

Concord: A Bicentennial Sketch

by

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Although Cabarrus County government was organized by the newly formed Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions at its first meeting on January 21, 1793, and county officials were elected, the dispute over the location of the seat of government continued until 1795, when a site was agreed upon. A town to be named "Concord" was laid off on a 26 acre tract of land lying on the ridge near the old Indian Trading Path and to the west of Three Mile Branch. By the April 1796 Session of the County Court, the land had been purchased, surveyed into lots and sold at public auction to the first Concord landowners.

Concord was incorporated in 1806, but the earliest records of city government have been lost. Written records begin with a meeting on March 13, 1837, when newly-elected Magistrate of Police (now Mayor) J. L. Beard, and four Town Commissioners met to take their oaths of office and to organize city government. Those early Commissioners wrestled with questions of imposing and collecting taxes, preserving the public health and safety through local ordinances, and opening and maintaining the public streets. In addition to providing for collection of taxes by the town constable, the Board appointed responsible citizens to repair the firefighting equipment and the public streets. Early ordinances penalized persons for running their horses through the streets of Concord, and for firing a gun within the city. Other safety ordinances provided fines for persons allowing cattle to lie in the city streets and for carrying "fire in the streets except in a fire pan."

During those formative years churches were built in Concord and provided a center for both social and spiritual life. With the encouragement of their Presbyterian friends in the established congregations of Rocky River and Poplar Tent, land was obtained in 1804 for the fledgling Presbyterian congregation in "Conkord." That flagship church was to be the center of worship in the town until 1837, when a Methodist revival led to the formation of the Concord Methodist congregation, now Central United Methodist Church. In 1843 Lutheran members of the Old Cold Water Lutheran church decided to build a new church in town, and St. James Lutheran Church was erected on East Corban Street near a cemetery site donated by George Kluttz.

The oldest African-American church in Concord, Zion Hill A. M. E. Zion Church, began as Zion Chapel in 1859. Zion Wesley Institute, which is now known as Livingstone College and is located in Salisbury, was started in 1879 to provide educational opportunities for church members. Members of the Zion Hill congregation left the mother church to build Price Temple, now Price Memorial A. M. E. Zion Church, in 1895. Members of the Price Temple congregation started the First Congregational Church, now First United Church of Christ, in 1902.

The old vacant Presbyterian church building on South Spring Street was home to a growing Episcopal congregation until 1892 when local builder, A. H. Propst, built the lovely brick building on West Depot Street. In 1880, a Reformed Church missionary held services in the courthouse in Concord. A congregation was organized on January 1, 1881, and a church building finished in 1885. Baptists who lived in town worshipped at the old Cold Water Baptist Church until 1886, when services were held in the County Courthouse. The first services in Concord's First Baptist Church, erected at Spring and Grove Streets, were held in January of 1889. .

Industry began in Concord with the organization of the first cotton mill in 1839 to the north of the town

limits on a location which is now the site of Locke Mill Plaza. Later, the city limits and Union Street were extended to the factory. By 1842 machinery had been installed and the plant was in "full operation," advertising that it was ready to supply cotton yarn, shirting, drilling, and nails to the public. By 1850 the small plant employed 70 persons.

During the decade of the 1850's, the location of a railroad just to the west of the town ensured its future growth, and an 1852 article in the town's newspaper, the Concord Mercury, rhapsodized about the "spirit of improvement" pervading our Town and community.

We have few records of life in Concord, following the end of the Civil War, although we know the town was occupied for a short time by Union soldiers. In those troubled Reconstruction days, Jim Cannon, at age 16, followed his older brother David to Concord to seek his fortune in the little courthouse village of less than eight hundred persons. The small town had muddy streets and frame buildings, without sidewalks or street lamps, but had the small cotton mill which was started in 1839 and another valuable asset: the North Carolina Railroad ran just to its west, so cotton and other goods could easily be shipped to market. The town also had a stately courthouse which was destroyed by fire in 1875, and replaced the following year by the lovely structure which is now the Historic Cabarrus County Courthouse.

Captain J. M. Odell, a native of Randolph County, purchased the Concord Cotton Factory at a distress sale in 1877. The old plant had 1,500 spindles and no looms. By 1892, Captain Odell had added three more mills to his original plant, with 21,000 spindles and 846 looms. A town of 800 people, Forest Hill, grew up around his mills. The only bleachery in the South was also located there, and could treat 40,000 yards of cloth a day. A new enterprise, the Kerr Bag Manufacturing Company, shipped huge quantities of bags throughout the country.

Meanwhile, J. W. Cannon applied himself to his work as a merchant and learned the business of cotton buying. Before he was 21, young Cannon had already established a reputation for hard work and integrity. In 1887 he organized the first of his textile companies in Concord. As demands for "Cannon Cloth" grew, he opened a new plant in Concord in 1892. Inspired by the success of Odell and Cannon, an enterprising black businessman named Warren C. Coleman launched what one biographer called a "noble experiment" by building a textile plant in Concord to be operated by only African-American employees. After his untimely death, the plant became part of the Cannon chain.

These textile men soon came to need their own bank; though they could fund it, they needed a special man to run it. They found their man in Daniel Branson Coltrane, a Confederate veteran who had ridden with "Jeb" Stuart's calvary in the war, and survived three wounds in battle. He returned to his native North Carolina in 1888 and Concord National Bank opened in July of that year.

With the success of the great mills, no city in North Carolina had more vitality and excitement than 1890 Concord. The town's population had more than doubled to 1600 persons in 1880, and then to 4,000 persons by 1890. Near the depot, R. A. "Bus" Brown was forming 35,000 bricks a day at his new steam-driven plant, trying to keep up with all the construction in town. From the depot, visitors to town could ride on the new steam street railway, the "dummy line." Salesmen could find lodging at the elegant new St. Cloud Hotel or the Morris House. By 1900, Concord's population had swelled to 8,000 persons. Concord's excellent public school system was established in Concord in 1891 when they were approved by a margin of only three votes at an election held in May of that year. E. P. Mangum of Chapel Hill served for several years as the first superintendent of the Concord City School system, which then had six teachers.

During the formative early years of the twentieth century, Concord took on many of the trappings of a modern southern city. A city fire department was officially organized on December 21, 1900, replacing the all volunteer Concord Hose and Reel Company which had operated since its organization in 1887. The fire department was housed in the new city hall building on South Union Street. Other city offices in the modern three-story building were those of the Chief of Police, J. L. Boger, the City Tax Collector, Ross McConnell, and the Mayor, J. B. Caldwell. An "Opera House" on the second floor was used by traveling companies for Shakespearean plays and vaudeville shows. Public meetings and local entertainments were also held in the hall.

Efforts to establish a local library began in 1902 with the appointment of a Board of Directors on July 8th of that year. The library was reorganized in 1911 when the Board of Aldermen appointed a Board of Directors composed of dedicated Concord citizens led by Mrs. L. D. Coltrane. James P. Cook, editor of a Concord newspaper, The Standard, led an effort to take young boys out of the state prison system and into a "training school." Seventeen years of effort led to the formation of the Stonewall Jackson Manual Training School, with Mr. Cook as its first Chairman and D. B. Coltrane as Treasurer.

Concord was also moving from the days of the horse and buggy into modern transportation during those first decades of the new century. In 1908 the Board of Aldermen approved a franchise for a street railway. The inaugural run of the battery operated street car in the United States was made in Concord in the fall of 1910 to considerable local enthusiasm. The battery needed constant recharging, however, and the car proved to be unsatisfactory. It was replaced in 1912 by a traditional trolley car which operated along the old tracks for about a decade longer.

The city continued its steady growth, its population increasing from 7,910 in 1900 to 8,715 in 1910 and 9,903 a decade later. In 1911 a modern post office was constructed. Interested Concord citizens petitioned for a Red Cross Chapter Charter in April of 1917, and the chapter began to write a history of service with Mrs. C. A. Cannon as Chairman and Mrs. L. D. Coltrane as Secretary.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the residents of Concord witnessed the first great world conflict, the boom times of the 1920's, and the beginnings of a massive worldwide depression. During those decades of growth, the population of Concord had increased from about 9,000 persons in 1916 to about 13,500 persons in 1936. Four miles of bitulithic streets had increased to 21 miles of paved streets in the city. Deposits at city banks had swelled to more than 7.5 million dollars, with another 2.7 million dollars in the three savings and loan associations. Savings banks boasted another 2 million dollars in assets, The city's principal industries included cotton manufacturing and hosiery mills, bleachery and finishing plants, an oil mill, ice plant, lumber mills, foundry and gas plant, and two wholesale grocery houses which served Cabarrus County and parts of all the surrounding counties.

By 1985, Concord had a population of about 18,000 persons and was poised for its greatest period of growth. On June 30, 1986, the city annexed 8.06 square miles of land along its western and southern boundaries, with an increase in population from 18,465 to 26,149. The highly developed area was rich in industry, and included the huge \$100 million Phillip Morris, U. S. A., cigarette manufacturing complex. The giant motorsports complex centered around the Charlotte Motor Speedway was already a part of the city, as the result of an earlier annexation.

In 1991 an additional 3.66 miles was added to the city by annexation. On February 2nd of that year, Phillip Morris announced a \$400 million dollar expansion of its Concord plant, the largest industrial expansion in the history of the state. Oiles American Corporation, a manufacturer of self-lubricating industrial bearings and the first Japanese firm to locate in Cabarrus County, began construction of a 30,000 square foot facility as the first tenant of the Concord International Business Park. The second tenant of the Park, Pass & Seymour/Legrand, a manufacturer of electrical wiring devices, completed construction of its manufacturing facility in December of 1991.

Although it enjoys many of the advantages of small town life, Concord has continued to be a progressive community. After settlement of a dispute with Cabarrus County over a regional airport facility, the Concord Regional Airport became a reality. The city and Cabarrus County also formed a countywide water and sewer authority to provide necessary services, and plan for orderly growth. In other successful litigation, Concord established the right of a municipality to refinance bonds at a lower rate by issuance of new bonds, a decision which was of significance to cities across North Carolina.

Quality cultural experiences are provided to Concord's citizens through the Old Courthouse Theater, as well as numerous local civic and arts groups, such as the Cabarrus Arts Council. The city has made extensive improvements to a city-owned parks facility, Les Myers Park, and has recently purchased 310 acres of land between the Concord Regional Airport and the Charlotte Motor Speedway for a city-owned golf course and recreational area. Cabarrus Memorial Hospital, with recent extensive additions, offers the best of modern medical care to residents of Concord and Cabarrus County.

As it nears the end of the century, Concord faces many of the problems shared by most other cities of the New South: the flight from downtown business districts, the demand for more governmental services without increases in tax revenues, the need to diversify the tax base by attracting business and industry, and the search for funds to ensure quality educational facilities for the city's children. The Concord Downtown Redevelopment Corporation is working successfully to revitalize the downtown Concord business district. The city has recently dramatically increased its boundaries and population with a December 31, 1995 annexation of 13.75 additional square miles of area to the south and west of the City, including the thriving new residential areas along Weddington Road, Poplar Tent Road, and North Carolina Highway 73. The annexed area increases city population by about 6,200 residents formerly in the County. Even while the city attempts to deal with the explosion in its school population through new construction, City fathers seek to attract more businesses which will strengthen the tax base without adding more young residents to the already overcrowded schools.