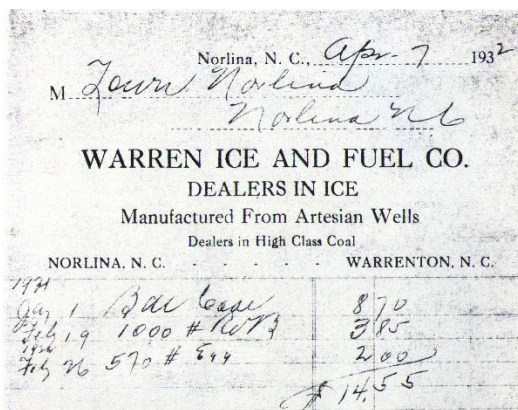

Warren County Historical Tidbits: Warrenton, “The Town That Owns Itself”

And The Fabulous Hotel Warren It Built

It seems, that without fail, every time I start researching one story, well, I will find information about another 2 or 3 or more stories. One thing that keeps popping up again and again is the incredible resourcefulness of the people who paved the way for us here in Warren County and especially the town of Warrenton. Faced with a need, they always came up with a solution.

Let’s turn back the clock just about 100 years and see how the Town of Warrenton built and operated our tallest standing building...the Hotel Warren.



Receipt from Warren Ice & Fuel...Ice from an on-site Artesian Well

Now, before we take a look at the Town’s “\$100,000 Hotel” (equal to \$1,395,560.69 in today’s dollars), I think we need to set the scene...and probably answer your question about my title. The early part of the 20th century saw a return of prosperity after 40 years of hard times and rebuilding. Tobacco and cotton prices had risen cucumbers were king and all were finally delivering much needed income to county residents. It was during this time that the Warrenton Town leaders began to look at modernization to greet the new century. It began early on with a town owned Ice & Coal plant that expanded to Norlina when the new town burst onto the Warren County landscape. The Town

then provided clean water for residents...wells had sufficed on the Courthouse Square and at the Town springs on Macon Street for years, but in the new century Warrenton got in the business of delivering it to homes.

Electricity and phones? Well, if a town wanted these modern conveniences in 1908 then you found a way to pay for them. Warrenton floated the idea of new taxes and found local residents felt like they were already over-taxed, to put it mildly. Never ones to give up, the Town Commissioners opened the Warrenton Dispensary selling liquor from the Market Street location until Prohibition and retiring the electric/phone bond in record time!

And of course we’ve heard the story earlier of the first town-owned business from the 1870’s, the Warrenton Railroad. So, with all this entrepreneurship, a writer from Collier’s Magazine dubbed Warrenton, “The Town That Owns Itself.”

As the second decade of a new century opened, town leaders saw a need for decent lodging for visitors to Warrenton. The hotels of the 19th century on Main Street had largely succumbed to the great fires of 1881 and 1899...Norlina had several fine new hotels, but they were nearly 5 miles away. The only remaining hotel of which I’m aware at the time was a wooden two story hotel facing Main Street on the corner of Macon (where the parking lot stands today).

It seems that the fight to get this hotel built was much like that of the Warrenton Railroad...it took time and the determination of a few citizens. In reading the Warren Record's account of the opening I found that the process actually started about 1913. At that time a large house facing Church Street with several outbuildings stood on that corner for a number of years. Three small shops faced Main Street. But since the move in 1910 of the Post Office from that location to the present Futrell Pharmacy building...and the changing businesses in the other two shops, the Town of Warrenton began to explore purchasing the land for a Grand Hotel.

World War I and finances saw this process continue until April of 1920 when ground was finally broken and the excavation began...BUT...then work was stopped and the hotel boarded up until October 1, 1921 in September of that year. Why work was stopped isn't explained in the newspaper article, but they do note that this delay saved \$15,000 in construction costs...so it seems to have been a good move.



Hotel Warren Postcard from 1932

At long last, Wednesday, May 3, 1922 saw the Grand Opening of the Hotel Warren. While no ceremonies marked the occasion, it was noted that there were already out of town guests in residence...and 40 local guests came for dinner that day.

Now, if you had stopped by the Hotel Warren in 1922, what would you have found in this new first-class hotel? From the descriptions I've read it was the height of modern conveniences and a testament to the Town's dream of building "a hotel as fine as any between Richmond and Raleigh or Norfolk and Raleigh. The

new structure is a monument to the town's determination to have a hotel second to none in any town of 1500 in this country." Enough said!

Included in this modern luxury hotel you would find steam heat throughout the building...hot and cold running water in each room...a private closet (rare for that day) in each room...a bath connecting with all of the 32 rooms...private telephones in your room along with a call bell to the front desk and Gibb's Southern Syncopaters on hand to provide music for your dining, dancing and listening pleasure.

But not satisfied to meet the needs of 1922 visitors, the foundation & roof were built in such a way as to allow the addition of a 4th story and the southern part of the property could hold further expansion. Modern Motorbus service was launched less than two weeks after the opening to meet every train arriving and departing in Norlina. Additionally, plans were discussed by manager, A. B. Anderson, for an addition of a newsstand in the lobby.

But my absolute favorite "modern convenience" recounted by the Hotel manager (one that seems trivial to us today, but was huge at the time) was that they had spared no expense on screens for the windows. He declared, "a fly shall not live in Hotel Warren!"

For the first ten years of its life the Hotel Warren operated at a profit. But then came the Depression and tough times. In reading the newspaper accounts it seems that through the 40s and 50s the once unequalled hotel slowly slipped, year by year until in 1959 the Town of Warrenton announced that on August 1, 1959 they would have to close this mainstay of Main Street.

But, now here's where the story gets good...and I mean REALLY good...in fact, I don't know that I've heard another story like it (and I'll bet you haven't either). But as I tempt you with that, I have realized that today's Tidbit is quickly turning into at least a two-course meal, so "the rest of the story guaranteed to make you smile" will have to wait for our next installment. Tune-in for our conclusion in just two short weeks.

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

"Warren County Historical Tidbits" is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.