Westminster celebrates 135 years

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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WESTMINSTER — When English settlers moved into the Golden Corner town before 1875, even then, it had the makings to be the quaint area it is proudly referred to today.

As more settlers continued to call the location home, it was formally named Westminster in 1875 and, since then, residents and town officials have watched it grow within its small town boundaries, both physically and metaphorically.

Sandra Powell, director of Westminster's Chamber of Commerce, spoke about a simple childhood, free from crime and big-city mentalities.

"I moved away for 20 years, and when I came back, not much had changed," she said. "Which to me is a good thing. It's the perfect place to raise a family. Everyone knows their neighbors, and it's those small town ideals that keep Westminster a great place to grow up."

For the young members of the community, tangible history lines the streets in the city's many historic districts.

"Houses along Abbey Strett and Isundega Street make up one district, while 100-year-old homes and buildings line Retreat Street, Old

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Main Street and even the Mill Hill area," Powell added. "People have fixed these places up, really beautifying some of the city's most cherished areas."

The Westminster Beacon Mill, which is now shut down, used to employ nearly 700 people from all over Oconee County, Powell said.

"There is no doubt that the mill was the economic driver for this city," she added. "When it closed six months ago, there were about 50 people employed."

Bill Strickland, great grandson of Westminster's first mayor Albert Zimmerman, said he has spent his entire life in the city.

"I've never lived more than one mile from the house I grew up in," he said. "My great grandfather came to Westminster after the Civil War and became quite the businessman. He opened the first store in the city, and according to the blue book, he was the first recorded mayor."

During the 1920s, when the city really began to flourish around the railroad, more stores and homes were opened and constructed.

"Zimmerman and a friend of his worked to clear out much of the area when the railroad was laid," he added. "There is just so much history here, and I'm proud to be a part of it."

The train depot, originally built for the Southern and Airline railways, remains on the national historic registry following its refurbishment after an arson fire in 2005.

Mark Anderson, resident, said his grandfather kept one of the first horse drawn buggies used in the city before 1900.

"I look at some of the old photos and simply can't imagine what it was like to live back then," Anderson said. "Simplicity at its absolute best. It's always important to keep moving ahead, but our Main Street keeps the footsteps of our ancestors alive."

Currently, Westminster has just under 3,000 residents, Powell said.

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FOR THE JOURNAL

Slow and steady growth of Westminster continues today, but the quaint town that residents fell in love with will remain, according to future visions of city officials.



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The west end of Westminster's Main Street looked quite a bit different in 1880 than it does present-day.