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Chapel Hill: Past and Present

CHAPEL HILL: PAST AND PRESENT

Situated atop a hill, the town of Chapel Hill has its roots as a quiet, relatively rural college town. Yet in the past century, this small town has flourished into a University City and is now a vibrant commercial center with diverse intellectual, cultural, and civic amenities. The major challenge for Downtown Chapel Hill has been to adapt to its changing character while preserving its small town heritage, historic visual character and pedestrian experience.

Historic events of the past have influenced the streetscape today, presenting unique challenges. Major floods into the early 20th century propelled the Town to build sidewalks and buildings at a higher elevation than the street to protect businesses and homes from water damage. This elevation difference between historic buildings and the street continue to present challenges as greater attention is given to pedestrian accessibility from sidewalk to building. The Master Plan guidelines for sidewalks begins to address the challenges of these grade changes. In addition, the decline of the predominant street tree species, the American Elm, to disease in the mid 20th century resulted in a loss of the graceful street tree canopy visible in the photographs below.

The planning efforts of the past two decades have taken important steps in restoring the pedestrian experience of Downtown Chapel Hill, and it is through the implementation of these initiatives that important lessons are learned about what is needed in approaching the future viability of Downtown.

The Downtown Chapel Hill Streetscape Master Plan of 1993 identified the diverse areas within the downtown, from the quiet residential and commercial mix of West Rosemary Street to the bustling retail and restaurant establishments of East Franklin Street at the periphery of the University. The observation of Downtown as being comprised of a diverse set of streetscape conditions is particularly important in devising a strategy that is implementable across the varied sections of the study area. The Master Plan was successful in understanding the importance of maintaining areas of movement as well as areas of gathering. The new Streetscape Master Plan will continue this effort at improving pedestrian movement while identifying opportunities for public open space.

In evaluating the changes and improvements implemented to date, the Master Plan intends to continue to emphasize the importance of supporting public uses and interactions, from establishing public open spaces such as courtyards and seating areas to improving pedestrian and bicycle circulation through Downtown. Future efforts should aim to improve the pedestrian experience while also improving the visual character of the streetscape. A defined plant palette will help to establish a consistent tree canopy throughout Downtown. A bold strategy is needed to unify Downtown and lend it a powerful and consistent visual identity that will set it apart as the culturally diverse and vibrant urban center that it has become.



Flower Ladies, circa 1950's



WWI Liberty Loan Parade



College Boys at Rathskeller, circa 1940's



Flood at 100-Block of East Franklin, circa 1919

Photos from 'Remembering Franklin Street,' *Chapel Hill Magazine* November/December 2007.

Photo from the North Carolina Collection at the UNC Library.

