

# City History and City Form

## Lessons Learned and Conclusions Drawn

### INTRODUCTION

It has been said that to effectively plan for the future of a city, one must fully understand its past. Certainly, few cities could be more deserving of such an understanding than the historic city of Salisbury. Reasons for its location, direction of growth, and phases of its development history provide important clues as to how future growth can best be directed and managed.

In addition to local influences, a city's growth seldom occurs in a vacuum from external influences. For this reason, it is important to consider prevailing economic conditions, technological advances, and social trends in place during each major growth phase of a community.

For Salisbury, four major historic growth periods are identified, which will be the subject of this section:

1. **Colonial-Early Years**      **“Horse & Buggy”**      **(1750 to 1830)**
2. **Industrial Revolution**      **“Railroad”**      **(1830 to 1900)**
3. **Early Suburbs**      **“Street Car”**      **(1900 to WWII)**
4. **Sprawling Suburbs**      **“Automobile”**      **(WWII to present)**



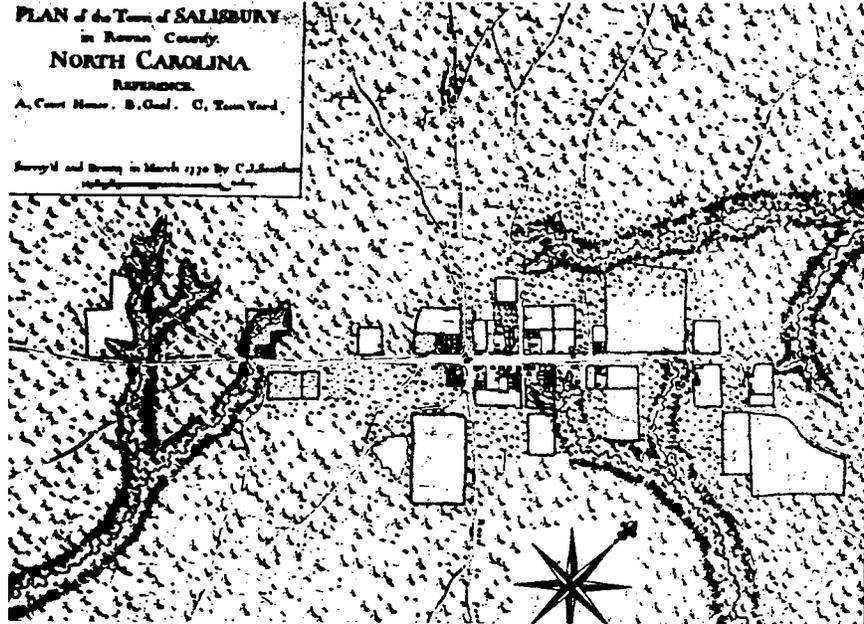
### PURPOSE OF THIS SECTION

For each historic period, Salisbury's growth will be evaluated within the context of what was happening in America at the time. National and regional trends of the day will provide a backdrop for specific changes in the character and shape of Salisbury<sup>1</sup>. Included will be a summary of key elements of city development and form during each period. Features of city form, which have proven most successful, will be identified.

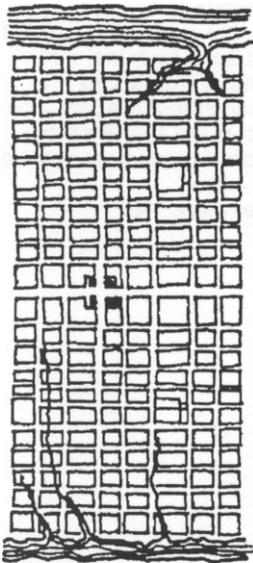
Finally, the section will conclude with a series of general recommendations, upon which the plan's detailed growth and development policies may be built.

<sup>1</sup> Note: Much of the information on Salisbury's early history contained in this section was derived from a 1999 paper entitled *"The Influence of Transportation Technology on the Urban Development Pattern of Salisbury, North Carolina"* by Joe Morris.

## THE COLONIAL/EARLY YEARS



The community now known as Salisbury was first established as a county seat by the Colonial Assembly in April, 1753. Originally known as the Rowan Courthouse, its purpose was to provide settlers with the services of a courthouse and jail. The location of the courthouse was no accident, in that the site was near the intersection of two ancient Native American trails. Ultimately, the new courthouse would serve as the anchor for a new center of government, transportation and commerce in the area. Less than two years later, in February, 1755 the courthouse community was formally created as the Town of Salisbury. Land grants to several settlers soon followed, including one to James Carter, a surveyor in the area.



Philadelphia, PA.

Carter set to work laying out the lots and streets of the new town, devising a plan that had a total of 256 lots. (Not surprisingly, 67 of the lots were on property Carter had been granted.) At the center of his plan, he drew a square made up of four equal quadrants or wards, each four blocks by four blocks. Thus, the heart of the new town had 64 lots on a grid system of streets laid out in a classic rectilinear pattern.

Interestingly, Carter's notion of the proper layout of Salisbury was not particularly original. Rather, it was patterned, like most other American colonial towns of the day, after the 1682 plan for Philadelphia. Philadelphia's plan had three principle features: (1) a gridiron street system, (2) a system of open spaces, and (3) uniform spacing and setbacks for the buildings. Historians have noted that perhaps because it was a principal port of entry, Philadelphia was widely copied by later American towns, as the settlement of the country moved farther to the "West".

Thus, most colonial towns, including Salisbury, took on a basic grid iron or trellis street pattern. In Salisbury's case, this resulted in a series of streets running in a southwest to northeast direction, parallel to Town Creek, and another series of streets running southeast to northwest,

perpendicular to the alignment of the Creek. This layout created city blocks that were 400 feet long and 400 feet deep. Eventually this same basic street pattern would be extended out uninterrupted for five to ten blocks in all directions from the main intersection at the center of the square.

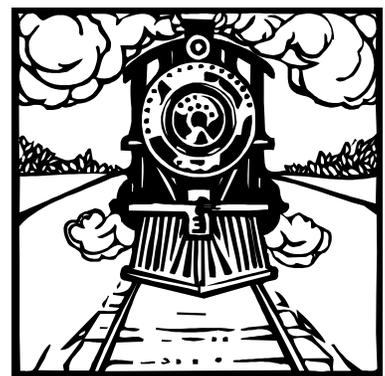
Within the grid iron framework, a very compact town evolved. As Carter had envisioned, the major civic, cultural, and trading buildings of the day were built within a very short distance of the main intersection. A mixture of businesses and homes filled in the voids and spilled out a few short blocks away from the town center. Homes were large and lots small to keep walking distances to a minimum. Servants quarters and smaller houses for the underclass were also kept close, given the need to walk virtually everywhere. This pattern of development would largely define Salisbury's growth for the City's first 150 years.

## INFLUENCES OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

During the period from about 1830 to 1900, numerous economic, social, and technological changes of the industrial revolution would take America, and to a lesser extent, Salisbury by storm. Railroad line, which totaled 23 miles nationwide in 1830, increased to 2,818 miles by 1840. The telegraph (1844) and the telephone (1876) revolutionized the speed at which information could be transferred. The invention of the passenger elevator (1852) and the Bessemer steel converter (1864) paved the way for the development of skyscrapers beginning in the 1880s. Gas lights and, later, electric lights (1878), revolutionized indoor lighting, and made the fire hazards of congested buildings less threatening.<sup>2</sup>

Salisbury was by no means isolated from these revolutionary technological advances. With the arrival of the North Carolina Rail Road in 1855, Salisbury's future became heavily intertwined with rail commerce and the growth it spawned. The rail line, which paralleled Main Street just two blocks down the hill toward Town Creek, established the southeastern border of the central business district. Before long, a number of commercial and industrial enterprises sprang up along the rail line. At the same time, smoke and ash blown by prevailing winds from the north and west made areas to the south and east of the city center "the wrong side of the tracks". As a result, a pattern of city growth was established which would see the most desirable residential neighborhoods of the future located largely to the west and north of the town center. This early pattern continues to this day.

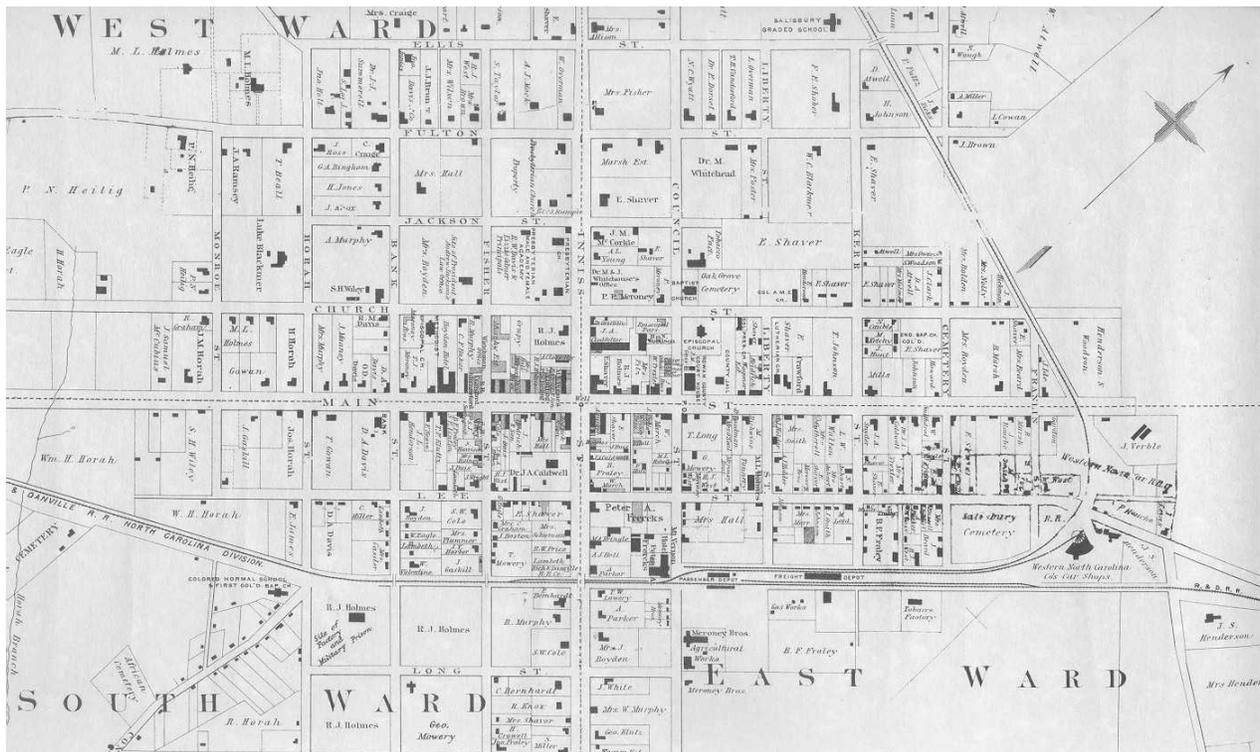
As America was nearing the turn of the century, the influence of rail on Salisbury was to become even more pronounced. The Southern Railway Company selected a site just to the northeast of Salisbury for a large steam locomotive repair and maintenance facility. The "Spencer Shops" opened in 1896, and the Town of Spencer was officially incorporated in 1902. Thus, the northeastern boundary of Salisbury was fixed and an




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<sup>2</sup>Coke, James G., "Antecedents of Local Planning", page 16 of **Principles and Practice of Urban Planning**, William I Goodman, Ed., ICMA 1968

even greater impetus for expansion of the City to the north and west was set in motion.



By 1900, train traffic through Salisbury was at an all time high, electric lights were in common use throughout much of the city, telephone lines crisscrossed the community, and a municipal waterworks was in use.

Even so, these technological advances had their down sides in many cities. When coupled with the enormous demand for labor to drive the machinery of the industrial revolution, overwhelming pressure existed to pack more people into less housing. After 1865, in fact, housing in large cities became congested to the point of plainly unhealthy conditions. By 1870, crowding in New York City tenement houses caused a city-wide equivalent density of 326 persons per acre (compare this with one family on a half-acre lot today).

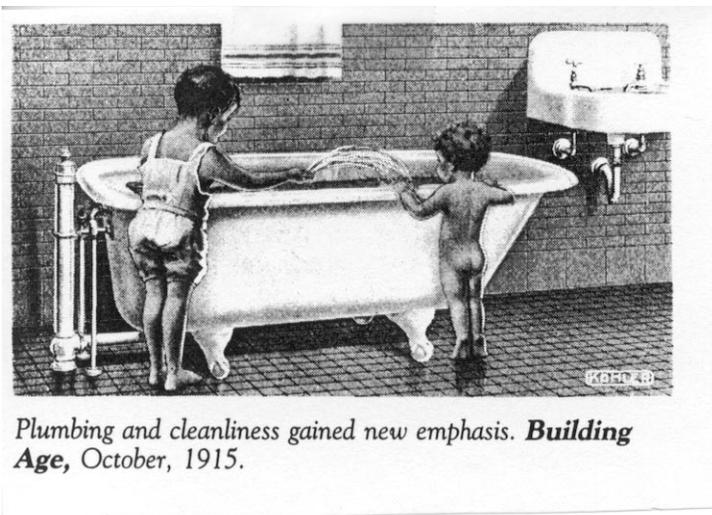
The practical, unwritten principles of city design and natural development constraints which had ruled city form for the country's first 150+ years had given over to the excesses that unbridled technology and demand for labor wrought. Housing for the working class provided for little or no light and air. Sanitation was poor. Diseases spread quickly. Fire was a constant threat. The mood of the country for a different pattern of urban development was ripe for change. One technological innovation, not yet spoken of, would provide the means for this change in New York and, to a lesser extent, in Salisbury: the electric streetcar.

## EARLY (STREET CAR) SUBURBS

By the 1870s, some families in the country's largest cities were moving into a new form of development called the suburb.

"These 19th century suburbs represented more than merely a place to live. They offered a return to nature for the American family. Increasingly, the city was viewed as a den of iniquity where competition, tension, poverty, and sinfulness were rampant. The suburbs provided a safe, "natural" retreat."<sup>3</sup>

But only the wealthy with their own means of transportation and flexible working hours could consider living "so far" from town. The middle and working classes had to live closer to their jobs at a time when roads were poor, public transportation limited and working hours long.



Plumbing and cleanliness gained new emphasis. *Building Age*, October, 1915.

**"She's Waiting for Her Daddy."** There's Plenty of Sunshine in Her Smile Because She Has a Happy Home and Delightful Surroundings. Early Environment Determines to a Great Measure the Future Disposition of Children. Why Not Raise Them in a Cheerful Home Like the One Described Here?

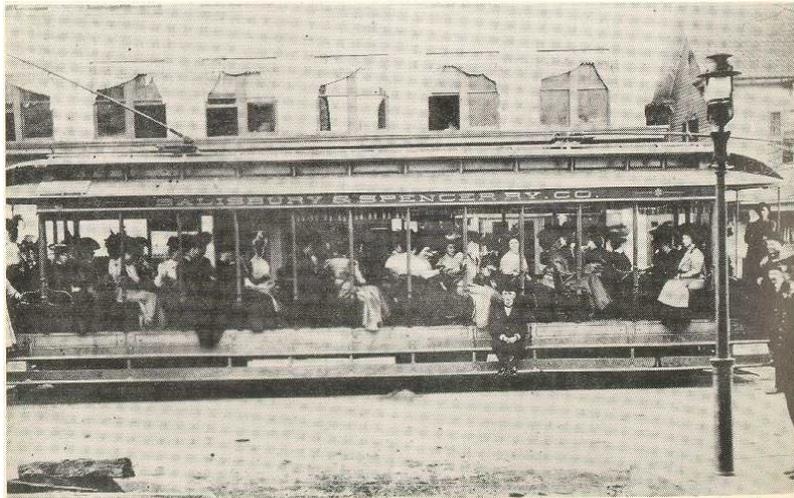
-Caption under an advertisement for a suburban house design, in *American Builder*, dated January 1921, epitomizing popular ideals of the time.

. . . "(Not) until the late 19th century was the American suburb open to the middle and working classes. The development of inexpensive transportation networks, expanding public utility systems, standardized building materials, and building and loan associations all encouraged this phenomenon, as did the speculators and builders who had much to gain from an expanding housing market."<sup>4</sup>

Salisbury was not isolated from this new phenomenon of suburban idealism. From the early 1900's to the beginning of the Second World War, the City of Salisbury underwent its first major change in urban form since the coming of the railroad in 1855.

<sup>3</sup>Smith, Margaret Supplee, "The American Idyll in North Carolina's First Suburbs...", page 21 of *Early Twentieth-Century Suburbs in North Carolina*, C.W. Bishir and L.S. Earley, Eds. N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources, 1985.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*



In 1905, Salisbury's streetcar system was put in operation. In 1906, the Southern Development Company, capitalizing on the availability of the streetcar system, laid out a significant new development southwest of the City center, naming it Fulton Heights. As Salisbury's first "street car suburb", this 314 lot development employed a uniform, rectilinear street pattern. Mitchell Avenue, the neighborhood's primary street, included a central median to accommodate the streetcar line. Most significantly, Fulton Heights offered the convenience of a short street car ride to the downtown for shopping and entertainment and, from there, continuing along Main Street to the Spencer Shops for work. Thus, the availability of cheap public transportation to new areas like Fulton Heights made possible the movement of Salisbury's working class to the "suburbs".

