

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

At the end of the Reconstruction period following the War Between the States, businessmen were looking for a replacement for the extremely lucrative rice crop that reigned until 1865. In the late 1890s, that replacement became the lumber industry. The most significant economic endeavor undertaken in Georgetown County was the opening of the Atlantic Coast Lumber Company. Georgetown has always had a minor lumber industry since our earliest days in the 1730s when it was necessary to build our own export vessels. Winyah Bay has always been too shallow to allow the larger ships into the port, so we built shallow draft, barge-like vessels to export our many products.

In 1899, a group of lumbermen chartered the Atlantic Coast Lumber Company (ACL) in the state of Virginia, with a capital of \$1,000,000. Within the first year they quickly built a hotel, a large store, and a large office building, dry kilns, foundry and a machine shop. Rows of houses were built for their workers. These were built in the area now known as the West End of Georgetown and originally called New Town. Some of those duplex and single residences still stand. Wharves and sheds along with a brickyard, dry houses, railroad tracks sprang up along the Sampit River. Property of the mill included land along the Sampit from the old Palmetto Shingle Mill behind the 300 block of Front Street to land of the former Serenity Plantation, west of the area. This was the largest building boom in Georgetown's history.

The ACL helped the Port of Entry business soar by 1905 and by 1917 exceeded previous values during World War I. The Georgetown Times described the bustle of a summer day in 1905 thus, "Front Street all day long is filled with people, drays and wagons carrying merchandise; our merchants are busy; our banks are busy, our wholesale merchants are doing an immense business, our water front is alive with shipping of every description, as marked last week, when on one day, eleven large three and four masted schooners arrived, besides two steamships, two barges and the usual fleet of river steamers. There is hardly ten minutes any day but what your ear is greeted by the whistle of some ship, steamer or tug arriving or departing. It sounds sometimes as if you were in New York harbor."

The ACL plant covered fifty-six acres in the bend of the Sampit River. It covered all of what is known as Goat Island, across from the town and expanded to the mainland on property now occupied by the steel mill. Tokens were issued to workers of the ACL to be used in their company store. At its peak, it employed over 5,000 workers. Creating even more jobs in the area, a number of businesses opened to support or benefit from the ACL. One of these was the E.I. Dupont de Nemours Company. In 1909 they opened an alcohol plant adjacent to the ACL. They purchased the wood waste and sawdust to be converted into alcohol. This plant lasted until 1922. The ACL produced electricity to power the mills and sold enough electricity to serve the whole town.

On April 12, 1913, a disastrous fire destroyed part of the facility. Undaunted, the ACL quickly recovered by building a large, fireproof sawmill, the most modern in the world. As a result of World War I, orders for shipbuilding products and other wartime materials for the ACL and port kept the lumber business active.

Early signs of the demise of the ACL came when the Dupont Alcohol plant closed its doors because of a decreased demand for alcohol. The demand for lumber began to decline as the depression approached. Finally, in 1932 the ACL sadly closed its doors. A terrific blow to the economy was felt.

The guiding force behind the establishment of the Atlantic Coast Lumber Company was Georgetown's first Mayor, William Doyle Morgan. He was the first civic leader to change the title of Intendent to Mayor. He was a true catalyst for much of Georgetown's growth during his term of office, 1891 – 1906, and therein lies another story.