

Johnson City is a Typical American City

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- History of Development is Embraced in Seventy Years
Originally Part of Land Grant, Purchased for Twelve Cents an Acre from North Carolina
- Started As Town By Henry Johnson
Built Steadily Since Panic of 1893 – Now East Tennessee’s Industrial Center – “30,000 Population By 1930” Slogan

Johnson City as a town and city is the result of the westward trend of civilization, although in age as a Southern city, it is comparatively young. Although more than 125 years have elapsed since the first dwelling house was erected in this vicinity, the beginning of this place as a settlement, a town and then a city, is yet within the memory of living man; for only about seventy years ago, the first business house was put up.

The first step in the reclamation from wilderness was taken by Abram Jobe, about 1785, when he “entered” a large tract of land embracing what is now the main business section of Johnson City, securing a grant from the State of North Carolina, and paying for his land the princely sum of 50 shillings for every 100 acres, or at the rate of about 12 cents an acre. Tennessee was then not in existence; the present state was Washington County, North Carolina, which extended from the Appalachian range to the Mississippi River. It later became the State of Franklin, the Tennessee government, and then Tennessee.

Only a short time before the advent of Mr. Jobe, this section of the county was the frontier between “civilization” and the unexplored wilderness, whose only known inhabitants were Indians. The known history of this immediate vicinity begins with the exploring trips of Daniel Boone and John Finley, who took in a section of the mountainous territory between the Yadkin Valley in Western North Carolina, across Upper East Tennessee, and into Southeastern Kentucky. His trail, from Boone, Trade, Butler, Elizabethton, Austin Springs, Boone’s Creek, on through Hawkins County, to Kentucky, has been marked; and indications are that he came through the valleys and western slopes of the great Allegheny range, crossing the territory now occupied by Johnson City.

Unwritten History

The unwritten history of this point would no doubt be more than romantic. Mounds have been discovered near Johnson City containing crude implements and utensils of clay and stone, with markings unmistakably Indian; and in numerous sections on the mountain sides surrounding the city can yet be found the Indian arrowheads, axes and clubs cut from hard flint in some yet unexplained way. There have been many speculations as to how these arrowheads were fastened on the shaft with relation to the feathering on the butt of the arrow. If parallel to the feathering, the arrows were for hunting; since the arrowhead would be perpendicular, so that it could penetrate between the ribs of a four-footed animal. If perpendicular, they were war arrows arranged to enter between the ribs of man.

Town Begins

But modern history begins with the "Jobe grant" more than a century and a quarter ago. For about seventy years, that was all. In 1853, the first store was established by Henry Johnson, on the western corner of what is now Market Street and the Southern Railway. This was a general store handling everything from millinery to hardware, and was one of the welcome stations on the old stage road traveling what is now Market Street and being a link in the old highway from Washington to Knoxville, and beyond.

No long delay ensued between the establishment of the first store and the gradual growth of the settlement. The next year, the home and store of T. A. Faw was built, a few hundred feet distant from the first one, and on the side where is now being built the new \$500,000 John Sevier Hotel. The bubbling springs of fresh cool water at this point were visited daily by travelers along the road, and formed one of the most delightful resting places on the road. This is considerably different at this time, when an electric pump is humming day and night to keep the unwelcome streams from flooding the basement being prepared for the large hotel building. Then followed other homes; the house of Mrs. Toppin, on what is now King Street, between Roan and Boone; the P. P. C. Nelson home, a few hundred feet eastward, near Roan Street; besides the Abram Hoss house, near the present freight station of the Southern Railway – but this was not then in Johnson City; it was "away out in the country;" then the Bowmans, Rankins, Millers, Reeves, Pouders, and many pioneer builders whose names are not in the present directory. And then they followed faster; the town had grown from a settlement to a village.

The railroad came through this section of the state – the old East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad, afterwards merged with another and

becoming the East Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia; with its old stacked locomotives and link-and-pin couplers.

First Post Office

The post office was at first “Blue Plum,” also away out in the country, on Sinking Creek, about two miles south of the present city. It was brought to the center of the village by Henry Johnson, founder of the town, and who built and presented to the railroad a depot, near what is now the Windsor Hotel annex. Mr. Johnson became the first postmaster using a portion of his store as the post office. When the mail arrived, he would retire behind the screen, open the mail and call off the addresses of the letters presenting them to those of the waiting villagers in the store who answered “Here” to the call of their names.

It is said too, that some young lad of a jovial trend would slip into the “post office” at times when a crowd would be in the store and begin reciting names of those present in a voice imitating that of Mr. Johnson, the postmaster. But they usually only proceeded a short way with in jest, for the postmaster’s threat to “have the law on you” had the deadly effect of routing the jokers.

During the war, and it is said on account of a political fight, the name of the village was changed to “Haynesville,” but was soon restored to “Johnson’s Depot.” The term, “Johnson’s Tank” was used in local sketches, but has no official sanction. The name was used descriptively by railroad employees, referring to the plant where the engines could get water, and was later applied by the citizens of Jonesborough, when rivalry over the size of the two towns began, became more heated.

Rivalry with Jonesborough

As is well known, Jonesborough is the oldest town west of the mountains and for years enjoyed the distinction of being the metropolis of the southwestern part of the United States; became the original capital of the State of Tennessee. Between 1880 and 1890 when the population of Johnson City began to approach that of Jonesborough, an intense rivalry sprang up between the two. This is illustrated, by an incident reported to have occurred in the passenger station at Johnson City when a Johnson City citizen said to the ticket agent, handing him a coin, “I want to go to Jonesborough.” The ticket agent replied sarcastically, “You’re a dad-gummed liar, you have to go to Jonesborough, or you wouldn’t be going!”

But the population contest was short-lived; for by 1900 Johnson City had doubled that of Jonesborough, and has been steadily increasing

since. The national Panic of 1893 doubly affected Johnson City. A few years previous, the projected "Three-C's" Railroad through the city had caused an unprecedented "boom" here and speculation, building, business plans and platting reached fictitious proportions. Lots of land in the newly created "Carnegie Addition" doubled in value overnight, and reached prices that would have been ample for business in the center of a thriving city. Many were sold on the streets of Johnson City from drawings only; deeds and money changed hands with as little ceremony as purchasing a bag of peanut. Two large hotels were built: one the Carnegie Hotel near the present plant of the Empire Chair Company and which was burned a few years ago; the other was the "Carlyle Hotel," now the Franklin Apartments, on East Main Street which was projected to be "right across the street" from the large passenger station of the trunk line railroad leading from the Great Lakes southward through Johnson City to the seaboard.

The Panic

The collapse of the railroad project came almost simultaneously with the great national panic. Lots that had sold for \$3,000 and more became a liability to their owners, because accrued taxes on them exceeded the actual value of the property. Many were summarily abandoned; others were given away; and the "Carnegie Addition" became the city's public pasture for herds of lowing kine.

The 'boom' affected the city both adversely and as a help: adversely because values generally dropped to levels below what they should have been, but psychologically a help, by acting as a deterrent to similar future ventures.

For several years the town practically stood still both in population and business. Shortly after 1900, however, business development began to manifest itself; manufacturing and industrial establishments recognized the advantageous location of the city; the C. C. and O. Railroad was built, and by 1910 the town had grown to a thriving place of more than 8,000 inhabitants.

Going Forward

During the World War, the city fared, in general, as other towns of this section; with the exception that in this immediate vicinity, very little drafting was necessary to fill up the country's quota since voluntary enlistment was large.

Following the Great War, Johnson city people co-operated to a wonderful extent to keep the city's business going; and maintained at least an even

keel, while depression was evident in other parts of the country. When the 1920 census was announced, Johnson City had in size attained proportions befitting its name; it was a city. The 10,000 mark had been passed; and the official figures of 12,442 did not include the National Soldiers' Home, nor the considerable settlement adjacent, which physically were parts of Johnson City.

And now, Johnson City has become the sixth city in Tennessee in size; an industrial and commercial center of upper East Tennessee, with a varied list of industries which should avoid any serious effect on the city financially in the event of depression in any particular commodity; the "Gateway of the Appalachians," and with the slogan giving every promise of fulfillment, "30,000 by 1930."