

Early days in Swain's County Seat; Part 1

Don Casada 16 Feb 2025

Swain County was formed from portions of Macon and Jackson on February 24, 1871. Soon thereafter, a 25-acre tract Lucy Ann Cline sold to the county commissioners was subdivided into 42 plots for the county seat of Charleston. Most were nominally a half-acre in size, although there was some variation. A one-acre section located a bit southwest of the middle of the 25 acres was set aside for a town square.

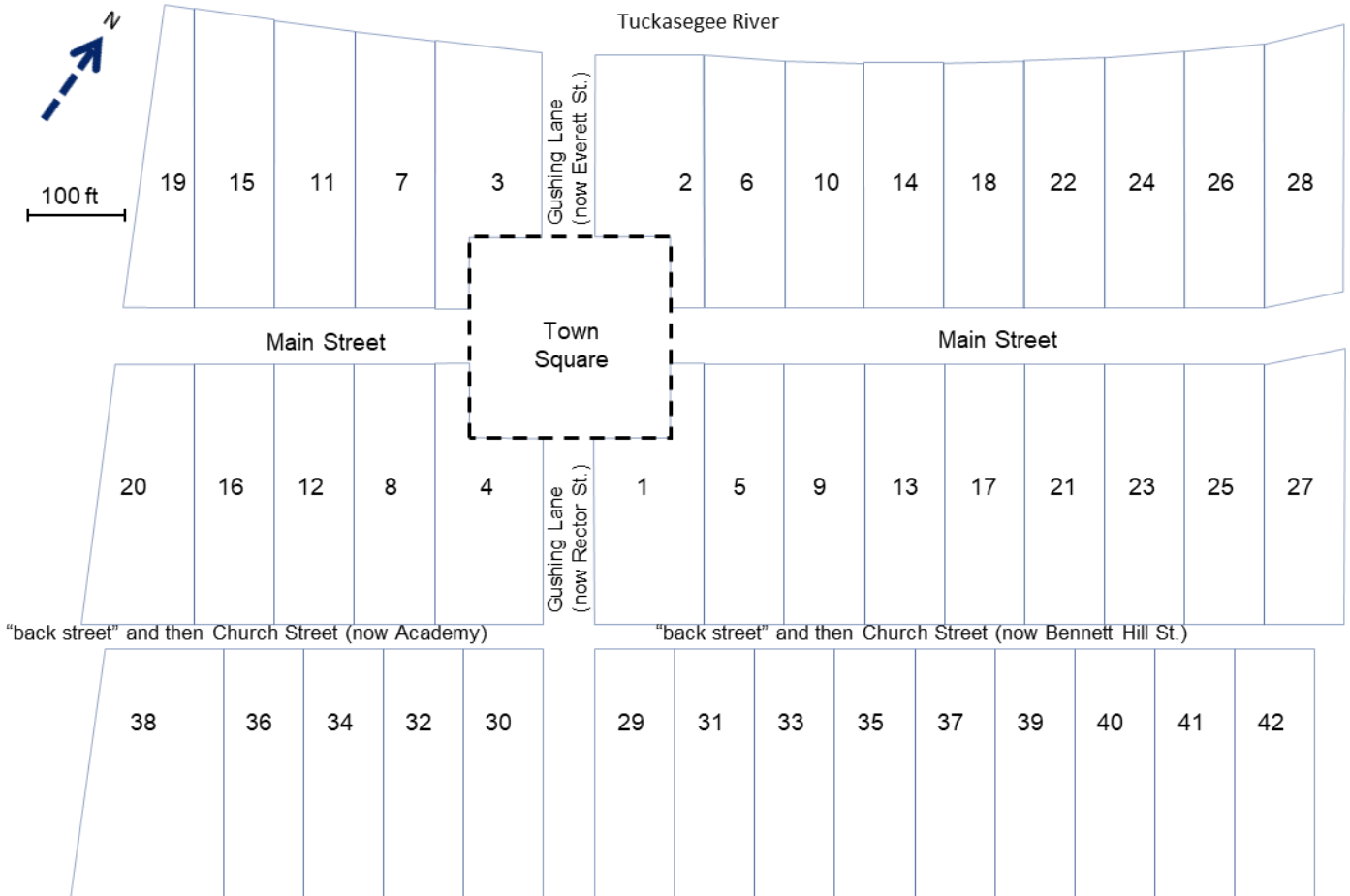


Figure 1. The original layout of Swain County's county seat: Charleston, NC

The first lot sold by the commissioners went to Epaphroditus "Epp" Everett, a Civil War veteran who served first in the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry Regiment and later as Captain in the Thomas's Legion Indian Battalion Company G. Everett, the county's first sheriff, acquired lot 9 for \$125 on February 2, 1874. Two months later, fellow former Legionnaire D.K. (David Kimsey) Collins purchased adjacent lot 5 for \$155, and followed that up with purchase of lot 1 on January 5, 1875 for \$90.

What did the area look like when Epp and D.K. bought those lots? A description provided by Lafayette "Fate" Wiggins in a 1939 Joseph Sargent Hall recorded interview gives an answer. Fate¹, who was raised in the home of his stepfather and mother Billy and Sarah Shuler Morris, at the mouth of Juney Whank Branch on Deep Creek, recalled:

¹ Fate's father was Moses Wiggins. He disappeared or died during the Civil War era. Fate had trouble with the law when he was young, but married life with Mary Beard apparently put him on the straight and narrow. A bit more about him is provided in the [tale of the family of his grandparents, James Holland and Polly Sherrill Wiggins](#).

“Back when I was a boy, I can remember when they’s only three houses in Bryson City – Old John Shuler, Alf Cline and Lucy Ann Cline. I’ve saw all this place in wheat and corn on both sides of the river. Deep Creek was settled up with about six (white) families in it. Several Indian families lived up Indian Creek and Deep Creek.”

The fact of the matter is that the area had been cultivated by Cherokees for decades, and likely centuries, before 1819, the year in which a Cherokee land cession treaty made the area available for acquisition of land from the state of NC. Buildings in the Cherokee town of Tuckaleechee, located at what is now Bryson City, were set afire and its “large quantity of corn” was destroyed in 1761 during a punitive expedition led by Colonel James Grant.

At the end of June, 1870, D.K. Collins, his wife Mattie (née Franks) and their son James Robert were living with Mattie’s parents in the Mill Shoal area of Macon County. Apparently it was the formation of a new county and county seat – and the opportunity for economic growth – which drew the young Collins family. They’d move here by February 19, 1872, when D.K. was named the first postmaster for Charleston. He held this post until March 1889, shortly after Charleston was renamed Bryson City for his friend, T.D. Bryson who lived on the north side of the river. A bridge erected in the mid-1880s made travel between the two homes far more convenient than crossing the river through the Bear Ford, located just below the Slope Street Bridge. Bryson died the following year; Collins served as estate executor.

The June 19, 1890 issue of the *Asheville Democrat* newspaper noted that several new structures had recently been completed or were in the works in Bryson City, including the recently completed Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, then under construction, and the Presbyterian Church for which ground had just been broken. The most notable structure, however, belonged to D.K. Collins:

“The new two-story brick store of Mr. D.K. Collins is one of the handsomest in the State, and is equal, in structure and finish, to any of its size in Asheville. It is 30 feet wide, 100 feet deep, and 16 feet from floor to ceiling on first floor. Mr. Collins carries a very heavy stock of general merchandise, and is doing a large business.”

A photo of the new two-story brick building which was included in the *Bryson City Centennial* volume, validates the newspaper claims. In the late 1920s, the former store was converted to a movie theater. A decade later, the Community Building was erected; its eastern wall was just over 13 feet away from the elegant Collins building. Years later, local realtor Bob Varner leased the Collins building for most of the 1960s decade.

In May, 1965, the Bryson City Bank directors agreed to a merger with Northwestern Bank. At that point, the BC Bank had operated for over six decades with only two presidents – D.K. Collins and S.W. (Stanley Warren) Black, and two locations: the D.K. Collins Store and the BC Bank building erected on the northeast corner of the square. It was verbally agreed that there would be no change in bank employees. Mr. Black died the following month. Some long-term employees stayed on, but some were pushed out.

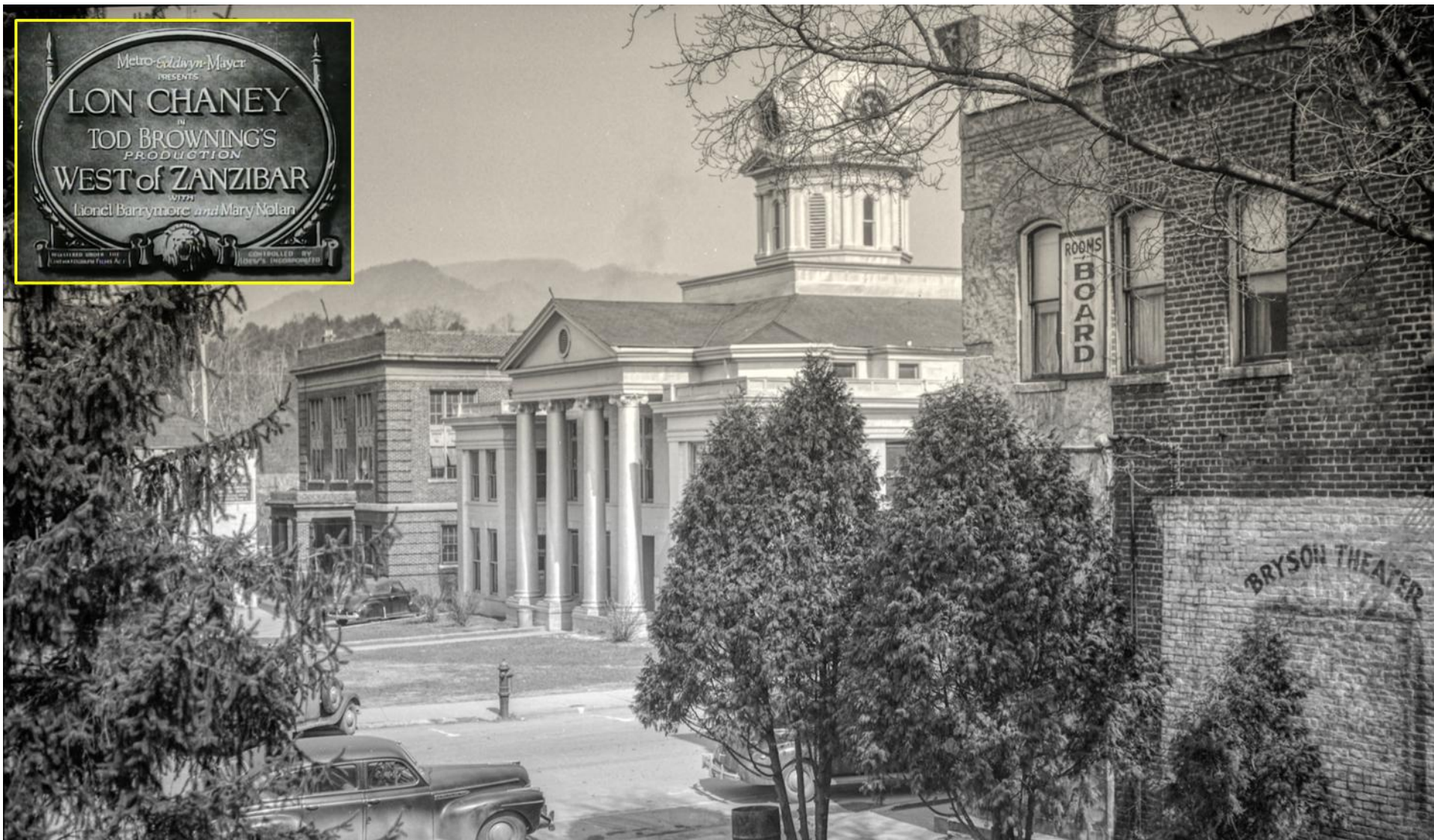
Northwestern quickly determined that the Bryson City Bank building wouldn’t do, and established an agreement with the Collins heirs to erect a new banking building east of the Community Building. To make way for this “progress,” the almost seven-decade old Collins building was leveled. The new bank building is now owned by the Chamber of Commerce. For a time, it served as the fly-fishing museum; now I’m not sure what it’s used for.

Shortly after the Collins building was destroyed, Joni Mitchell released a song, “Big Yellow Taxi,” which includes a line fitting to the Collins building destruction:

“Don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘till it’s gone?”



D.K. Collins home and store, from Bryson City Centennial. The trees which flank the store appear to be paper birches. They saplings which were transplanted must have been of considerable size to have reached this size by even as late as the early 1900s. The year 1889 is in letters above D.K. Collins at the peak of the brick building. Above the left-most window are the letters "PO" – for Post Office. The first Charleston Post Office and the first three or four years of the Bryson City Bank operations were inside the D.K. Collins store. D.K. Collins was President of the BC Bank and he was also the first town Postmaster, serving in that position from 1872 to 1889.



Northward view from the Community Building porch. This photo was probably taken in the 1950s. Two elements of the old D.K. Collins store building on the right speak to two of its uses after his death (1924). It was converted to a movie theater in late 1928. On Friday, November 30, 1928, the “New Swain Theater” opened with the silent film [West of Zanzibar](#), starring Lon Chaney. Young Jeanne Cogdill took a room in the upstairs of the old D.K. Collins Building – note the “Rooms – BOARD” sign – when she went to work in Sneed’s Restaurant (just around the corner to the right) in 1951. Lovely Jeanne was snared by Jim Sneed and they married on May 23, 1954. The building beyond the courthouse was the jail. Even the calaboose was architecturally and aesthetically appealing in that era. Photo source: Kelly Bennett Collection, Hunter Library.



In the 1960s, Bob Varner leased the D.K. Collins Building from the Collins heirs and operated his real estate business there. This was during the period when the Big Laurel venture was underway. Beyond the building is Roper's Gift Shop and then beyond it, the T-shaped Sneed's Restaurant sign can be seen. Town police offices were in the ground floor section of the Community Building at the time; a Bryson City Police car was parked at the location seen here the majority of the time during that era. Photo source: Lillian Thomasson collection (courtesy of Doris Thomasson Brown).