural sign for Blue Moon.



Jordan Pascale | The Virginian-Pilot
Two towers on either side of Waterside have smaller signs.

Bob Gehrman, principal architect for BCT Architects, said at a planning commission meeting last June that the sign is “going to be a very iconic symbol on the building.”

Cari Furman, a spokeswoman for developer The Cordish Cos., agreed. “We wanted it to have prominence both day and night, so we pushed our team to look at the size, scale, visibility,” Furman said. “It’ll have a visual impact architecturally, but also brings character and a level excitement to what we’re doing.

“It should look very welcoming lit up at night.”

But the sign did require special permission from the City Council, which rewrote the sign regulations in December 2013 to allow bigger sizes and heights in the

Waterside, Town Point and Nauticus area. Rooftop signs aren't allowed in most of Norfolk.

Staff said then that the changes would reflect the "vision" proposed for Waterside District and that similar features had been successful at Cordish projects elsewhere.

Norfolk has history of rooftop signs, but not many Rooftop signs appeared with greater frequency in the late 1800s and typically were found on hotels, theaters, banks and other large buildings, according to the National Parks Service, [which has a website dedicated to maintaining iconic and historic signs](#).

Signs grew larger as buildings grew bigger, and cars and other vehicles brought faster travel. Speed alters scale: The faster people travel, the bigger a sign has to be before they can see it.

Neon became a hit in the 1940s. But then as cityscapes became too cluttered, planners tried to winnow down some of the loud signs.

Norfolk revised its sign ordinance in 1992 to disallow flashing "computerized" signs and temporary A-frame signs on sidewalks.

Norfolk never had a ton of rooftop signs, says local building historian and former Slover librarian Bill Inge.

The former Southern Produce building in downtown Norfolk had one, as did Budweiser, National Bank and Johns Bros Coal. Most were on the waterfront in the 1910s and 1920s, but a 1931 fire in the area destroyed many buildings and the coinciding economic depression meant few were rebuilt.

"(Rooftop signs) were a taste of the times, but as businesses changed, those signs were obsolete and taken away," Inge said. "All the hotels, theaters, big departments stores ... big businesses closed and signs were never replaced."

Historic rooftop signs:



Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the Virginian-Pilot and Ledger Star building and its rooftop sign in Downtown Norfolk.



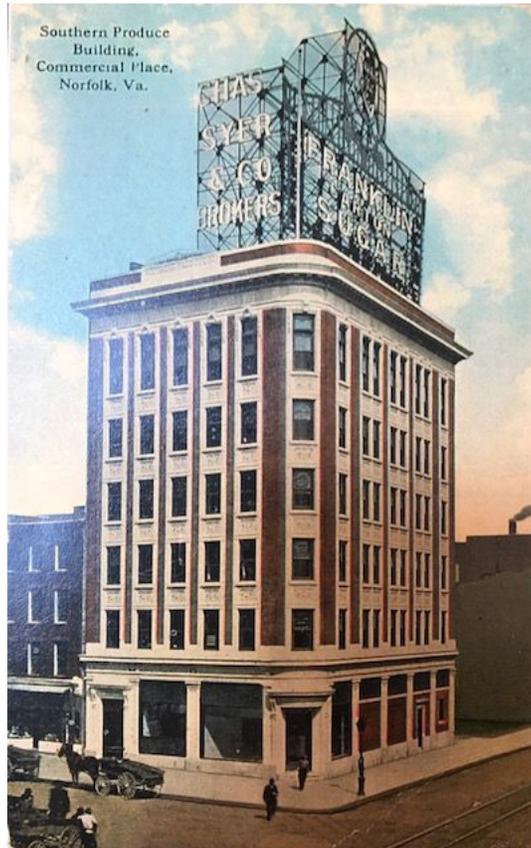
Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the National Bank building and its rooftop sign in Downtown Norfolk.



Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the Budweiser brewing building and its rooftop sign in Downtown Norfolk.



Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the Southern Produce building and its

rooftop sign in Downtown Norfolk.



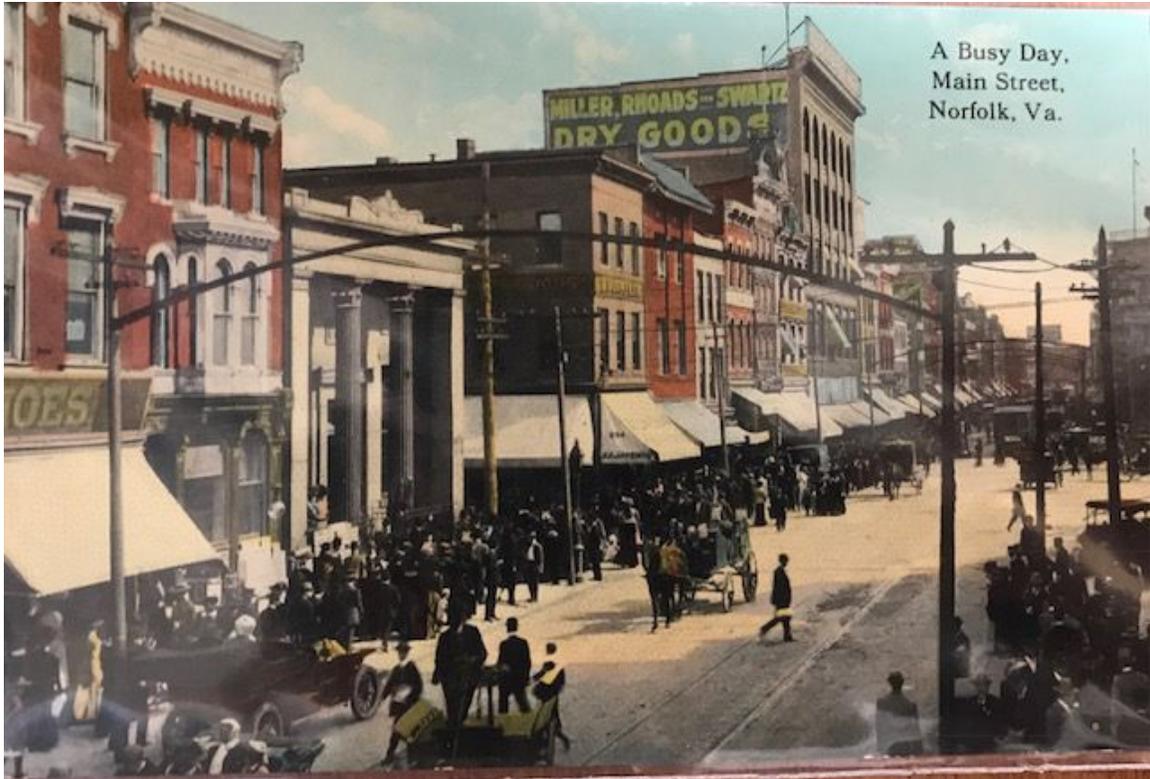
Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the Johns Bros Coal and Wood building and its rooftop sign in the background.



Courtesy of Slover Library

This 1908 postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the Old Dominion Paper Company building and its rooftop sign in Downtown Norfolk.



A Busy Day,
Main Street,
Norfolk, Va.

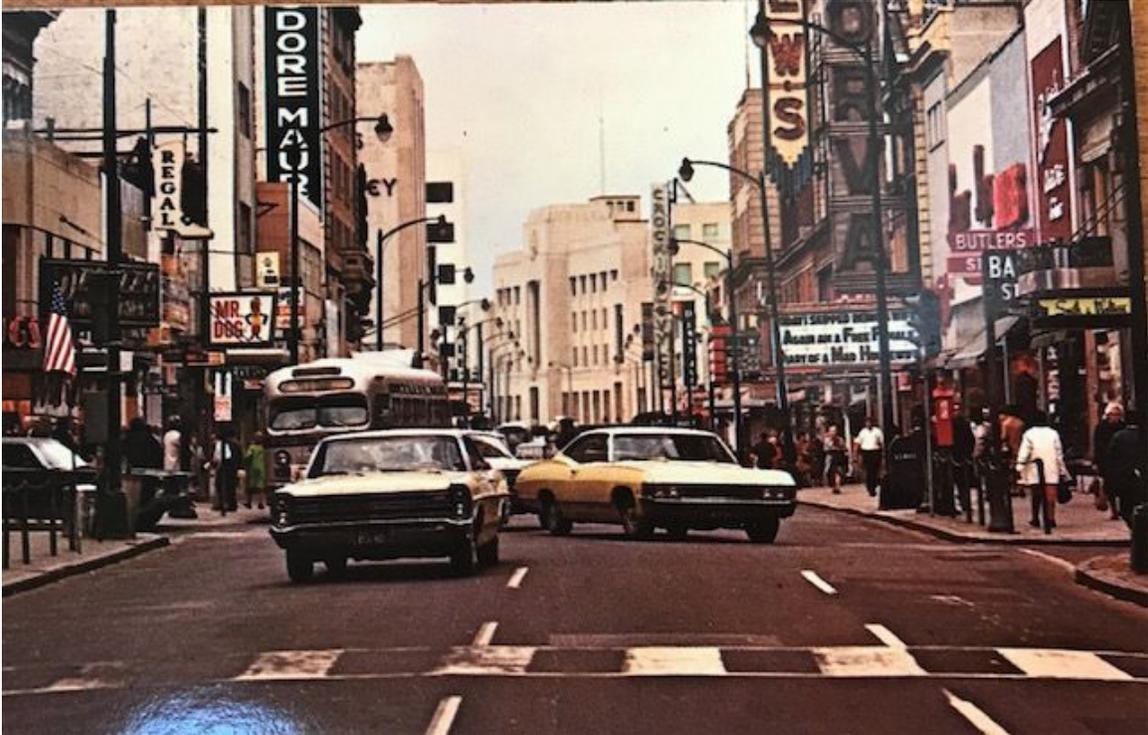
Courtesy of Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows the Miller, Rhoads and Schwartz building and its wall sign in Downtown Norfolk.



Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows Granby Street and its myriad of signs during the 1970s when it was a pedestrian promenade.



Courtesy of the Slover Library

This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows a Granby Street with its numerous projecting signs.



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This undated postcard from the Slover Library's collection shows a Granby Street with its numerous projecting signs.



By: Jordan Pascale

Richmond has a number of neon rooftop signs, including this one for Berry-Burk, a now-defunct clothing store.



Courtesy of [RVAPhotoDude](#) via Creative Commons license

Richmond has a collection of neon rooftop signs still in use, including this one in Downtown for the Hotel John Marshall in Richmond.

There's none left on that scale, Inge said. The Naro Expanded Cinema in Ghent and Commodore Theater in Portsmouth have smaller letters on top of their overhangs, but not large letters on the roof.

There are plenty of examples across the state, including the Hotel John Marshall and Berry-Burk signs in Richmond's downtown and in Roanoke, H&C Coffee and the famed Roanoke Star.

The Star is nearly 90 feet tall and would change from white to red whenever there was a traffic fatality in the area. It changed to red, white and blue after 9/11, and to all white to represent hope after the Virginia Tech shooting.

Each brought a sense of character and identity to the cities, as Waterside's likely will to Norfolk, Inge said.