What would a city say if it could speak? O. Henry, 1908

Voices Of Greensboro: 1880s and 1890s [1]

by J. Stephen Catlett

Growth of a City

From the City of Flowers to the Gate City

The decade of the 1880s and 1890s was a watershed period in local history. In many respects Greensboro's identify was up for grabs. Was it to remain the "City of Flowers" of old, or become the "Gate City" of the New South?


Elm Street 1890s

As late as 1889 it was still being promoted as an attractive, welcoming, gracious, yet conservative, and somewhat cautious, community:

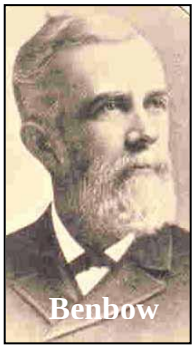
> *The captivated fancy of the visiting stranger has given to Greensboro the name of "City of Flowers," … with a wealth of foliage and a profusion of flowers … many elegant residences adorn the principal streets, and if the architecture is not always fashioned strictly after approved and classic models, it is ever beautiful and attractive.*
>
> *Greensboro is an eminently conservative community. … This generation deems it best, even for a new South, to "prove all things: hold fast that which is good;" and while it would be difficult to imagine them in the vortex of a feverish "boom," losing their heads over new methods and new ideas, it would be still more difficult to imagine them given over to indifference and apathy in the face of progress and substantial improvement.* [2]

---

[1] The author was Archivist at the Greensboro Historical Museum from 1986-2011. This paper was part of the preliminary research and writing used in the planning phase for the Museum's major core history exhibit, "Voices of a City: Greensboro, N.C." which opened in August 2010. After this version, community historian Linda Evans assembled the story, and additional stories, which became the interpretation for the exhibit presentation up through the early 2000s. See: http://greensborohistory.org/exhibits/voices-of-a-city This paper is limited in scope with only a small number of contemporary voices selected, and only a few of the basic themes explored in any depth. In other words, it is not a comprehensive picture of 1880s-1890s Greensboro. Rather, it is presented as a detailed sketch of some of the major themes of this period, with particular emphasis on actual voices from the period under review, as a potential model or approach for fleshing out in more detail using voices to tell a more interesting story of Greensboro's history.

[2] *Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway*, (1889), p.86.

Greensboro did grow in the 1880s, especially after mid-decade – its population increased by slightly over 1000 inhabitants – but the pace during the decade was leisurely. Although perhaps good for its flora and fauna, it did not bode well for advancing its business and industry. The conservative nature of its leaders certainly had an impact, but it is also true that the economic, political, and social dislocations caused by the Civil War and resulting Reconstruction era left Greensboro, like the South in general, swimming upstream against a strong economic current. The older, conservative town leaders, like Mayor Silas **Dodson**, preached economy and reduced taxes. In opposition were the younger, often newer citizens – like Mayors Jabez Mendenhall, Zebulon V. Taylor, and civic leader Dr. D. W. C. **Benbow** – who pushed the New South agenda of improvements, industry, and rapid growth.


Benbow


Dodson

Outsider David **Schenck,** arriving in Greensboro in the May 1882 as general counsel of the Richmond and Danville Railroad, commented, **"***how filthy this city is permitted to become*." Why was this, he asked? Because a *"set of old fogies pledged to oppose reforms and governed by a sort of commerce class who dictate their policy and keep a town which ought long since to have been a big city from its natural growth."* [3]

Local newspaper editors, while not attacking the "old fogies" directly, were solidly aboard the New South train, and had been for several years. Believing the tobacco industry had passed Greensboro by, the editors of the *New North State* – unable, of course, to foresee the looming textile industrial boom of the 1890s – lamented in sad economic state in April 1878:


Schenck

> *We have played the sluggard and let Winston, Durham, and Reidsville absorb all the tobacco interest. There is nothing left for us but iron, coal and wood. The spoke and handle factories, to which, in the future, can be added, foundries, furnaces, rolling mills, etc. will make us a people of some importance.* [4]

The *Greensboro Patriot* played the same tune, but a slightly different chord, five years later:

> *"Cities and towns that depend on swapping one thing for another have crystallized into fossils, and counties living on one crop carried only to the first stage are stagnant and lifeless — the land worn out and the population gone to more congenial climes. … Agriculture, manufactures, mining and commerce must unite to make a State prosperous."* [5]

"The town wants and must have FACTORIES."

Greensboro Patriot, March 23, 1883

---

[3] As quoted in Gayle Fripp, *Greensboro: A Chosen Center* (Windsor Publications, 1982) p.45.

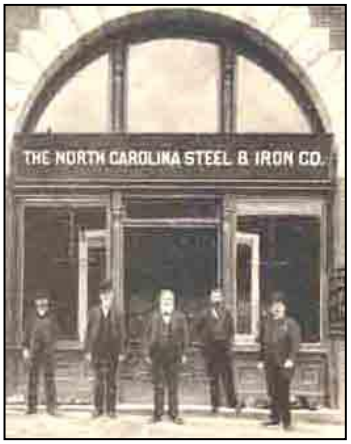
[4] The New North State (Newspaper) April 18, 1878. Quoted in, Jonathan F. Baylin," An historical study of residential development in Greensboro, 1808-1965." UNC, Master's Thesis, May 1968. p.47

[5] Greensboro Patriot (Newspaper), Jan. 19, 1883. In Kipp, p.159; also, Edward Ayers, The Promise of the New South, p.58-59

Thus "Old South" and "New South" squared off in Greensboro during the 1880s. Who won? In terms of growth, development, and economic life, the late 1880s and 1890s witnessed the transformation of Greensboro from a small town to an emerging New South city. Set against the national backdrop of the financial panic of 1893 and a countrywide depression following fast on its heels, Greensboro's "Gate City" decade is even more noteworthy.

Elm Street. Looking North. 1904

"Little Pittsburgh of the South" ?



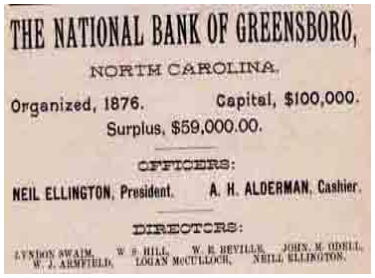
When the decade broke the great economic hope was the promise of the **North Carolina Steel and Iron Company,** which had been organized in 1887 by J. A. Odell, Julius A. Gray, and C. D. and Dr. D. W.C. Benbow. Their idea was to produce iron and steel from local ore. The goal? Making Greensboro the "little Pittsburgh of the South." They purchased some 2000 acres of land north of town, constructed a blast furnace, and then discovered that the local ore was unsuitable. [6] This was New South thinking and promotion – if not execution – at its best. Although the steel industry never materialized, it energized investors and citizens, and jump-started the real estate market. As David Schenck noted in March 1890:

> *It is interesting and curious to witness the excitement of buying and selling of real estate in Greensboro, in view of the immediate location here of the 'North Carolina Steel and Iron Company' which will have a working capital of $500,000. Two or three land improvement companies have formed and real estate has gone up from three hundred per cent to ten hundred per cent. Every man you meet on the street is asking about sales and purchases, and enterprises of every description are springing up.* [7]

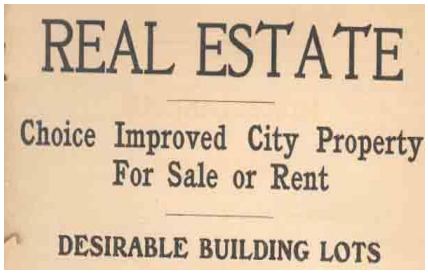
---

[6] Fripp, Chosen Center, p.49.
[7] David Schenck, March 17, 1890. Diary entry quoted in, Ayers, The Promise of the New South, p.61

Businesses – like the **National Bank of Greensboro** and the Southern Real Estate Co. – were ready both to promote and reap the benefits of this real estate fever. The potential of this steel industry, helped push development toward the sparsely inhabited northern part of town, as the *Patriot* noted in March:


THE NATIONAL BANK OF GREENSBORO,
NORTH CAROLINA.
Organized, 1876. Capital, $100,000.
Surplus, $59,000.00.
OFFICERS:
NEIL ELLINGTON, President. A. H. ALDERMAN, Cashier.
DIRECTORS:
LYNDON SWAIM, W. P. HILL, W. R. REVILLE, JOHN. M. ODELL,
W. J. ARMFIELD, LOGAN McCULLOCH, NEILL ELLINGTON.

The trend of the high prices for land is on the north side of Greensboro. For years, the town has been going south, but it seems now that the great improvements are to be made to the north. [8]


REAL ESTATE
Choice Improved City Property
For Sale or Rent
DESIRABLE BUILDING LOTS

The mention of south Greensboro points out that, although the 1880s did not boom like the 1890s, Greensboro had not been dead-in-the-water either. As the promoters of the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway indicated in 1889:

> *It is not extravagant to say that the growth of the suburb of South Greensboro has been phenomenal. Five years have transformed it from a straggling settlement into a town of itself, with comfortable and elegant abodes, artistic flower years and grounds, and beautiful streets.* [9]

Even outside visitors, with no promotional or vested interests in the city, sensed the energy permeating late-century Greensboro. A northern journalist touring southern cities passed through town in November, and described the city in detail for his *Boston American* readers:

> *Greensboro undoubtedly has natural and acquired points of advantage beyond the great majority of towns anywhere, north or south. This certainly is apparent to anyone who has investigated the growing towns of the south as I have. The place is admirably located, midway between the north and the south, for the manufacture of anything used in either section. … From my room in the* **Benbow House** *(a better hotel than I found anywhere in Virginia, with a single exception), I look out on a broad, excellently paved street, lined on either side with substantial brick business blocks, in which are located stores carrying large stocks of merchandise suited to a thriving community, the show windows of which present a neat and attractive appearance, the sidewalks filled with orderly, well dressed, polite and intelligent people. I make the assertion that not one business man in all Yankeeland could tell whether he was north or south of Mason and Dixon line if brought*


Benbow House

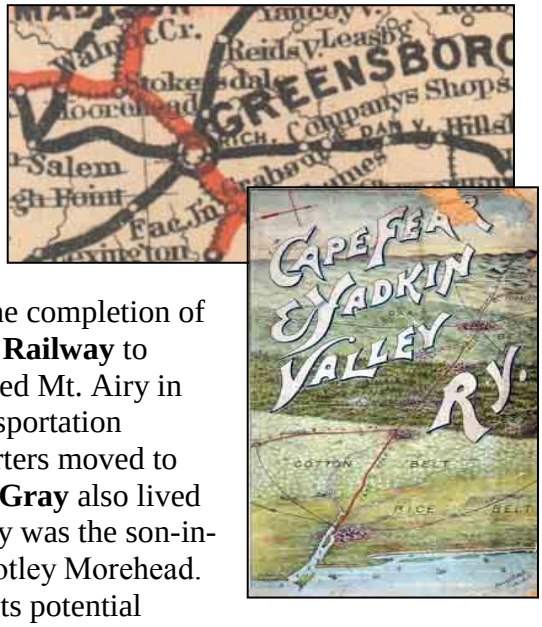
[8] Greensboro North State, March 6, 1890. Quoted in: Jonathan F. Baylin, An historical study of residential development in Greensboro, 1808-1965 p.50.
[9] Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway, 1889 (pamphlet), pp.76-77.

here blindfolded and allowed to gaze on the street below. Perchance, he should notice that the people here are more polite than those in the north. [10]

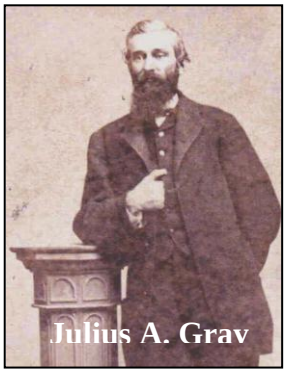
Foreshadowing the economic engine that would kick Greensboro into economic high gear after 1895, the reporter made note of the cotton and textile potential of the area.

> *Cotton mills are now in full operation in this state. … The reasons why cotton factories are more profitable here than in the north are apparent … white female help must always be abundant … building sites can be obtained free against the large prices paid in the manufacturing centers of the north … Taxation here is far below what it is in the northern cities … buildings can be constructed for less money … and it is not necessary, because of the climate to build so substantially, the climate also being an important figure in determining the cost of living, rendering lower wages here as effective as larger pay in the north. A home market for the finished products in the south, easily accessible by direct railroad communication, the raw material in close proximity, and reached by competing railroads, and the annual saving of at least 50 cents per bale on the buying of cotton, that amount now being paid by your northern mills to the Boston buyer, in addition to the same amount paid through him to the southern local buyer.*

A Transportation Hub



If there was one key to the economic transformation of Greensboro during the last fifteen years of the century it undoubtedly was the railway system, consisting of six lines radiating in all directions, with 60 trains arriving daily by the early 1890s. [11] Greensboro had been linked to the outside world via rail lines in 1856, with additional tracks constructed during the Civil War. However, it was the completion of the **Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway** to Greensboro in 1884 (it finally reached Mt. Airy in 1889) that helped complete the transportation puzzle.[12] Not only was its headquarters moved to Greensboro, its president **Julius A. Gray** also lived in town. Perhaps appropriately, Gray was the son-in-law of "railroad" Governor John Motley Morehead. Even more important in relation to its potential economic impact, this new rail line gave direct access to the port at Wilmington. It also created competition with the Richmond & Danville Railroad for freight and passenger rates, which was a first for the city and no insignificant development. [13] It has been estimated that close to 70% of the freight passing through North Carolina during the late latter part of the nineteenth century came through Greensboro and Charlotte. [14] Such developments lead the *Patriot* to declare in 1887:


Julius A. Gray

[10] "Northern Writer Foresaw Bright Outlook for City After Visit Here in 90's," Unidentified reporter, Boston American, Nov. 8, 1890. Quoted: *Greensboro Record*, Nov. 16, 1940 F-12 "(see: GHM Archives, Newsclips, 1968.209.1f-26)

[11] Fripp, Chosen Center, p.55.

[12] Samuel Kipp, *Urban Growth and Social Change: Greensboro 1880-1920*. (Princeton Univ., PhD. Dissertation)p.84.

[13] Kipp, p.95. Kipp's chapter 3, "Developments In Transportation, 1880-1920" (pp.70-117) offers an excellent analysis of the railroad, and other transportation developments in Greensboro during this peiod.

[14] Lefler and Newsome, *The History of a Southern State: North Carolina*. 3rd ed. Chapel Hill, 1973. p. 516

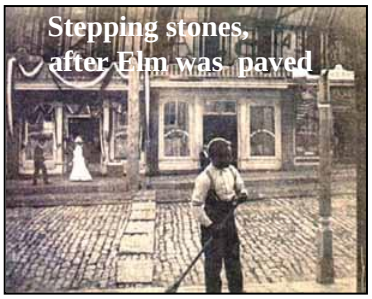
As a business center Greensboro is developing into one of the leading markets in North Carolina, and having such fine railroad facilities, the advantages as a distribution point are beyond question. There are six outlets by rail, and the trading territory tributary to Greensboro extends over one hundred miles in every direction. [15]

The crowning symbol of this crucial economic tool came two years later, perhaps spurred on by both the *Patriot's* praise and criticism of Greensboro's transportation assets:

Railroad men say more baggage is handled at Greensboro than at any point between Washington and Atlanta. The city also enjoys the distinction of having the poorest depot between those points. [16]

Their wish was fulfilled with the opening in June 1899 of the new **Southern Railroad Station**. [17] Greensboro had at last joined other major cities with a sophisticated gateway, which served as an inviting symbol of its vitality and growth. [18]

Although the railroad transportation system was crucial, just as important were improvements made to the streets and roads. Complaints about local streets, especially during periods of rain when dirt turned to mud, were voiced often. "*The mud is so deep that to cross some of the streets*," said the Patriot in 1891, *"is rendered dangerous to shortlegged men and women."* [19] Such conditions even led the new resident Mrs. J. E. Latham to tease her children when they first observed the **stepping stones** placed across the streets at strategic locations. "Those, my dear, are tombstones in memory of people who fell in the mud, were buried, and could never be gotten out again!" [20]


Stepping stones, after Elm was paved

There had been numerous attempts to improve the local roads and streets as early as 1870 but the need for funding, and thus increased taxes, had always defeated the efforts. By the late 1890s, however, the developing economic situation in Greensboro created the perfect conditions for major advancements. The *Patriot* reported to its readers in 1898 that:

The work on Summit Avenue was finally completed Friday afternoon, and it is probably the finest highway in North Carolina. What was, a short while ago, a stubble field lying in waste has been opened by a magnificent boulevard, with many handsome and commodious residences erected on either side. [21]

---

[15] *Greensboro Patriot*, Dec. 2, 1887. As quoted in Kipp, p.121.
[16] *Greensboro Patriot*, Sept. 29, 1887. As quoted in Kipp, p.96
[17] Fripp, Chosen Center, p.58
[18] Edward Ayers, The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction. p.75
[19] *Greensboro Patriot*, Dec. 9, 1891. Quoted in Kipp, p.138
[20] As quoted in the *Greensboro Sesquicentennial Program, 1808-1958*.
[21] *Greensboro Patriot*, Nov. 9, 1898. Quoted in Kipp, p.375

The next year in Greensboro witnessed the beginnings of North Carolina's "Good Roads" movement, with the founding of the Guilford County Good Roads Club by several Greensboro and county businessmen. [22]

Although one must always remain cautious in accepting uncritically all the civic pride and booster promotion written and printed during these years, there are numerous facts that reinforce the rather lofty contemporary rhetoric. Between 1880 and 1900 Greensboro did:

- Increase from 2,102 to 10,035, and to probably more than 16,000 including the mill villages
- Expand from one to four square miles
- Pass its first two bond referendums, for $100,000 in 1887 and $300,000 in 1899
- Increase from 11 manufacturers with total capitalization of $59,000 to 79 manufacturers with total capitalization of $1,711,629 [23]

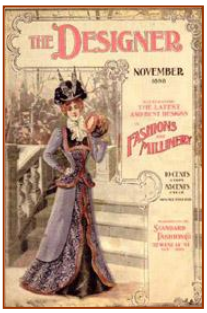
Even impartial observers like the northern reporter in 1890 sensed the growth and development. And the southerner writer B. J. Ramage's general survey of the transformation of small southern towns, led to his observation that:

> *In the smart modern town, with its banks, and shops, and mills, and stores, and numerous other accessories of a nineteenth-century industrial community, one finds it hard to recognize the sleepy medieval village of forty years ago.* [24]

Home and Community Life

A Mobile Population

The changes brought by this growth were not only economic. The easier connections to the wider world beyond Greensboro and Guilford County were a steel highway running in both directions. All aspects of community life were impacted by these changes. Easier, cheaper transportation links not only brought a wider range of manufactured goods from all over the country – and also gave local agricultural and manufactured goods a regional and national market – it also allowed the local population to move in all directions more easily, and experience life more fully.




Elm Street 1890s

Mobility brought faster accessibility to **fashions**, fads, and new ideas. From the **bicycling** enthusiasm of the 1890s (the Greensboro Bicycle Club was organized in 1896), to the national theatrical and musical touring shows which reached town more easily and frequently to play at the 900-seat Academy of Music, Benbow Hall or later the **Grand Opera House**, Greensboro was connected to the outside world in a variety of new ways.

---

[22] Kipp, p.108-109.
[23] Kipp, pp.203-204.
[24] B. J. Ramage, 1895. Quoted in, Edward Ayers, The Promise of the New South, p.19.

Grand Opera House

Laurinda Richardson Carlson moved to Greensboro with her parents in the 1890s, and remembered vividly the first time she experienced the newest beverage fad:

Laurinda Richardson

We loved to go to the Richardson-Farriss Drug Store to see the beautiful soda fountain … I remember one time especially when Dad said we could try a new drink called coca-cola which was being introduced through the drug stores. The soda fountain boy took a big glass jar full of dark liquid and poured a small measure of it into a glass, added crushed ice, and pulled a lever in the soda fountain to add carbonated water and handed it to us. I think I was the only one who did not like it then or now… [25]

The rail lines, which probably brought the "dark liquid" to Greensboro, also took residents on recreational rides both near and far. When the Guilford Battle Ground Company was founded in 1887, to commemorate the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, it developed a park**, museum**, artificial lake, and pavilion, which quickly became the most popular place to hold the July 4th patriotic celebrations. Although not easily accessible by roads, its popularity had a lot to do with the fact that the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway went right through the park. Mary Lewis Rucker had vivid memories of the festivities in the early years:

Museum at Battle Ground

The Fourth of July! Second only to Christmas in the Red Letter days of the year … Dressed in our Sunday best – stiffly starched petticoats and long black ribbed cotton stockings and our 'dressed-up hats,' … we would set out on foot to catch the train for the four-and-one-half-mile journey to the Guilford Battleground. …In the Pavilion, hung with red, white and blue bunting, prayers were said, orators orated and the 'Star-Spangled Banner" attempted by all present. … [26]

---

[25] Laurinda Richardson Carlson, Jan./Feb. 1978, "Lunsford Richardson II, '1854-1919' " p.4. GHM Archives, Vertical File.

[26] Mary Lewis Rucker Edmunds, *The Photography of John Walker Fry*, pp.14-15

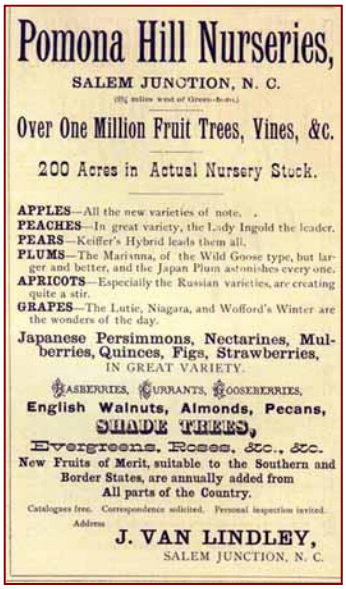
Longer trips were just as easy to arrange, although obviously more expensive and thus not available to the majority of Greensboro residents. Nevertheless, the same effort it took to get down to the station to catch a train to the Battleground could take you just as easily on an **"Excursion to Washington City"** or perhaps on the CFYV line to the port of Wrightsville Beach.

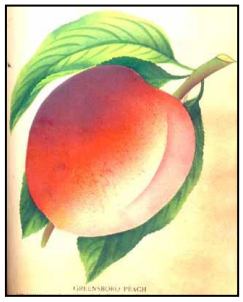
The World of Work

Connecting To Markets

Holiday or weekend excursions to the Battleground or the coast certainly added new dimensions to life in Greensboro, but the rail lines and improved transportation network came into existence to promote, hasten and solidify business and industrial growth and development.

The horticultural nursery business, which had developed in Guilford County as early as the 1850s when Joshua Lindley moved his nursery from Chatham to Guilford County, was a major regional business by the end of the century. When James Albright surveyed the business economy at the turn of the century he noted that the **Lindley Nursery Co**. was shipping flowers in a five-hundred-mile radius. [27] *"The trade of the company extends throughout the entire South and they also make shipments to the Northern sections."* [28] They employed about sixty men locally, and had seventy-five salesmen who called on farmers and merchants and other prospects, armed with colorful sales catalogs showing examples of the **"Greensboro Peach,"** or other fruit or plant stock. [29] More important to the regional economy is the fact that the Lindley Co. was the creator of the peach industry in the N.C., which developed after Lindley planted over 50,000 peach trees in Moore County in 1892. [30]


Pomona Hill Nurseries,
SALEM JUNCTION, N. C.
(3½ miles west of Greensboro.)
Over One Million Fruit Trees, Vines, &c.
200 Acres in Actual Nursery Stock.
APPLES—All the new varieties of note.
PEACHES—In great variety, the Lady Ingold the leader.
PEARS—Keiffer's Hybrid leads them all.
PLUMS—The Marianna, of the Wild Goose type, but larger and better, and the Japan Plum astonishes every one.
APRICOTS—Especially the Russian varieties, are creating quite a stir.
GRAPES—The Lutie, Niagara, and Wofford's Winter are the wonders of the day.
Japanese Persimmons, Nectarines, Mulberries, Quinces, Figs, Strawberries,
IN GREAT VARIETY.
RASBERRIES, CURRANTS, GOOSEBERRIES,
English Walnuts, Almonds, Pecans,
SHADE TREES,
Evergreens, Roses, &c., &c.
New Fruits of Merit, suitable to the Southern and Border States, are annually added from All parts of the Country.
Catalogues free. Correspondence solicited. Personal inspection invited.
Address
J. VAN LINDLEY,
SALEM JUNCTION, N. C.

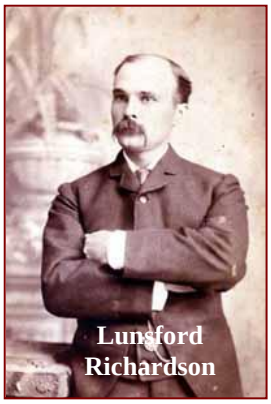


The 1890s saw a noticeable improvement in the business and industrial climate in Greensboro, even though the nation at large was suffering through a major depression. There were notable business beginnings during these years, like the opening of Schiffman jewelry, Belk's Dept. Store, and Fordham's drugstore.

---

[27] James W. Albright, *Greensboro 1808-1904*, p.91.
[28] Albright, *Greensboro*, p.92.
[29] The illustration of the "Greensboro Peach" is in the salesman's notebook, Mss.Coll.#38 5:21, GHM Archives. (This is actually in the Guilf. Nursery Collection (Anthony Family) but is being used here for illustration purposes.)
[30] Arnett, p.204

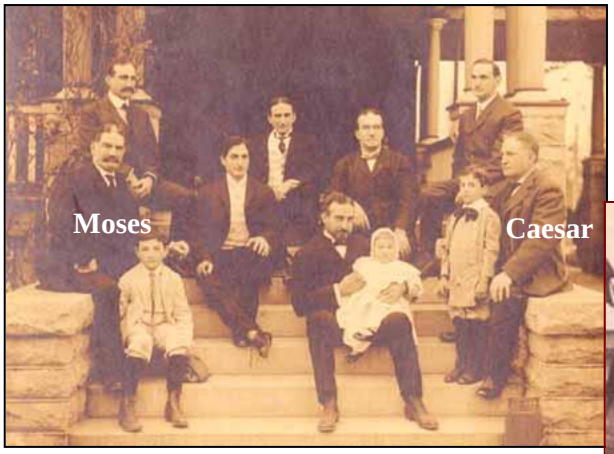
More significant for the long-term economic prosperity of the city were the beginnings of major manufacturing companies. **Lunsford Richardson** came to town in the 1890s to buy, with his partner John Fariss, the old Porter Drugstore. Richardson-Fariss was soon the largest retail drugstore in town. [31] More importantly, however, was Richardson's introduction in 1894 of the Vick's Magic Croup Salve. It's prospects looked promising, which led Richardson to abandon the drugstore in 1898 and establish the L. Richardson Drug Co., to manufacture and wholesale his products. This eventually led to the Vicks VapoRub empire with its headquarters in Greensboro.

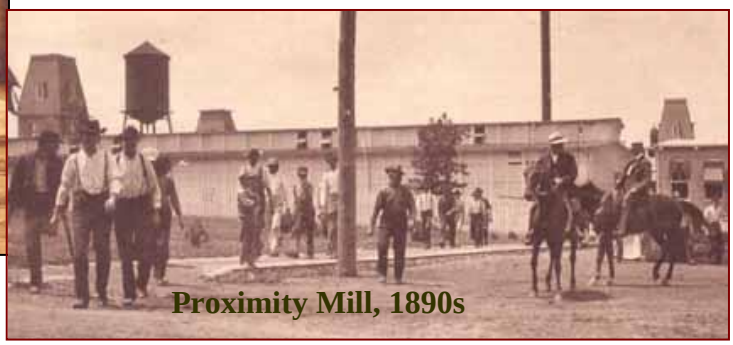

Lunsford Richardson

The Cones Come To Town

"Grab hold of their coat tails, boys, and don't let them get away."

J. A. Odell [32]


Moses Caesar


Proximity Mill, 1890s

By far the most crucial development during the 1890s was the building and growth of the textile mill industry. Although Greensboro had been the site of North Carolina's first textile factory – Henry Humphrey's 1828 Mount Hecla Steam Cotton Mills – it had long since shuttered its doors.

The real beginning of textiles in Greensboro arrived in 1892, when brothers **Moses** and **Ceasar Cone** came to town and set up the Southern Finishing & Warehouse Company. It seems fitting that they occupied property adjacent to the then-vacant 2000-acre North Carolina Steel and Company site, which had just been Greensboro's most recent, best hope for dynamic industrial expansion. Upon their arrival in Greensboro, J. A. Odell is reported to have stated, It was excellent advice. The Cones soon purchased most of the 2000 acre N. C. Steel and Iron property. They built the 200-loom **Proximity Mill** in 1894, convinced Emanuel and Herman Sternberger to move to Greensboro and build the 376-loom Revolution Mill, and finally opened the 2500-loom, 2500 worker White Oak Mills in 1904. [33] They had realized quickly the advantage of building textile plants near the cotton fields, which is the reason they chose "Proximity" as their first mill's name. But even more

[31] Fripp, *Chosen Center*, p.58.
[32] Ethel Arnett, *Greensboro N.C.* (UNC Press, 1955) p.172
[33] Fripp, *Chosen Center*, pp.57, 78

important for their eventual success were the burgeoning rail connections in Greensboro. In fact the Cape Fear and Yadkin Valley Railway had already constructed a one-mile "Furnace Branch" to the old N. C. Steel and Iron Co., which soon made its way directly to the Proximity plant. [34]

There were other important manufacturing companies in existence and expanding during these years, including the Sergeant Manufacturing Co., Glascock Stove & Manufacturing Co., and Wysong & Miles. In comparison to the textile mills, however, their output and the number of workers they employed was relatively small. Sergeant and Glascock, for example, employed only 28 workers between them.[35]

African-American Labor

The overall population of African-Americans in Greensboro and Guilford County remained stable from 1880 to 1900, comprising about 28% of the total population (from 6,700 in 1880 to 11,105 by 1900). Based on data from the city directory, there were some 388 blacks employed in the city during the mid-1880s. About 8% of them worked in white-collar jobs (professionals, shop owners), 13% were skilled workers (primarily brick and stonemasons), and 79% were semi-skilled or unskilled laborers. [36] This did not change much with the textile boom in the 1890s, since the mills were segregated, with only a very few blacks employed in the more menial **loading** and unloading **areas**. In general the black community had no large merchants, no manufacturers, no lawyers or doctors, no major government officials, no financiers, and no superintendents or managers. [37] The majority of African-Americans worked in the service trades, as porters, carters, draymen, cooks, and butlers cleaning ladies. The work was difficult, often irregular, and the pay was low, often less than $1 a day. [38]


White Oak Mill, early 1900s

The **Reverend John Chavis**, Sr. had vivid memories of just this type of work, which his father, Henry Chavis, performed in and around Greensboro during these years.

> *(My Father) walked for miles and miles and ditched. Sometimes he could make seventy-five or eighty cents a day and maybe a dollar. In the wintertime I used to have to carry his dinner to him, and he'd be sitting down there in that ditch, his feet down there in that cold water, that mud. He'd go in there in the morning and hardly ever come out of there till he'd*

[34] Kipp, *Urban Growth*, p. 86, note 32.
[35] Kipp, *Urban Growth* p.160. This comes from the 1884 city directory.
[36] Kipp, *Urban Growth*, pp.220-221. Chapter VI, "Urbanization and Community Social Structure," pp.211-256, is an excellent introduction to this topic.
[37] Kipp, *Urban Growth* , p.231
[38] Kipp, *Urban Growth* , p.232

get ready to come home. I'd carry his dinner out and he'd eat, come out of there and wash his feet off, dry them off, put on dry socks and dry shoes. That was his job for years and years. [39]

Local Factory Labor

Where did the workers come from during the 1890s industrial expansion? This was hardly an issue when only small manufacturers like Sergeant or Glascock, or the numerous spoke and handle woodworking factories, formed the core of the town's industry. It loomed large, however, with the coming of textile mills. Most of the **factory workers** were "the sons and daughters of tenant farmers or former tenant farmers and sharecroppers" from nearby counties, who came out of a relatively bleak agricultural economic landscape. They arrived in Greensboro with few work or urban living skills, but in most cases happy to find jobs. [40]


White Oak Mill, early 1900s

But the supply of labor created significant challenges in Greensboro and elsewhere. Workers were often tardy, absent, or simply quite altogether. As was noted, workers came with limited skills for factory work, with no understanding of the demands of working in a mill and no real idea of the demands of urban life. They had left a rural, slow-paced, independent lifestyle governed by the rising and setting sun, and moved to a life regimented by factory whistle and time-clock. To deal with the constant labor turnover the Cones used the "spare hand" labor system; they called more workers to report each morning than there were available jobs.[41] This helped fill their labor needs, but it also meant that workers did not always get a full weeks work. The frustrations of life and work were at times extreme.

An unidentified worker captured well the dilemma that the move from the farm to the factory created.

> *They's more money at the mill, but a better livin' on the farm. Unless a man's mighty sorry he can raise good somethin' t'eat on the land, while he has more spendin' money in the mill – and he spends it too. All he does at either one is jus' about break even.* [42]

---

[39] *From Brush Arbor to Bricks and Mortar: An Oral History of the Mount Zion Community of Greensboro*, N.C., p.27
[40] Kipp, *Urban Growth* p.171, 188
[41] Kipp, *Urban Growth* p.192
[42] Eward Ayers, The Promise of the New South, p. 114 (note 34).

Women & Children In The Mills

"Wanted – Fifteen young women are wanted at once to operate sewing machines in the Hunter Manufacturing and Commission Company's overall factory, on Buchanan street. Those with experience in handklin machines are preferred."

Greensboro Patriot, Oct. 4, 1899

By 1900 about 50-60% of Greensboro's industrial labor force worked in the cotton mills. The majority of the workers were women and children: 42% were men, 34% were women, and 24% were children. [43] They normally worked around 65 hours, six days a week. In 1898 the Proximity Mills worked a 10-hour day shift, and a 12-hour night shift.


White Oak Mill, early 1900s

Men earned $25 a month ($590 in 2014 dollars); women around $14 a month ($331 in 2014 dollars); and children about $12 a month ($284). [44] These local wages were actually above the average southern mill rate, which during these years was about $18 for men, $13 for women, and $8.60 for children.[45] In Greensboro, as in all southern mills, the owners employed more women and children than men, which was one strategy they used to keep labor costs down. Such labor savings helped make the mills very profitable. Proximity Mill reported 25% in 1898: 6% was paid out as investor dividends, while the remaining 19% was reinvested for plant expansion and improvement. [46]

Although there was the security of steady work for most mill hands, the work was not easy. The noise, air quality, and long hours created conditions not always easy to bear. The Cone plants were new, and generally better maintained both inside and out. [47] Nevertheless, the very nature of the

---

[43] Kipp, *Urban Growth* p.204; Lefler & Newsome, p.509

[44] Kipp, *Urban Growth* p.193, Quoted in the *Greensboro Patriot*, Apil 6, 1898. The 2014 conversion rates are from the of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm. The earliest date for comparison is 1913, so the values listed here are most likely on the low side.

[45] Lefler & Newsome, p.509.

[46] Kipp, *Urban Growth* p.195

[47] Lewis Hines, the noted photographer who documented the very harsh conditions in the southern mills prior to 1910, took at least one photo of the Cone mill, in which he stated that, at least the outside appearance, was much better than any mill he had seen before, as there was landscaping, etc.

factory created similar work experiences in all mills. As one unidentified southern female textile worker wrote:

> *When I desired a drink of water, I had to dip my cup into a pail of water … Often I saw lint from cotton in the room floating on top of the lukewarm water. All of the men chewed tobacco, and most of*
> *the women used snuff. Little imagination is needed to judge the condition of the water I had to drink, for working in that close, hot spinning room made me thirsty. … Nowhere was there any running water. Even in the houses provided by the company there was no running water.* [48]

The challenge for women was not only the conditions in the mill, but the fact that they usually had a busy, stressful life at home.

> *The majority of them work in the mill besides having large families to care for. They arise about 5:00 to take the cow out to the pasture, to do some weeding in the garden, and to have hot cakes ready for their husbands' breakfasts when they arise. Then they prepare their children for school, and finally start their work in the mills at 6:30 where they work for eleven hours. Upon their return to their homes, they have housework to do. They have no conveniences. Instead of a sink, they have a board stretched across one corner of a room. When the washing of the dishes is done, the refuse is thrown out of the back door.* [49]


A southern mill, by Lewis Hine

The long hours, and often grueling working conditions were stated clearly in a letter Thomas Moses of Gibsonville wrote to the state Commissioner of Labor in 1894.

> *I would suggest that you urge upon the next Legislature to pass a ten-hour law. It would be the best thing for the laboring class that has ever been done. You don't know how it is killing up the women and children. It is ruining their health and breaking down their constitutions working over ten hours a day. We run sixty-nine hours a week, which you knows is too hard for women to be on their feet eleven and one-half hours a day…* [50]

---

[48] "Southern Mills Hand," in Janet Zandy, Calling Home: *Working-Class Women's Writings An Anthology*. Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990. p.46-47.

[49] "Southern Mill Hands," in Janet Zandy, p.46-47.

[50] N.C. Dept. of Labor & Printing, 8th Annual Report, 1894. p.77 (UNCG, Microfiche, HC 107.N8 A2)

White Oak Mills, 1890s

Organized and Child Labor

he dissatisfactions against textile mill life, that developed later in some of the children and grandchildren of the first-generation workers – " the issues of low wages, child labor, night work, log hours, segregation from the rest of the population, exploitation by the 'company store'…" – were not as pronounced in the beginning. [51] These first generation textile workers tended not to have a well developed a sense of class-consciousness. Although they undoubtedly found mill life difficult at times, their fresh memories of the harsh post-Civil War farm life tended to soften their view of mill village life. Also, there were no labor unions in the south. This is one major reason that the Cones and other manufacturers located here. Whenever labor unrest did appear the managers and owners were quick to combat it. For example, as early as 1900 workers at Proximity attempted to unionize, but they were locked out, with the confrontation ending in a few days with the defeat of the union and rejection of the worker's demands.[52] There were other efforts, like Greensboro's hosting of a labor convention that included a major address, and a large **labor day parade**, but in general labor unrest and organization did not amount to much during these years. [53]

One issue that did generate controversy was the employment of children in mills and elsewhere. In some mills in the south, although apparently not in Greensboro, children under the age of 10 were found at work. S. W. H. Smith of Guilford College, expressed his opinion on this subject in a letter he wrote to the N.C. Labor Commissioner in 1896.

---

[51] Lefler and Newsome, p.514

[52] Kipp, *Urban Growth*, p.194, note. #47, from *Greensboro Patriot*, November 1900

[53] See, W. E. Faison, "The Dignity, Power and Responsibility of Organized Labor; Labor Day Address, Greensboro, N.C., Sept. 4, 1905. Documenting the American South. http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/faison/faison.html

I believe children under fourteen years of age should not be allowed to work in factories or shops over eight hours a day; on farms, in open air, ten hours, and should be compelled to attend schools four months each year from eight to sixteen years of age. [54]

Cone mill village

Mill owner Caesar Cone came to a change of position, or heart, over this matter between 1898 and 1901. In a lengthy letter to the state Commissioner in 1898, Cone advocated a "let alone" policy by the State, in regards to "hours, ages, or anything else."

We think your Bureau can be made useful to the mills now in operation, and can also aid the rapid development of the cotton industry of the State by advocating a "let alone" policy by the State Legislature. While there may be some evils and wrongs in a few isolated places, we believe the cotton factory employees are most all well satisfied and about the best paid people in the State and they are not anxious to have the Legislature take up the question of hours, ages, or anything else; just let the mills and their employees work together as harmonious as in the past and present. Don't pass any laws concerning either, and we will really come to the front as a cotton factory section. [55]

Cone mill village

Three years later he wrote a letter stating that he was *"not in favor of working children under fourteen years and encourage them to go to school while young."* [56] It is not possible to know for certain why he changed his opinion. The problems of attracting and keeping a stable labor force, and the necessity of keeping them satisfied so they would stay and work more productively, was probably one motivation. In fact, around this time the Cones developed one of the most progressive welfare or social work programs for any textile mill, north or south. They hired Pearl Wyche, a 1903 graduate of State Normal College, to set up a comprehensive program focusing on cooking, sewing, gardening, social activities, and schooling. As she noted, Caesar Cone told her early on *"if in a year he could see 'a very little improvement' he would be satisfied."* [57] He followed through on his commitment, and Ms. Wyche stayed in the position for the next 48 years.

---

[54] N.C. Dept. of Labor & Printing, 10th Annual Report, 1896, p. 127 (UNCG, Microfiche, HC 107.N8 A2)
[55] N.C. Dept. of Labor & Printing, 12th Annual Report, 1898, p. 398 (UNCG, Microfiche, HC 107.N8 A2)
[56] Quoted in Gayle Fripp, *Greensboro* (Arcadia, 1997), p.45
[57] Harriet L. Herring, Welfare Work in the Mill Villages, Chapel Hill, 1929. pp.114-116.

For whatever reasons, by 1915 Caesar Cone had come to embrace a more civilized working, social and cultural life for his employees. As he told a New York Herald reporter:

> *From the first we worked on the principle that if the manufacturer manifests the same interest in the welfare of his operatives that he does in his high priced machinery, he will be able to turn out a pretty high standard of the finished product.* [58]

Educating a Community

Educating Children

The building of mill village schools like **White Oak** was a small part of a dramatic increase in educational institutions during 1890s Greensboro. Although the emphasis focused on middle and upper class education, the idea of education for the laboring classes was not lost on the collective consciousness of the community. In fact J. W. Causey, a local carpenter, wrote to the Labor Commissioner in 1895 with the observation:


White Oak School

> *I think that the class of laboring people with whom I am in contact need more or at least better educational facilities, and if necessary, a law requiring the children to go to them. Night trade schools should be encouraged by all means. If Southern people would hold their own they must learn to first fit themselves for the great future before us, or the Yankees will again conquer us on our own soil.* [59]

Educating Young Adults

What put Greensboro on the education map during the 1890s was the founding here of two state supported colleges. After much political lobbying, and significant financial commitments by local leaders and the city, Greensboro was selected in 1891 as the site of both a woman's and an African-American college. The **"Normal and Industrial School** for White Girls**"** (soon to become the State Normal and Industrial College) opened on October 5,

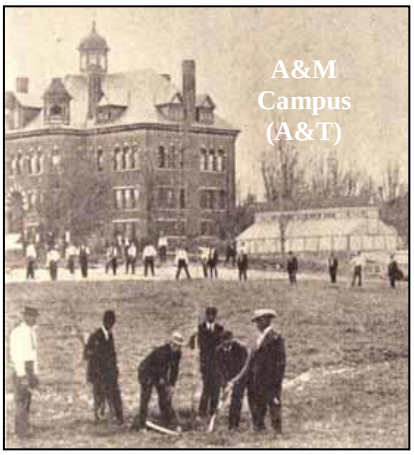

Spring Garden St. at College Ave., 1895

[58] Gayle Fripp, *Greensboro* (Arcadia, 1997), p.47

[59] N.C. Dept. of Labor & Printing, 9th Annual Report, 1895 p.287 (UNCG, Microfiche, HC 107.N8 A2)

1892, with 176 students. The next year the ***"Agricultural and Mechanical College*** for the Colored Race" (to become A & T State University) opened with Dr. John O. Crosby as president. The second president, **James B. Dudley**, who came in 1896 and served until 1925, had the greatest impact on its early growth and development.[60]


Dudley


A&M Campus (A&T)

Both schools were to have a significant impact not only on the history of the community, but also on education in North Carolina. As Charles Duncan McIver, the college's first president, observed: *"If you educate a man, you educate one person; if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family."* [61] Annie G. Randall, one of McIver's first teachers, was almost as succinct, adding a link between the education of women and progress in the state:

> *"Without educated women there can be no trained teachers. Without trained teachers there can be no effective schools. Without these schools, there can be no progress in North Carolina."* [62]

These statements were concise arguments against the then-prevailing prejudice, which held that educating women was a waste of time and money. One local educator, **Mary Mendenhall Hobbs,** had struggled against that attitude and successfully conquered it at Guilford College.

> *"In various ways I have tried to combat that strange hallucination which some fathers still have … that it is not as important for women to be educated as it is for men. Another phase of the question troubled me greatly. The opportunities for boys and girls to make money enough to send themselves to school were preponderantly on the boys' side."* [63]

As for public schools, since the 1870s Greensboro had boasted the first graded schools in the state, for both white and African-American students. In fact, the new, enlarged **Lindsay Street School** was constructed in 1886, and a new Warnersville public school for blacks was opened in 1892. The social commitment to education in Greensboro was real, but just as important was the public's willingness to accept the additional taxes it required.

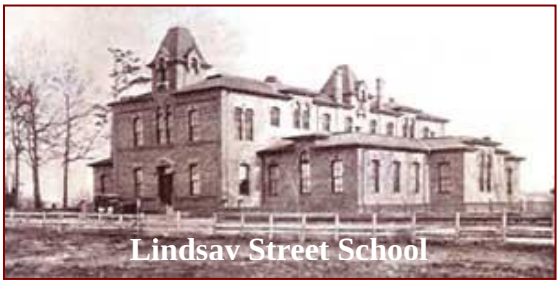
---

[60] Fripp, *Chosen Center*, pp.63-65

[61] As quoted in Arnett, *Greensboro, N.C.*, p.108

[62] Annie G. Randall, "Training of Teachers in N.C.," *State Normal Magazine*, V (Dec., 1901), p.59. As cited in: Margaret S. Smith, North Carolina Women: Making History, p.179 Original: Pamela Dean, "Learning to be new women: Campus culture at the North Carolina Normal and Industrial College" N.C.Historical Review. 68 (July 1991), p.286.

[63] Paula S. Jordan, *Women of Guilford County, North Carolina: A Study of Women's Contributions 1740-1979*. p.73


Lindsay Street School

Such was not the case in the county, as is vividly described by the reminiscences of teacher T. E. Whitaker.

> *The schoolhouse in which I taught in 1885 and 1886 was a one-room log cabin in sad repair. Much of the chinking was out and mischievous hands, in the years that had come and gone, had plucked out and thrown bits of daubing … until little of it remained. There were no desks and the boys and girls sat on backless benches made of slabs with pegs for legs. …* [64]

The Public Arena

Taxing For Progress

If people vote with their pocketbooks, the successful bond referendums passed in 1887 and 1899 are key pieces of evidence as to the Greensboro's move from the "City of Flowers" to the New South "Gate City." It was a vote of confidence for the future.

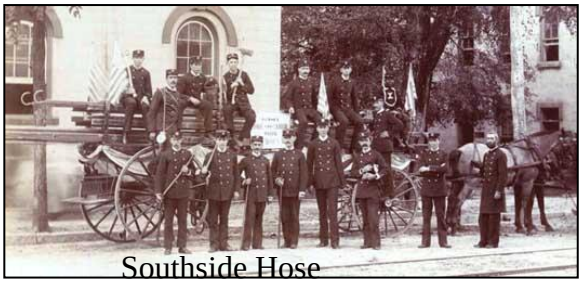
The initial bond had purchased a new water system and **tower**, new gas mains and electricity for the city. The $300,000 in 1899 ($6.5 million in 2002 dollars) brought more substantial improvements:

- $ 100,000 waterworks
- $ 75,000 street improvements
- $ 65,000 sewage system
- $ 35,000 build firehouse/city hall/market
- $ 25,000 expand electric power/light/gas plant [65]

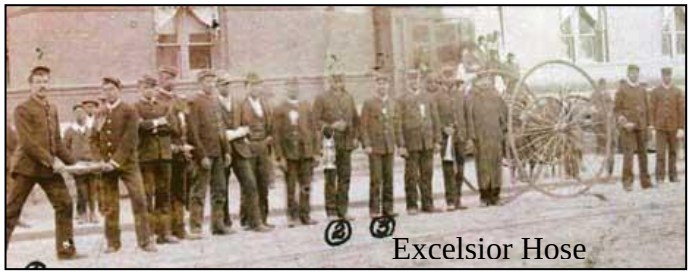
The police department was reorganized in 1890, with a paid chief and four patrolmen, working 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week. The fire department remained all-volunteer throughout this period, with white companies like **Southside Hose**, and the African-American **Excelsior Hose Company,** which was organized in 1892. [66]


Greensboro Fire Department,
ORGANIZED 1847.
Eleventh Annual Tournament
Greensboro, N. C., August 1st, 2d, 3d and 4th, 1899.
GREENSBORO, N. C., May, 3d, 1899.

[64] John Batchelor, *The Guilford County Schools: A History* p.27
[65] Fripp (1997), *Greensboro* (Arcadia), p.35
[66] Fripp, *Chosen Center*, p.57.

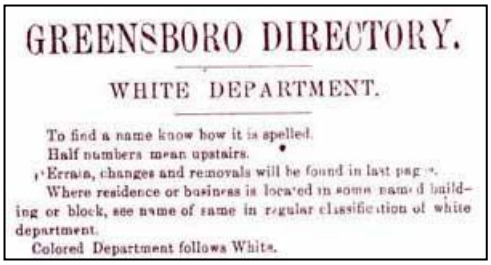


Southside Hose



Excelsior Hose

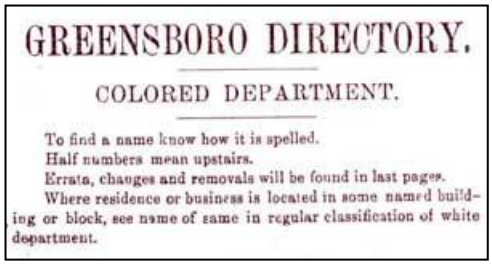
One City, Two Populations



GREENSBORO DIRECTORY.

WHITE DEPARTMENT.

To find a name know how it is spelled.
Half numbers mean upstairs.
Errata, changes and removals will be found in last pages.
Where residence or business is located in some named building or block, see name of same in regular classification of white department.
Colored Department follows White.



GREENSBORO DIRECTORY.

COLORED DEPARTMENT.

To find a name know how it is spelled.
Half numbers mean upstairs.
Errata, changes and removals will be found in last pages.
Where residence or business is located in some named building or block, see name of same in regular classification of white department.

Like the entire south, Greensboro was a segregated community during the 1880s and 1890s, from its schools to its fire companies, to its great industrial cotton mills. The political gains made by blacks during Reconstruction were under attack throughout North Carolina by the end of the century. It had bubbled under the surface for years. Forward-looking leaders like David Schenck might not express themselves in public on these issues, but they often captured the tenor of the times in their writings or diaries, as Schenck did in January 1890.

> *The breach between the races widens as the young free negroes grow up and intrude themselves on white society and nothing prevents the white people of the South from annihilating the negro race but the military power of the United States Government. (The hostility) is repressed and silent, showing itself only by violent Lynchings, mobs, and crusades that exterminate all opposition. I pity the Negro but the struggle is for the survival of the fittest race.* [67]

Towards the end of the decade such sentiments were moving from diary entries to public print. The *Greensboro Record* informed its readers in 1897 – perhaps in an attempt to promote the city to outside interests – that:

> *"Guilford County is a white county. There are very few negroes. Greensboro is not cursed with negro loafers. This is a blessing."* [68]

The rhetoric became more open and vocal and after the Democratic Party defeated the Republican and Populist "Fusion" coalition in the election of 1900. This watershed political event

[67] Diary of David Schenck, Jan. 20, 1890. Quoted in: Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, p.428.
[68] Quoted in: John Batchelor, *The Guilford County Schools: A History*, p.42

disenfranchised African-Americans and helped usher in the "Jim Crown" era in Greensboro and throughout the south. Thus the editors of the 1903 promotional brochure, "Progressive Greensboro" could write quite openly:

> *"The negro population of the city is much less than in most Southern cities, and those that are here are generally among the best representatives of their race and not of that class that disregard all laws of health. There has never been any racial trouble or disturbances in Greensboro."* [69]

Although Greensboro was certainly making progress in terms of the growth and expansion of its business and economic base by century's end, its sense as a truly "progressive" city had yet to be attained.

Taking Up Arms

Fighting For Country And Respect


Abbott

The major military event during the 1890s was the Spanish-American war, which saw separate white and African-American companies sign up locally, eager to be sent to the front. Some of the white enlistees, like **Charles Abbott**, did serve in combat, but the two African-American companies from Greensboro – one commanded by **Dr. J. Elmer Dellinger** and the other by **Capt. David J. Gilmer** – became part of the Third N.C. Regiment, which never left the country. The treatment these men endured from the public when they returned home was shocking in the racial confrontations they endured.

Remarkably, Capt. Gilmer was promoted into the U.S. Forth-Ninth Infantry in 1899, and was sent to the island of Linao in the Philippines, where he served as base commandant. In an eloquent address prior to leaving Linao in 1901, he told his audience that he felt confident American democracy would ultimately be able to purge itself of its prejudice against the "darker races." [70] Gilmer predicted that a sense of justice and humanity would prevail in the American empire. He ended with a clear, unambiguous message:

> *Teach your children to judge men according to the deeds of the individual and not by the color of his skin.*

Gilmer's eloquent words were certainly more a testament to hope, than to the reality of the world as it existed in 1900 Greensboro, or the United States.

---

[69] *Progressive Greensboro*, 1903. p.6

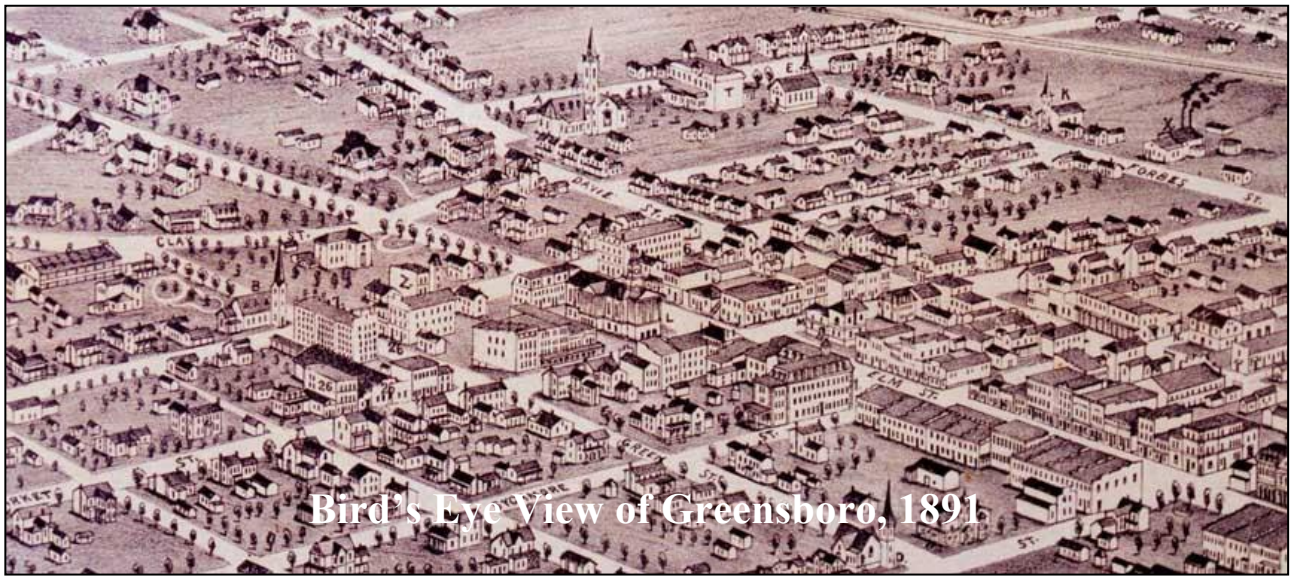
[70] Williard B. Gatewood, Jr., "North Carolina's Negro Regiment in the Spanish-American War," *N.C. Historical Review*, Oct. 1971 (Vol. 48, No.4), pp.386-387.

Greensboro as a New South City

The New South advocates in Greensboro felt, like their counterparts elsewhere, that industry, good schools, and good roads formed the trinity of progress. Although they extended a *"cordial welcome … to Yankee brains and capital,"* they never really advocated imitating all aspects of northern society. [71] They felt that adopting the north's technology and copying its economic success would basically be all that was required. As historian Samuel Kipp noted in his detailed study of life from 1870-1920:

> *In towns like Greensboro and places like Guilford County, urbanization and industrialization were accompanied by substantial alterations in the pattern and scale of business, in the character of the city's and county's economy, in the relations between city and countryside, in the urban social structure, in peoples' life styles and attitudes, in political leadership, and in the direction and scope of public policy.* [72]

By 1900 Greensboro had certainly made the transition from a city of attractive and fragrant flowers, to one boasting and boosting its industry, excellent roads, and first-class schools. If the New South had arrived, it is also true that remnants of the old south still lay beneath the surface.



Bird's Eye View of Greensboro, 1891

[71] Kipp, *Urban Growth*, p.163; and see *Greensboro Patriot*, Sept. 7, 1881
[72] Kipp, *Urban Growth*, p. 68.