

A Tour of 1930s' Mount Holly

By Ernest Stowe

Welcome to the City of Mount Holly! My name is Ernest Stowe, and I am your official tour guide for the City of Mount Holly. Established in 1879, Mount Holly adopted the reputation as a “river town;” its economy and life revolved around the Catawba River. The first settlers of this town were the German, Scotch, and Irish immigrants, who discovered the area around the 1770’s. Then, in the mid-1800’s, the Catawba Indians fought these settlers and gained control of Mount Holly and its surroundings.

Downtown Mount Holly is known for its historic charm. Main Street has always been the center of activity in Mount Holly. Until the late 1980’s, all of the major businesses in Mount Holly were located on one or two streets. As a lifelong resident of Mount Holly, I would like to take you on a “virtual tour” of Downtown the way it looked in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

Our starting point for this tour is the Wachovia bank building on the corner of Central and Main. This bank stands where a two story building once stood—which also was home to a bank on its first story, with a hotel on the second story. Moving down Main Street, where C&M Interiors is now, there was a pool hall on Central Avenue. Inside this building was also a laundromat and a small restaurant. Next to the pool hall was Summey’s Drug store. If you look up, you can still read the words “Summey’s Drug 1927” at the top of that structure. If I wanted to stop by Summey’s for a bottle of Coke or a licorice, my friends and I had to enter through the back door. Those were the days of segregation.

Let’s keep walking down Main to where the Massey building was once located. Where the parking lot of the Wachovia Bank is was once The Massey Company, Inc. This company is a retail hardware store that was established in Mount Holly in 1923 by Olin E. Massey. After a

1959 fire destroyed their Downtown location, they relocated to East Central Avenue. Next to the former Massey building, where C&M Interiors is now located, was the Gaston Theater. This theater was one of two movie theaters in downtown Mount Holly; however the Gaston Theater was exclusively for the African-American community. Next to the Gaston Theater was Paul Derr's Department Store and Rankin's Shoe Store. Where Joe Robinson Studio of Photography is located was a Western Auto Tire Service.

There were two service stations in this area of Main Street. Where David's Detailing and Car Wash is today was an Atlantic Service Station. Across the street where BB&T is now was a McCoy Service Station. After you filled up the tank, you could drop the kids off at the Mount Holly Skating Rink. This place was the hangout for children of all ages. While your kids were at the rink, you could go check out the new Chevys at River Valley Chevrolet, where Mount Holly TV and Repair is today. This car dealership was the premier vehicle provider for Mount Holly residents. If your wife wasn't interested in the new shipment of Chevys, she could stop by the American Tea Grocery Store, where Jones Brothers Supermarket building is located.

Beside American Tea was the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd. Constructed in 1881, the Lutheran church was the first place of worship in Mount Holly. None of the other denominations had houses of worship, but the Lutheran church allowed other congregations to use their sanctuary for services until their own churches were completed. This kindness just goes to show the character of the citizens of Mount Holly.

The building next to the Lutheran church was a five-and-dime store. This store was similar to a modern-day Dollar Tree; it sold a variety of items, everything from toys to yarn. We'll come across another Mount Holly five-and-dime store shortly.

As we walk down Main Street, the next shop would have been R&W Shoe Repair. You could bring all your boots, high heels, roller skates, and moccasins for mending. After you dropped off your shoes you could drop off your suit and your church dress for dry cleaning at Grier's Dry Cleaners. Grier's was the only dry cleaning service in Mount Holly. Next to the cleaners, now where Charlie's Drug is located, was a funeral home that serviced most of Mount Holly's families.

Now it's time to cross the railroad tracks, which once was used by the P&N train that ran from Mount Holly to Charlotte. You could ride the train for a dime, arrive at Uptown Charlotte, go shopping and eat lunch, and still have some coins left over from your allowance. Where Dr. Emmett's optometry practice is now, there was a Shell service station. Just like Atlantic and McCoy, workers would pump your gas so you wouldn't have to leave your car.

Let's walk down West Charlotte Avenue and make a left onto North Main Street. A drug store and a dry goods store were next to the Shell service station. Next to these two stores were the old A&P Grocery and another five-and-dime store. After that came Henry Rhyne's Grocery and Hogan's Shoe Shop. Nole's Jewelry store was located next to the shoe shop, and in the 1940s, the A&P moved to where Mount Holly Furniture Company is today, and later to where Mount Holly Family Physicians is now.

Alongside Mount Holly Furniture Company was a taxi stand called Payne's Cab. Mount Holly used to have a cab service which provided transportation through Mount Holly and Charlotte. It usually had customers from the café, located next to the stand. Holland's Drug store, at the corner of Charlotte and Main, was one of three drug stores in Mount Holly at the time. Beside Holland's was Dr. B.C. Taylor's office and Tick-Tock's Watch Repair store. Next to those two businesses was the Mount Holly Post Office.

After you dropped off your mail you could go right next door and pay your telephone bill at Southern Bell. While you're paying the bills, the kids could visit the Holly Theater next door, and your wife could get a new hairdo at Clifford's Barber Shop for a reasonable price.

Robertson Hardware—adjacent to Clifford's—offered a wide selection of tools and hard goods. Pryor's Service Station was across from the Mount Holly Police Department's current location.

Now let's cross the railroad tracks back onto East Central Avenue. Next to the service station was the Mount Holly Family Restaurant, which is still in business today. After you had lunch at the restaurant, you could go drop off your prescription next door at Charlie's Drugstore. Charlie's is a Mount Holly landmark; serving local residents for over 57 years. Behind the Wachovia bank was Dr. Stroupe's dentist's office. He was the primary dentist in Mount Holly; everyone—young and old, black and white—went to Dr. Stroupe's to have their teeth cleaned. A shoe store was located beside Dr. Stroupe's office called Hamilton Shoe Shop, which was also right next to a small café.

On the corner of Highland Street and East Central Avenue was Mount Holly Cannery Company, which was a large provider of jobs for Mount Holly's African-American community before integration. The A&P store moved from its Mount Holly Furniture Company location to across from Hardee's in the late 1940s. Another service station named Gardner's Service Station served customers from its location on South Main Street.

I hope you have enjoyed this “virtual tour” of Mount Holly. All of us should remember to appreciate the history that surrounds us—wherever we may live—and to do our best to preserve it for future generations. My name is Ernest Stowe, and I am proud to call Mount Holly my hometown.