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OLD BERRIEN

Newsletter of the
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Volume 6 Number 1

Spring Quarter 2024

NASHVILLE'S GRAND AVENUE



At the time of Nashville's creation as an incorporated city in 1892, the town had little more than 200 residents.

The first courthouse, a wood framed structure, sat on a former cow lot, that was not fully established as a square. A period photograph shows boys playing baseball in the dirt area that later became the intersection of Washington Avenue and Davis Street. A

dirt trail cut across the space that would later become the Schwartz Pontiac dealership block, providing a short cut to the courthouse from Bartow Street.

The City Fathers had not quite established a plan for the growth that would shortly become the progressive business center for the naval stores industry.

However, with the need for a more substantial structure to replace the forty-year-old courthouse in 1898, a street

One of only a few images of Nashville's West Avenue from the Public School building in the right foreground, viewing eastward toward the County Courthouse in the distance. Two of the city's finest homes in the mid-foreground and the First Baptist Church on the left still give credibility to the city planners effort to create Nashville's Grand Avenue. Photo taken from the City Water Tower about 1917.

plan eventually emerged from the city planners that began to shape the downtown area of Nashville.

The town's relatively flat terrain was conducive to the basic grid pattern that was established with each block being about one acre square. Roads running north and south would be called streets, and those running east and west would be avenues. Anchoring the grid would be the new brick two-story Berrien County Courthouse, placed with its front portico facing westward onto Davis Street.

This positioning of the impressive brick structure with its dramatic center entryway, established itself as the guide for the four blocks around it. A center avenue divided each block in half, creating West Avenue, North Street, East Avenue, and South Street.

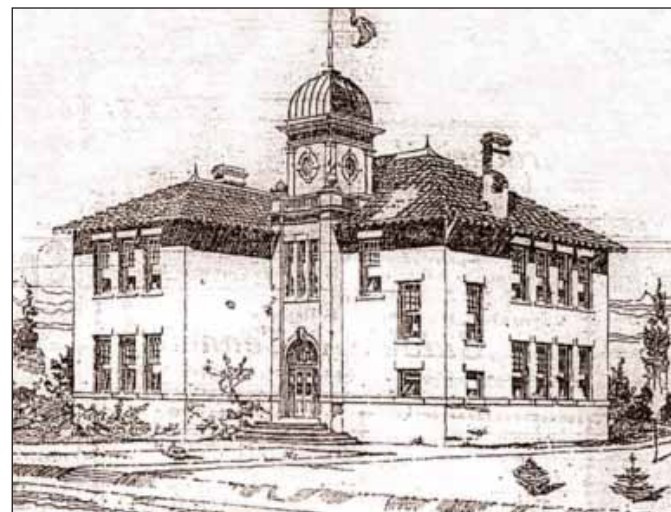
But West Avenue was the "Grand Avenue". Shortly after the construction of the new Courthouse in 1898, two of Nashville's financial institutions were the first to place new brick buildings at this coveted location.

In December, 1900, the First National Bank of Nashville opened on the south corner of West Avenue. In November 1904, the Farmers Bank opened their doors on the north corner of West Avenue. Each bank created corner entrances in a diagonal position to open to the two main fairways, Davis Street and West Avenue.

1904 was a pivotal year in Nashville's push to become a real progressive city. The Ocilla, Pinebloom & Valdosta Railway made its way into Nashville, connecting with the Nashville & Sparks Railroad. A new train depot was being planned. And the Nashville Herald newspaper proclaimed "Nashville's Direst Need"—was a new school house.

In January, 1904, a mass meeting in the new courthouse, brought concerned citizens and leaders together to support a bond election to pay for a new building. In March, the bond election was held and passed overwhelmingly.

Though there are no minutes of the City Council's decision, the location of the school was determined to be at the far end of West Avenue. Mayor R.A. Hendricks assigned Dr. W. B. Goodman to secure the property for the school from J. A. Alex-



1904 architectural drawing of the Nashville Public School. Doorway faces eastward up West Avenue toward the recently completed Courthouse.

ander. In May, 1904, Dr. Goodman closed a deal with Alexander for six acres on the west end of town, for a price of \$500. On June 21, 1904, Mayor Hendricks and the board of Councilmen met and laid out the position of the school on the property. They positioned the front entrance and the domed tower facing eastward up West Avenue to the front doors of the new Courthouse.

The cornerstone of the school was laid on July 4, 1904, and construction of the \$5,000 edifice was completed and occupied by December, 1904. The total cost of land, building, and furnishings—\$10,000.

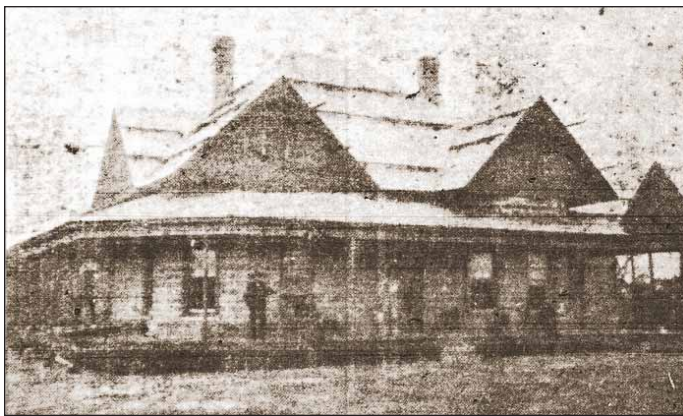
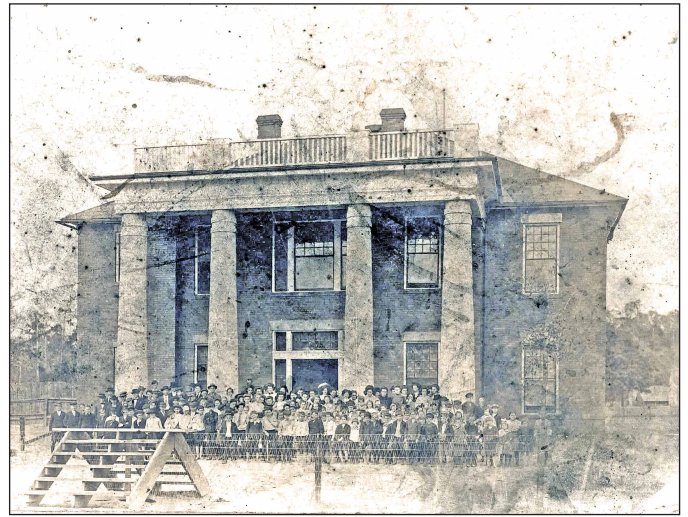
Southwest view of the intersection of Davis Street and Washington Avenue in Nashville. Photo taken from the 2nd floor of the wood-frame Courthouse about 1890. Peoples Mercantile store in the center of photo. Note the young boys playing baseball on the dirt road in the foreground.

In May, 1905, T.H.T. Sutton announced that he had opened an artificial stone manufacturing business, to rival Dr. L.A. Carter's stone works.

In August, 1905, Sutton broke ground for his fine artificial stone home on the southeast corner of West Avenue and what was to become Berrien Street. The home was completed by the end of the year, but not without legal wrangling between Sutton and the City of Nashville.

The City wanted the strip of land between the school and Mr. Sutton's home to the street. Sutton refused to let the City have it until they paid him \$300, a hefty sum considering the City had purchased the full six acres the year before for \$500.

This dispute between the City and T.H.T. Sutton, may have started the erosion



First National Bank of Nashville, above top, had its entrance at an angle facing West Avenue and Davis. The building is now Dessa's Dress Shop. The prestige of being on West Avenue was established in 1905, with construction of the T.H.T. residence, above bottom, on the south side of the avenue, across from the new public school.

In 1907, the City made an addition to the 1904 public school building, but the entrance, above top, was moved to the south side of the building, and featured 4 large romanesque columns. When the First Baptist Church was built in 1913, above bottom, the magnificent tower entrance faced West Avenue, seen here in the foreground.

of Nashville's Grand Avenue concept before it even started. Just two years later, more class room was needed in the school, so an annex was added to the south side of the building. The new addition became the large romanesque-column entrance to the school, facing Washington Avenue. The original ornate entrance facing up West Avenue was relegated to a side door entrance.

Certainly though, the grandest addition to the Grand Avenue was the beautiful First Baptist Church.

In December, 1915, Pastor Simpson S. Mathis announced plans to erect one of the finest brick churches that all Nashville could be proud of. It was projected to cost \$10,000, and he expected that the entire \$10,000 could be raised in one day.

The community responded overwhelmingly, and on December 19, 1915, \$10,094.09 in cash and promissory notes, was raised in one day.

The church was originally planned to be built on Davis Street, south of the McLamb building, however for some unknown reason, perhaps to help establish the character of West Avenue, the church was built where it stands today. The magnificent towered entrance facing West Avenue, certainly reinforcing that idea. On Easter Sunday morning, April 6, 1917, the church was finally opened for services.

For all intents and purposes, the character of West Avenue remained unchanged for three decades. However, in January, 1938, the Berrien County Commissioners applied for assistance

from the federal government's WPA project funds, to help pay for expanding the size of the 1898 Courthouse. The project was to provide more space for the sheriff and the school superintendent offices. Unfortunately, one of the most egregious architectural decisions in County Building history was made.

The commissioners positioned the addition on the south west side of the building, destroying the architectural symmetry of the face of the building. It crowded the portico and minimized the importance of the entrance. Though it did not dramatically affect the Grand Avenue concept on West Avenue, it did diminish the attractiveness of the Courthouse when viewed from West Avenue.

The hope for the Grand Avenue began to wain when the Giddens Funeral Home was constructed in 1937, and faced Marion Avenue instead. The



Only two blocks remain of West Avenue, visible in the center of this 1974 aerial view of Nashville. The Courthouse is in the foreground, and the very top is the Nashville City Hall.

Duncan Masonic Lodge was built on the southeast corner of West Avenue and McKinley Street in 1949, but didn't face West Avenue either.

Finally, in 1973 the City officials eliminated all doubts that the Grand Avenue would ever come to be.

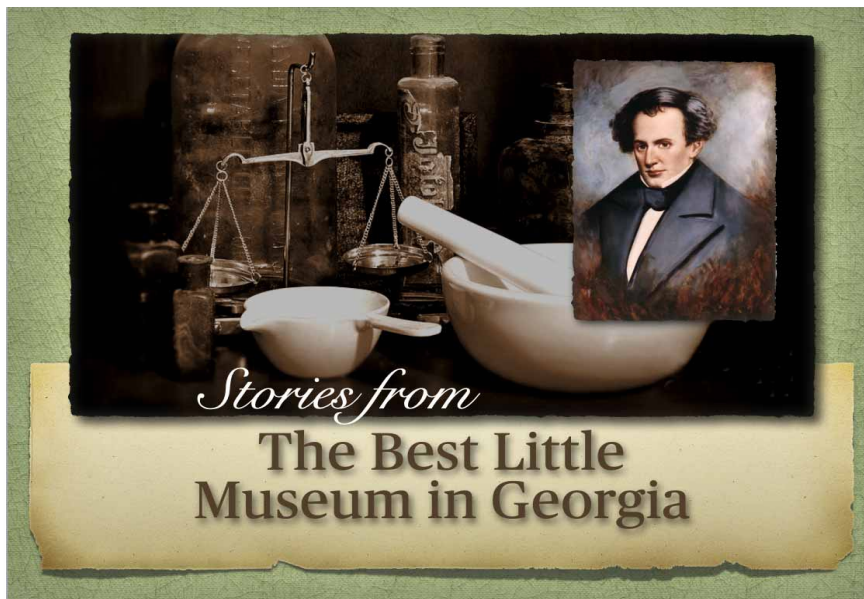
In October, 1973, the First Baptist Church had purchased the property on both sides of West Avenue, from McKinley Street to Berrien Street. With little fanfare, and a token payment, the City closed West Avenue and sold it to the First Baptist Church, so that they could construct their two story Education Center. In September, 1974, the Education Center was opened for use.

For almost four decades, the remnants of West Avenue was relegated to nothing more than an alley way. Then in 2011, Dawn Morrison, Director of Better Hometown received GDOT funding to renovate West Avenue from Davis to Bartow Streets, creating a pedestrian parkway. Today, West Avenue is only a single block between McKinley and Bartow streets, and gives no hint of the Grand Avenue that once was.



Today, the last token of Nashville's Grand Avenue is this street sign from the corner of West Avenue and South Davis Street. It aligns itself in the same direction as its original location, however it only identifies the corner of the stairway and the central hall in the Old Courthouse on the Square.

VIDEO SERIES "STORIES FROM THE BEST LITTLE MUSEUM IN GEORGIA"



This new video series will feature stories of interesting items from the historical collection of the Berrien County Museum and Archive. Each presentation will premiere at the Berrien Historical Foundation's Quarterly Meetings.

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