

## **A History of East Knoxville Business**

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It is my effort today to recall the history of East Knoxville and show its importance in the development of the City of Knoxville. East Knoxville is and has always been the location of some of our more famous attractions and important government services. It has thrived for more than 153 years in spite of population shifts, urban renewals and a lot of bad press.

It is also my desire this morning to wish out loud and hope that we can find way to improve the image, business opportunities, and quality of life in this section of our city.

East Knoxville businesses have played a big part in the growth of the total city. Indeed, some of those eastside businesses had good reputations that went far beyond our city limits. They were as diverse as the Swan's Bakery that shipped bread and cakes throughout this region; the Union Stockyards that bought and sold cattle in this region. The Keller Foundry shipped ore products across the country. The Lay Packing Company meats were served on tables throughout the region.

Eastside businesses were as iconic as the C&S Laundry, the Tick-Tock Drive-In, Free Service Tire Company, the Pizza Palace and Krispy Kreme. There was Harman's Beverage that handled Pepsi Cola products. All were on Magnolia Avenue. Roddy Manufacturing on Morgan Street produced all the Coca Cola Products. It is a fact that most of the bottling companies in Knoxville in the 1940s were located in East Knoxville; They included:

- Birely's Orangeade Co, 520 E. Magnolia
- Royal Crown Bottling Co, 1502 East Magnolia
- Brown Belle Bottling, (black owned company) 514 Mee Street near East Main

The City of Knoxville was established in 1791. Most of it consisted of just a few blocks between First and Second creeks. Central Street divided the city between east and west. Jackson Avenue divided it between north and south. So, the corners of Central and Jackson were the very center of Knoxville.

The city began to put its meager resources to work to better the lives of those within its borders. People who lived east of that boundary felt the need to have an organized government, too. They petitioned the State Legislature and on February 22, 1856, became the City of East Knoxville with three voting wards. They elected James Swan mayor. Each ward had two city council members.

This new city included East Clinch Avenue, East Church, East Cumberland, East Hill, East Main, Willow and all the streets that ran across them. The town limits were Bertrand Street on the east, Central on the west, Linden Avenue on the north and the river on the south. After 13 years of operation, it was annexed by Knoxville in 1869.

Roads like East Jackson Avenue, Magnolia Avenue and Washington Avenue were still in Knox County, that had been established in 1792. These roads and crossroads went undeveloped until the town of Park City was organized February 19, 1907 with eight voting wards and elected a mayor named W.R. Johnson. It had a population of 7,000 and an area of two square miles. It extended from the west end of what is now the Magnolia Avenue (Casey C. Jones Memorial) Bridge to beyond Chilhowee Park.

Park City established a school system and in 1908 changed the name of Armstrong High School at 2350 Linden Avenue to Park City High School. A new addition was made to it and by March 1909 and it had 1,000 students in grades 8, 9 and 10. In those days, Knoxville students finished high school in the tenth grade. It is interesting to note that between 1864 and today, 23 schools have been located in East Knoxville.

On August 15, 1913, the wooded Park Street Bridge was replaced by a new concrete one. It was 550 feet long and 54 feet wide. It cost \$40,000. The Knoxville Tribune of April 6, 1917 described the progress in Park City. It said, *"It now boasts three of the longest thoroughfares in greater Knoxville, they being Jackson, Magnolia and Washington avenues. The three streets are extremely wide and paved with the latest form of asphalt material."*

The City of Knoxville was well aware of these advancements, and wanting to increase its territory, annexed Park City, Lonsdale, Mountain View and other areas in early 1917. The worth of Park City was said to be \$1,641,000.

Not many people think of KUB as an East Knoxville entity, but our water operations have existed in this area since the idea of a water system arose in 1809. Not much came of it in those early days, but there was always trial and error. As late as 1883 machinery on the river pumped water to Reservoir Hill, the site now occupied by Green Elementary School across from the Fort Hill Building on Summit Hill Drive. Pipes were supposed to carry the water to various parts of the city. Unfortunately the water force was too great and several mains burst on Gay Street, shooting water into the air and flooding nearby streets.

Finally in 1894, a 500,000 gallon water tank was built on Reservoir Hill and began to provide real water service to various parts of the city. KUB was established in 1939 and has made continuous improvements to the system.

On May 17, 1914, the Knoxville City Commission passed an ordinance giving permission to the Southern Railroad Company to construct a spur track on Campbell Street. It ran from the Smithson Stadium (Bill Meyer) to a point on Willow Avenue and Central. The railroad built three trestles over First Creek to have access to the businesses in that area. Railroad officials claimed it the most profitable spur line in Knoxville.

During the 1940s, Jackson Avenue was bustling with various kinds of businesses between Central and First Creek. There were 36 businesses on that street. There were 11 businesses on Willow that ran from Central to Florida Street.

East Knoxville is home for the Safety Building and City Jail. We don't need to toot that horn too often, but it is what it is. We have here the new bus transfer station on Church Avenue. We have the Civic Coliseum that hosts shows, conventions, dances and sports activities. There is Chilhowee Park, the Knoxville Zoo and the Tennessee Valley Fair, where hundreds of thousands visit each year.

We can boast of the Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Mabry Hazen House and Pellissippi State Community College. There is the John T O'Connor Senior Center, the Urban League, the Cansler Family YMCA and the city softball and baseball complex on Winona Avenue that was once Evans/Collins Field.

A large number of Knoxville's black citizens live in the east. At one time, the black business community was evident and viable. There were several taxicab companies operating at the same time. There were poolrooms, grocery stores, office buildings, a service station, a drugstore, a motel and other businesses that employed hundreds of people. They no longer exist.

Urban Renewal projects that began in 1959 and ended in 1975 decimated the black community. They took hundreds of homes, scores of businesses and 15 churches. Eight of those churches built new structures. Only two of the uprooted businesses were able to move and still operate today. Both are still in East Knoxville.

As a resident who takes pride in the progress of East Knoxville, I am bothered by the loss of fast food outlets here. Kentucky Fried Chicken was the last to close. It was preceded by Taco Bell, Krystal and Wendys. I remember when we had a Burger King and a Burger Queen. There were Mrs. Winners and others.

Not only have we lost the convenience of those restaurants, we have lost employment opportunities. I don't know the reason for those closings and I will not speculate. I asked a person employed by the Chamber about this situation, but he did not know. A long time businessman on Magnolia had some ideas, but they, too, are speculative.

When I shop at the Sav-A-Lot or the Fish Market in Burlington, I see among abandoned buildings, several embers of life, but it is not the Burlington of yore. I wish some enterprising people could determine what would work there and ignite some type of development.

I wish this organization would do a simple survey about current businesses and what other businesses are needed. It is a must that our business sector appeal to those who live here and to those who live elsewhere. There are several ways to build pride in this area and to channel that pride into better sales.

Festive decorations using simple streamers, signs that offer a welcome feeling and special theme sales could help the cause. We should not forget there are seven public schools in East Knoxville. Many of those students are shoppers now and will be for life if they, too, develop community pride. They could be involved in:

1. An essay writing contest about the area
2. A poster contest touting East Knoxville
3. A slogan contest on why it's a good place to live and shop and play

When I read the Halls Shopper, the Fountain City Shopper, the Bearden Shopper or the Karns Shopper, they are chock full of community pride and what they have to offer. We in the East should do the same things and more on a regular basis, but our good and important efforts are sparsely reported without a free regularly distributed publication. Are more ads needed to support or own shopper?

When I first joined my fraternity, we had a crusty old regional director who often said, "He who tooteth not his own horn, the same shall not be tooted." We in the East must begin to toot that horn, enhance our image and attract new homeowners, new businesses and new consumers.

I don't begrudge or envy the success of other parts of this city. They worked for and touted those successes. They made people want to eat in their restaurants and shop in their stores. They constantly spread the welcome mat in print, on the radio and on TV.