

Chapman Quarters housed businesses, hotels for a century

By Rebekah Davis

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As late as the 1990s, visitors to downtown Athens could still see the painted sign on the side of the two-story brick building: “Griffin Hotel – Rooms 75 Cents.”

But the nights spent a few steps from the railroad tracks in Chapman Quarters were by then no more than a memory for some of the old-timers around town, and within a few years the hotel and the rest of Chapman Quarters would be no more than a picture in a frame.

The strip of shops between Washington and Market Streets that became known as Chapman Quarters was founded in the early 1900s when John H. Raney built a group of one-level structures along Monroe Street facing the railroad tracks and, in 1906, the newly-built L&N Passenger Depot. By 1909, Raney had finished the fourth brick building, just in time for Leon Cartwright to move the Express Office into its new home. Another occupant of one of the buildings was Dr. W.R. McWilliams, dentist.

In 1914, the year in which the railroad was double-tracked, R.C. Harris arranged with Raney to build a two-story building on the north end of the row of buildings Raney had completed. Harris was interested in having a place to move his City Café with a few rooms upstairs that could be rented. The Harris Hotel and Café opened its doors in August 1914.

That same year, Paul J. Campbell, a Scottsboro native, opened The Flag Tailoring Company in part of the Harris Hotel. The company specialized in tailor-made clothing before Campbell went on to become sales manager of the W.S. Quimby Co. in Boston, makers of LaTouraine coffee.

In 1916, Lloyd Griffin purchased the restaurant and rooming house from Harris, and within a few months, sold part interest to Rube Chambers of Giles County. The hotel became popular as Chambers and Griffin, but Chambers soon sold interest back to Griffin and moved to Texas.

In 1921, Griffin changed the name to European Hotel. He refurnished it and rented the dining hall to Mr. and Mrs. Ben Rambo, who would operate it in the European style. Griffin sold the hotel in 1923 to Mr. W.D. Eastep and moved to Birmingham to manage a large rooming house. After Mr. Eastep died in 1930, Mrs. Eastep continued as proprietress.

In January 1929, Will Kennemer opened his newly-purchased Shell gas station that occupied the corner building along Washington Street. Kennemer’s station was as well known for sandwiches, hamburgers and drinks as it was for its gas prices. Kennemer later sold it to J.E. Chapman, and in 1941, Chapman purchased the other buildings from Frank Duffy, including the Griffin Hotel. Under Chapman’s ownership the business section became known as Chapman Quarters, and as new occupants moved in and redecorated, the buildings took on the appearance of a New Orleans Street.

In 1980, Athens resident Frank Looney recalled early Chapman Quarters in an interview, recounting the combination tobacco and candy shop and fruit stand that stood on the corner next to Washington Street. While some cigars sold for a quarter apiece, others were two for a nickel. By 1982, Chapman Quarters was filled with crafts and antiques shops like Jackie Johnson’s Olde Town Sampler crafts shop.

“We’ve no desire to change the looks of the buildings,” Johnson said that October. “I hate to see the tearing down of an old building. Old buildings have personality.”

Personality or not, over the next several years, the businesses gradually closed and most of the buildings remained empty. In 2000, the buildings were razed to make room for the Limestone County Clinton Street Courthouse Annex and parking lot, completed in 2004.

Note: Information for this article taken from "Treasures of Athens and Limestone County" by Betty Taylor and from Rick Mould's article in the Oct. 24, 1982 edition of The News-Courier.

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