

# RUTHERFORD COUNTY HISTORY

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## Rutherfordton

Rutherfordton's business section sits on a hill, with the courthouse at the apex, and steep streets streaming off into residential sections. It is an old town with a proud history, founded in 1787 as the county seat, and located at the juncture of three important frontier roads. It became the center of the area which was the "far west" of that day, and ranked in importance with Hillsboro, Salisbury, Lincolton.

Already the center of commerce for the border country, coming of the railways brought industry, too. Today, with a population of 3,398, it is the home of Tanners of Carolina, Doncaster, and Young Traditions, Inc., makers of fashionable garments, and all owned by the same pioneer textile family. Located also in Rutherfordton are Laurel Mills, Excelsior Mills, Grace Mill, Tru-Pak Co., a manufacturer of pins, and Special Yarns Co.

Rutherfordton has two banks – the Union Trust of Shelby and Security Bank of Forest City. It has one Savings and Loan Association. The handsome Norris Memorial Library also houses the main unit of the county library, and the town has the Rutherford County News.

Rutherfordton has a conservative citizenry. In fact, much of the city's politics revolve around promises of careful and prudent management. A newcomer remarked that Rutherfordton has a sound background for its conservatism. Back in the 1920's, he said, the town went overboard on progressive government, including a paving spree which covered most of the town's streets with cement. When the depression came, the town had to refinance bonds. Some of those paving bonds will not be paid of until 1984.

During this period of economic distress, even collecting water bills was a burden, and this the municipality solved by selling its water system to the Duke Power Company which still sells water to the community.

## Forest City

At the juncture of two highways, James McArthur had a house which was destroyed by fire – all except the chimney. This gaunt landmark gave the crossroad its name of Burnt Chimney. It was the old muster ground for the militia. By 1785, a village had grown up on the spot, and it boasted the Burnt Chimney Academy.

The name was changed to Forest City in 1882; the railway arrived in 1887, and then came the mills. The first was in 1890. This first endeavor failed in 1895, but the successful Tanner & Hayes partnership established Florence Mills in 1897 and this one endured.

The factories attracted workers for the surrounding area, and a bank was established in 1904.

Ever since, old Burnt Chimney grew steadily, finally outstripping its rivals to become the county's largest town (6,574 population).

Forest City has matched its growth with apparatus for convenience and good living. It has two public parks with swimming pools, a municipal golf course, picnic area, bowling lanes, and a planned recreation program. It has a new library, a newspaper, two radio stations, two banks (with extra branch), a savings and loan. There are four schools and seventeen churches. The city has a modern water and sewage system, with a surplus water supply. Three railways and 44 motor lines serve the town. There is an active chamber of commerce.

Rutherford's largest city pleases visitors with its neat main street of retail shops. Strips of trees and grass are down part of the street resulted from a community planning program of many years ago, bringing the town much favorable comment.

In and around the community are the town's muscles – the plants which in recent years have grown in number and variety. Largest employer is the Florence Mills, making gray good, now a plant of the Cone enterprises. A new firm manufactures office furniture.

Modern Forest City is tidy not only in appearance, but also in finances, with a low tax rate of \$.70 and a debt of less than half a million. Its citizenship has been vigorously supporting programs not only to improve the town, but to expand it with job-creating business.

### **Spindale**

The most spirited community rivalry is between Old Rutherfordton, the county seat, and vigorous Forest City. Between them lies the community of Spindale (pop. 4,073) which claims to contain the industrial strength of the county. The largest single plant – the Stonecutter Mills – is located here, and employs around 1,500 to 1,600 normally. The town is also the site of Spindale Mills, Inc., of Elmore Corp., Spinners Processing Company and Sterling Hosiery – all in the textile group. In addition there is the Wright Veneer Company and the Yelton Milling Company.

Spindale had its start with the Frank Coxe farm, developed by Colonel Frank Coxe of Green River as his summer home. The house and land came into the possession of Spencer B. Tanner, and when the railway arrived in 1887 the place was known as Coxe's Crossing.

It was a well-known place. Nearby was the Eaves home, which also was an inn and post office. The flat below was a public campground, where mountain drovers stopped on their way to the market, and this traffic supported a store and smithy.

The first mill – Spindale Mills, Inc., came in 1916, the name of the community was changed, and the town incorporated in 1923. Other mills arrived, including Stonecutter in 1920, and a school opened in 1919. The town achieved a population of 3,000 by 1930.

### **Ellenboro**

Ellenboro is an old railroad town, the large but abandoned "Piedmont House" hotel attesting its popularity with drummers who came by train and hired buggies here to cover the surrounding territory. Today business has moved from around the railway station down to the main highway. The town is home of the Massachusetts Mohair Plush Company, Davis Upholstery Company, Eldon Hamrick Lumber Company, and a cotton gin. It has a branch of the Union Trust Company Bank of Shelby.

It is located on the highest point of the highway between Charlotte and the foot of the mountain. It was a shipping point for monazite.

### **Ruth**

The incorporated community of Ruth is an industrial and residential suburb of Rutherfordton, containing Citizens manufacturing Company (a lumber mill) and the Sparks Lumber Company.

It was incorporated in 1893 as Hampton, named for S.D. Hampton, the first mayor, and renamed in 1906, using the first part of the county's name. For a time, it was the temporary county seat.

### **Cliffside**

Cliffside, with its mill down in the river's gorge and its home rising tier on tier above, was founded by R. R. Haynes about 1899. The large textile plant, now a part of the Cone chain, has operated successfully ever since. The town has a bank, school, churches, and a little business sections. Of much interest to railroad fans is the Cliffside Railway, built about 1905 to connect the mill with the Seaboard, and totaling 3 miles. In 1916, the line was extended 0.7 mile to serve the town of Avondale, where the Haynes interests and associates established another mill. It now also is a Cone property. The little shortline handles most of the heavy freight into the communities and ships products of the mills to market.

The two towns – Cliffside and Avondale – are served by thriving Haynes Banks, established in 1907 and surviving both boom and bust ever since. Even during the Roosevelt Bank Holiday it closed for only part of one day.

### **Towns in South**

Aside from these towns, Rutherford has an unusual number of incorporated places. To the south is a chain of villages of varying sizes built along the railroad and each around a textile plant. Industry came to this section because of transportation and water power.

**Alexander Mills** is an industrial suburb of Forest City, which it adjoins. In addition to the large factory it has a few stores, a school and churches. **Caroleen** also has its mill founded by the ubiquitous Haynes. The homes are on the side of a hill leading down to the river – a familiar sight in old Piedmont towns. There is a school, a bank, post office, churches, and railroad. Nearby is **Avondale**, and in addition to its factory it contains the Rutherford County Industrial Training Center, providing training for industrial jobs. There is a school here, too. **Henrietta** is the site of the county's pioneer mill – it practically is one community with Avondale. All around these villages is much abandoned farmland. The Caroleen Plant and Henrietta Plant of the B.I. Cotton Mills division of Burlington employ more than 900 citizens. Annual payrolls for the two plants are nearly \$3.5 million.

Print cloths, tobacco cloth, twill and shirting are produced at the Caroleen operation. Products of the Henrietta Plant include shirtings, drills, print cloths, tobacco cloth, sateens, twills and coarse yarns.

### **Towns North**

To the north, toward the South Mountains, are old communities of varying complexion – some of them remnants of mining days, some clustered around old churches and schools. They survive today as placid residential centers surrounded by farms and forests. Some of them are delightfully located along ridges offering views of the South Mountains along the McDowell border.

**Westminster** has a couple of stores and a grill. A very small village, it lies in the shadow of the South Mountains and is the site of historic old Brittain Presbyterian Church. **Sunshine**, with two or three stores is a curious little village, draped along the side of a ridge, an unusual location. **Bostic** has a bank, a cotton gin, railroad, some old stores, a filling station, café, florist shop, post office, churches and a school. At one time it was a considerable shipping point. **Washburn** is a tiny community near Bostic – a crossroads community, and **Harris** is the same.

**Golden Valley** is a community, not a village, with a store as the focal point, and around it a thrifty farming section.

**Union Mills** is the site of historic Round Hill Baptist Church, and is the location of Alexander School, an orphanage. It is a fairly large village with several churches and stores, but few travelers see it, for it is about a mile or two off of US 221. **Gilkey** is the site of a lumber yard and church. Other communities include **Logan** and **Thermal City**.