

A glimpse of 'Old Rock Hill'

■ Main Street offers a sense of what the city was like in days gone by.

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This coming week, May 8-15, is Historic Preservation Week and good reason for us to think of current efforts to preserve the best of the past.

The most notable effort in this area at present is the rehabilitation of storefronts on Rock Hill's downtown Main Street, after its recent "roof-raising."

The town's beginnings stretch back to 1851, when the railroad came through. The first buildings were all wood and the streets unpaved. Early descriptions of the town leave the reader with the impression of either a "Wild West" atmosphere or a sleepy primitive village.

As the result of numerous fires, Friedheim's Store, constructed in 1899, is the oldest building in the Main Street downtown area.

Employment in cotton mills provided the first spurt of population growth. In 1880, there were 809 people in the town, and population jumped to 2,781 in the 1890 census. The greatest jump ever in one year saw Rock Hill with 3,804 people at the end of 1891. In 1895, the same year Winthrop opened in Rock Hill, there were 5,500 people.

William J. Cherry wrote "A Hand-Book of the City of Rock Hill" in 1895 in which he called Rock Hill "The Hub of the Piedmont" and included a history of the early town. He stated that there were 23 lots in the original Main Street survey.



Nearby history

LOUISE
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In 1886, the city had one cotton mill and one bank. In 1895, Rock Hill had in operation, in addition to the Rock Hill Cotton Co., the Standard Cotton Mill, Globe Mill, Arcade Mill, Manchester Mill, and the Rock Hill Buggy Co. It also had two banks, a tobacco factory, a canning factory, machine shops, an electric light plant, a street railway and waterworks and four livery stables.

In addition, there were two hotels in downtown Rock Hill. One, the 40-room Carolina Hotel within the Roddey Building, had electric call bells, speaking tubes, and a telephone. Guests who checked into the Carolina Hotel also had shooting privileges on 12,000 acres of land in the countryside around Rock Hill.

In 1927, the Andrew Jackson Hotel (later called the Guardian Building and now One Law Place) opened. Before the era of motels, the Andrew Jackson provided the best housing in town and was a favorite place to dine.

Most of the storefronts being renovated in the former Town-Center Mall were constructed between the late 1920s and the 1950s. Most of that construction was the result of the post-World War II building boom. The population of Rock Hill had its second great growth spurt in the late 1940s with a 63% increase in population by 1950 from that of 1940.

Of the 30 present-day downtown Rock Hill buildings, 26 are the property of the Rock Hill Economic Development Corp., which is doing the major work in refurbishing the area from 114 E. Main St. to 148 E. Main St.

The names of some of the old buildings will be remembered by many of Rock Hill's citizens: Rock Hill Hardware, Eleanor's, Belk's, Kimbrell's, Friedheim's, Leaders. Smith Drugs, Tollison-Neal, McCrory's and Woolworth's.

Now, leaning facades are being reinforced and leaky roofs are being replaced. Workers are busy doing much painting, cleaning masonry, replacing stucco, installing new brick veneering, putting in new wood around windows, etc.

The Rock Hill Arts Center will have newer and better facilities and will likely become the centerpiece of revived activity on Main Street.

When completed, it will not be the same old downtown Rock Hill, of course. After all, pre-1973 Main Street wasn't good enough to withstand the competition of strip shopping centers like Rock Hill Mall (which in turn was displaced by the Galleria).

No, it will not be the same, but it will be in the same location as "Old Rock Hill" and it will be the only place in town other than the "old campus" of Winthrop University that will give its citizens a sense of what "Old Rock Hill" was like.

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