

The Main Attraction

By Kristine Hartvigsen - **Lake Murray Magazine** - September 2004

Decades before “meet me at the rocket” became a part of our local lexicon, the Confederate monument at the State House was a central meeting place for families and friends attending the State Fair. In the 1920s and 30s, trolleys shuttled people between the fairground’s agricultural and livestock exhibits to midway amusements along Main Street, the pulse point of the city.

With the 1945 news that Japan had surrendered to Allied forces, Columbians poured onto Main Street to celebrate. “It was exciting!” wrote author Margaret Autrey Sims in *Columbia: History of a Southern Capital*. “Everyone was downtown.... We heard the news and headed for town because we knew everybody else would be there, too. Main Street was the only place people knew to gather.”

Earlier times in downtown Columbia had been less celebratory. In 1865, Gen. William Sherman and his Union troops swept through the heart of the city, leaving 85 blocks burned and looted. They spared much of the existing State House, which was under construction at the time.

“General Sherman has given orders for the further destruction of all public property in the city, except the new capitol, which will not be injured,” wrote Maj. George Ward Nichols in *The Story of the Great March*. “I think the general saves this building more because it is such a beautiful work of art than for any other reason.”

Though downtown Columbia’s robust history has always drawn visitors, the commercial landscape hasn’t always been appealing. Like main streets across the nation, Columbia’s downtown experienced a slow decline in the early 1970s as families migrated to the suburbs and retailers followed them to climate-controlled malls.

A landmark presence on Main Street since 1897, Sylvan Brothers Jewelers weathered the setback and continues to bring fine jewelry, silver and china to its loyal clientele.

“When I came to Sylvan (in 1994), Belk’s was boarded up, as was Macy’s,” says gemologist Robert Riemann. “The Kress Building was on its last legs. Basically, downtown rolled up its sidewalks at 5 p.m.”

But Main Street is undergoing a renaissance, transforming both its skyline and the spirit of downtown Columbia.

“Now we are a 24-7 neighborhood,” Reimann says. “The art museum is an excellent neighbor because folks come from there with refreshed eyes and nibble on our ‘eye candy.’”

Karen Brosius, the executive director of the Columbia Museum of Art, says the arts play a critical role in community revitalization. "Our education and cultural programs at the museum provide inspiring and fun, life-long learning opportunities for all ages and motivate economic development for the area. We have an opportunity to make downtown a cohesive cultural scene."

Efforts also are underway to move Nickelodeon movie theater and Workshop Theatre to Main Street sites near the museum.

Matt Kennell, executive director of the City Center Partnership, an advocacy group for commercial property owners, says there is a new sense of excitement around the museum and the emerging new downtown. "Lots of new restaurants are moving into the area and others are expanding their hours into the evening," Kennell says. "It is no accident that this is happening because of the Main Street Beautification Project."

That \$12 million streetscaping project, slated for completion by the end of 2005, will add raised medians, planters, benches, new lighting, trees, bricked sidewalks and new traffic signals. It also will upgrade underground cable, sewer and drainage systems.

"Main Street is definitely open for business," Kennell says. "The focus of this project is to make this South Carolina's Main Street. I think it will be one of the prettiest streets in the region."

Once known as Richardson Street, Main Street was the first road in the city to be paved, in 1908. Running parallel to it was a dirt Assembly Street. Stretched for 10 blocks along it was the bustling Columbia Market, established during Reconstruction. The popular emporium for fresh, locally grown produce moved to Bluff Road, just south of downtown, in 1951 and is known today as the state Farmer's Market.

Inspired by the old downtown market, the Magnolia Market is now held Saturdays during the spring and fall at the intersection of Main and Hampton streets. The open-air market features a variety of vendors. Musicians, dancers and storytellers provide entertainment. Resuming this fall, the Magnolia Market will run September, October and the first Saturday in December, coinciding with the annual Christmas parade.

Tom Pioreschi, who owns Capitol Places development company with wife Madeline, is reclaiming thousands of square feet of abandoned downtown space and converting it into apartments and condominiums. "It is totally, environmentally responsible to have housing downtown, where 60,000 to 70,000 people work," Pioreschi says. "Quality of life is why many people would choose to live downtown."

Rent in the Kress and Berry's On Main buildings, renovated by Capitol Places, ranges from about \$600 for a small studio to \$1,225 for a three-bedroom apartment. Renovation of the Silvers Building has yielded a dozen condos priced from about \$180,000 to \$300,000. Capitol Places has plans to up-fit 75 new apartments in the historic Barringer Building.

Downtown Columbia has a lot to offer shoppers. Men's fine clothiers such as Granger Owings and Lourie's, both on Main Street, cater to an executive clientele, as does Initially Yours Columbia Luggage on Lady Street with its leather-bound planners, brief cases and satchels, all monogrammed free. Next door, Moe Levy's Wilderness Station accommodates the time-off trade with its camping and outdoor gear.

At Main & Taylor shoes, ladies will find classic and right-off-the-runway styles in footwear and handbags, hard-to-find sizes and friendly, personal service from owner Henry Webb and his staff.

At Carolina Interiors Market, in the old Tapp's building, you can shop the decorative accessories and antiques of many local interior designers and retailers under one roof.

The Columbia Museum of Art store has a delightful selection of gifts and other artful indulgences. Coral's Ladies Fashions stocks a broad inventory of clothing for all ages and sizes. You'll even find formal gowns for little girls, fancy tiaras and satin gloves.

Main Street may very well be the wig shop capital of the state, with Cosmo's Wigs, International Wigs and Solid Gold Beauty Supply a short walk from each other.

The focus is military and survival gear at the Army-Navy Store, which carries fatigues, backpacks, combat boots, field rations, even hand grenades and gas masks.

Lake Murray resident Jodie McCord relocated Salon 1507 to the Sylvan Building because she saw promise in the upscale atmosphere of downtown. The salon's services include hair styling and color, manicure, pedicure, facials, microderm abrasion and chemical peels.

Bookworms in the family can find something satisfying to read downtown at Capitol City News & Maps or at the Richland County Public Library. Youngsters of all ages adore the stories, songs and plays performed every Saturday at 10:30 a.m. in the library's Children's Room.

Theater options, both film and stage, are plentiful in the downtown area. Nickelodeon, which is run by the Columbia Film Society, offers foreign and independent titles. Trustus, Workshop and Town theaters stage fresh scripts and improvisational skits. All offer acting classes.

An architectural tour of the city is a vivid way to trace its history. From the pre-Civil War buildings on USC's Horseshoe to the Hampton-Preston Mansion, the Mann-Simons Cottage, the Robert Mills House and Woodrow Wilson's family home. Historic Columbia conducts hourly tours of many sites.

It took nearly 50 years and a succession of architects to finish the State House. Original plans for the structure called for an elaborate tower instead of the signature copper dome. The State House and its monuments are absolutes on any historical tour. Be sure to look for the bronze stars in the granite outer walls, marking Civil War artillery strikes.

The steeples of historical churches add an appealing contrast to the contemporary office structures around them. One of these steeples belongs to the 83-year-old Bethel AME Church, vacant since its congregation outgrew its sanctuary and moved to Shandon in 1995. The church has leased its empty building to the non-profit Renaissance Foundation, which plans to convert it to a performing arts center and museum.

The original First Baptist Church, historic site of the 1860 secession convention, and its newer next-door sanctuary is home to Columbia's largest congregation. Other proud spires surviving from antebellum times include those of First Presbyterian Church, St. Peter's Catholic Church, Washington Street United Methodist and Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. It is said that during Sherman's assault in 1865, Trinity Episcopal was spared because parishioners removed the name and mounted papier-mache' crosses on parapets. Union soldiers passed it by, believing it to be a Catholic Church. Sherman's mother was Catholic.

The cemetery at Trinity has perhaps the largest live oak tree in Columbia. Called the "Sire Oak," its trunk measures more than 20 feet in diameter. Confederate General Wade Hampton, later governor, and family members are buried beneath the towering oak.

Amid the historic sites, downtown Columbia continues to grow. The new 17-story Meridian Building is a stunning addition to the city's changing skyline and adds 1,000 parking spaces in its adjoining garage. First Citizens Bank recently announced plans to build its new \$40 million headquarters and park on Main Street.

Artist Blue Sky's public art projects always capture attention — from the Tunnel Vision mural and double-take fire hydrant sculpture on Taylor Street to the outsized chain links attaching the Sylvan and Kress buildings on Main Street.

The green expanses of Finlay and Memorial parks offer respite in the midst of town for the weary visitor.

For the hungry one, restaurant options abound. Hennessey's is a business-day lunch oasis that transforms itself into an elegant dining room after dark. Villa Tronco, the city's oldest Italian eatery, occupies a Blanding Street building that was once a 19th century firehouse.

M Cafe is a popular stop for exotic Chinese dishes in an uptown setting. Other choices include the Hampton Street Vineyard, Mac's on Main, Jammin' Java, Rising High, Cat & Cleaver, Hunter-Gatherer and Immaculate Consumption.

There's plenty of nightlife, too. One of the newest hot spots for dancing downtown is Rio Nightlife. In addition to its excellent microbrews, Hunter-Gatherer Brewery and Ale House books some of the best live music in the Midlands. And at Mac's on Main, Chef Fatback (Barry Walker Sr.) serves up live jazz and blues along with his signature shrimp and grits.

Main Street, Columbia is still one of the Midlands most exciting places to explore.

