

## **Boom Town: Athens population tripled in early 1900s**

By Rebekah Davis  
Limestone County Archivist

The Athens newspaper headlines in the summer of 1913 used words like “Wonderful Increase” and “Progressive County Site.” Athens wasn’t just growing, it was booming as more and more young families chose to make the town their home.

Between 1900 and 1920, the population of the city of Athens grew from 1,011 to 3,323, and the city stretched itself in all directions to make room for the boom. By the end of the century’s second decade, Athens had a new courthouse that was more than double the size of its old one; two new train depots – one for passengers and one for freight; a new music hall at Athens College; new store buildings downtown; and new cottages as well as larger homes in the city’s most fashionable new neighborhoods – Coleman Heights on Coleman Hill, and Fairview and Pinehurst in what is now the Houston Historic District.

The town limits had also been moved outward to include more neighborhoods and businesses, which accounted for some of the population growth, but the 70 percent increase from 1900 to 1910 was due solely to “natural growth,” or people moving in and growing families. The fact that so many young couples were choosing Athens as a place to raise their families was reflected in the average age of the town’s residents by 1913: 27 years, 5 months.

On a Friday night in July, 1913, the Athens City Council heard from census takers I.B. Lerman and G.G. McCracken about how the city was growing, and where. The local papers reported on the results:

- Population had grown from 1,011 in 1900, to 1,715 in 1913, to 2,693 in 1913.
- The 978-person increase in the prior three years was primarily due to the extension of the corporate limits.
- Population breakdown: 929 white males, 1,016 white females, 342 “colored” males, 406 “colored” females.
- Of those, 538 were street tax payers and 529 were voters.

One very helpful resource at the Limestone County Archives is a roll of microfilm containing the Sanborn Maps of Athens from 1882 to 1934. Originally created to show the layouts of buildings in downtown areas for fire insurance assessment, these maps make it easy to see the booming growth of the city of Athens during this time frame as more streets, businesses and homes are marked on each successive map.

The footprint of the Limestone County Courthouse on these maps is a vivid indicator of why a new one was needed by 1916: The 1835 courthouse that had took up less than half the space in the center of the Square that the current one does. Quite simply, the courthouse was able to survive Union occupation, a fire that gutted it, and reconstruction during Reconstruction, but it couldn’t survive a town and county that grew so fast that it was bursting at the seams.

The map section pictured is the index print for the Sanborn Map of 1910. To see Athens of 1910 in more detail, and to compare it the town of other years and of today, come visit us at the Limestone County Archives.

### **About the Archives:**

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

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