

ROCK HILL IN 1895  
by Louise Pettus  
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I have been asked to speak about what Rock Hill was like in 1895—the year Winthrop came to this town. But first, I would like to take us back in time to take a brief look at Rock Hill history prior to 1895.

Rock Hill was created in 1852 by the coming through of a railroad, the Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta, or C. C. & A. The same railroad created Fort Mill—that is, the railroad laid the track and built depots at certain spots and on those spots stores and houses sprung up. There were few towns in those days. Most people lived in the country. It was an agricultural world. Think of the whole area covered by the counties of York, Chester, Lancaster in SC, and Mecklenburg and Gaston in NC. In these five counties in the 1850s only the towns that were county seats—the courthouse towns— had as many as 500 people.

Charlotte and Chesterville, now called Chester, were the largest towns of the five I have mentioned and they were about the same size in 1852, followed in size by Yorkville, Lancasterville and Gastonia. It was an agricultural world with cotton the main crop.

The 1860 census showed that in 8 years Rock Hill had a population of 100 people and 5 or 6 businesses.

In the next eight years and in spite of the Civil War, Rock Hill's population tripled. In 1868 Rock Hill boasted of 300 people, 2 churches, 11 stores, 2 bar rooms, 2 hotels, 1 male and 1 female school, 2 carriage shops, 3 blacksmith shops, 3 shoe shops, 1 tannery, 1 cabinet shop, a depot and post office. And that year, 1868, Rock Hill petitioned to be incorporated.

All of the buildings on Main Street were wooden and all were one-story and all were cheaply built. The streets weren't paved. There were artesian springs in the downtown area and it has been said that when there was a great deal of rain, the main street of Rock Hill was so muddy that mules sometimes sunk down to their bellies. Liquor was a nickel a drink and there were plenty of customers. Gunplay was not unusual. Rock Hill was wild with too many single, rootless men. It was not very different from the western towns of the same era.

Sometime around 1870 there were changes as cooler heads prevailed. Men who would become leaders of the town emerged—James Morrow Ivy, Capt. W. Lyle Roddey, John R. London, David Hutchison and others. They built several churches and established a newspaper.

The 1880 census showed 809 people and that year town leaders built the first steam-driven cotton mill in SC; it was the first cotton mill that did not sit on the banks of a river and therefore be subject to being washed away by periodic flooding. They called it the Rock Hill Cotton Mill, The building is still standing down by the railroad tracks back of the Herald Building (where Plej's outlet store is).

Four years after the Rock Hill Cotton Mill was built the town had 1,400 people—an increase of nearly 600 people in four years. That year the town built a subscription library.

In 1887 the first telephone company was organized and the First National Bank was built and a second cotton mill was erected.

The next year a second railroad, the 3 C's —Charleston, Cincinnati and Chicago Railroad, came and built a Rock Hill depot.

In 1889, The Holler and Anderson Buggy Co, the Globe Mills, and numerous smaller businesses were built.

In 1890 the population has grown to 2,781 and the town limits have expanded. That year the Rock Hill Electric Light Company was chartered. They said, "our nights are soon expected to be as bright as day."

New companies to manufacture everything from coat hangers and horse collars to farm machinery and bricks were established. In one year the town added more than 1,000 people. The town was booming.

In 1891, one of the companies formed was the Rock Hill Land and Town Site Company. It is the company that will own the future site of Winthrop. The founders of the company were William Blackburn Wilson, R. T. Fewell, W. L. Roddey, James M. Cherry and John J. Hemphill.

What they were building was a new concept for this area—a planned subdivision of upscale houses. The subdivision stretched down Oakland Avenue from the overhead bridge (which was not overhead then) to present-day Cherry Road which didn't exist at that time beyond a farm wagon road. The major north-south road in 1895 was the present day Eden Terrace which was at that time called either the Columbia Road or the Old Nation Ford Road. That road ran right under our feet in 1895, in fact was here until this auditorium was built on top of it in the 1930s.

The first thing built by the Rock Hill Land and Town Site Company in Oakland Park was a place of entertainment that they called the Casino. Because of the name, you may think of it as a gambling place but there is no evidence that it was. The Casino's location was on present-day Winthrop's back campus, behind the Little Chapel. The Casino was built beside a lake. That large scooped-out area between us and Peabody

Gymnasium was once a lake. Every weekend there were dances at the Casino. Japanese lanterns were hung outside in a way to reflect on the water and an orchestra played. One of the mayors of Rock Hill, who owned a drug store, J. B. Johnson, led one of the most popular bands for many years.

Among the first houses built by the Land and Townsite Company was the home of William H. Stewart, a York County legislator and contractor. Stewart built a house for himself that is now the Winthrop president's home. Since Dr. Webb will talk about Winthrop in 1895, I will not go any further on the origins of , except for one.

There was a building across the street that was here before Winthrop came up from Columbia. They called it the Presbyterian High School. It was a boy's school ( don't think they were so advanced as to permit coeducation above the grammar school level in 1895) Presbyterian High School was intended to prepare boys for college. It was built in 1891 at a cost of \$22,000. The building still exists and predates every other building on the Winthrop campus. It also predates every store building on Main Street.

Today the old Presbyterian High School is the central part of the Withers/WTS Building. The Macfeat Nursery is housed in the basement of what was built as the Presbyterian High School. Winthrop acquired the property in 1911 and built Withers in front of it but connected to it. But that is not a part of our story.

By 1895 Rock Hill had around 6,000 people. Rock Hill was growing at a phenomenal rate. One of the newspapers calculated that if Rock Hill continued to grow at the same rate that it grew between 1890 and 1895 by 1940 Rock Hill would have over 1 million people. I was skeptical of that but got out my calculator and figured that if the population doubled every five years Rock Hill would indeed have close to 1,100,000 people. Indeed, if the population continued doubling every five years the population of Rock Hill would be over 8 billion in 1995! You can see what I mean when I say Rock Hill was booming between 1890 and 1895.

In 1895 Rock Hill also had 3 cotton mills and 2 more being built. The new smaller businesses tended to be machine shops and lumber companies. The year that Winthrop came to town, Rock Hill was one of the most industrialized towns in South Carolina.

Cotton mills were the major employers. There was a common pattern to starting a new cotton mill. A few businessmen, including the leading banker, would start a subscription drive in order to raise enough

money to build and equip the mill. In the first years the money was local with the money put up by average citizens as well as the town leaders; prosperous farmers, too, were likely to subscribe. It was after 1900 that northern capital began coming south.

The cotton mill workers were chiefly white sharecroppers. No blacks. Nearly all the cotton mill workers had never lived in a town. The mill provided the housing—three and four room houses with low rent—as low as 20 cents a room per week. The houses were not fancy but were almost always better than the ones the workers had come from.

The typical work week was 60 hours. It appears that the workers were grateful for the jobs. There was very little protest of the long hours or of the mill shutdowns that were likely to occur when the mill owners failed to get enough orders for the gingham and sheeting. The worker's major problem seems to have been in keeping to a schedule that had them working by the clock rather than working by the sun as they did on the farm.

There was another major difference between farming and mill work. Many times the mill had jobs for the mother and children but not for the father. Many men lacked the nimble fingers necessary to tie knots in fragile yarn. Plowing, hoeing and chopping wood did not prepare a man for the more delicate tasks of spinning and weaving. Unfortunately, too many men loafed and lived off the wages of their wives and children. Industrialization was indeed a mixed blessing.

In 1895 Rock Hill could boast of having 10 miles of macadamized streets with more in the process of being built. This may not seem important today but it was then. For our younger folks in the audience I will define the term “macadamized.” The process was named for the inventor, a man named MacAdam. According to the dictionary, it means paving with broken stone and adding either tar or asphalt. Rock Hill used broken stone but, instead of tar or asphalt, used clay brought in from the Blackjacks south of town to use as the binder. A steam roller would pack the stone and clay into a hard, smooth surface.

Macadamized roads meant that farmers could start to town with two mules and a wagon and carry twice the number of bales of cotton they could carry on the old heavily-rutted roads. The macadamized roads made Rock Hill a magnet to the farmers. Rock Hill became a major cotton market and everyone prospered as a result.

I have painted a rather rosy picture of Rock Hill but feel in all honesty I should not show only one side of the picture. There were drawbacks to living in Rock Hill. For instance, Rock Hill was a smoky town.

Not only were there frequent fires destroying wood houses and stores, one thousand houses burning wood in fireplaces and kitchen stoves creates a lot of smoke, especially in winter. And add the smoke of the cotton mill chimneys and the trains passing through. The demand for wood was so high that for miles around Rock Hill nearly all the trees had been cut in order to meet the demand for wood to heat the houses and cook the meals and fire the boilers. There were nothing but stumps left as far as the eye could see.

Today, we ride by large pine forests and forget that there were few pine trees around this area until the 1930s when the CCC and the US Dept. of Agriculture planted all these pines to stop erosion caused by overcropping and overcutting.

Also, in 1895 Rock Hill had no municipal water and sewage system. Each home had a backyard well and an outhouse. Many of them, including the new houses being built on Oakland Avenue, also had stables for the family horses, a cow or two, a flock of chickens, perhaps a goat or a pony for the children. The lots were larger than now, or rather, most of them what we would call double-lots, running deep. The Winthrop Lodge sits on one of these double-lots. The original house on that lot had a barn and a garden besides the various animals I have mentioned.

While roads were paved in order to lure farmers into town, most of the residential streets weren't paved and were likely to be either dusty or muddy. Housewives had to keep windows closed in order to keep out dust. And, remember, they didn't have air conditioning.

And they had their traffic accidents. The newspapers were filled with items such as "Mrs. W. L. Roddey and Marian, her granddaughter, had a narrow escape. While they were driving, the horse ran away, throwing both out and breaking up the buggy. Fortunately, neither was injured beyond a few slight bruises and soreness." Mrs. Roddey and Marian were fortunate. Many others were not. A frightened horse could kill a man with its hooves. The plodding country mule brought into town would bolt at a sudden noise and run helter-skelter. Carriages side-swiped. Runaway horses broke many a bone.

Town life was not as healthy as country life. Diseases spread more readily. Tuberculosis (they called it consumption), measles, smallpox, diphtheria-you name it, they had it.

Still, in spite of all the drawbacks I mention and some more I haven't mentioned, they were still the drawbacks of every town in that time. Rock Hill, as seen through the eyes of contemporaries, was a great place to live. There was a sense of optimism and great pride.

So, in 1895 Rock Hill had a cotton market with buyers, a railroad depot from which to ship, and good roads for that day. It also had a National Bank, spare money, and lots of citizens with ambition and daring. There was a high proportion of young men who were not “sticks in the mud,” as they used to say, but young men eager to prosper and the opportunity to acquire a college was a challenge.

I think it was the young men’s willingness added to the organizational skills of older men, including Capt. Roddey and David Hutchison, two of the town fathers who were willing to underwrite the town notes, that led Rock Hill to become the home of The Winthrop Normal and Industrial College of South Carolina.

And two Rock Hillians were among the first trustees—William Joseph Roddey, a prominent banker, cotton mill owners and head of Rock Hill’s largest insurance business, who was appointed in 1893 to the Board of trustees and stayed on the board until his death in 1945, and Dr. T. A. Crawford, whose first Winthrop patients were the convicts who worked on the construction of the buildings. Dr. Crawford was a sensitive, caring individual who was loved by the convicts for his kindnesses and tender care. The Crawford Infirmary, named for him, was to become the third building on campus, known best today for housing the Winthrop Police Department. I will close with a quotation by D. B. Johnson, Winthrop’s first president. Johnson wrote in 1895 about Rock Hill to the chairman of the Peabody Fund, “The people are energetic and public-spirited, and are noted for the way in which they work together for the success of all their public enterprises.”