



...in print, and online

This article is from the Spring '17 issue.

© 2017 Carolina Mountain Life Magazine, Inc, Linville NC USA. All Rights Reserved.

A Walk Through the Architecture of West Jefferson's Main Street

By Lynn Rees-Jones

Downtown West Jefferson is a charming blend of historic buildings, vibrant shops and a freshly designed streetscape. While it is easy to get wrapped up in the window displays of the shops, or to focus on the buildings according to their current function, a closer look at the architecture provides clues to the stories that make up the history of the town. While Jefferson Avenue is now the primary business corridor, Main Street is the original thoroughfare along which much of the town first developed. One hundred years ago, the streets were dirt and the traffic was horses, carts and the occasional new-fangled motor vehicle, and the often muddy footpaths were covered by boardwalks.

The catalyst for the establishment of the Town of West Jefferson in 1915 was the Virginia-Carolina railroad which extended from Abington VA to Todd NC. The railroad was originally constructed to extract timber from the area, but once the timber supply was depleted, railroad use declined and the railroad stopped operations in 1977.

The train followed the current day "Backstreet," and the **West Jefferson Depot** once served as the heart of town with the original town limits radiating one half mile in each direction from the depot. The original two story wood depot was located in the area of the current Backstreet Park before it burned down and was replaced with the red depot building seen today. It is a well-

preserved, side-gable, board-and-batten-sheathed building and is one of only three remaining historic depots in Ashe County. It was relocated to its current position in the 100 block of Main Street during the late-twentieth century.

The Old Hotel, located at 5 W Main Street, was originally built of wood in the year 1915, specifically to house people and businesses brought by the railroad. It burned down a year later and was immediately rebuilt in 1917 using brick. It is built in a modest Classical Revival style and the bricks used for construction were hand-made on-site, with native clay from the adjacent hill where the library now stands. The bricks on the exterior of the building are now painted; however, the historic natural bricks can be seen in the dining room of The Hotel Tavern Restaurant.

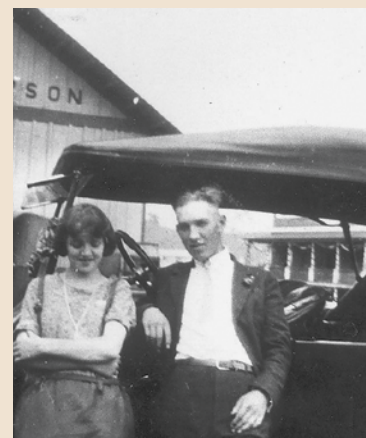
The original hotel included 22 hotel rooms, formal dining room, sitting room and large kitchen and operated until the early 1970's. As a hub of the community, the building has served in many capacities including the Ashe County's first library, the post office, newspaper office, bus station, beauty shop, doctors' offices, and various restaurants. While no longer operational as a hotel, it continues to be a dominant building downtown and houses a variety of successful businesses, both on the street level and in the upstairs guest rooms recently renovated into shops and offices. It is interesting to stand at the top of the interior staircase and envision what it must have been like back in the early 1900's.

Across the street from the hotel is a two story brick building at 4 West Main Street that houses **WJ Hardware**, one of the oldest businesses in town. It was built in 1920 as a hardware store and also included upstairs offices, a dental practice, and at one time residences. On the side of the building there is a second story door with no means of egress but there is evidence of a former stairway outlined in the bricks. The single story portion of the hardware store was added in the 1950's.

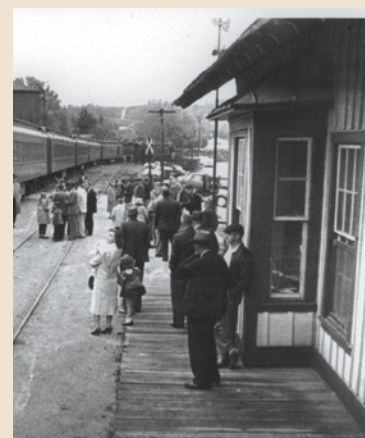
The original **Parkway Theater** (The Artists Theater) at 10 East Main Street was built in 1938 in just 58 days by R. W. Barr. Art Deco in style, the original building was designed by architect D.H. Cook and was modeled after the historic Earle Theater in Mt. Airy. Originally containing a balcony and 430 seats, it was West Jefferson's movie theater for 10 years, before relocating to its current location next door. Opening night featured Gene Autry's "Boots and Saddles" and Mr. Autry sent a telegraph extending his regrets for being unable to attend the theater's formal opening. The building exterior has remained largely unchanged except for the infill of the recessed entry. The interior balcony was extended to create a second floor to accommodate a furniture store. The original second stair to the balcony was removed and a freight elevator was added at the rear of the building. The beautiful ceiling on the second floor is original. The building underwent major renovations in 2009 for conversion to The Artists Theater, an art gallery, and current plans include



Kraft Cheese / Ashe County Cheese



West Jefferson Railroad Depot



West Jefferson Railroad Depot and train



The Old Hotel



West Jefferson Hardware

alterations for a Dr. Pepper museum and soda bar. Note: the current Parkway Theater (next door at 8 E. Main St) was originally a car dealership but was renovated as a movie theater with cream-colored steel enamel panels on the façade and an art deco style marquee).

The **Ashe County Cheese** building at 106 East Main Street was built by the Kraft-Phoenix Cheese Corporation in 1930. Cheese has been produced in this same building for the past 80 years, making it North Carolina's oldest cheese factory. The front of the building, where the silo and milk tank cows now stand, was covered by a porte-cochere until 1955. Farm trucks with milk for cheese production would pull up and drop milk cans onto metal roller conveyors which would then be emptied inside the plant. The curbing for the drop-off is still visible as is the brick patched outline of the original front door. With its close proximity to the historic West Jefferson School, it was a popular location for an afternoon snack with school kids.

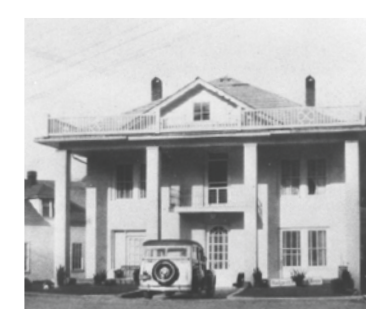
Existing large milk tanks were refashioned into the iconic cows by local high school welding students guided by a local artist. The cows are a popular photo destination for the many tourists visiting the cheese plant. Cheese produced in the plant is sold in the shop across the street and is shipped to southeast distributors from Texas to Pennsylvania. The cheese is also carved for buffets on cruise ships.

The **Ashe Arts Council** building is a visual gem in a downtown of predominately brick buildings. It was built as a

Works Progress Administration (WPA) project and is made of rough-cut random coursed native "Parkway" granite typical of many late 1930's depression era projects. Located at 303 School Avenue (but facing Main Street), it was originally built as a Community Building and has also been the location for the non-profit Blue Ridge Opportunities Commission, school offices, vaccination clinics, and has served as a gathering space for other community groups. Seventy-nine years after its construction, the building now houses the Ashe County Arts Council's offices, an art gallery, shop, meeting and performance venues and currently serves as a "hub" for the arts in West Jefferson. This sturdy, stately little building evokes nostalgia as it continues as a community building and gathering place.

The **Badger Funeral Home** is located at 300 North Main Street at the eastern terminus of Main Street; however, the building originally served a much different purpose. In the early days of the town when the historic West Jefferson School was built, students would travel from rural areas in the county to attend school. Because of the poor roads and rough terrain, it was not feasible for students to travel to and from school daily. In 1925, a school dormitory was built next door to the historic school and students would stay there weekdays during the six-month school term. There were rooms for up to thirty students, and an apartment for principals and teachers. A central staircase led to rooms on

continued on next page...



Old School Dormitory / Badger Funeral Home



Original Parkway Theater

both sides of the building's second floor. When there was no longer a need for the dormitories, a local couple took over and rented out rooms. In 1944, the building was sold to the Badger family who converted it to a funeral home which they still operate today. It was remodeled in 1956 and 1985 with wings built on each side of the original structure. The Badger Funeral Home, which originally operated in a building around the corner from its current location, has been the longest continually operated business in Ashe County and the 16th longest in North Carolina, providing its services since 1854.

There are, of course, lots more historic buildings in West Jefferson and many more stories to tell, but those are for another day. The railroad is long gone, but the impact of it lives on, in a town that is thriving as a community and tourist destination.

A self-guided "West Jefferson Historic Building Walking Tour" brochure is available at the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce or West Jefferson Town Hall. The tour was a joint venture between the West Jefferson Centennial Commission and Appalachian State University's Recreation Management program during the town's Centennial Celebration in 2015. For additional information contact Town Hall at 336.246.3551.