

Survey and Research Report of
Historic Downtown
for



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General Physical Description

The Downtown Smithfield Historic District is an irregularly-shaped two-and-one-half block area, the principal focus of which is the intersection of South Third and Market Streets in Smithfield, the county seat of Johnston County. The principal, intact block of mostly one-and two-story buildings dating from about the 1890s through 1930s lies on the southeast side of the 100 block of South Third Street, southwest of its intersection with Market Street. A small group of buildings on the southwest side of South Third Street, adjacent to its intersection with market, is also included. Extending northwest from the intersection, the southwest side of the 200 block of Market Street is a nearly intact block face of brick commercial buildings. Southeast of the intersection lies the 300 block of Market, which terminates at a parking lot at the intersection of Market and Fourth Streets. The First Citizens Bank building, at 241 Market Street, anchors the northwest corner of the district, while the Municipal Building at the corner of South Fourth and Johnston streets defines the southeast corner. Commercial area of primarily non-contributing commercial fabric are adjacent to the district in roughly all directions. To the southwest lie governmental buildings associated with the Johnston County Courthouse, and a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century residential area borders the southeast and southwest district boundaries.

Distinctive in this district of primarily one-and-two-story modest buildings are the three-story Austin Building at 127-131 South Third Street, the Hood Brothers Building at 101 South Third Street (individually listed in the National Register), and the First Citizens Bank at 241 Market Street. The latter two are also notable for their full-scale decorative Neoclassical finishes. The Howell Theater, 141 South Third Street, is the finest example of Art Deco architecture to survive in Smithfield.

Within the district are 24 contributing properties. All of the buildings are of brick masonry construction and date from around the 1890s through 1943. The majority of the properties are executed in traditional and widely popular commercial vernacular styles of the early-twentieth century which are found in small town commercial districts all over eastern North Carolina. These building styles are distinguished primarily by the simple masonry details, such as corbelled cornices, behind and recessed panels, flat stone windowsills and lintels, and quoins. Nine of the 24 buildings have painted masonry. As is typical of early-twentieth century commercial districts, many of the buildings have experienced storefront alterations. However, they maintain an overall remarkable degree of integrity of design, setting, scale and materials, especially above their shopfronts.

Inventory List

SM = Sanborn maps (1885, 1891, 1896, 1901, 1908, 1915, 1924)

SHBE = Smithfield Herald Bicentennial Edition

INV = An Inventory of Historic Architecture, Smithfield, NC

S&P = Survey and Planning Branch files

South Third Street, East Side

Hood-Spiers Building 101 S. Third Street ca. 1890

The nicely detailed two-story, three-bay brick building stands on a prominent corner at the intersection of Market and South Third Street. A pressed tin cornice is surmounted by a corbelled parapet with shallow pilasters. Below the cornice are brick corbelling and three small recessed panels which are centered above the one-over-one double-hung sash in decorative surrounds. Corner quoins complete the ornamentation of the front façade. The recessed entry is flanked by display windows set on a tile spandrel. A 1906 documentary photograph shows a small cornice located above the storefront. The Market Street elevation features a parapet stepped toward the rear and an entry on the street level near the rear of the building. This entry shows in the 1906 photograph, as do the six second-level windows, which are now bricked in. The interior retains a pressed tin ceiling.



Beau Robin Hood, a local druggist, reportedly built this as a one-story brick building in the 1880s. It had been enlarged to two stories by 1906 by J. D. Spiers for his dry goods and furniture business. J. D. Gregory operated a dime store here beginning in the mid-to-late-1930s and is likely responsible for the storefront remodeling. (SM, INV, S&P)

Commercial Building 103 S. Third Street ca. 1900

This is a small one-story, stretcher-bond-brick building with two recessed panels and a shallow stepped parapet. The double-door recessed entry is flanked by display windows which have a tile spandrel beneath the glass. The building was operated early as a dry goods establishment, later as a grocery store and, by 1913, as Smithfield Hardware. It is currently used as a jewelry store. (SM)



Commercial Building 105 S. Third Street ca. 1900

This utilitarian three-bay, two-story brick building is simply finished with a blind panel surmounting three one-over-one double-hung sash on the second floor. Modern display windows angle into the recessed entrance, which is covered by a continuous metal canopy above the street level. The store was utilized as a general store until around 1915, when it is noted on Sanborn maps as being used for “motion pictures.” The upper story was remodeled in 2007 to residential apartments and the lower floor is available for retail sales and service uses. (SM)



Creech’s Pharmacy 109 S. Third Street ca. 1900

A deep corbelled brick cornice above three recessed panels decorate this one-story, three-bay building constructed ca. 1900. A central double-door entrance is flanked by plate glass windows. Utilized in 1901 as S. Field Furniture, and later as a grocery store, the building is locally known for the drugstores, which have operated here. A. S. Johnston operated a pharmacy here until 1951. James L. Creech moved his pharmacy to this site that year and the pharmacy/soda fountain is still in operation. Handsome mahogany fixtures, featuring fluted columns and elaborate cartouches, were brought to the building from D. Heber Creech’s drugstore on Market Street. (SM, INV, S&P)



Commercial Building 111-113 S. Third Street ca. 1901-1908

This is a simple one-story, painted brick building with one blind panel above the recessed entry. It may originally have been joined with the structure next door as an undivided building; the parapets were apparently remodeled ca. 1920. Modern display windows flank the single door entry, all of which are sheltered beneath a canvas awning. The building's early uses include a furniture store and a grocery store. (SM)



Commercial Building 115 S. Third Street ca. 1901-1908

Except for the stepped parapet, this storefront is similar to the building next door. The modernized entry is apparently an early configuration. Early on, this was George Thurton's music store. Gregory's dime store was also located here prior to its move to the Hood-Spiers Building in 1933. The building currently houses a photography studio. (SM, S&P)



Commercial Building 117 S. Third Street ca. 1901-1908

A large recessed panel topped by mousetooth corbelling and a narrow recessed strip are the major decorative features of this one-story, one-bay painted brick building. The asymmetrical storefront is composed of modern plate glass doors, all of which are sheltered under a canvas awning. Constructed between 1901-1908, the building by 1908 was being used as a grocery. A gift shop currently occupies the building (SM)



Commercial Building 119 S. Third Street ca. 1901-1908

This is a small, typical one-story commercial building with a corbelled cornice and a recessed central entry flanked by display windows above a tile spandrel. No canopy exists above the altered storefront. Early uses of the building, according to Sanborn maps, include a hardware store and a crockery. A property is currently available for retail uses. (SM)



Commercial Building 123 S. Third Street ca. 1915-1924

A shallow stepped parapet and a blind panel outlined in contrasting brick are the only exterior decoration on this utilitarian one-story building. The storefront is comprised of modern wide entrance that is flanked by plate glass display windows, all of which are covered by a canvas awning.



Austin Building 127-131 S. Third Street 1921

Hailed as the “largest department store in eastern North Carolina” upon its completion in 1921, this imposing three-story red pressed brick building towers over the streetscape. The building is seven bays wide on the upper floors; the windows have been paired on the ends and tripled in the center to create three mail bays. The façade is strongly symmetrical. The concrete-capped parapet terminates at the corners with end pilasters topped with concrete finials. The central bay features three large windows with concrete sills and on each of the top two floors, a row of six small windows at cornice level, and a central pediment ornament which rises above the parapet and is decorated with vertical



banding and finials. The end bays are slightly recessed and have large windows on each floor; they are separated between floors by paired sets of small blind panels. Windows on the front elevation are the original frame, double-hung sash. The rear and side facades retain traces painted Austin's signs and ten-and-fifteen-light industrial windows were removed during a renovation in 1999. A ca. 1920s photo of the store shows that it had a center-recessed entry with display windows, as well as recessed and angled entrance on each corner.

A documentary photograph from ca. 1910 shows one-and-two-story frame buildings on the site where Austin's was later built. The department store was built for Willis Austin to replace the Austin-Stephenson Store on the west side of South Third Street. The building has, in the latter part of the twentieth century, served as a Heilig-Meyers Furniture Store and, in most recent years, has housed the temporary facilities of the Ave Gardner Museum. (SM, INV, S&P, SHBE)

Commercial Building 137 S. Third Street ca. 1935

This small three-bay building has a stepped, concrete-capped pediment and vertically-laid brick along the cornice. Decorative brickwork defines the center "bay" above the altered storefront. Here, brick pilasters on concrete plinths create three bays and are infilled with modern plate glass. The central entry is modern, as is the rounded metal canopy over the door. It is currently used as a restaurant.



Howell Theater 141 S. Third Street 1935

Smithfield's finest example of Art Deco architecture features a classic period frontispiece in the popular ziggurat motif, which creates a bold silhouette against the sky. Concrete capping tops the flat parapet with corner pilasters. Decorative vertical rectangular panels, in a checkerboard motif created by dark and light brick, flank the frontispiece on the third level. Two one-over-one, double-hung sash occupy the center bays of this level. On the second floor of the main elevation are four one-over-one, double hung sash, the center two of which are within the frontispiece. The pedestrian level storefront was altered with modern pressed pebble panels and a modern plate glass and aluminum central entry when the theater was remodeled into four cinemas in 1972-1973. It is still in operation as of 2007.



H. P. Howell, who operated several theaters in Smithfield and throughout eastern North Carolina, built the Howell after the Sanders Theater on Market Street, burned in 1934. A number of businesses, all apparently housed in frame buildings, had occupied this site since the early twentieth century, including “Fred’s Place,” which was a local eatery, Bud Brown’s Barbershop, and the “Western Hot Spot,” a café. The Howell Theater was designed by local architect Miles Hildebrand, who worked for the J. P. Rogers Construction Company. Built at a cost of \$50,00, the brick and stucco theater originally featured red velvet draperies, a gold curtain and 900 seats. None of the original interior material survives. (INV, S&P)

South Third Street, West Side

Hood Brothers Building 100-104 S. Third Street ca. 1923

This well-preserved and impressive Neoclassical Revival commercial building anchors the southwest corner of the intersection of Market and S. Third Streets, long known as “Hood’s Corner.” It is constructed of red pressed brick accented by blond brick window surrounds and stringcourses at the sills. Blonde brick decorative horizontal banding over windows, and vertical banding at the corner, is accented by white diamond-shaped tiles. A heavy pressed tin modillioned cornice caps the building; a smaller cornice is found above the east-facing storefronts on Third Street. Apparently, two original storefronts survive, one each on the Market and Third Street elevations. The drugstore occupied most of the first floor and its entry was in the recessed corner that contained double wooden doors flanked by plate glass display windows. A similar entrance on Third Street served the south one-third of the building. The secondary Market Street entrance accessed the rear of the drugstore. Prominent twelve-over-one sash in the second and third stories dominate the exterior of the building. The interiors of both stores have been altered, though the original barbershop in the underground basement is still in use with the original shop fittings. The upstairs spaces are used for office and retail purposes. Coffered tin ceilings and original display shelves remain intact.



The Hood Brothers Building was built for Thomas R. Hood by D. J. Rose of Rocky Mount, who worked throughout the South during the early twentieth century designing banks, hotels, churches, residences, and other buildings. The Hood family had been in the drugstore business in Smithfield since 1871, first occupying a store on Second Street. They moved to this site after the 1889 fire, first using a one-story building and then constructing the current structure in 1923. Besides the drugstore, the building housed

offices for Dr. Thel Hooks and Dr. Royall, a barbershop in the basement, and the first A&P grocery store in Smithfield. The drugstore closed in 1973 and the building was sensitively rehabilitated in 1986 for commercial uses. (National Register, 1986)

Commercial Building 106 S. Third Street ca. 1900, ca. 1915-1924

The simply finished two-story, four-bay building features a stepped parapet and two blind panels. A row of four one-over-one double-hung sash in wood frames light the second floor. The central recessed entrance appears to be an early configuration, with double wooden doors and display windows with cut-away corners. The building was used in the early twentieth century as both a grocery store and a clothier. It appears to have been raised to two stories between 1915-1924. It is currently used for offices. (SM)



Commercial Building 108 S. Third Street ca. 1900, ca. 1915-1924

Although a one-story brick building appears on this site on the 1901 Sanborn map, the current structure appears to have achieved its Art Deco appearance during the 1920s; the structure shows as a two-story building on the 1924 Sanborn map. It features a gabled parapet with concrete capping and arched concrete finials and a small blind panel in the central gable above the five six-over-six double hung sash window band. The recessed central entrance with double wooden doors and display windows is an early configuration. The structure is vacant. (SM, INV)



Market Street, South side

Commercial Building 226-228 Market Street ca. 1901-1908

The symmetrical façade of this six-bay, red painted brick building features blind panels centered above each window and a corbelled cornice. The upper sash of each window are divided into four larger rectangles. The storefront is altered with a black glass tile dado and modern display windows. A variety of retail uses over the years have been housed in this structure. (SM, INV)



Commercial Building 230-232 Market Street ca. 1901-1908

The storefront at 230-232 achieved its two-story height between 1901-1908, either incorporating or replacing a one-story structure on the site in 1901. The slightly stepped parapet rises above a long narrow blind panel, beneath which are paired blind panels. Two bands of four one-over-one double hung in wooden surrounds sash light the second floor. A modern canvas awning shades both storefronts, with two entries, each flanked by large display windows. A set of stairs in the center of the building are accessed through a single front door. Sanborn maps labeled this structure as offices until 1915, when one side became a jewelry store. Two retail businesses with separate storefronts now share the building. (SM)



Commercial Building 234 Market Street ca. 1901-1908, ca. 1915-1924

This structure was constructed as a one-story building around the turn of the century and was apparently raised to two stories between 1915-1924. The brickwork on the front façade appears to join this storefront with that at 230-232 Market Street, but the buildings are apparently separate. 234 Market Street features a center stepped parapet above a blind panel and a band of four one-over-one, double-hung sash in wooden surrounds. A modern canvas awning covers the center entry flanked by display windows above a black tile spandrel. The building is being used for retail purposes. (SM, INV)



Commercial Building 312 Market Street post 1945

One-story modern brick commercial building with wooden shingled mansard awning.



Commercial Building 314-320 Market Street ca. 1924-1935

Similar facades characterize these separate buildings that date between 1924-1935. Each building features a gabled parapet with concrete capping, blind panels outlined in concrete, horizontal banding just above the storefront level, and pilasters topped with flat concrete tops.



Both storefronts have been altered; the display windows at 320 Market Street have been filled in with brick and modern strip windows, while the storefront on the 314 building features modern plate glass and single glass doors. A jewelry shop occupies the 320 Market storefront and a barbershop and restaurant currently occupy the storefronts in the building at 314 Market.

Carolina Telephone Building 326 Market Street 1913

This is a handsome Colonial Revival commercial structure constructed in 1913 by Carolina Telephone Company. The freestanding two-story, three-bay building has a recessed southeast corner with a tripartite wooden door on the first level and a one-over-one sash window, with a stone lintel, on the second floor. Decorative features include stone lintels and sills, a stringcourse, and a substantial overhanging pressed tin modillioned cornice. Two first floor windows on the main elevation have been bricked in and a third possibly converted into a modern entrance with metal canopy. The second story of the main block features a large one-over-one sash window flanked by two narrower windows of the same configuration. The three are topped with continuous stone lintel. A modern addition in the rear is sympathetic to the original building. The parapet on the side elevations is stepped toward the rear and windows in the side elevations are slightly arched with two-over-two sash. Carolina Telephone purchased Smithfield's locally owned telephone system, which had been in existence since ca. 1905, in 1911. This structure continues to be used by the telephone company for offices. (SM, INV, SHBE)



Market Street, North side

First Citizens Bank 241 Market Street 1913

Built by V.C. Brown, with the firm of Joe W. Stout and Company of Sanford, this imposing Neoclassical structure is a monument to one of Smithfield's most important institutions. First Citizens Bank grew out of the Bank of Smithfield, which originated in Smithfield in 1898. This building is still used for banking purposes. The three-story, three-bay building is constructed of pressed blond brick. Stylized pilasters standing on tall stone plinths define the corners of the front façade and the six-bay east side elevation.



Horizontal banding, a projecting cap, and projecting stone ornaments decorate the top of the pilasters. The building is crowned by a massive stone overhanging modillioned cornice, above which is a stone-capped flat parapet with corner blocks. A Doric entablature decorates the front façade between the second and third floors and small flat pilasters define the three window bays on the third level. The double door entry, with replacement modern doors, is topped by a gabled pediment. All of the building's original double-hung frame sash on the first and second floors were replaced with glass block in the 1950s. The two-story interior lobby, which once featured marble teller cages and octagonal tile floors, was also modernized in the mid-twentieth century. A modern unsympathetic three-story, two-bay extension is attached to the building's west side. The structure is currently occupied by Johnston County Heritage Center. (INV, SHBE, S&P)

South Fourth Street, West side

Gabriel Johnston Hotel- Municipal Building 116 S. Fourth Street 1937

Constructed in 1937, the former Gabriel Johnston Hotel is a three-story, I-shaped in plan building with Art Deco architectural influences. The main elevation is five bays wide; the first floor windows are oversized twelve-over-twelve sash, while those on the upper two floors are eight-over-eight. The central bay features a tripartite double-door entrance and small pairs of four-over-four, double-hung sash in the second and third floors.



The side elevations of the main block are three bays wide and mimic the front elevation in the arrangement and size of windows. A one-story recessed porch with a single entrance links the main block to the rear section of the building. Brickwork on the entire building is Flemish bond, and stone lintels with keystone tops top each window. Art Deco touches are seen in the flat piers between the bays, the cement capping of the pilasters which define the bays, and in the decorative patterned brickwork in the center rectangle of the main façade. The front entry, which is sheltered by a suspended metal marquee, is approached by concrete steps on either side of a brick and concrete porch that is defined by a plain wrought-iron balustrade.

The hotel was built on the corner of Johnston and Fourth Streets, on land formerly occupied by a portion of the Banner Warehouse which burned in the early 1930s. A contemporary account noted that the building was a “modern hotel” which had cost \$75,000 to build. The architect was Miles Hildebrand, who was employed by the local construction firm of J.P. Rogers; the Rogers firm constructed the building. The hotel was converted into the town hall/police station in 1963 and the interior has been altered with dropped ceilings, modern paneling, and partitioning.

Summary

The Downtown Smithfield Historic District, a roughly two-and-one-half block area focused around the main intersection of Market and Third streets, is currently on the National Register as a remarkably intact collection of traditional early twentieth century commercial architecture. One and two-story, modestly decorated brick commercial buildings comprise the majority of the historic streetscapes, through there are also a number of individually significant structures. These include the handsome Neoclassical Hood Brothers Building, individually listed in the National Register and a local landmark business in operation since 1871; the 1913 Neoclassical First Citizens Bank, the flagship building of the financial institution which was founded as the Bank of Smithfield in 1898 and later became First Citizens Bank; the Howell Theater, Smithfield's finest example of Art Deco architecture, and Austin's Department Store, a towering red brick edifice which was billed as eastern North Carolina's largest department store at its opening in 1923.

The historic district reflects Smithfield's commercial development between the 1890s and the mid-1930s. During this period several forces played major roles in shaping the development and appearance of the commercial area. The coming of the railroad in 1882 initiated Smithfield's first, albeit short-lived, real period of growth, but a disastrous 1889 fire destroyed all trace of the early commercial fabric. Rebuilding after the fire was concentrated at the intersection of Market and Third streets, in the heart of the present historic district. IN 1898 the town's first tobacco warehouse company was founded and the first warehouse. The Banner, was constructed adjacent to the commercial area. The bright leaf tobacco industry, and later the cotton industry, brought significant economic prosperity to Smithfield and, as a result, the commercial area's greatest growth occurred from the turn of the century until the Depression in the 1920s. Its appearance reflects the designs, materials, scale, and finishes popular in traditional small-town downtowns all over eastern North Carolina in the early twentieth century. The commercial area remains vital, with a majority of the stores occupied for retail purposes.

Historical Background

The town of Smithfield was created by a resolution of the North Carolina General Assembly on April 23, 1777, which stated that "a Town on the lands of John Smith on the North side of the Neuse River, in Johnston County (formed from a part of Craven County in 1746) where the Courthouse and other public buildings now stand...be chartered." The original town encompassed one hundred acres, drawn off in a regular grid pattern. The area covered the current fifteen blocks from Front Street east to Fourth Street, and from Hancock Street south to Church Street (Shoemaker, p. 1)

Though Smithfield did not officially become a town until 1777, it was already well established as “Smith’s Ferry” by 1759 and served as an inland port. Tobacco, naval stores and timber were loaded at Smith’s Ferry and shipped to New Bern for export overseas (Lassiter, p.2). However, for several reasons, Smithfield remained a sleepy county seat well into the nineteenth century with very little growth or change. One major reason was the difficulty of navigation in the Neuse River, which prohibited any substantial development of river commerce for Smithfield. Another reason was the fact that Johnston County was an area of small subsistence farms rather than large-scale plantations in the antebellum period. The town also missed out on potential prosperity brought by the railroad in 1856 when the North Carolina Railroad’s line from Goldsboro to Charlotte bypassed Smithfield four miles to the north.

It was not until 1882 that Smithfield experienced its first real period of growth. That year, the North Carolina Midland Railroad acquired control of the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad, a line which linked Beaufort to Goldsboro. The lease stipulated that a line must be built from Goldsboro west to Salisbury but, beset by financial problems, the line by 1882 was only completed as far as Smithfield (Lassiter, p. 24). The railroad ran right down Market Street (then known as Railroad Street) through the heart of the business area in Smithfield, allowing merchants direct access to rail service and connecting the town with neighboring states. Commerce flourished and Smithfield did experience a boom period of prosperity. One citizen noted that during the mid-1880s the town had been “crowded with visitors ‘prospecting’ for business locations; that Smithfield had no empty stores, and that the town’s property valuation had risen 100 percent” (Lassiter, p. 24).

The 1885 Sanborn insurance map indicates that the small but bustling business district was concentrated along roughly two blocks of Second Street from Church to Bridge Streets and along Market Street between Second and Third streets. General merchandise establishments, saloons, and other assorted retail interests flourished, mainly in one and two-story frame structures.

The Midland railroad line was removed from Market Street in 1886 and new lines were laid east of town. This removal initiated a noticeable slowing of the town’s development for a decade or so. By 1888, the town was experiencing a local recession and in 1889 a calamitous fire destroyed practically the entire business district. Rebuilding began almost immediately, with the focus of the business district shifting one block east and concentrating around the prominent intersection of Market and Third streets (Shoemaker, p.3). One landmark business, the Hood Family drugstore, which had occupied the southwest corner of this intersection since 1887, was rebuilt on its original site after the fire. Thomas Ruffin Hood and Beau Robin Hood built a one-story brick building for their popular drugstore business. The business flourished and in 1923 the one-story building was replaced by the fine three-story Neoclassical building which still stands on the corner (Hood Brothers Building).

Other property at this prominent intersection was owned by prosperous local black businessman Ashley Smith, who was responsible for the construction of several

buildings along Third Street in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the handsome commercial structure at 121 S. Third. Blacks owned numerous businesses along the east side of Third Street in the early 1900s (Shoemaker, Oral history notes, n. p.). Smith was a hired worker who rose to great prominence and wealth and served as a town commissioner for several terms between 1891 and 1900 (Lassiter, p. 21).

In 1898 the town's fortunes began to improve once again. A major reason was the cultivation of bright leaf tobacco in the southeastern part of the state and, as a result opportunities for profitable warehouse business arose. The impact of this phenomenon on the development of downtowns in eastern North Carolina was substantial. Smithfield's first warehouse company was organized in 1898. The Banner Warehouse was built the same year. The Riverside and Farmers' Warehouse soon followed and by 1900 the tobacco market was being hailed locally as an economic bonanza (Lassiter, p. 34).

Critical to the successful establishment of the tobacco market was the chartering of the town's first financial institution, the Bank of Smithfield, in 1898. This institution later became the First Citizens Bank, today one of the state's largest and strongest financial institutions. The original two story brick bank stood on the west side of Third Street near the intersection with Johnston Street (Lee, n. p.). The handsome First Citizens Bank building on the corner of South Third and Market streets was constructed in 1913 by V.C. Brown, a contractor with the Joe W. Stout and Co. of Sanford (The Heritage of Johnston County, p. 58). The Bank's stately Neoclassical style, suggesting solidity and integrity as appropriate characteristics of a bank, was widely used in the early twentieth century. Other similarly styled banks in eastern North Carolina are found in Rocky Mount, Greenville, and Wilmington.

Growth in the commercial area was steady during the prosperous years of the early 1900s, particularly between 1898 and 1915. Third and Market streets were being solidly developed with substantial brick and smaller frame buildings. Local newspaper accounts cite numerous examples of new businesses opening, existing businesses expanding, and major municipal improvements such as electricity and waterworks, brought in 1913 (Lee, n. p.). The town's population grew from 764 in 1900 to 1,347 in 1910 (Shoemaker, p. 4). A number of substantial buildings constructed during the period no longer survive, but were nevertheless indicative of the prosperity Smithfield enjoyed as the time. The City Hall and Opera House was one such building. Constructed in 1905 on the west side of Third Street, this was a handsome classical building with arched windows and a heavy overhanging cornice. The Town Hall occupied the first floor; the second floor was an opera house for stage shows and it also housed the Dixie Theater, Smithfield's first movie theater (Elsee, p. 2). A fire destroyed the building in 1926, along with most of the early municipal records.

As Smithfield entered the 1920s it continued to enjoy economic good times that were supplemented by the rising fortunes of the cotton market which had become established in Smithfield around the turn of the century (Lassiter, p. 35). Civic boosterism, municipal improvements such as street paving downtown, increasingly

mobile and affluent lifestyles, and a general optimism about the town's future brought continued business expansion (Lassiter, p. 46). Although the town already boasted three department stores, W.L. Woodall's, J.D. Spier's, and Davis Department Store, Third Street saw a monumental new addition in 1921 with the imposing Austin's Department Store (Smithfield Herald, March 23, 1993). Built by Willis Austin to replace the Austin-Stephenson Store across the street, this was billed as the largest department store in eastern North Carolina.

The close of the 1920s brought an effective end to Smithfield's remarkable period of growth, as it did in other eastern North Carolina towns. The Great Depression brought construction and expansion in the business district to a virtual standstill until the 1940s, when a wartime economy helped initiate a business upturn (Lassiter, p. 48). In spite of the Depression, two important buildings were constructed in the 1930s in the downtown area. The Howell Theater was built by H.P. Howell in 1935 after the Sanders Theater on East Market burned in 1934. Howell operated theaters all over eastern North Carolina, as well as several in Smithfield. The construction of the Howell Theater continued a long and important tradition of motion pictures as a vital part of the Town's social life. Howell's theater was designed by local architect Miles Hildebrand, who was employed by the local J.P. Rogers Construction Co. Its striking Art Deco design was popular for theaters in the 1920s and 1930s; other examples in eastern North Carolina are found in Clinton and Rocky Mount.

Smithfield had always had downtown hotels, which were important to the business community. By the 1920s the old "Tuscarora Inn" (also known as the Smithfield Hotel) on Market Street had become obsolete and the need for a new hotel was apparent. It was not until 1937 that the town's last hotel, the Gabriel Johnston Hotel, was constructed. Financed by a local stock company, the Gabriel Johnston was hailed as Smithfield's "modern hotel" (Smithfield Herald, Dec. 31, 1937). However, as was typical of downtown hotels in general, the post-World War II coming of motels along nearby interstate highways brought decline to the Gabriel Johnston and in 1962 it was sold to the town and converted into municipal offices (Lassiter, p. 46).

Smithfield's downtown district today appears to be quite vital, with property owners undertaking improvement projects and a downtown corporation promoting downtown in general. A major rehabilitation project involving the Austin's Department Store will result in new downtown housing and other projects are contemplated which will help preserve the area's historic resources.

Commerce and Architecture Contexts

The major influences upon the development of Smithfield's commercial district, the railroad and the tobacco industry, are the same forces, which influenced the growth of downtown areas all over eastern North Carolina in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The patterns of growth among towns in the region are remarkably similar, as are the physical characteristics of the downtowns which resulted from that growth.

Rocky Mount and Wilson are two small eastern North Carolina cities whose commercial areas were greatly influenced by railroads and tobacco-related industries, as was Smithfield's.

Although the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad came to Rocky Mount in 1840, it was not until the late 1880s that any real effort was made to capitalize on the town's diversified economy, excellent location, and good rail transportation to expand the business area. A major catalyst for expansion was the tobacco market, which opened in the late 1880s and spawned a number of allied industries, including the founding of the Bank of Rocky Mount to handle the large amounts of cash in town during the tobacco season (Mearns, n.p.). The early warehouses and prizeries (storage facilities for purchased tobacco) were built of frame, but by 1900 they were being replaced with brick structures. At least six major warehouses were constructed in the early-twentieth century, all located along the railroad at the north end of the commercial area.

As the tobacco industry flourished, the adjacent commercial area in Rocky Mount grew well into the 1920s. One-and two-story brick commercial buildings, with the popular varieties of raised brick ornamentation, lined the main streets. Service-related businesses, such as banks, offices, and hotels, occupied major buildings executed in the popular Neoclassical and other Revival styles and flourished in response to the booming economy.

In Wilson, the commercial area surviving today, like Smithfield's, post-dates disastrous fires. These occurred in Wilson in 1868 and 1884, wiping out the early frame commercial area, which had grown up in response to the coming of the Norfolk and Southern Railroad in 1881. Like Smithfield, rebuilding after the fire was executed in widely available and cheaper brick, and the commercial area rebounded somewhat because of its location along the railroad. However, it was again the institution of the tobacco market which brought the greatest growth and prosperity in Wilson. The local market opened in 1890 and warehouse companies thrived. The first prizery was build that year, sited near the railroad for easy transportation of goods. The tobacco-related buildings were grouped together in a district adjacent to the commercial area, which grew significantly between the late-1890s and 1929 when the Depression hit. By then Wilson's tobacco market had the beginnings of what would become a world-famous tobacco industry.

Wilson's commercial area is entirely consistent with the traditional patterns of development and expression of architectural forms and finished in the early-twentieth century. Similar to Rocky Mount and Smithfield, the area is dominated by brick commercial structures, mostly one-and-two-stories in height and with various expressions of brick ornamentation. Examples of substantial buildings executed in more academic styles also contribute to the historic commercial streetscapes. As elsewhere, the retail businesses and the service-oriented institutions developed in response to, and to serve, the growing economy of the early twentieth century.

Significant Dates

1921
1923
1935
1939

Architect / Builder

Rogers, J.P.
Stout, J.W.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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Boundary Map

Boundaries of the Downtown Smithfield Historic District are shown on the accompanying map, which was prepared by the Town of Smithfield Geographic Information Services.

Boundary Justification

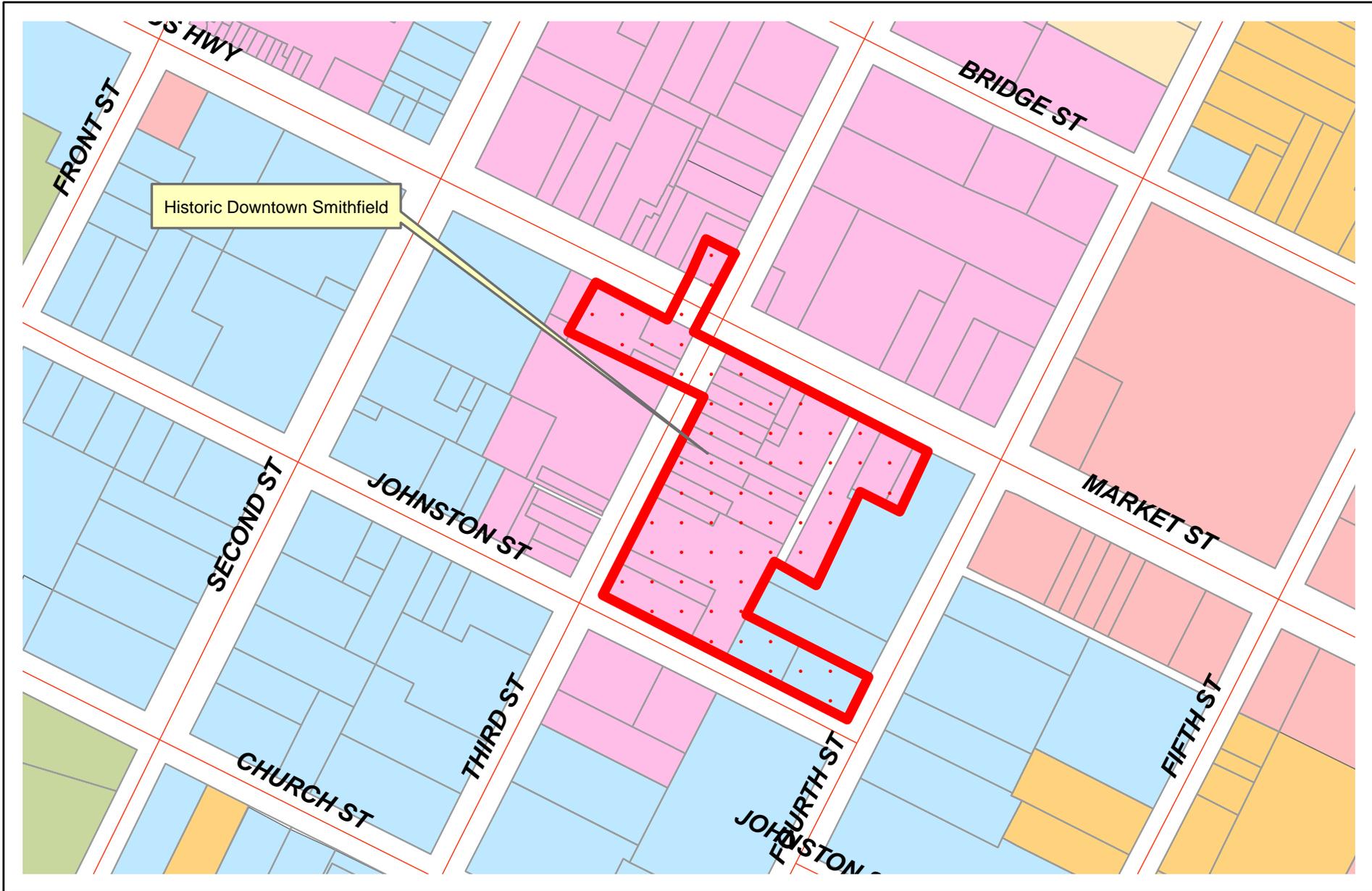
The boundaries of the Downtown Smithfield Historic District are drawn to include the surviving intact portions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial area in Smithfield. The boundary reflects what is currently listed on the Nation Registry of Historic Places.

Photographs

The following information applies to all photographs

Photographer: Mark E. Helmer, AICP

Date: December 2007



Historic Downtown Overlay District



Map Created by the Smithfield Geographic Information Services
Smithfield Planning Department

