

SOCIAL CIRCLE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Statement of Historic Significance

The Social Circle Historic District consists of nineteenth through early and mid-twentieth century residential, commercial, and industrial areas, all significant aspects of this representative Georgia Piedmont town. The District is significant in terms of architecture, landscape architecture, commerce, industry, transportation, and community development.

The structures in the district represent the major architectural styles and periods of the time. Included are examples of Greek Revival, Plantation Plain, Gothic Revival, Second Empire, Queen Anne, American Victorian, Victorian Eclectic, Italianate, Colonial, Georgian, Neo-Classical, "Half-Houses", Federal, Bungalow, Tudor and Ranch. These structures are quite typical in terms of scale, materials, design, and workmanship of buildings found in other Georgia Piedmont towns of the same age.

The residential buildings in the district are situated in a landscape of trees, shrubs and grass, which derives from the late-nineteenth-century domestic landscaping practices. The landscaping in Social Circle was done by local people and was not designed by a notable person or part of a grand scheme. The tree lined streets, and well kept public and private properties have changed little from the early part of this century.

Transportation was important to the development of the Social Circle District, affecting the plan of the town itself and the development of commerce and industry. The location of the town was determined by the intersection of two early roads and development followed no formal plan. The commercial enterprises that grew up at this location served a considerable area of southern Walton, northern Newton and western Morgan counties. The coming of the railroad providing easy access to Augusta and Atlanta enhanced the position of Social Circle as a center of commerce and made the town more desirable for industry. Oil mills, cotton gins, and finally a textile factory were developed within the district, their location determined largely by that of the railroad. Although of less regional importance today, the substantially intact central business district continues to serve its historic function in the absence of shopping centers in the town. The railroad depot and a few adjacent warehouses remain, converted to new uses. Portions of the cotton mill can still be seen after the 1994 fire which virtually destroyed an establishment that had a significant economic and social impact on the town and region since its founding, providing employment and housing for a large segment of the town's population, and opening a substantial area of the town to development.

Social Circle is located in Walton County, which was created by the Georgia General Assembly in 1818 and named for George Walton, one of Georgia's signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Joel Strickland of Tatnall County was the man who drew Land Lot 96 containing about 250 acres where Social Circle is now located, bordering both sides of the Old Hightower Trail used by the Creek and Cherokee Indians. John Blackmon and two others purchased the land from Strickland for \$118.00. Blackmon soon acquired sole ownership and added his dwelling to those already standing near the intersection of two important roads of the period, the north-south "Rogue Road" and the roughly east-west "Hightower Trail." In January of 1826, Blackmon and Augustin B. Pope measured off an acre of land with an already standing apothecary shop, and Pope paid Blackmon \$100 for the lot.

Social Circle bears one of Georgia's most widely known placenames, but its origin is unclear. Local tradition has it that a group of travelers met at the crossroads and one of their number, impressed by the hospitality and joviality of the group remarked, "This sure is a social circle." John Goff, an authority on Georgia placenames, offers another, though less colorful, explanation. Pointing to an earlier community in Bulloch County, he postulates simply that the Walton County community was named for that town. Goff also includes the name in the category of "social and fancy names," a category of placenames long in use in Georgia and other states. Because of its favorable position on two intersecting trading routes, the town began to grow. John Blackmon gave land for a Methodist church. Soon a small storehouse, the meetinghouse and a shop gave the little settlement the semblance of a village. It was a likely spot for business, for at the junction of the two routes (Hightower Trail & Rogues Road) near the well, travelers often paused to rest. When a post office was authorized in 1826, Blackmon was designated the first postmaster. The town was incorporated in 1832 with limits set at a quarter mile radius from the post office, thus making it one of Georgia's round towns. The town had no formal plan. Development occurred primarily along the two nearly perpendicular intersecting main streets and on smaller streets and alleys laid out roughly at right angles to the main streets. The coming of the railroad that cut diagonally across the two main streets reinforced this "irregular" plan.

In 1829 the greatest portion of this land was sold to William Cabiness who was interested in organizing a town. In the same year that Social Circle was incorporated Samuel Catlin granted to the trustees of the Social Circle Academy five acres of land for the purpose of establishing a male and female academy. By 1835 an academy had been established for the education of the young men and women of

the town and surrounding countryside. Farmers and planters not only sent their children to school in Social Circle, but also continued to trade at the growing number of stores in the town. In 1835 an advertisement for town lots in the Athens Southern Banner described the place as “now settled up with moral and respectable citizens, and bids fair to be a place of some notice”. It was the railroad, however, that assured Social Circle a bright future.

The Georgia Railroad reached Social Circle in the early 1840's and was completed between Augusta and Atlanta in 1845, providing the merchants and planters with easy shipment for their goods. The completion of the railroad was greeted with a great deal of celebration in Social Circle. In addition to the railroad, a stage route connected Social Circle with Athens via Monroe, High Shoals, and Watkinsville, providing access to the county seat, Monroe. For many years rail service between Monroe and Social Circle was discussed, but it was not to be a reality until 1880 when the first run was made on the new 10-mile route. This line was extended in 1884 when the Gainesville, Jefferson and Southern Railroad purchased the Walton Railroad Company. This route, providing access to Gainesville through Belmont and Hoschton, was operated until 1947 when it was dismantled. The 10-mile route from Social Circle to Monroe is still in operation as a freight route, part of the Georgia Railroad system.

During the Civil War, the railroad was of strategic importance and the depot and other facilities at Social Circle were burned in July of 1864 by the Federal cavalry. During the March to the Sea, the 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the 20th Corps under Brigadier General A. S. Williams reached Social Circle on November 18, 1864, and destroyed the Georgia Railroad from Social Circle to Madison. Railroad service was restored to the town by February 1865, and the depot was rebuilt by 1866. It is believed that this structure exists as part of the present depot. A new wing was added to the depot in 1913.

The railroad also stimulated the hotel and restaurant business in the town. The Social Circle Dinner House was established about 1850 to provide food for the train passengers and crews during stops in the town, and the town made a bid to attract tourists, capitalizing on its “healthful climate.” The Dinner House received high praise from the Atlanta Southern Confederacy, Augusta Dispatch, and Athens Southern Banner. The Spencer House, also known as the Supper House, was located across the tracks from the depot in the 1860's. This frame structure housed the express company and a grocery. It appeared on the Sanborn insurance maps as late as 1909. A third notable hotel, the Echols House, operated from about 1871 until 1894. The Garrett House and annex, later the George Stanton Hotel, was located near the depot until 1956.

In 1860, there were some forty houses, churches and schools which made up “a pretty village,” according to historian Adiel Sherwood. After the destruction of the railroad and occupation of the town by Federal troops during the Civil War, the town rebuilt and continued to grow with more enthusiasm than ever. Cotton contributed to the growth, as did the railroad. At one point prior to the Civil War Social Circle had been the terminus of the Georgia Railroad. Even today freight trains rumble through the town several times each day. In 1869 the town limits were increased to one-half mile and Walton County's first newspaper, the Walton Journal, was issued at Social Circle. Advertisements were carried for general merchandise establishments, a tin shop, a milliner, and a physician, among others. In 1887, John M. Brown published the Walton County Vidette in Social Circle, but later moved operations to Monroe. One of his advertisers was Lawrence and Company of Social Circle.

The commercial structures of the town also date from this boom period. Prior to 1890, most of the commercial structures were of frame construction. They were gradually replaced by one and two-story brick commercial structures of eclectic Victorian detailing during the succeeding three decades. The majority of these structures form a block on both sides of Cherokee Road below its intersection with Hightower Trail. This continues to be the primary commercial district of the town and has been the object of a concerted effort to revitalize the central business district. City officials and the Better Home Town Program volunteers are working on a downtown beautification project. Many of the commercial buildings have been rehabilitated within recent years, most, on the whole, sensitively.

Social Circle has survived largely intact from the period of its heyday at about the turn of the century. There are few modern intrusions with the exception of a few commercial structures. The residential areas remain largely residential and are well maintained. In 1977, the Social Circle Historical Society did the work to get Social Circle into the National Register of Historic Places. The city then adopted an Historic District Zoning Ordinance and appointed an Architectural Review Board to insure that the character, which the town had retained, was not lost to unplanned development.

In 2001 the city adopted a new Historic District Ordinance and appointed an Historic Preservation Commission. The Commission has resurveyed the Historic District and is working on designation for expanded boundaries. Social Circle also has a Tree Ordinance in place, partly, to replant the old trees as we lose them and assuring that the landscape architecture of the city remains intact. In summary, Social Circle represents many of the typical aspects of a turn of the century Piedmont Georgia town and the citizens have taken actions to retain those qualities for the future.