

# The History of Greenville



The city of Greenville is situated on land that was once Cherokee hunting ground, closed to colonists' settlement. About 1770, Richard Pearis, an Indian trader from Virginia who was living with a chief's daughter, received about 100,000 acres of hunting lands from the Cherokees. Pearis set up a plantation on the banks of the Reedy River in what is now downtown Greenville.

His Great Plains Plantation included a saw mill, grist mill, and stables together with a trading post. When the Revolutionary War came, the struggle in the South Carolina back country between Tories and Patriots was fierce. Pearis threw his support to the Tories and their Cherokee allies, and together they terrorized upstate Patriots. In retaliation, a Patriot troop raided his plantation, burned his mill and home, and briefly jailed him in Charleston. He never returned to the upstate, but he left his name on Paris Mountain.

After the Revolution, the new state of South Carolina claimed the Cherokees' territory and began distributing it to Patriot soldiers as payment for their wartime services. In 1786, the state legislature formed Greenville (originally spelled Greeneville) County, naming it for Gen. Nathanael Greene, the hero of the American southern campaign.



The first owner of the land that became city of Greenville was Thomas Brandon of Union, who purchased 400 acres that had once been Pearis's in 1784. Several years later, Lemuel Alston purchased Brandon's holdings and additional acreage, amassing over 11,000 acres around the Reedy River.

The General Assembly sited the county's courthouse on Alston's property in 1794. Three years later he platted 60 lots for a village he called Pleasantburg, with a log courthouse surrounded by a court square. He built his home, Prospect Hill, called by a visitor "the finest dwelling in the upstate," at the crest of a sycamore-lined avenue north of Court Square. Alston's lots did not sell well, and since the settlement was already called Greenville Courthouse, his choice of name didn't catch on.

In 1815, attracted by the rich soil of Alabama, Alston sold his acreage for \$27,557 to Vardry McBee of Lincolnton, North Carolina, a 40-year old tanner and merchant. Although McBee was an absentee landlord, he understood community building, and he encouraged Greenville growth.



He gave land for the first schools (the Greenville Male and Female Academies), for the first four churches (Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian), and he established a brick yard, rock quarry, and saw mill, in addition to corn and grist mills, a tannery, and a large

general store. Seven miles south of town he built a paper factory and cotton and woolen mills. Alston's former home became a boarding house for the summer visitors who were making the little village a summer resort.

Visitors could also stay at the Mansion House, which had a bar, ballroom, piano, and the only sofa in the village, and entertain themselves with picnics beside the Reedy River and trips to Caesar's Head and Table Rock. After 1823, visiting judges presided over a new fireproof courthouse designed by state architect Robert Mills.

While most visitors lived in hotels and boarding houses, some built large vacation homes. They include Whitehall, erected by Governor Arthur Middleton in 1813 and Lowndes Hill Plantation on the Pelham Road (1827). Other still extant antebellum homes include the Earle Town House (c. 1810), the F. F. Beattie House (1835, now the Women's Club), and the Kilgore-Lewis House (1835), home of the Greenville Garden Club.



Politically Greenville was Unionist, opposed to neighbor John C. Calhoun's theory of nullification. Lawyer and newspaper editor Benjamin Perry was a spokesman for the anti-nullification forces, who included Vardry McBee and summer visitor Joel Poinsett, one-time Secretary of War and ambassador to Mexico (where he discovered the flower later named for him).

In the 1850s the little resort village (its population had climbed to about a thousand people) became "the Athens of the Upstate." In 1851 the Furman University moved from Winnsboro to a bluff above the Reedy River, bringing with it Baptist faculty and students. In 1854 the Greenville Baptist Female College opened on the land and in the buildings of the former academies, and in 1859 Furman's religion department separated to become the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In December 1853, the first Greenville and Columbia Railroad train arrived at a depot on Augusta Road, providing far more convenient access to the rest of the state. Greenville was the district market town, but it also had busy Main Street stores and the Gower, Cox and Markley Coach Factory, the largest coach manufacturer south of the Potomac.

The town was a Unionist stronghold in 1850, but a combination of national events—John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry and Abraham Lincoln's election among them—and fiery speeches supporting Secession by University President James Clement Furman and others led Greenville to vote for Secession in December 1860.

During the Civil War, the town, far removed from action in Virginia and the West, became a refuge for low country residents fleeing from federal troops. Furman and the Seminary closed, but the Female College continued operating. A women's association created a "Soldiers' Rest," while nearby farms and mills supplied food and clothing to the Confederacy, and the coach factory manufactured ambulances and gun caissons. An armory on Green Avenue produced rifles.

The town's single brush with war came three weeks after Appomattox when federal troops searching for Jefferson Davis came through Greenville. Six weeks later, President Johnson appointed Benjamin Perry provisional governor of the state.

During Reconstruction, the small upstate town, like the rest of the state, faced a new, different, and often difficult world. Newly freed people had new decisions and opportunities. Black Baptists and Methodists began their own congregations, Springfield Baptist and Silver Hill (later John Wesley United Methodist) Churches. In 1866, primary classes began for black children and adults in a Main Street hotel that became Allen School in 1869.

A Freedmen's Bureau headed by Major John W. DeForest adjudicated racial arguments and distributed food and clothing to those in need. DeForest later published a series of articles in Harpers Weekly about his experience. They are primary sources on Reconstruction Greenville.

In 1868, the town sent a bi-racial delegation to a convention that wrote a new state constitution. It ended slavery and provided for free public education, property rights for women, and the vote for black men. The following year, Greenville (population now 2,757) was chartered as a city.

Construction, halted for a decade, returned in the 1870s. City Officials built the first bridge across the Reedy River sturdy enough for horses and carriages, while three Bostonians constructed the Camperdown Mill on the Reedy River. The Charlotte and Atlanta Airline Railroad (later the Southern Railway) was completed. A mule-drawn street railway joined the new railroad station on West Washington Street with the Augusta Street G & C Depot. After 1874, residents could read a daily newspaper, the Greenville Daily News. Hoping that it would attract immigrants to town, its overwhelmingly Protestant Scots-Irish citizenry supported the building of St. Mary's Catholic Church in 1876.

The seeds of modern Greenville were planted in the 1880s. Southern Bell installed a telephone exchange; a Board of Health began operating; pipes were laid for water and sewers, electric lights began illuminating city streets on dark nights. In spite of opposition from some taxpayers, free public schooling began.

Between 1895 and 1897, Greenville became a cotton mill town. American Spinning, Mills Manufacturing, and Poe Mill--opened just outside the city's limits. With Camp Wetherill, set up during Spanish-American War, they brought new people and money to the small city.



Soon after the turn of the twentieth century, Greenville's population surged. Four new mills opened and the Great Migration of 1905 brought new workers and their families. A "beltline" trolley soon linked the mills with down town and with each other. Residential electricity and paved streets improved new "suburbs." Boyce Lawn (now the Pettigru Street Historic District), Hampton-Pinckney, Earle Street and the neighborhoods near City Park were popular with the new cotton men who came to work at mill offices. Salesmen could check into new hotels—the Ottaray and the Imperial.

Congregations of Lutherans and Jews formed, a public hospital opened, and a large new YMCA gave men and boys a place for recreation. Black people, though, did not share in the increased prosperity. Jim Crow legislation, including ordinances establishing segregated housing, accommodations, and transportation, led many to move north.

While the coming of the World War to Europe brought a brief economic downturn, by 1917 most local mills were working three shifts daily. The first Textile Exposition in 1915 was so great a success that Greenville began proclaiming itself the "Textile Center of the South." In the

summer of 1917, the first troops training Camp Sevier on 1900 acres north of the city, found a hearty welcome downtown. A new courthouse and a home for the Textile Exposition were completed in spite of the conflict, and with the addition of an 11th grade and accreditation, Central School became Greenville High School.

The city boomed in the Jazz Age. Commercial activity, long extended from Court Square to North Street, surged up to College Street with department stores and movie theatres. The Chamber of Commerce demolished Robert Mills' old Courthouse to build a headquarters of their own. Across Court Square, the century-old Mansion House was leveled and replaced by the Poinsett Hotel. John Woodside built the tallest building in the two Carolinas. A modest public library opened. With eight new mills outside the city limits, the city's "metropolitan" population increased to 50,000.

Although the Great Depression hit the rest of the nation in 1929, it began in the South about 1926. When the boll weevil decimated crops, farmers had less cash to purchase goods and the value of their land fell. Mills, losing money, "stretched out" work and fired older workers. The Bank of Commerce failed in 1926; three more, including Woodside National Bank, closed their doors by 1931. Even though Furman finally was accredited, became a recipient of the Duke Endowment, and was a football power, both it and the Greenville Women's College struggled to survive.

Conditions were so bad in the early 1930s that telephones were removed from city hall and salaries of police and firemen and school teachers, already reduced 20 percent, were paid five months late. Furman and the Women's College were forced to merge. The General Textile Strike of 1934 brought martial law to the city and National Guardsmen to the mill villages. While Greenville enthusiastically supported the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932 and 1936 (with 98 percent of the vote), and New Deal programs improved Cleveland Park, constructed a federal building, Sistine Stadium, and a new Greenville High School, it took increased orders because of threats of war in Europe before prosperity slowly returned.

Those threats became a reality in December 1941. The town strongly supported the building of the Greenville Army Air Base (later Donaldson Air Force Base) near Conestee and worked to support national goals, raising money, entertaining soldiers, and accepting wartime austerity and rationing.

After V-E and V-J Days, though, four years of saving and pent-up demand brought an orgy of spending and traffic. Main Street pulsated with cars; four national highways siphoned into it. Real estate firms quickly leased available downtown stores. Furman bulged—its student body nearly doubled with returning veterans. City limits expanded to include Bob Jones University on Wade Hampton Boulevard and the Augusta Road and North Main neighborhoods.

Within a decade, though, those successes brought problems. Suburban shopping centers drew shoppers and traffic from downtown. So did extending Church and Academy Streets from two-block long city streets to access roads to Highway 29 and new Interstate 185. Camperdown Mill's site was more valuable for development than production, and it and its mill village were razed. In 1958, Furman moved to 1100 acres on the Poinsett Highway, leaving behind their campus in the shabby West End. When women students joined them in 1961, their old campus began to be developed as a center for the arts and was renamed Heritage Green.

In the early 1960s, Greenville Tech opened and soon afterwards the Greenville-Spartanburg Jetport began providing enhanced air services. Local business leaders as well as city officials, though, were increasingly dismayed by Main Street vacancies. Beginning in 1966, the Total Development Campaign urged retailers to modernize downtown by “slip-covering” old buildings with sleek aluminum siding, demolishing the Ottaray Hotel and replacing it with a motel, and leveling the Woodside Building. Construction executive Charles Daniel built the 25-story Daniel Building at the top of Main Street and Roger Peace had a new Greenville News Building erected near the river.

Nothing seemed to work. The Bell Tower Shopping Center on the old university campus was not a success. The West End became increasingly forlorn. Dozens of Main Street shops had “For Lease: signs. It wasn’t until the early 1980s when a new street scape was completed and Mayor Max Heller, working with business leaders Buck Mickel and Tommy Wyche, was able to leverage federal dollars to build the Hyatt Regency and an adjacent parking garage that downtown began to turn around.