DECADE OF GROWTH FOLLOWS CAMPERDOWN BRIDGE REMOVAL



The Reedy River Falls, hidden for decades beneath a state bridge demolished in 2002, have spurred growth as the visual centerpiece of Falls Park and a revitalized downtown Greenville. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

FREEING THE FALLS

"The waters tumbled and foamed in their mad leap to the placid pond."

CHARLES A. DAVID
wrote in a column in the 1920s
The Greenville Daily News



The Reedy River Falls was hidden before a bridge demolition in 2002

By Lyn Riddle
Staff Writer
lnriddle@greenvillenews.com

DOWNTOWN

It was never intended to be pretty. It served a purpose.

The Camperdown bridge was a slab of concrete across the Reedy River, one of four ways to cross the river in downtown Greenville. It linked the West End with Church Street and the residential neighborhoods beyond such as Cleveland Forest, Crescent Avenue, Haynie-Sirrine.

And it hid the view of the falls, the place the Cherokee traded and lived, the place Greenville began, the place the area's first mill was built. For many, even when the river ran blue or red or black, depending on what color the textile mills were using, it remained a sacred place. The river was so polluted, it was common for people to say, "smells like the Reedy" when describing something particularly foul.

See BRIDGE, Page 3A

As the mills closed and sewerage improved, the water cleared and the idea of tearing down the bridge to fully appreciate those falls took hold once again. It was a 10-year effort, fraught with opposition, managed like a war and bolstered by coincidence.

Ten years ago this month, in the words of those who fought to make it happen, the falls were freed. In the years since, with the bridge gone, Falls Park on the Reedy done and a nationally recognized pedestrian bridge installed, investment in the West End has topped $137 million, according to city records.

Mayor Knox White says in freeing the falls, the West End was unleashed to become an entertainment and shopping area so established, city leaders no longer recruit businesses there.

"The West End is on auto-pilot," said White.

The largest development is, of course, RiverPlace, a $55 million multi-phase project that includes restaurants, retail, offices, condominiums overlooking the river, a Hampton Inn and below-cost space for artists. The Greenville Drive baseball stadium accounts for $22 million. The most recent is the $18 million RiverWalk @ RiverPlace and its offices and 44 apartments on Camperdown Way, the street that once forged the river by way of the Camperdown bridge.

How it began

Charles A. David, a columnist for *The Greenville Daily News* in the 1920s, remembered reaching the falls along a winding path through a forest of hickories and oaks.

"The waters tumbled and foamed in their mad leap to the placid pond," he wrote. Furman University was located on the bluff above.

In 1913, a wooden bridge was built across the river. A steel bridge followed and then the concrete structure supported by pilings driven deep into the rock bed opened on Oct. 20, 1960. It was considered an engineering marvel, part of the expansive federal highway program and intended to be part of a sweeping highway around downtown, linking Church and Academy streets.

Few cared about the stinking river and its falls. Cars ruled.

Beginning in 1964, the Carolina Foothills Garden Club began working on a riverside park despite the desolation of the area.

"It was a scary place," White said.

Anna Kate Hipp, who joined the garden club in the early 1980s, said the first time she became aware of the intrusion of the bridge was when Clemson University completed a master plan for the park.

"We thought what in the world is this bridge doing here?" she said. Club members, led by Harriet Wyche, spent a great deal of time building a constituency and lobbying City Council to get the bridge torn down.

"That bridge just happened, unobserved," Hipp said.

In April 1989, then Mayor Bill Workman convened a work session to figure out what to do to keep downtown growing. The Hyatt Hotel had opened. The streetscape installed. Now what?

Land/Design Research Inc. of Columbia had completed a survey of people interested in Greenville and found 76 percent of them thought of Charleston when asked about outstanding downtowns. Barely 5 percent said Greenville.

The company also found residents wanted two important improvements: build a coliseum and tear down that bridge.

A traffic study, however, estimated the demolition would cost city residents millions in gas and car repair to go the extra blocks and to widen surrounding streets.

"They even computed the wear and tear of residents' tires," White said.

The city backed off.

Getting serious

After White was elected mayor in 1995, he often took out-of-town guests to see the falls. Their reaction was always the same. What is this bridge doing here? He took his kids fishing there, and threw back anything they caught, and rarely saw anyone. Convinced the bridge needed to come down, he saw little interest among council members.

To him, the ultimate insult came while he was attending a festival in the West End. He was standing near the bridge entrance, which was blocked off, and noticed someone jumping off a section that was close to the ground and disappearing. Then another, and still more. He called a policeman over and asked him to investigate. When the officer returned, he told White people were going to the bathroom under the bridge.

"That's how degraded it was," White said.

In this second term, he took advantage of a speaking engagement before the Carolina Foothills Garden Club to say he intended to get the bridge torn down. Club members welcomed his announcement and pledged their support.

"Knox was the champion that gathered everyone together," Hipp said.

White then went to the Downtown Rotary Club. Many there were less enthusiastic. White remembers the response as subdued. It was no longer a private conversation.

"We can make the Reedy River Falls the pride of our community once again," he told the members and handed out a card with a beautiful picture of the flowing river on one side and a gloomy shot of women standing on rocks under the bridge on the other.

"I could see division before my eyes," he said.

Opponents rallied around a single idea: why tear down a perfectly good bridge? White said he heard that so often he started thinking perfectly good bridge was its name.

Arlene Marcley, then the mayor's administrative assistant, began keeping score of how many letters to the editor favored, how many opposed. One called the river a "stinking cesspool." Another called the effort nonsense. It was inconvenient and would cause traffic chaos.

"Council represents the concerns of a few over the concerns of the masses," one man wrote. A Sunday school class signed a petition saying they would have trouble getting to church.

But the garden club members and others countered every complaint with their dreams for what the area could become. Chandra Dillard learned of the demolition proposal while she was running for City Council.

"I was talking about crime, housing, transportation, going door to door in the Overbrook community, and somebody said, 'How do you feel about that bridge?'"

She promised to see about it.

A decisive election

When Dillard was elected to City Council in 1999, Wyche asked to meet with her at the Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. They stood in the library and looked out the window at the park, the river, the bridge.

Dillard recalled Wyche asking, "What do you see?"

"I see the falls," Dillard responded.

"Who can see it from down there?" Wyche said.

"Well, ma'am, you have a point." Dillard was on board.

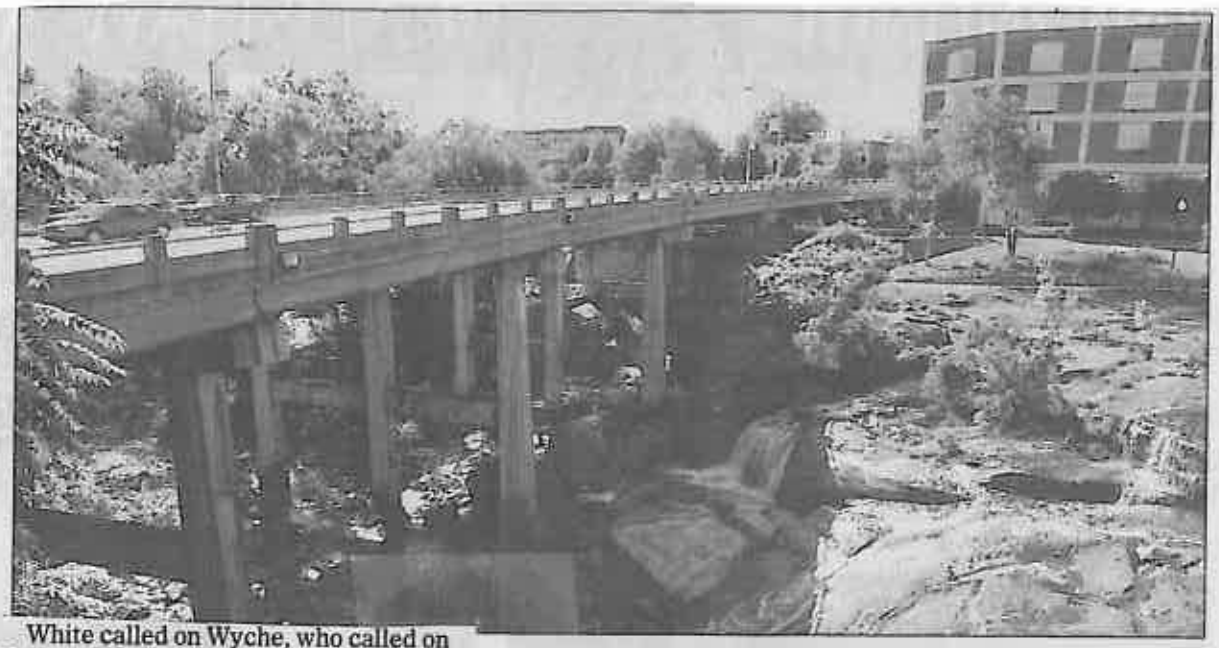
With the election of Dillard, Michelle Shain and Gary Coulter, White had the votes to make the plan happen. But a major obstacle loomed. The city did not own the bridge. It belonged to the South Carolina Department of Transportation.

Hipp remembers the highway department being a major obstacle because no one had ever asked for a roadbed to be torn down.

"They had no willingness to do this," she said.

That's where coincidence came in.

White was at an event at the Commerce Club and standing over the hors d'oeuvres table when he told a friend he had to meet with the DOT head, someone named Betty Mabry. The friend responded that Mabry was the sister of a Greenville man's wife. And, the friend said, she's the former head of the Columbia Garden Club.



In 1999, Camperdown Way extended over the Reedy River Falls. With the Camperdown bridge's demolition, the falls have become the centerpiece of a revitalized downtown. STAFF/FILE

White called on Wyche, who called on Mabry, who came to Greenville and said, "This is so amazing." She said Columbia had just paid a lot of money to build a fake waterfall at Finlay Park, and Greenville had a spectacular one covered up by a state bridge.

She pledged her support. White called on state Sen. Verne Smith to lead the effort in the General Assembly. Smith didn't tell White, but he had never seen the falls, like so many people. A friend of White's saw Smith at the falls the weekend after their meeting. Smith was on board. Virginia Uldrick, then the president of the Governor's School, which overlooks the falls, lent her support. White considers them unsung heroes.

Dillard said a postcard developed by the city that showed what the falls and the park would look like was instrumental in changing opinion.

"It taught us a lesson that people are visual," she said.

A campaign-like strategy took hold with various supporters responsible for contacting others in the community. The list filled four pages. They wanted a big turnout for the Feb. 12, 2001 public hearing in City Council chambers. Members of the garden club arrived early to snatch front-row seats, as planned.

The council meeting was packed. The list of speakers was long. One by one, people walked to the microphone to speak from their heart. Law enforcement and other public safety officials said the detour would cause no change in response times. The Sunday school members expressed concern about getting to church. Merchants, business leaders, garden club members, the park designer, all had a viewpoint. Tension grew.

Dillard wondered whether her fellow council members were changing their minds.

"We heard everybody who signed up to speak," she said. "The mayor let people talk and get it out."

But the city staff had done its homework and had an answer for every challenge, she said.

Two weeks later, the council voted unanimously to tear down the bridge.

Demolition began in August. Workmen cut the bridge apart like slicing a loaf of bread. The cost was $1 million. When it was done, Harriet Wyche's husband, Tommy, whose law firm is perched on the opposite side of the river from the park, celebrated with a beer toast for the workers.

Trees and brush grew out of the rock. A cave-like hole was found in the bank near the Bowater building. Inside were blankets.

Dillard said besides the rebirth of downtown, the bridge demolition also caused people to believe the city could get a project done, quickly and efficiently.

"People trusted our council. We had done something so dramatic," said Dillard, who served on council until 2008 when she was elected to the state House of Representatives.

Construction of Falls Park on the Reedy took two years. The city used the hospitality tax, and the garden club raised more. They sold Eastern hemlocks and white pines, park benches and wooden bridges, trashcans and stone steps. They distributed a brochure listing everything in the park that could be named.

Hipp worked with Lowery in growing the Falls Park Endowment. They worked from an office beside the river and regularly invited people in so they could see what they were giving money to. They saw a big mud hole for a lot of that time, she said.

"We told them to have some vision," Hipp said.

Hipp's family donated $500,000 to the endowment and named the Liberty Bridge in honor of her husband's father, sister and brothers, whose Liberty Corp. was one of Greenville's biggest businesses. The Falls Park Endowment Fund is managed by the Community Foundation of Greenville now and has $2.5 million. Lowery died in 2010; Harriet Wyche died in 2011.



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

Hipp said she thinks of them every single time she visits the park. She goes often.

"I walk out on that Liberty Bridge and see all the people getting such pleasure," she said.

Some time ago, someone asked White the cost of naming the falls.

He responded, "Priceless."