

*Demolition of the
Oglethorpe Hotel
in 1958. Courtesy
of Golden Isles
Arts & Humani-
ties Association*



Defacing Downtown: What Happened and Why

By Leslie Faulkenberry

No art form created by human beings can exist independently of the time in which it was created. The massive tombs of the Pharaohs, the magnificent architectural accomplishments in ancient Greece and Rome, delicate marble statuary that created the illusion of sheer linen in the drapery over the body of Christ from the workshops of Renaissance masters, light-dappled paintings of the Impressionists: all represent the state of the world at the time the works of art were brought into being.

Conversely, the destruction of art also reflects the era of the event. Surely, there can be no more explicit monument of the devastation of war and the resilience of faith than the bombed shell of Coventry Cathedral adjacent to the new St. Michael's Cathedral in the West Midlands of England. On a much smaller and more humble scale, the demolition of Victorian landmark buildings of Brunswick, Georgia, in the late 1950s, also serves as an example of art—and its demise—imitating life. Their loss was a product of the times.

The Turmoil of War

During World War II, the population of Brunswick, Georgia went from 16,000 to over 64,000 in a few months. Its position as the nexus of three critical defense projects—building Naval Air Station Glynco for the new coastal patrol airships, shipbuilding at the J.A. Jones Shipyards and the manufacture of urgently needed paint and coatings for military materiel—made Brunswick an important city on the eastern seaboard.

Wartime was considered a national emergency in which no new private construction was undertaken, and many non-essential jobs were left unfinished for the duration. Building necessities like lumber and steel, nails, paint and wire were diverted to defense projects and war housing for those workers. The wise Directors of Brunswick Bank and Trust on Jekyll Square had moved quickly at the beginning of the war in 1942 to finish a remodeling job that created a 25% increase in the size of the lobby interior. These timely changes would



The J.A. Jones shipyards, circa 1944. Courtesy of the Brunswick-Glynn County Library

Right: Blimp hangar under construction, circa 1943. Courtesy Captain John Lindgren, USN, Ret. From the Glynn County Airport Commission archives

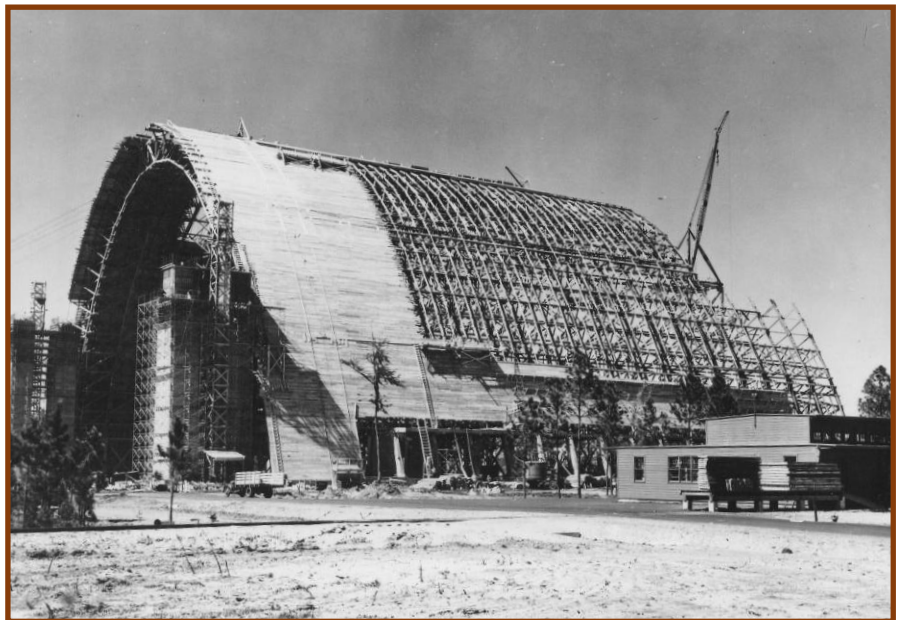
what new arrivals faced in the first 6-8 months of the war.

Every spare bedroom in the houses around the squares of Brunswick, or along its tranquil tree-lined streets, was rented to at least one boarder. Some homes resorted to renting beds for 8 hours at a time, a practice known as “hot beds.” Although the habit was firmly discouraged by movie theater owners, foremen at the shipyards often encouraged exhausted newcomers, with a knowing wink, to “take in a movie.” Teenage ushers, only a year or two away from the minimum age required to work at the shipyards themselves, would attempt to police the darkest back rows of crowded theaters. Armed with long metal flashlights, the nervous youngsters would gingerly nudge sleeping workers awake and tell them to leave. At times, the startled sleepers would jump into wakefulness swinging their fists.

As chaotic and difficult as the war years were, any

improve the bank’s service and accommodate the new customers brought in by the shipyard operations. The exterior and basic structure of the building was left intact. Similar alterations to downtown businesses were undertaken as quickly as possible. The savvy business owner knew that the supply of materials could run dry at any moment, so improvements were finished at a feverish pace.

Along Newcastle Street, restaurants and movie houses stayed open around the clock to meet the needs of shipyard workers on 24-hour shifts. Newcomers to town, lured into the city by the promise of work and higher wages than many young people had seen in their lifetime, were confronted with a dire housing shortage. It is difficult to imagine doing 8 hours of hard physical labor such as welding giant plates of steel while perched on a scaffold high above the ground in the penetrating damp winds off the river in winter, or in the unbearable summer heat, then having no place to clean up and rest properly afterwards. Yet this situation was exactly



Right: 17-year-old Eugene Bennett (top row, first on left) with his co-workers at the J.A. Jones Yards in Brunswick. Eugene supported his invalid father, mother and siblings with his shipyard earnings. Courtesy Faye Bennett Tucker, from the Coastal Georgia Historical Society archives

Brunswick resident who lived in the city or county in that era will be quick to add that the jobs were well-paid and desperately needed. Workers at the shipyards earned more in a short time than they had previously in their lives, in some cases. Not everyone worked on defense projects; there was plenty of other work available in support of the efforts. Cooks in cafes, seamstresses that tailored uniforms for the Navy men at the airship base and babysitters in the shipyard workers' housing projects all took home wages that were carefully saved and even more carefully spent. The Depression had crushed the local



economy; families would have starved if not for our long growing season for kitchen gardens, the barter system and the kindness of neighbors.

"The memory of that never leaves you," members of the so-called Greatest Generation remind the rest of us. The fear of loss, hunger and need drove many adults into a passion for success and financial stability that their children did not understand.

In the war years, there was no interest in modernizing buildings, beyond stretching the capacity of theaters or wedging more tables and chairs into cafes and diners. The motto of the

times was "make do, or do without." Every spare inch of tin foil, chewing gum wrappers and any other tiny bits of scrap metal were collected by enthusiastic school children to be melted down and made into weapons. Socks were darned, shoes were mended and new school clothes were a rarity. The sturdy Victorian buildings in downtown Brunswick served their community well in those difficult times. If anyone longed to modernize them, they dared not announce those ideas publicly. All efforts were on winning the war and bringing service members home safely. Anything contrary to those goals was considered unpatriotic.

The Aftermath and Its Implications

The end of the war was celebrated with intense joy, but the city of Brunswick felt the shock waves of departing industry almost immediately. Everyone was eager to live without



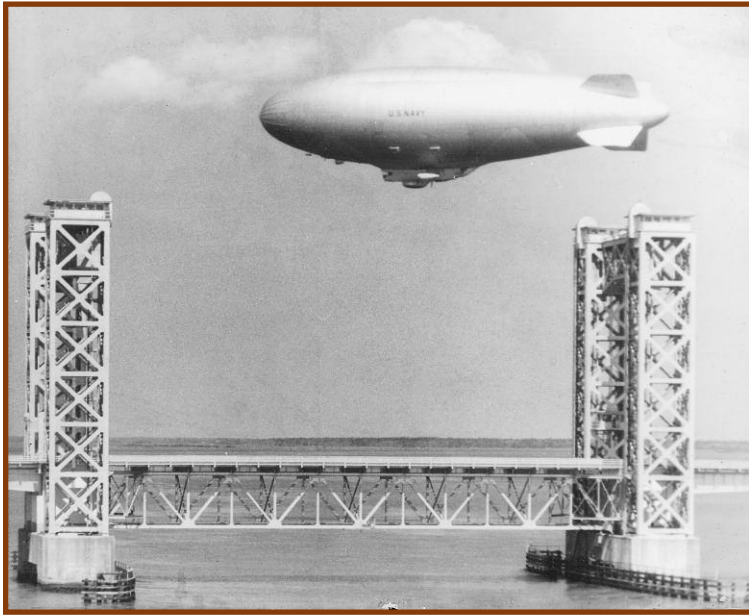
NAS Glynco sailors and WAVES on parade down Newcastle Street, past Machen Square, circa 1943. Courtesy Golden Isles Arts & Humanities Association

rationing of the most mundane of things, like sewing needles, butter and laundry detergent. But the loss of jobs was another matter.

The shipyards closed down, and thousands of workers from outlying counties went home to their farms, shoe shops and grocery stores. The paint companies were still in business, but their jobs were far fewer in peacetime. The employment that supported these short-term residents of Brunswick also went away. If you were a night shift cook at a diner downtown that had catered to shipwrights, you suddenly found yourself out of a job, along with hundreds of your neighbors.

Many South Georgians who had learned the welding trade in the shipyards were relieved to find employment at Babcock and Wilcox when the boiler manufacturer purchased the former metal shop of the J.A. Jones Company. This new source of employment was a blessing, but opportunities at B&W, as it was known locally, could not make up for the overall loss of jobs in the immediate post-war period.

To add to the dilemma, the Navy decided to phase out Naval Air Station Glynco's operations. The huge silver



A Navy Glynco airship glides through the uprights of the old Sidney Lanier Bridge, circa 1952. Courtesy David Gill and Wanda Taylor, Glynn County Airport Commission archives

blimps glided away from Brunswick to a base in Weeksville, North Carolina in 1947. The immense hangars were used to store old fighter aircraft, and the plans were announced that Glynco would close altogether when all the planes had been processed in 1949. As tensions in Korea mounted, the planes were needed to make ready for combat once again.

Local citizens were dismayed. The base offered civilian jobs, but even more important, it provided local businesses with customers. At the end of operations, there were 343 people left on base. The livelihood of 168 civilian employees was in danger with the closure. At the last minute, the Navy reversed its decision.

Glynco Commander W.R. Peeler told the Brunswick News that the base was to be "kept open indefinitely because of its importance in the Navy's Lighter-Than-Air (blimp) operations." The strategic location of the base between the highly active blimp stations at Key West, FL, and Weeksville, NC, made Glynco the ideal place to refuel, repair and resupply the airships. Also, the giant hangars offered the Navy a safe place to store its experimental patrol airships—a utility that the Key West base did not offer.

The LTA program was looked upon with new interest as the Cold War geared up. Blimps had always been used for anti-submarine warfare. As global tensions gave rise to fears of another war, it became clear that new technology research would play an important part in a modern victory. Blimps offered a stable, stationary, low-altitude platform for conducting research on more sensitive radar and other imaging methods. The airships of NAS Glynco played a part in developing technology that gave rise

to the “spy planes” of the atomic age, such as the EC-121 Constellation (called “Connies” by men on base) and later, the AWACS aircraft.

“Blimps were the great-granddaddies of spy satellites,” former Glyncio base commander, Captain John Lowe, observed in 2004. “Once we figured out how to do all these operations in mid-air on the blimps, we could move forward into adapting them into more efficient ways to do the surveillance and other things we needed—but on conventional aircraft.”

The trend toward research and training moved in favor of the little port city on the coast of Georgia. In 1951, the U.S. Navy announced its plan to move all of its Combat Information Center School operations to NAS Glyncio. Brunswick was, to put it mildly, overjoyed. From the grim despair of the Depression, to the peak of employment in wartime, to the edge of the precipice of abandoned defense operations and massive unemployment once again, to the prospect of an important new mission at Glyncio: the city was exhausted by the extremes of fortune. It was time for a party.

But the euphoria was short-lived, at least initially. The \$10,000,000 planned outlay for construction at Glyncio in 1951 was held up in the midst of a bidding and contract procedure when Dwight Eisenhower was elected. Upon his swearing-in as the nation's 34th President, all federally funded projects were halted pending a thorough review. Brunswick held its breath; work on a new 8,000-foot runway for conventional aircraft at NAS Glyncio was suspended, and CIC classrooms were left unfinished while the review progressed. When the base expansion was finally approved, city and county residents heaved a collective sigh of relief. The projects were put into high gear. No one was going to let an opportunity like this slip away.

Hope, Fear and Progress

Brunswick's city fathers were understandably jumpy about what the Navy might expect from the town in terms of services and accommodations for the servicemen and women arriving for training at Glyncio. All training for the country's Lighter-Than-Air program was moved to

Glyncio, along with the CIC Schools. Strange-looking new spy planes roared into the air from the runway; a forest of weird, angular radar antennae sprouted from the sandy soil of the base like alien life forms.

Nothing was like it was before. Children carried out atomic bomb drills by hiding under their desks at school. Technology developed during wartime in secret was gradually released for public consumer use. New wonders like a national highway system and television confirmed that the modern age was upon us.

Desperate to avoid being seen as behind the times, or old-fashioned, Brunswick's business community sought the advice of base

Outdoor UHF antennae for aircraft control training operations at NAS Glyncio. Courtesy Lt. Commander Roy A. Norman, USN, Ret. Glynn County Airport Commission archives



commanders at Glynco to guide them. They were determined that no deficiency of the city's businesses or services would ever tempt the Navy to remove this new economic mainstay. Above all, they wanted the Navy and other military members to like being here.

The predictions of the early 1950s came true: NAS Glynco was, in 1958, the home base of three separate training commands. The CIC School, Airship Squadron Two and the Naval Airship Training Command were resident at Glynco. It became the only base in the world to utilize all known forms of aviation at the time: blimps, fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. The population at Glynco was about 3,000 to 3,300 students, instructors and support staff. Other civilian jobs also bloomed as a result of the base expansion. It was the answer to a fervent, community-wide prayer.

Our World of Machines, Radios and Fast Cars

Here is where the story of downtown leaves hard, verifiable fact and ventures into the shadowy land of hearsay. According to accounts by family members of a group of downtown business and property owners, the Captain of the base in 1958 observed that the city was "old fashioned," and advised them to "modernize" as much as possible. To the practical and earnest businessmen of Brunswick, this was interpreted as marching orders to eradicate all lingering Victorian embellishments on buildings, and to square off every building possible.

The influence of the Bauhaus movement had spawned a generation of modernist buildings, which, according to founding architect Walter Gropius, called for an absence of ornamentation. His style favored architecture and consumer goods that were functional, cheap and consistent with mass production. In fact, he once declared, "We want an architecture adapted to our world of machines, radios and fast cars."

After the privations of want and war, this made perfect sense to small-town Americans in 1958. Everyone wanted more goods, cheaper goods, no more rationing or living on scraps. If the space-age military men who were spending their paychecks in Brunswick expected blank cubes for buildings, if the majestic masterpiece buildings of Eichberg and his contemporaries looked old fashioned and inappropriate to the commander, they had to go. And they did.

In a frenzy of improperly understood "form follows function," the front of the Ritz Theatre was plastered over and rendered devoid of its previous charm. The castle-like crenelations at the roofline had already been lopped off in the 1920s to create an Art Deco style façade for the building. Details like cupolas disappeared from the tops of buildings. Colorful sidewalk awnings that once lined Newcastle Street vanished.

The small group of downtown property owners met several times, and encouraged others to consider modernizing their own buildings. They urged their neighbors to do away with embellishments, gingerbread, anything that recalled the city's Victorian past. Eager to shake off the pall of fear and hard times, and to embrace opportunities of the future, the small group of Brunswick leaders contacted every other business owner and commercial landlord in the city. They were proud of their efforts to bring Brunswick into the modern age. From their perspective, the campaign represented leadership. As we look back from the following century, we see destruction. Their actions led to the loss of priceless architectural

treasures: the bank buildings on Jekyll and Machen Squares, and the magnificent Oglethorpe Hotel. The destruction of an art form does not come about independently of the time in which it occurs.

The Bank and Courthouse on Jekyll Square West

The Oglethorpe Bank building on Jekyll Square, later used as the Glynn County Courthouse and eventually, home office of American National Bank. Courtesy of Golden Isles Arts & Humanities Association

After the bitter hardships of war and Reconstruction, the economy of Brunswick, Georgia enjoyed a vigorous comeback in the late 19th century. The forest products industry took advantage of coastal pinelands, and the Port of Brunswick emerged as a major national source of exported railroad ties. A flurry of bank charters were granted by the state, and in 1890, the Oglethorpe National Bank opened its doors at a grand, new three-story building on Jekyll Square's northwestern quadrant at 211 Newcastle Street. (The contemporary number is 1419 Newcastle.)

The architectural style of the handsome new bank was in keeping with the recently commissioned City Hall designed by Alfred Eichberg. It is important to point out that to our knowledge, Eichberg did not work on the design for the bank on Jekyll Square, but his style influenced the appearance of other city structures.

Adopting a variation on the Richardson-Romanesque Revival style, the structure incorporated the signature series of arches and red brick trimmed with contrasting granite elements. Oglethorpe National Bank occupied the Jekyll Square building until a major economic depression resulted in its closure in 1893. After the hurricane of 1898 damaged the county courthouse in Queen Square and obliterated a century's worth of public records

due to flooding, the county used the sturdy former bank building as its official courthouse until 1908. In 1909, the Brunswick Savings and Trust Company purchased the building. Under the name of American National Bank, the financial institution operated there through two world wars until it moved to new headquarters in 1958.

As World War II started, the experienced businessmen who served as Directors of the bank realized they were in an ideal position to offer financial services to military men and defense workers. Suddenly, a record number of Brunswick residents—whether they were permanent or transitory—had paychecks and needed a place to cash them. The lobby was quickly expanded into what had been street front office suites, formerly rented to lumber companies and similar enterprises. Improvements to the bank were made at breakneck speed, before the supply of building materials vanished in the wake of a nation-wide defense manufacturing and building boom.

Fluorescent lighting, acoustical treatments, and “resilient tile floor” were features of the new interior. These materials would have greatly reduced the echoing noise from crowds of people in a building with a wood and marble floor and high ceilings. A new design for teller cages placed a lower safety screen between the



teller and the customer that allowed the bank employee to see all over the bank without interference from a high top section. This layout placed the cash drawer beneath a counter on the teller's side, so that no money was visible to the customer. The interior also offered a special private booth for safe deposit box customers. These changes in functional design were a direct result of changes in the population and industrial development of the city.

Tenants: Assets to Liabilities

Leasing out space in second or higher floors was a common practice in the management of banks and other businesses along the main streets of small towns from the late 1800s up through the mid-20th century. The ground floor was reserved for a tenant that required consumer access, whether it was a retail shop, movie theater or bank. Attorneys, doctors and dentists or other professional services frequently rented upper floors of downtown buildings. In the late 1890s, tenants, employees and clients of a business on the second or third floor would have expected to use the stairs to reach the offices. Electric elevators for passengers were invented in the late 1800s, but initially, their use was not commonplace in small city office buildings.

As time went on, passenger elevators became more popular, especially in larger retail stores with multiple floors. They were relatively expensive amenities for a smaller building, as they required an operator on site at all times until fully automated elevators became the norm in the 1960s. In the bank building on Jekyll Square in Brunswick, Georgia, there was no elevator, nor was there a practical, affordable space to install one later.

In 1958, the bank finished construction on its new Main Office on Gloucester Street, and the Jekyll Square office building was sold. Clarence and Gerald Ehrlich of Augusta, Georgia, bought the place sight unseen. Upon inspection, Clarence, the elder of the two brothers and the driving force of the investment duo, was dismayed to discover that most of the building's upper-floor tenants had also moved out when the bank vacated the premises. The steep stairs were just one problem, according to local realtor Bill Brown, whose career has spanned nearly three-quarters of a century.

"Back in the days when the bank was new, people just put up with the summer heat," he pointed out. "If you lived here, you simply expected to endure the hot weather and wear your summer suit! The windows in the old buildings were very tall. They were intended to catch some cross ventilation, and nobody expected anything more than that. But after the war, when air conditioning became more popular, people began to demand it."

Adding air conditioning to the three-story structure was a significant, unplanned expense as well as a logistical nightmare, Bill Brown recalled. Adding an elevator was even more complicated, according to several engineers who were called in to investigate the possibility. Each floor of the building would need to be remodeled, and smaller offices would have been eliminated to consolidate space left over after installing an elevator shaft. Suddenly, the number of rental spaces available was shrinking while the costs grew.

Still, the Ehrlich brothers were determined to attempt to make their investment workable with updated amenities if possible. That idea met its end when the property tax bill reached their mailbox.

“The building was taxed on all its space, whether it was rented or not,” Bill Brown observed. If nothing else, the tax dilemma made the Ehrlich brothers’ decision easier—for them. The only option they could accept was to remove the top two floors, the liability portion of the building, and attempt to find a long-term tenant that would appreciate some of the peculiar amenities of an office space that included such features as a large vault from the former bank days. Today, it is likely that the brothers would have met with vigorous protest over the demolition plans. But in 1958, no such preservationist sentiment prevailed.

Across the street, at O’Quinn’s Men’s Shop on the southern half of Jekyll Square East, long-time employee and family friend Ann North locked up for the night one Saturday. Everything looked as it did for as long as she could remember. The tall bank building across the street, now abandoned, loomed silently over the corresponding half of the square. She has tried to recall what time of year it was, but she admitted that she cannot place the season. But she does recall the shock of coming back to work the following Monday morning to find the top two-thirds of the bank building missing. Most of the demolition debris had been hauled away, quietly, on Sunday as the work had been hurriedly carried out. The landmark was decapitated and topped with a Mansard-style roof. Soon, a local attorney purchased the building, making good use of the old bank vault inside for secure document storage. The arches along the side of the building that borders Jekyll Square West were bricked in, the colonnade obliterated.

The city was stunned. Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of a season of destruction that changed the appearance of downtown forever.

The National Bank of Brunswick on Machen Square

In the rapid growth years of the late 1880s, the city began chartering new banks at a feverish pace. Industry and commerce leader Major Columbia Downing and other local businessmen pooled their resources to form the National Bank of Brunswick in 1884. The organizers shrewdly developed their business model on a new concept for the times: personal service. Couriers made regular visits to bank customers, picking up deposits or other transaction requests at their homes or places of business, and returning with the requested completion in form of cash or receipts.

This simple commitment to personalized service was a typical bit of Downing genius. In the post-Reconstruction era, small town businesses were often mom-and-pop enterprises with no spare employees to run banking errands. Busy proprietors appreciated this secure and individualized service in the era before public transportation. If the customer was located off the main downtown corridor, a trip to the bank could have involved a long walk carrying a considerable amount of cash. Or it would have required saddling a horse or mule, or perhaps hitching up a buggy. Making use of a free courier service made doing business with the National Bank of Brunswick easy, and it left more time for owners to operate their own establishments. The visiting banker service was also made available to non-commercial depositors who wanted to transact business in their homes.

In later years, when trolley lines enabled business owners to make a quick trip downtown from anywhere in town, the loyalties had been in place for nearly a decade, and

the bank withstood the near-collapse of the nation's financial systems in 1893. In fact, the new office building on Machen Square's western side was in the midst of construction



The National Bank of Brunswick on Machen Square, 1894. Courtesy Coastal Georgia Historical Society

when the bank collapse hit. As a monument to its confidence and commitment to the city, the directors plowed ahead to finish the building in 1894.

The building was designed by well-known Savannah architect, Alfred Eichberg. His work on the town's City Hall building on Queen Square had set the tone for Brunswick's civic architecture. The design for the bank building was in keeping with his favored Richardson-Romanesque Revival style. The structure's red brick exterior incorporated the typical series of arches and rough-cut granite contrast elements as well as elegant classical details such as Corinthian-style acanthus leaf capitals. As his own expression of the style developed, new features were incorporated into the ornamentation on the bank building. Faces of benign lionesses peered out from a frame of leaves, beaming down on customers that entered the arched colonnade along the Newcastle Street frontage of the bank and adjacent Western Union office.

Inside, the floor and workspace counters in the main lobby were marble. Heavy bars were installed in transaction windows separating tellers from customers, to prevent grab-and-run robberies. Several of the city's largest law firms rented office space on the upper floors. During World War II, the National Bank of Brunswick, like its contemporaries on Jekyll Square, offered extended hours and services for shipyard and other essential industry workers. As the city grew out to meet it, the bank on Machen Square changed little on the exterior, with the exception of a large time-and-temperature clock installed after the war ended in the late 1940s.

Lost and Found

In 1958, the bank name was changed to the First National Bank of Brunswick, and the structure was sold to the Kress Corporation, which operated a classic dime store adjacent to the bank. An unapologetic report in *The Brunswick News* noted that S.H. Kress Company bought the former bank building for \$80,000 and announced plans to "raze the three-story landmark" and erect an addition to its store. The company announced plans for "a new look" that required the 3-story building to be taken "down to the ground," and removed in what was acknowledged to be "a major undertaking in relation to demolition work ordinarily seen here.

"The existing store will be renovated throughout and with its new exterior, will form a single modern two-story building covering the bank property as well," according to the news story. The design for the new structure included a porcelain enamel facing on the lower front of the new store, and an upper story with no windows facing Newcastle Street, and only a few on the north side. The profile and general appearance was typical of the



The “modern” Kress store that replaced the bank building on Machen Square, circa 1960.

Courtesy, Golden Isles Arts & Humanities Association

Right: Granite blocks from the former Machen Square bank building are retrieved from the Snyders’ backyard. Photo courtesy of Jerry Spencer

early 1960s longing for “modern” streamlined architecture. The Brunswick Women’s Club and the Chamber of Commerce requested that the company include “public lounge facilities” (restrooms) in their plans as a “needed downtown convenience.” The store also promised to offer a luncheon counter for downtown shoppers and business people.

After the bank management

was allowed to retrieve any fixtures they desired, the dirty work of demolition was accomplished fairly quickly. The owner of the demolition company hauled off the elaborately carved granite blocks that trimmed the corners, colonnades and arches. These incredibly heavy bits of architectural art disappeared for decades. No one gave it much thought as the new Kress building defined a new era in downtown Brunswick’s skyline; long and low, sleek and smooth, without ornamentation or detail. It looked like the times, reminiscent of machines, fast cars and radios.

There might have been a few long-time Brunswick residents who mused, “I wonder what happened to...” Nobody seemed to know where all the materials went—until two lively and intelligent children started asking questions.

Alex Snyder, a local physician, and his wife, Carol, bought their home on Cedar Creek in Brunswick when their children, Emma and Will, were quite small. There was plenty of room to run and play outdoors, and plenty of good places to climb. Their favorite spot was a tumbled pile of granite pieces. One day, the children asked their

mother, “Why do our rocks have faces?” Upon closer inspection, Carol saw what her children did: the almost-smiling faces of lionesses designed by Alfred Eichberg a century before. The Snyder family had discovered the lost granite trim and



decorative carvings from the old National Bank building on Machen Square.

Historic preservation experts from the Savannah College of Art and Design traveled to the Snyder’s home. After careful research and comparing the weathered blocks to old photos of the bank, they verified that they were authentic. Eventually,

Carol Snyder uncovered the story of the stones. The original owner of the home was also the owner of the demolition company. He had hauled the granite to his riverside property and dumped the priceless treasures into the bank to prevent erosion.

The Snyders donated the blocks to Signature Squares of Brunswick, and with the help of the city, the massive pieces of granite were excavated from the creek bank and hauled to a holding area. There, some of the blocks were drilled to create access holes for PVC tubing for the creation of a water feature sculptural fountain in the restored eastern half of Machen Square. Other blocks provide seating and additional visual interest. Although the landmark building has gone forever, a significant element of its artistry remains for all downtown visitors to enjoy.

The Oglethorpe Hotel: Downtown Brunswick's Grand Lady

Although the Oglethorpe Hotel was not located directly on a square within the original footprint of the city, any lamentation about the destruction of landmarks would be incomplete without mentioning it. The hotel was the brainchild of a group of forward-thinking city leaders who sought to broaden the economic horizons of the city by creating a tourism destination. The reasoning was twofold; first, the hotel would serve as a luxury transitional lodging for guests of the millionaires on privately owned Jekyll Island, and additionally, create a winter vacation destination within the city for the growing number of tourists in the nation.

After the painful conclusion of the War Between the States and the devastating period of Reconstruction, Americans were eager to use a rapidly expanding rail system and newfound prosperity to explore their country. The Industrial Revolution transformed the nation from a majority of isolated farmers and a minority of city-dwellers into a more urbanized society. A booming economy put money in the pockets of ordinary workers, who gladly utilized an inexpensive, convenient network of small cruise ships and railroads for travel. To serve those new customers, the city's main railroad depot was built adjacent to the hotel.

This made it convenient for wealthy and perhaps recognizable guests of the Jekyll Island Club to walk discreetly into the back entrance of the hotel from their private rail cars. Early the next morning, coaches would be on hand to take these overnight guests from the hotel to the wharf. There, private yachts belonging to financial and industrial giants like the Rockefellers would take guests over the river and the sound to the docks on Jekyll Island.

Interestingly, local leaders approached investors from the North, particularly in New York, for the backing to build the Oglethorpe Hotel. Popular literature portrays Southerners as wary and defensive in defeat after the bitter war years, but in fact, many former Union officers saw great potential in the South and more than a few relocated below the Mason-Dixon line after the war ended. Leaders in Southern communities forged valuable business relationships, and in the case of the Oglethorpe Hotel project, success followed.

The hotel, which opened in January 1888, was designed by New Yorker J. A. Wood, not Stanford White as many rumors reported over following decades. The stately red brick building spanned an entire city block, just across F Street at the very

edge of the original founders' footprint for Old Town Brunswick. Round castle-like turrets anchored the ends of the building's 240-foot-long porch, and the open-backed square design allowed for an elaborate Southern garden in an interior courtyard space.



Along with the dazzling crystal chandeliers and pink-grey-and-white marble tiled floors, the hotel also boasted electric lights and indoor plumbing.

The Oglethorpe was more than a tourist destination. It was the center of social life for the city. Balls, wedding receptions, club dinners and meetings were held in the hotel's lavishly appointed interior. Older Brunswick residents

*The Oglethorpe
Hotel, circa 1899.
Courtesy of
Golden Isles Arts
& Humanities
Association*

can recall ballroom dancing and ballet lessons in the hotel's main ballroom when they were children. The excellent dining room hosted patriarchs and even a President (Franklin Roosevelt) in its day.

In its beginning years, guests at the hotel would dress in their finest clothes to be driven by carriage down Newcastle Street to the fountain in Hanover Square to "take the waters." It was believed that the sulfur-rich artesian well water had curative properties. At the very least, escaping from big-city pollution and harsh winters up North, plus the abundant fresh local food available in Brunswick would have been beneficial to visitors regardless of the mineral content of the water.

During World War II, the train station built adjacent to the hotel was the site of bond rallies. Visiting military leaders and other dignitaries would deliver their rousing oratories on the platform to waiting crowds to encourage bond purchases, then step back onto their cars to journey to their next destination.

Downfall

The hotel played host to civic functions, and even a Hollywood production, well into the 1950s. Although Brunswick's citizens still loved their hospitable landmark, it had begun to deteriorate from age and the ever-present enemy of the low country coast: moisture. In fact, a long-time resident observed, "It was a contest to see what would do the Oglethorpe in first: rot or rats."

The final blow came in 1958, when the boiler in the hotel's basement burst. Pipes in the interior had become blocked over the years, and with a lack of money for upkeep or repairs, the owners could no longer operate the hotel. Plans were made to sell the property and structure, tear down the Oglethorpe and rebuild a "modern" motel.

Unlike the cavalier attitude about destroying other landmark structures in the downtown corridor, the local citizenry was quite dismayed at the prospect of losing the venerable Oglethorpe Hotel. Some people attempted to save the place, some dreamed

of opening other types of businesses within its sturdy walls. *The Brunswick News* valiantly ran pictures of the hotel in its decline to attempt to encourage efforts to stop the demolition. All was in vain, however, and the hotel was doomed.

At the final hours, a curious thing happened. The very well-liked local commander of Naval Air Station Glynco was an avid antique collector, and an admirer of classic architecture. Prohibited by his post orders from interfering in local matters such as destruction of landmarks, he nonetheless expressed regret over the loss of the fine fixtures and finishing materials. With the blessing of the owners, he offered his men an opportunity to use duty hours to volunteer at the site before the final wrecking ball swung, to retrieve anything they felt had significance or exceptional beauty. The commander was an accomplished equestrian, and was in the process of having stables built on the wooded Glynco property at the time. He took some of the hotel's marble floor tiles to floor the new structure at the base, prompting good-natured jokes among his men that his horses were so pampered that they lived in marble halls, not stables.

But perhaps even more significant was the keen eye of Huling Tower Armstrong, the Director of Engineering at Glynco. When he gazed upon the lavish pink, white and grey marble floor tiles of the hotel's main dining room, he knew he had to save them from being crushed into rubble by the soon-to-arrive bulldozers. An avid and well-informed antique lover himself, Mr. Armstrong put many hours of grueling hard work into prying up the lovely tiles and hauling them one station wagon load at a time to his family home, with the blessing of the hotel owners and his commanding officer. He had visions of him and his wife building their dream home one day, and incorporating the marble tiles in some grand and appropriate fashion. As it often happens, however, other life priorities jumped ahead of the dream home and in his last years, he insisted that his son Richard, take the tiles and share them with his sister, Katherine Armstrong Clark, of Athens, Georgia. Mr. Armstrong hoped that perhaps Richard and his wife, Martha, would be able to use some of the tiles in one of the several homes they restored in Old Town Brunswick and other areas in the city.

"The problem with that plan," noted Martha Armstrong, "was that once the tiles were installed in a home, they had to stay there. What would happen if the next person didn't appreciate the heritage of the Oglethorpe tiles, and ripped them out as soon as they owned the house? We just couldn't bear the thought!"

Always planning to "use them in our next house," the Armstrongs kept the tiles and hauled them one exhausting load at a time to the newest address. Finally, Richard recalled, "We had to admit that we were never going to use the marble after all." The risk of such priceless historic architectural material falling into the wrong hands was too great. When the family heard of Signature Squares' plans to create a public garden space near the site of the Oglethorpe Hotel that honored the cultural heritage of Brunswick, Richard and his sister agreed to donate the tiles to the preservation organization in hopes that they could become a permanent part of the landscape.

Over 118 years after the Hotel was built, local families and supporters of Signature Squares purchased tiles to be engraved with the names of family members and people they admired. Landscape Architect Jerry Spencer, the creative powerhouse behind the designs

for the revitalized squares of our city, designed an installation area for the tiles within the garden space for Machen Square's western side.

Conclusion

What can we, in the 21st century, learn about historic preservation and maintaining our cultural heritage? Certainly in the interest of economic stability, property owners will have to balance the need to return a profit on building usage with the cost of upkeep of older structures. Perhaps with a higher level of awareness of the value of landmark architecture, owners of these buildings will find ways to incorporate for-profit enterprise with preservation.

Do restaurant patrons prefer to dine in a century-old building that has been "modernized" to accommodate a food-safe kitchen and air conditioning? Is a clothing boutique, bookstore or jeweler's shop more appealing in a "vintage" setting, so long as certain safety and comfort features are in place? Increasingly, public taste and interest has matured to favor such esthetics.

But even the most preservation-minded among us must realize that in order for landmark structures to be spared, they must allow their owners and tenants to realize a profit after overhead expenses are covered. Older buildings are more expensive to operate; factors such as insulation, infrastructure upkeep and challenging physical space layouts must be considered. Solutions are available. The issue is how to afford them, and how to convince lenders of their value.

What can we do? Support non-profit organizations that pursue responsible historic preservation, by volunteerism and financial contribution. Patronize businesses that operate within restored structures. Stay informed and aware of zoning laws, variances and development plans.

Preserving public space is also critical, and perhaps impacts even more people than individual buildings. While it is sometimes costly initially to obtain land and undergo the necessary infrastructure installations, green spaces add value to the city landscape. In Brunswick, we have the significant advantage in that our parks and squares are already part of the permanent land holdings of the city, as dictated in the original plans of Colonial founders in 1771. No further expense need be incurred to obtain ownership of the land. Parks and squares offer inviting places to refresh and relax in the midst of commerce and business tasks. They invite visitors, encourage retail activity and increase value of nearby property.

All things considered, we, as a society, must resolve to save our civic heritage now, before temporary goals overpower permanent legacies. The time to save a landmark structure is before it is sold and the wrecking crew arrives. Is new and cutting-edge more important than our cultural origins? The answer to that question may well define the character of our community.