THE GIBSONVILLE MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Gibsonville's 150th Anniversary

Gibsonville's 150th anniversary was on Feb 18, 2021. To honor this benchmark, this newsletter investigates our historic downtown in detail, briefly reviews town history, pays respects to our founding family, and documents this history in an eighteen month calendar. In the summer through fall of 2021, you will see town events to celebrate this sesquicentennial event. Consider this newsletter your notice of our town's 150th birthday and an invitation to visit our historic core to celebrate it.

Our Enduring Downtown

A 2019 analysis of downtown Gibsonville's commercial buildings was revealing. Based on tax card information, downtown Gibsonville totals 731,162 square feet over 64 buildings:

- 43 of these were built before 1949. This is 67.2% of the downtown inventory. During this time, Gibsonville was on the primary east – west road across NC called Highway 100.
- 14 buildings were built between 1950 – 1969. This is 21.9% of our downtown. Traffic in our downtown decreased after Highway 70 (1931) and I-40 (1950's - 1960's) were built.
  - Only 7 downtown buildings were built after 1970. This is 10.9% of all commercial structures.
  - The largest buildings control much of our downtown's character. The 439,674 SF Minneola Mill and the 78,216 SF Dixie Belle Mill are 70.8% of all downtown space.

The heart of our city still has much of its original character. It is for this reason our commercial business district is on the NC study list and is pre-qualified for historic rehabilitation tax credits. Those interested in more information about historic rehabilitation should contact NC's State Historic Preservation Office (www.ncdcr.gov). Also for a personal walk through our history, there is a Walking Tour on the GMHSI website under the History tab.

Others interested in keeping our historic downtown strong should actively visit local businesses. Our city center offers numerous restaurants and includes casual to fine dining choices. We have destination retailers like Gibsonville Antiques & Collectibles, Just for You Gift Shop, Once Upon a Chocolate, and more. In the last year, we have also seen many new businesses open as well. These include two coffee shops (Daisy May Cafe and The Gilded Bean), the Toasty Kettlyst Brewery, Sip In Shop bottle shop, with multiple other new businesses pending. For the last century, our downtown core has been a hub for our community. It continues to be so today.

A Brief Review of Town History

The below information is drawn from Melvin O. Wyrick's History of the Town of Gibsonville (1971), the detailed histories on our website www.gmhsi.org, and from research by GMHSI contributors.

1848: The NC Legislature passed a railroad bill calling for an east-west railroad to connect the coastal plain with the piedmont. The purpose of this new infrastructure was to open western portions of the state for economic and industrial development. In 1849, the North Carolina Railroad Company chartered a course for this new rail road between Charlotte and Goldsboro. In January 1852, railroad construction began simultaneously at both ends of this new rail line.

1850's: Infrastructure began to take shape in Gibsonville. In 1851 the road bed was started for the railroad to build tracks through the town and area. This work was completed by the enslaved people of Joseph Gibson. In 1854 a train depot in downtown Gibsonville was constructed; this is no longer in existence. On October 9, 1855, the first train entered the new Gibson Station. Due to the abundance of roses at Minneola Mill across from the train depot, Gibsonville later becomes branded "the city of roses."

June 15, 1855: Opening of the Gibsonville Post Office. While the community was not formally named Gibsonville until 1871, the Post Office did bear this name as early as its opening.

1861 – 1865: US Civil War. At the end of the Civil War, slavery is abolished by the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution.

Feb 18, 1871: The Town of Gibsonville was incorporated and named in honor of Joseph Gibson (1785-1857). Prior to his death, Joseph requested the community bear his name since he had no sons to carry on his cognomen.

1887: Grover Cleveland was President, the US was composed of 38 states, the first automobile was recently invented (1886), and the commercial light bulb was under development and production by Thomas Edison.

Late 1880's – Early 1900's: During this period, Gibsonville's downtown and employment centers saw initial construction. The oldest sections of Minneola Mill were constructed in 1887 by Mr. Berry Davidson and added to over time; this is the large mill located across the railroad tracks from downtown. Hiawatha Mill was constructed in the mid-1890s by Mr. Berry Davidson and was later renamed Gem Cotton Mill (after it was sold to the Holts of Burlington). Today this mill is located at 130 Eugene Street 'behind' downtown and across from Mr. Davidson's plaque off Little Avenue. By 1899, a Greensboro newspaper reported Gibsonville boasted seven general stores, a drug store, a hotel, a livery barn, and some minor enterprises. By 1901, other records show that Gibsonville had 80 homes, two cotton mills, three or four merchandise establishments, and about 500 persons. While industry built Gibsonville, our location near Elon University (established 1889), the Whitsett Institute (a prestigious private college prep school from 1884 and 1918), and Palmer Memorial Institute (a nationally recognized African American School from 1904 – 1970) also aided our community's growth.

1907: The town's first bank was established, The Bank of Gibsonville. Local owner of Burke's Department Store, Mr. J.W. Burke was one of the organizers and a member of the Board. This bank had a presence in downtown Gibsonville from 1907 until 1969 when it merged with and became a branch of First Citizens Bank & Trust Company. This is today located at the site of the Fidelity bank building.

1913 – 1933: Mayor Dwight (D. M.) Davidson, Sr starts his twenty years term in office. D. M. ran against his father in his 1913 initial win for Mayor. After his election, D. M. guided Gibsonville through World War I (1914 – 1918), the town's tremendous growth in the 1920's, cultural changes like women's first opportunity to vote (1920), construction of Highway 70 taking statewide traffic away from downtown Gibsonville (1931), and the start of the Great Depression (1929 – 1939). D.M was Gibsonville's longest serving Mayor until our current Mayor Lenny William.

1918: Mrs. Etta 'P. T.' Burke "was instrumental in helping to organize the [P.T.A] program on a state level." "The first State PTA office, which housed the Office of the Treasurer, was located on the second floor of Burke's Department Store. Mrs. J. W. Burke, better known as 'P. T. Burke,' was the first State PTA Treasurer, and she served without compensation." Additionally, this office space was furnished gratis by Mr. and Mrs. Burke. During this time and through her life, Mrs. Burke "kept the books" for both her husband's businesses and for statewide PTA efforts. Ironically, women are finally allowed the right to vote by the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1920.

1920: Formation of the Gibsonville Development Corporation for "Insurance, Loans, Real Estate, and Lumber". This was the partnership of high net worth individuals D. M. Davidson (president and mayor of Gibsonville), J.W. Burke (vice president), A. B. Owens (secretary), and P. L. Kivett (assistant secretary). This group purchased, built, and owned many of the town buildings and expanded our downtown. This group also developed vacant land into neighborhoods and were an active part of the town's residential growth.

1923: Completion of the town's water and sewer systems. This access to water on demand allowed for the start of the Gibsonville Fire Department. During this time, Gibsonville also saw development of both two new schools as well as the overpass in downtown.

1929: The crash of Wall Street and start of Great Depression was marked in Gibsonville by the closing of the Gem Cotton Mill by the Holts.

1930: J.W. Burke became a Guilford County Commissioner. This was following the great stock market collapse in 1929 and when real implications of the Great Depression were becoming apparent. In 1931, US national unemployment jumped to 16.3%. Locally, high net worth Guilford County is impacted. Under the first two year of J.W.'s tenancy, county positions, hours county services are provided, and wages to staff are cut. Mr. Burke and his peers' efforts paid off. "The county succeeded in weathering the effects of the Depression without defaulting on its obligations, due in no small degree to the fact that, by 1933 and for the remainder of the decade, it had become the wealthiest county in the state." Mr. Burke was a County Commissioner for twelve years.

1931: Highway 70 was constructed south of downtown. This removed most of the primary traffic that passed through downtown Gibsonville and routed it around town in a more direct east -west fashion. Prior to Highway 70, the main east – west road through the area was Highway 100, which ran from small town to small town in a zig zag fashion.

1910 – 1940's: Gibsonville stayed a small town through much of the start of the 20th century. Per the US Census, the Town's population grew only 591 persons from 1910 to 1940. Population figures were as follows: 1,162 persons (1910), 1,302 persons (1920), 1,605 persons (1930), and 1,753 persons (1940).

1939 – 1945: World War II. The US became involved in WWII based on the surprise Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941. One of Gibsonville's own (Charles Willis Mann) was at Pearl Harbor and is considered the first of Gibsonville's sons lost to this war. During this time, Mr. W. D. Hammer was the Veteran Service Officer in Town Hall. Our VFW at 423 Boonwood Drive is today named after Mr. Hammer.

1950 – 1960s: After WWII, the Gibsonville population did not follow general US trends of the increasing Baby Boomer generation. Part of the reason for this is that after the war ended, many of those who went to war did not return to our small town. Employment in the larger metros was more appealing and offered these individuals better opportunity. Through the 1950s and 1960s, Interstate 40 was constructed across North Carolina. This new, larger interstate took the traffic off of three lane Highway 70 and allowed for easier access to and between the larger area metros or Raleigh / Durham and Greensboro / High Point.

Sept 11, 1950: Gibsonville became regional news when a significant rail accident occurred in downtown. Due to a jammed switch, a locomotive exploded. Locally this shook houses, smashed six lead cars, turned over 18 other cars, and left an additional 22 cars stranded on the tracks behind. Overall, this unfortunate event killed two people, disrupted rail service for 16 hours, and drew 30,000+ visitors interested in this carnage. More information is available on the Detailed Histories section of our website.

1951: Cone Mills discontinued reduced cost rental housing for Minneola Mill employees. This was due to a significant Textile Workers Union of American (TWUA) labor dispute. Blocks of residential homes and over 60+ homes were sold and moved. This forced employees to find homes outside of city limits further moving people out of the town. As a result, the Town's population decreased from 1,866 persons (1950) to 1,784 persons (1960). This was Gibsonville's only decade of population decrease in its history. In 1960, Gibsonville only had 179+ persons more than the town had in 1930, thirty years earlier.

1960's – 1970's: Local education facilities are updated and repositioned. In 1965, an addition was built for Gibsonville Elementary School at 401 East Joyner Street with extra classrooms and a cafeteria. Eastern Guilford High School opened in 1977 and around this time, middle school grades were transferred to McLeansville Middle (until a new Middle School opened adjacent EGHS in 1999). The historic school structure remained in use until the early 2000's when a new school was built adjacent at 401 East Joyner St. The historic school was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 2014 and was later sold for redevelopment.

1971: The History of the Town of Gibsonville is written by Melvin O. Wyrick. Mr. Wyrick was Gibsonville's longest serving town manager with 43+ years of service to our community. In 1999, Mr. Wyrick was named one of the Top 150 People whom help shaped Alamance County's first 150 years. For more info, see Newsletter 10, Volume 1.

Circa 1970: Local education facilities are updated. In 1965, the Gibsonville Elementary School was built at 401 East Joyner Street. In 1974, Eastern High School was built. Middle school grades were transferred to this same location after a middle school was built adjacent to Eastern High School. This began the closure of the historic Gibsonville School, which was later put on the National Register of Historic Places in 2014.

1988: Closure of the Cone Mills plant in downtown. This facility became a multi-tenant location with many businesses rather than just the one larger employer. This defining building occupies 60% of our downtown's commercial space.

2000: There were 4,372 people, 1,707 households, and 1,206 families in Gibsonville, per the Census. In only thirty years (1970 – 2000), the town doubled its population.

2010: Gibsonville grows to 6,410 persons, per the 2010 US Census. The growth of 2,000+ persons in a ten year period is the largest single population increase in Gibsonville's history. This population increase alone is equivalent to the entire town's population in 1970.

2019: Gibsonville has an estimated 7,339 persons and continues to grow.

2001 – 2021: Mayor Lenny Williams becomes Gibsonville's longest serving Mayor. He had 18 years of service when elected for a four year term in 2019. This exceeds the prior record of 20 years served by Mayor D.M. Davidson from 1913 – 1933.

Feb 18, 2021: Gibsonville's 150th anniversary.

Present Day: For current town information, see the Town's website at www.gibsonville.net. 'Our small town' continues to grow and is projected to hit 10,000+ persons in the next few years. Just as we celebrate our history to date, we welcome Gibsonville's new families. Together, we all create Gibsonville's future.

Interested in More: Please visit www.gmhsi.org for additional details on above and much more.

Your Additions: Did we miss something in the above summary? Do you have a donation, fact, or story you want included in our archives? Please let us know by emailing the GMHSI at info@gmhsi.org. We would love a comprehensive timeline and appreciate all assistance towards this end.

Paying Respects to American Patriot Andrew Gibson
By Sandi Moulton

American patriot Andrew Gibson (1750 – 1823) was the prominent feature of an October 2020 tour of the Gibsonville Cemetery at 1201 Springwood Church Road. This was an event a) sponsored by the GMHSI and the Gibsonville Library and b) organized and conducted by Ms. Lisa Kobrin of Alamance County Public Libraries. For this event, more than 30 people gathered around Andrew Gibson's grave stone in the oldest section of the cemetery. Vice President of the Gibsonville Museum & Historical Society, Deleno Flynn pointed out the stone markers that outlined the borders of the Gibson Family Plot. Lisa Kobrin recounted a thorough history of Andrew's life. Per Lisa, Andrew was apprenticed to a silversmith when he immigrated from Scotland to the colonies in 1765. His ship disembarked at the port of Charles Town, SC, which became later known as Charleston. Andrew travelled inland, first to Camden, then to what is now known as Cheraw SC, where he set up a business. Sometime later Andrew came to Orange County, NC in order to collect a debt. Once in our enchanting state, he fell in love with his future wife Jane. They married and began a new life together in what is now known as Guilford County. Andrew became a prominent leader in the Gibsonville community; He was a farmer, a merchant, a silversmith, and dabbled in gold mining during wintertime when the fields were fallow. Having fought at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, Andrew Gibson's grave is today marked with an American flag in honor of his service during the Revolutionary War. Locally Andrew is the father of town founder Joseph Gibson (1785-1857).

GMHSI Calendar (2021-2022)

- *Theme:* Gibsonville Celebrates 150 Years. Like this newsletter, this will be a collection of Gibsonville's history. Photographs to include old town street views, celebration of the 100th anniversary in 1971, and much more.
- *Format:* This is an eighteen (18) month calendar from June 2021 – December 2022.
- *Advertising:* Approximately 2" x 8" whole page ad positions are available for $150.   Sponsors, reach out to us today as publication of this calendar is imminent and spaces are limited.
- *Available:* This calendar will be available for $15. Order forms are available on our website. Also, once published this will be available for sale downtown at Gibsonville Antiques & Collectibles.
- *Full Details:* For more information, see www.gmhsi.org/calendar

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