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“CAN’T YOU SEE THE SUN’S SETTIN’ DOWN ON OUR TOWN?”: DECLINE, SPACE,
AND COMMUNITY IN FRISCO CITY, ALABAMA

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

MARY AMELIA TAYLOR

April 2011

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the physical and social decline of Frisco City, a small town in southwest Alabama, and its residents' associations with changing spaces and communities in the downtown area and the Frisco City school. It includes a rephotography project hosted on a website and a short documentary film that demonstrate the changes in the downtown physical environment and residents' ties to its spaces. The group of residents interviewed for the study seemed to view the declining downtown area and school as signifiers of their declining community; the economic, social, and physical changes in the town's later history seemed to be accompanied by residents' continuing detachment from social networks based in town. In 2009, however, a new civic group formed in hopes of providing a solution for the town's decline by building new communities that share and care for restored spaces together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would be nonexistent without the encouragement of many wise, patient, and helpful people. First, my deepest thanks are reserved for the residents of Frisco City, who shared their memories, thoughts, and pictures with me and whose conversations gave me a thesis to write, especially Jimmy and Fredia Tatum, Ronnie Ray, Anne Brown, Dell Walston, Nickey Gaston, Faye Taylor, Annie Laura Tatum, Marilyn Williams, and Lou Dunn. The other residents who stopped to talk with me in downtown Frisco City are too numerous to name but were too helpful not to thank here.

I am exceedingly grateful to the people at my other home in Oxford, all of whom inspired me to think deeply and broadly. Dr. David Wharton's guidance encouraged my developing interest in documentary studies, and ideas inspired by an environmental studies class with Dr. Andy Harper taught me what I could do with it. I am also particularly grateful to Dr. Harper for his help with video equipment and editing software; without his patient instruction, this project would be without its film and website. Drs. Nancy Bercaw and Kathryn McKee helped me talk through the beginning stages of this thesis—and graduate school—and encouraged me with helpful advice and high expectations.

My graduate experience in Oxford would have been a bland one without the broad interests and entertaining, meaningful conversations that Xaris Martinez, Ross Brand, Jennifer “Bingo” Gunter, Meghan Leonard, Novelette Brown, Tyler Keith, and Jake Fussell shared with

me; they were not only classmates but friends and teachers. I am also grateful to Jimmy Thomas and Kyle and Amy Jo Kite, whose interest in this project, free-ranging conversations, and general understanding, helped me to keep things in perspective. Finally, I owe my deepest, and longest-standing, debt of gratitude to my parents, Tim and Martha Taylor, whose faith in me continually astounds and inspires me.

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INTRODUCTION

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL DECLINE IN FRISCO CITY

In 1992, country-folk singer/songwriter Iris Dement released her first album, *Infamous Angel*, which featured a song called “Our Town.” Inspired by a drive through a deserted small town in Oklahoma, the song’s lyrics sadly cling to distant memories of family, porch-sitting, neon lights, first cars, and first loves, the narrator’s only remaining connections to her dying hometown. The chorus’s farewell to the spaces that hold those memories laments:

And you know the sun’s setting fast,
And, just like they say, nothing good ever lasts.
So go on now and kiss it goodbye,
But hold on to your lover ‘cause your heart’s bound to die.
Go on now and say goodbye to our town, to our town.
Can’t you see the sun’s settin’ down on our town, on our town?
Goodnight.¹

Though the narrator gives no reason for her town’s decline, the gut-wrenching sense of loss her mourning conveys struck a chord with Tim Taylor, a long-time resident of a tiny southwest Alabama town called Frisco City.² Taylor identified with the song when he first heard it in the early 1990s because he, too, felt a connection to his town through the memories he had made there, whether while playing as a child in the town’s cotton gin or sawmill water tank, buying two-for-a-penny cookies at a downtown grocery store, or later working at the downtown Coca-

¹ Iris Dement, “Our Town,” *Infamous Angel* (Songs of Iris/Forerunner Music, Inc., 1992). The introductory notes with the album give the story of Dement’s inspiration for “Our Town.”

² Tim Taylor, telephone conversation with author, March 18, 2011.

Cola Bottling Company.³ For Taylor, those memories were attached to businesses and spaces that, by the 1990s, no longer remained in Frisco City, and several conversations with him revealed that over the following decades he, like Dement's narrator, sensed a continuing departure of his town from the place of his memory. In a 2010 interview, as he looked at several pictures of downtown Frisco City in the 1950s, he remarked,

“What now looks like *nothing* used to be a thriving...booming town, and it's really amazing when you look at all these old pictures, to see how it used to be. And you can hear there's still a lot of traffic coming through here, but there's not any business. There's just—very little.”⁴

Many other long-time residents use terms like “unbelievable,” “hard to imagine,” and “real sad” to describe the difference between today's reality and their memories of the town's busier days.⁵

The downtown area's buildings, even since my own childhood in Frisco City in the 1980s and 1990s, have indeed changed dramatically, and remain vacant reminders of a once-bustling past.

Today, in 2011, it certainly appears that Frisco City is in a state of decline. The vacant-looking main street is a typical weekday sight in the Monroe County town; cars and trucks steadily pass through the roughly half-mile downtown area, where almost all of Frisco City's few remaining businesses are located. The north half of this area is relatively busy and would almost make one rescind a “declining” label for the town. A small pharmacy, a Dollar General, a tractor dealership, and Frisco City's only restaurant, Larry's Drive-In, begin the downtown business district, which occupies a smattering of buildings on both sides of Alabama Highway 21, a thoroughfare that runs northeast-southwest through most of the state. A traveler headed south on Highway 21 would also pass a Farmer's Cooperative Market, the Frisco City Post Office, a dentist's office, and a Southern Pine Electric Cooperative building before entering the downtown

³ Tim Taylor, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, October 14, 2010.

⁴ Tim Taylor, interview by author, October 14, 2010.

⁵ Louis Dunn, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, November 15, 2010; Jimmy Tatum, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, October 16, 2010; David Bowen, conversation with author, Frisco City, AL, October 4, 2010.

center and witnessing a marked change. There a more concentrated (semi-contiguous) line of buildings and storefronts occupy about a quarter of a mile along both sides of the highway, at that point often called Bowden Street.

Out of forty buildings lining Bowden Street in this brief stretch, only seventeen are occupied by operating businesses. A four-pump gas station, The Fillin' Station, begins the edge of this downtown center, along with a sewing and crafts supply shop and a car wash, laundromat, dry cleaners, and a small ice machine. Other open businesses in this downtown core are a hardware store, an auto parts and repair store, Frisco City Hall, one barbershop, two beauty shops, and a beauty supply store. A separate short line of buildings angles with a curve in Bowden Street at the south end of the downtown center and is occupied by the main offices and showroom of D&D Furniture Factory Outlet. The town's bank, a branch of United Bank, and Fris-Cap, a car and tire repair garage, finish the main operable business area.⁶

Many buildings in this downtown stretch are vacant or are used for storage. Paint peels from their dingy fronts and fading signs, windows are broken or absent, and ivy and other running plants grow on the sides of many awningless structures. Several of these buildings have no roofs, and, in one, the roof rests in pieces on the floor amongst running plants and young trees. Several buildings bear the bright, though faded, goldenrod yellow and royal blue colors of D&D Furniture, which rents the buildings to use for storage.

About a quarter of a mile from Bowden Street, just behind it, is School Street, the main fixture of which is a large empty building labeled by lettering and a sign that read "Frisco City

⁶ A few other businesses operate in this area, but are not located on Bowden Street. One grocery store, the IGA Frisco Supermarket, serves the town and is located just behind the auto parts store on Bowden Street. A Tri-County Rural Health Clinic is also located just off Bowden Street across from Fris-Cap, and a feed and seed store, Tucker's Farm Center, and the Frisco Pecan House, both near Bowden Street, supplement the services of the Farmer's Cooperative on Highway 21.

High School: Home of the Whippets.” A football field, a practice football/baseball field, and two other buildings make up the vacant campus, which closed in 2009.

The area near School Street is densely populated with houses, several of which are now vacant; the same can be said for most other neighborhood areas in the town. The 2010 census revealed that of 623 total housing units in Frisco City, 92 are vacant.⁷ Census data also indicates that the number of people living in those houses has been steadily dwindling since 1990; from its peak population then at 1,581, the town experienced an accelerating population decline, and in 2010 it boasted only 1,309 residents.⁸

At the south end of the downtown area, a small city-owned parcel of land, occupied by a few somewhat-preserved historic structures, joins the vacant downtown buildings as further visible indication that Frisco City was once a much busier place. A historical marker designates the spot: “Jones Park.” A large deteriorating two-story house, a wooden one-room jail house, and a small white building labeled “Jones Mills Post Office” occupy the space. The new Frisco City Senior Center, opened in 2009, operates at one corner of this lot, visually separated from the older buildings by the presence of a freshly-painted red caboose, whose text reads: “Ship it on the Frisco!” The St. Louis-San Francisco railroad, Frisco City’s namesake, was, according to a resident in 1929, “one of the biggest advancements” the town experienced.⁹ Passenger lines have long since ceased to run on the railroad, now owned by the Alabama and Gulf Railway, and Frisco City’s depot is gone, but an occasional late-night or afternoon train whistle from a passing freight train can still be heard. There are no industries remaining in Frisco City, but two soft-

⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Occupancy Status,” 2010 Census Redistricting Data. http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_PL_H1&prodType=table (accessed April 8, 2010).

⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990); U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Occupancy Status,” 2010 Census Redistricting Data. .

⁹ Inez Williams, “Frisco City,” (Term paper, Huntingdon College, 1929) 8. Frisco City file, Monroe County Heritage Museum, Monroeville, AL.

drink bottling plants once provided employment for the town, as did a furniture manufacturing company, several (at different times) garment manufacturers, and two lumber yards. Agriculture is still a mainstay of the area's economy, though only a handful of large farms now exist in the area.

The photographs Tim Taylor viewed in the aforementioned 2010 interview also confirm Frisco City's busier days and have proven valuable in opening conversations with residents and in prompting my own questions about the town's changes. This study began as a rephotography project that aimed to show changes in the visual landscape of downtown Frisco City.

Rephotography, or the practice of recreating views of previously-taken photographs, became my most effective tool for documenting these changes.¹⁰ With the help of several Frisco City residents who were willing to lend yearbooks and family photo albums and boxes, I began collecting old photographs of downtown buildings and re-taking them to show the physical changes in Frisco City's landscape. As I walked the length of Bowden Street with my camera and stack of old photographs, numerous concerned and curious townspeople stopped me, but, when I produced the old photographs, the residents, now honored and interested, immediately began sharing their memories and stories with me. Realizing that the conversations the photographs generated were teaching me volumes and provoking numerous questions about Frisco City's history and decline, I began conducting formal interviews with several residents.

Since my rephotography project began with photographs taken in the 1950s and 1960s, I mainly chose residents who remembered that era to interview. Most of these residents had already been willing to volunteer information about the downtown area in previous conversations with me; their approachability had encouraged me to continue searching for more of their stories.

¹⁰ See Mark Klett, Kyle Bajakian, William L. Fox, Michael Marshall, Toshi Ueshina, and Byron G. Wolfe, *Third Views, Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2005).

I had known many of them for much of my life and had already developed relationships with them. Though I had discussions with a wider range of residents, my interviews were restricted mainly to middle-aged and older white Frisco City residents.

At first, I was uncertain about what I hoped to find in these interviews, but as the residents shared their memories with me, an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss began to emerge from their collective story. Though Taylor ventured that few people in Frisco City were ever exposed to Iris Dement's music, "Our Town" seems to vocalize the feelings of many residents of the little town. Young residents I talked to seemed to like the idea of Frisco City's smallness, but to them the downtown area was dead: "there's nothing to do here."¹¹ One younger resident, who grew up in the late 1970s and 1980s, did remember that Frisco City was once busier than it is today: "You don't notice [change] so much when you're young...but then you get older and you realize, 'Where has our town gone?'"¹² But the older residents I interviewed, whose earliest memories span from the 1930s to the 1950s, expressed the most sadness about the decline of the town they remembered, a town of busy storefronts, strong community ties, and a "marvelous" school.¹³

The following short film provides an introductory look at downtown Frisco City's physical changes and hears from those residents who remember it in its "heyday," the late 1940s to the late 1960s. Pairings of old and new photographs give then-and-now glimpses of several downtown buildings, and interviews with residents about the businesses that occupied those buildings begin to illustrate residents' attachment to the built spaces of Frisco City's townscape. The interview clips reveal that even vacant or non-existent spaces can come alive in residents' memories, despite change or deterioration, and prompted questions for me about how residents

¹¹ Worker at D&D Furniture Company, conversation with author, Frisco City, AL, October 13, 2010.

¹² Nickey Gaston, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, February 22, 2011.

¹³ Anne Brown, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, February 21, 2011.

might interpret larger changes in the town using their perceptions of changes in the built environment.

SEE FILM

As residents described the town's heyday and later expressed sadness at the changes in their "lost" town, I became increasingly aware of, and more curious about, their strong attachment to the built spaces that, though empty now, inspire many memories and recall many associations.¹⁴ As I interviewed residents for the making of the film, I became interested in how their connections to the downtown built environment revealed a sense of belonging to the community that interacted in these spaces.¹⁵ It seemed that those residents' common memories of the downtown spaces contributed to their identity as citizens of an "our town." How and why do ties to those places (of lack of them) contribute to the residents' senses of community and to their understandings of changes in the town? How could a building like the two-story drugstore in the film, be—not spatially, but socially—"the central point in town," so important to residents that its destruction "took the heart out of Frisco City"?¹⁶

These deep attachments to the buildings in which the residents once gathered seem to have prompted residents' use of the conditions of buildings as gauges of community success.

¹⁴ Craig Barton recognizes the "capacity of the built environment to serve as a repository of our collective and individual cultural history and memory." Craig Barton, ed. *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), xv.

¹⁵ Neil Leach, "Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space" in Jean Hiller and Emma Rooksby, eds. *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, 2nd ed. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 308. Leach traces French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, or a "sense of one's...place and role in the world and one's lived [cultural or economic] environment," adding to it psychoanalysis and built environment studies, and concludes that "through a complex process of making sense of place, developing a feeling of belonging and eventually identifying with that place, an identity may be forged against an architectural backdrop. As individuals identify with an environment, so their identity comes to be constituted through that environment." Leach extends this identity-forging process to group identity, which is useful for this study of community and spaces in Frisco City.

¹⁶ Ronnie Ray, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, October 13, 2010; Anne Brown, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, February 21, 2011.

Though the height of Frisco City's population and industrial operations occurred in the 1980s, arguably its most economically prosperous time, the residents interviewed for this study all chose the 1940s-1960s, when the main street was busiest, when civic engagement between downtown businesses, the school, and the community at large was most prevalent, as Frisco City's most prosperous time. They name the 1980s and 1990s, a time when many of the downtown buildings had become vacant, as a period of decline in the town. For these residents, it seems, a bustling downtown signified an active community, while vacant, decaying buildings and quiet streets indicate deteriorating, or nonexistent, community bonds.

In addition to their symbolic attachments to the downtown area, the residents I interviewed also seemed to utilize another gauge of community health: the relationship between the Frisco City school and the local community. When ties between the school and community were strong, the town prospered in those residents' eyes. When those bonds slackened, the school and the community suffered tremendous decline, culminating in the school's closing in 2009.

The sense of Dement-like loss these residents related in our interviews indicate that changes must have happened in Frisco City between its bustling, connected heyday years and its vacant, isolated present. This study aims to follow those changes, both in the downtown built environment and in the Frisco City school, and in the subsequent interconnected shifts in community that, for residents, these outward changes signified. The sources I draw upon most heavily are interviews with residents, whose thoughts about the decline of the community range from changes in agriculture and industry, changes in small business, increased mobility, and racial integration, to the arrival of a nearby Wal-Mart. My narrative follows theirs, allowing a fading-in and -out of elements of change as they become more or less important in residents'

stories. Certainly, none of the interviewed residents disputed that increased mobility and changes in agriculture, small business, and industry changed the town, but they seemed less concerned about Interstate 65 redirecting heavy volumes of traffic from the town center than they were about the drop-off of community involvement in the town between 1970 and 2011. The decline they most often describe is the decline of Frisco City's community, the relationships to people and spaces that make a town "our town."

This study will begin by exploring the early history of Frisco City, tracing the roots of the community it became as its residents built their lives in relation to local economic and social institutions. The post-World War II decades (1940s-1960s) brought changes that would send the town into its heyday, but they also began changes, like increasing mobility, that accelerated in later years and became factors in decline. When the narrative reaches what the residents name as Frisco City's heyday period, the text will incorporate a rephotography and oral history website to help describe the town's "prosperity" and residents' connections to the built spaces there. The text will resume with the 1960s and 1970s, when integration and white flight began to unravel the social fabric of Frisco City's community, and when larger trends began stealing small businesses and industries away from the downtown area. In the 1980s and 1990s, though industry in the town reached its peak, a focus on maintaining Frisco City's public image begins appearing at the forefront of the town's consciousness. From the 1990s to 2009, this image declined sharply, and a deep sense of community loss dominates what the interviewed residents remember about those decades. In addition to its deteriorating buildings and declining school, the town struggled through the 2000s with an increasingly unfavorable image, eventually labeled by outsiders, and townspeople, too, as a drug and crime hot spot for Monroe County.¹⁷ One resident

¹⁷ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, February 22, 2011.

expressed that Frisco City's nearly vacant, deteriorating downtown is still looked upon with disgust by some people in the county as a blight on the road for passersby.¹⁸

Indeed, by 2009 the decaying town hardly inspired anything more than a resigned attitude from its residents, whose emotional ties to the spaces and communities of their memories seemed broken forever. Awakened to the declining physical environment and increasingly distrustful relationships with other people in town, in May 2009 a group of Frisco City women posed a solution for the town: a return to community through the activities of a new civic group, Revive Frisco City. The group's primary goal is, in addition to hosting community events on the closed school campus and in Jones Park, to revitalize the downtown area by restoring and recruiting businesses to the vacant downtown buildings. Revive Frisco City's plan to restore community pride and involvement, starting with the downtown area, is indication that community is the key to the town's survival, and that it may still be signified by common care of shared spaces.

LIMITATIONS

Several elements of Frisco City's story fade in and out of the focus of this study as I examine the narrative of the town's changes. I acknowledge that though the following are important parts of Frisco City's story, no one element receives full treatment, nor is it designed to. This study is not meant to be a comprehensive examination of at any single concrete factor in Frisco City's decline; its primary focus is on how the residents viewed the changes that occurred.

Retail businesses downtown did not represent all of Frisco City's economy or signify all of its community connections. Agricultural systems, and changes in them, dictated early

¹⁸ Anne Brown, conversation with author, Frisco City, AL, October 5, 2010. Brown told of a recent conversation she had with a woman from Monroeville, the Monroe County seat, 10 miles north of Frisco City. The woman had been surprised to finally notice a "nice-looking" house in Frisco City, saying that she "*never* stopped" and barely kept herself from closing her eyes completely when driving through the "abandoned" downtown area.

community-building in Frisco City, and agriculture and the timber industry continue to be mainstays of the community's economy. However, this study's focus shifts away from agriculture's importance to Frisco City's community after the 1950s-1960s period because residents' accounts of what constituted the town's experience and identity shifted to something else, though that era perhaps signified the most profound changes in farming in the area.

Though this study will closely examine residents' connections to and through one community institution, the Frisco City school, another community institution that was and is important to Frisco City's community, the local church, receives minimal treatment in this study. Like agriculture, churches certainly played a vital role in the early history of Frisco City, both as cultural avenues for the sharing of ideas and information and as socialization centers for training many residents in the behavioral and ideological norms that contributed to community-building. However, because residents often indicated that involvement in church and school activities went hand-in-hand, they tended to combine them when discussing community connectedness. Residents' focuses on the downtown area and the school, the aspects of community in which larger changes seem more easily observable, dictated the focus of this study.¹⁹ The connection between church institutions and community life resurfaces in the Epilogue in the activities of Revive Frisco City.

Since I conducted my formal interviews with white Frisco City residents, this study focuses on the white community's response to the changes that the institutions in Frisco City (namely the downtown area and school) experienced. African-American history is only peripherally included in the interviewed residents' stories of "community" decline in Frisco City, perhaps because involvement at Frisco City High School, for these residents, centered on

¹⁹ The churches of the town have existed in relatively the same buildings, with little exterior changes, and a study of these built structures, and residents' connections to them, would make for an interesting future look at the church's constancy in the community.

“townspeople,” or the people with whom they shared the downtown area. Though African Americans shopped in the downtown area, they populated it less visibly than white residents, often from back doors of businesses, so they seem to have experienced a different—or absent—community downtown.²⁰ Interestingly, white residents I interviewed pointed exactly to the era in their town’s history when the two races’ stories converged—school integration and downtown desegregation—as the turning point toward the town’s decline in community connectedness. Their story is one of renegotiating their senses of “community” throughout Frisco City’s changes to accommodate new (African American) members in “their” spaces. Possible glimpses of a new community have recently seemed to be emerging as black and white groups have come together on some community issues, like the school’s closing in 2009, and lately, several of the activities and programs of Revive Frisco City. This turn toward a new “community” that can include all of Frisco City’s residents will be taken up in the Epilogue.

²⁰ Conversation with Jeffrey Williams, Frisco City, Alabama, October 5, 2010. Williams’s grandmother “traded” at Barnes Grocery, and he remembered going with her to the back door to pick up her purchases.

EARLY HISTORY

“CENTRAL PLACES” AND THE ROOTS OF COMMUNITY, 1880s-1930s

Frisco City is located just below the center of Monroe County, Alabama, about ten miles south of Monroeville, the county seat. The spot is roughly eighty miles northeast of Mobile and about ten miles east of the Alabama River, which runs along the west border of Monroe County. The ten- to fifteen-square mile area surrounding Frisco City had been a highly trafficked area from the early history of the region. Perhaps the area’s first brush with recorded history occurred in November of 1703, when a group of French soldiers and Indian warriors, led by Jean-Baptiste le Moyne de Bienville, turned back toward Mobile at the spot, abandoning a retaliatory attack against a further-north Alabama Indian village.²¹ Not much from the region appeared again in the annals of written history until the Creek Indian War of 1813-1814, when the area witnessed several intense battles between Creek Indians and white settlers, including Sam Dale’s “canoe fight” battle at nearby Randon’s Creek.²² Present-day Frisco City is about ten miles from the site of Claiborne, an American supply fort during that war and, a year after the war’s end, county seat of Monroe County.²³ Claiborne, which had been built at a place where a branch of the Old Federal Road crossed the Alabama River, became an important trade center and riverboat

²¹ For the full story of Bienville’s expedition, see Jay Higginbotham, *Old Mobile: Fort Louis de la Louisiane, 1702-1711* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 119-128.

²² Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *The Formative Period in Alabama, 1815-1828* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1965), 23-24. The Battle of Burnt Corn and a massacre of white settlers at Fort Mims also occurred within several miles of what would become Frisco City.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27. After the war, the Creek nations ceded the entire area of Monroe County to U.S. government, which added it to the Mississippi Territory. In 1815 Monroe County, the entire Creek cession, made up half of the Mississippi Territory.

landing, and the area nearby became a popular place to settle. New settlers, attracted by the promise of cheap, fertile land favorable for farming and cutting timber, flooded into the area.²⁴

Several families homesteaded property and began settlements in the area that would later become Frisco City in the mid-1800s.

In 1854 a man named Martin Luther Hendrix, and his wife Ellen Morris, began the community of Lufkin less than two miles west of downtown Frisco City's present site.²⁵ Several other families moved to Lufkin in the following years, and by the turn of the century the little community had its own school, along with a general store and church.²⁶ In 1888 concentrated economic developments came to the area when a Primitive Baptist minister, Rev. James W. Jones and his wife, Mary Frances, moved to the edge of what is now downtown Frisco City, and built a large house (the now-deteriorating one in Jones Park), a gristmill, a sawmill, and a store to serve the surrounding communities. His two brothers, Ben and Sidney Jones, moved to the area a couple of years later and opened another store, and the spot became known as Jones Mills.²⁷ Thomas J. Jones, no relation to the J.W. Joneses, built a cotton gin and fertilizer store there a few years later.²⁸ Jones Mill sprang up around these centers of economic and social activity, which geographer John Fraser Hart calls "central places," the centers for the exchange of goods and

²⁴ Robert J. Norrell, *The Making of Modern Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 15.

²⁵ Blanche Haigler Borum, "History of Frisco City" *Monroe County Museum and Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 2, no.3 (Fall, 1998): 2.

²⁶ In 1884, Rev. Burney Sawyer established Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church in Lufkin. Today his granddaughter, Dorothy Sims, lives near the Sawyers' old home and maintains the church building, said to be the oldest building left in Frisco City.

²⁷ At the town's incorporation, the name Jones Mills (plural) would be the name officially chosen and indicated in the town's by-laws. However, in U.S. Census records and on maps and post office records, as well as in local newspapers and accounts about the town written by early residents, the town is commonly referred to as Jones Mill (singular). For this study I will use the singular name—as it is remembered by most residents.

²⁸ Marilyn Williams, granddaughter of Thomas J. Jones, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, February 22, 2011; Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 5-6. Centrally-located gins and gristmills in towns, rather than ones on individual farms, became the norm in much of the rural South by the turn of the century.

ideas that were the foundations of many rural small towns.²⁹ Jones Mill’s gristmill and sawmill were community centers that attracted people and their businesses, churches, and schools to the area.³⁰ It is significant that the first name of the community reflected its affiliation with its “central places”; the people who began to identify themselves as residents of “Jones Mill” claimed the places as their own, and began forming community ties based on their shared congregating spaces.³¹ Soon the town had a busy main street lined with wooden buildings, including a doctor’s office and the new Jones Mill Post Office.³²



Figure 1. Jones Mill Main Street in 1897. This photocopy appears in Blanche Haigler Borum’s “History of Frisco City,” *Monroe County Museum and Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 2, no.3 (Fall, 1998). The original photograph’s location is unknown.

²⁹ John Fraser Hart, *The Rural Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 307-313.

³⁰ Borum, 2. In 1891, J.W. Jones and several citizens with families built a small school halfway between Jones Mill and the community of Excel, a few miles east of Jones Mill. According to the local story, founders chose a location accessible to both communities because there were barely enough regularly-attending students in either community to meet the 10-student public school requirement.

³¹ Harvey H. Jackson, III, *Inside Alabama: A Personal History of My State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 149. Jackson explains these types of community ties politically using the name “small-town bourbonism,” a characteristic of the “rising middle class of merchants and professional people” who began populating small towns around the turn of the century. These small town dwellers shared a “world of tightly-knit social groups...based on and sustained by church affiliations, family ties, and interconnecting occupations.” This study of Frisco City hopes to add “place” to the defining bases of such small-town social groups.

³² Untitled clipping from *Monroe Journal*, August 16, 1938, Monroe County Heritage Museum. The nearest post offices were in Perdue Hill, Repton, or Monroeville, so in 1890, Jones Mill got its own post office. Some accounts say that J.W. Jones himself officially chose Jones Mill as the name for the community. This is the building restored by the Mid-Century Club in the film.

The economic prospects for the area had long been bound up in cotton farming and steamboat trade from the Alabama River, but in the late 1800s, logging became an area money-maker as homesteaders began clearing Monroe County's "Piney Woods" for farming and the sale of timber in a statewide timber boom.³³ In 1900, the Bear Creek Mill Company in Manistee, a new logging town just a couple of miles west of Lufkin, established a 20-mile-long railroad line, the Manistee and Repton Railroad, or the M&R, to connect the mill to the L&N Railroad at Manistee Junction, a site to the east of Frisco City, near a banking center in neighboring Escambia county.³⁴ This railroad had a stop in the community of Snider, which had developed between Jones Mill and Lufkin and was the stop where a rural mail carrier acted as "postman" to unload and deliver mail to the surrounding communities.³⁵ There was also a passenger car service on the M&R, which carried passengers to a host of now nonexistent communities, like Lufkin, Snider, and other nearby places called, Allene, Conoly, Tekoa, and Dottelle.³⁶ This first railroad through Snider would be a foretaste of the prosperity a railroad through the area could bring to the growing community of Jones Mill. The "postmaster" of Snider, Willis H. Tucker, set up a store in the community, and in 1908 a man named James English built a Coca-Cola bottling plant there to serve the residents of the increasingly populated area.³⁷

In 1909 twenty-five men of the Jones Mill community applied for their area's official incorporation as Jones Mill. A census of the proposed area, which included Jones Mill, Lufkin

³³ Wayne Cline, *Alabama Railroads*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press: 1997), 222-223. Before 1880, pine forests in the area had primarily just been felled for subsistence, not trade, but in 1880, Alabama's yellow pine found a national market with the depletion of timber resources in the American Northeast and the Great Lakes area.; Robert J. Norrell, *The Making of Modern Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: Yellowhammer Press, 1993), 58. From 1879 to 1914, the yellow pine cut in Alabama would increase by six times.

³⁴ Louis Zadnichek, III., "Logging Railroads of Alabama: Introduction" in Thomas Lawson, Jr. *Logging Railroads of Alabama* (Birmingham: Cabbage Stock Publishing, 1996), v. As the demand for timber grew by leaps and bounds, many such "spur lines" were added to existing railroads in order to allow logging deeper in the forest and to transport logs to mill sites and market sites via larger railroads.

³⁵ Borum, 4.

³⁶ Nettie Lou Andress Florey, "Old Manistee Once a Bustling, Busy Mill Town Near Bear Creek." *Monroe Journal Centennial Edition Supplement*, 1969, 60-61.

³⁷ Borum, 4.

and Snider, yielded 370 people, enough to meet incorporation requirements, and the state approved Jones Mill's incorporation on April 26, 1909.³⁸ The following years witnessed major growth of the new town, especially the downtown area. Dentists' and doctors' offices, mercantile stores, and grocery stores made their way to the downtown area in the 1910s.³⁹

A significant change occurred for the town in 1913, when the Gulf, Florida, & Alabama Railroad promised to build a line through Jones Mill to Megargel and Atmore (towns to the south of Jones Mill). A man named Roy Megargel was president of this railroad, and, perhaps in order to garner favor with him, Jones Mill followed nearby Megargel's lead and took the name Roy, Alabama. The newly-named "future metropolis" celebrated its official opening on November 4, 1913, with the sale of town lots, band concerts, foot races, a baby beauty contest, and a public wedding.⁴⁰ J.W. Jones gave the town some land near his house for a park that year, and this land is still "Jones Park."⁴¹ A telephone system followed the grading of Roy's streets in 1913, and the town's first bank, which would remain in the same building until the 1970s, began as People's Bank of Roy, Ala., in 1914.⁴²

The photograph below shows the crowds who gathered in the "new" town of Roy on its opening day.

³⁸ Buddy Smith, "Frisco City: A railroad's promise changed its name," *Mobile Press-Register*, August 18, 1984.; W.J. Galloway, Mayor, J.A. Barnes, Clerk, "By-laws and Ordinances of the Town of Jones' Mills, Alabama," April 26, 1909.

³⁹ Borum, 7-12, lists many early businesses and names of doctors and mercantile store owners.

⁴⁰ "Grand Opening: Gala Day of Fun and Fortune, Roy, Ala." *Monroe Journal*, Nov. 6, 1913. A previous announcement about the grand opening included the "future metropolis" quote and advertised the area "as level as the valley of the Nile—rich as the cream of Jersey, all made complete for the wigwam of man. Will be sold without reserve or limit to the Highest bidder on the following regular Poorhouse terms—only One-fourth Cash—payable on grounds at time of purchase."

⁴¹ Smith, *Mobile Register* (August 18, 1984).

⁴² People's Bank advertisement, *Monroe Journal Centennial Edition*, 1966, 2G.



Figure 2. Public wedding at the celebration of the “Grand Opening of Roy, Alabama.” Photograph from Blanche Haigler Borum’s “History of Frisco City,” *Monroe County Museum and Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 2, no.3 (Fall, 1998).

The promised railroad never materialized, so in 1919, just six years after Jones Mill became Roy, the town returned to its original name. In 1922, the G.F.&A. Railroad (also known as the “Deep Water Route”) came under the ownership of the Muscle Shoals, Birmingham, and Pensacola Railroad company, which did continue the long-awaited line through Jones Mill. In 1925, the St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad acquired the MS.B.&P. line, and its operators promised that a freight yard would be located in Jones Mill if the town would name itself after the new railroad. The town did take the railroad’s nickname, “Frisco,” and became “Frisco City” in 1928. However, the railroad company was unable to get enough land near the depot to build its freight yard.⁴³ The town kept its new name, though, citing a wish to divorce itself from an outdated “mill town” image: “The name Jones Mill has long been a misnomer. The impression of

⁴³ Borum, 6.

strangers is that the town is only a little saw mill village. This is a misrepresentation as the town has no mills...During the past few months the town has experienced unparalleled growth, evidenced by 16 new brick businesses.”⁴⁴

The town certainly had been experiencing remarkable growth in the 1920s. Along with churches and the growing Frisco City School (a relocation of the original Jones Mill School to its spot on School Street), businesses and buildings continued to grow in the downtown area. The Coca-Cola plant in Snider moved from there to a new downtown building in 1923. By 1930, the plant had become a first-line franchise plant.⁴⁵ In 1925, John T. Lee established a successful Ford dealership, Lee Motor Co., which by 1933 had operations in both Frisco City and nearby Monroeville, the Monroe County seat.⁴⁶ Charles Florey, a resident of by-then-declining Manistee, moved to Jones Mill and established a two-story mercantile store.⁴⁷ A large two-story hotel also opened on Bowden Street in 1928. A young woman from Frisco City wrote in 1929: “Today there is forty business houses open here included are barber shops, stores, garages, hotel, cafés, Coca-Cola bottling works, ice plant, and ‘The Peoples Bank.’ The town has a Baptist church, Methodist church, and two Primitive Baptist churches. It is thickly populated now and is increasing rapidly as it is one of the best farming sections of Alabama.”⁴⁸ Her thoughts express the optimism of residents about the growth of their town.

This growth would continue through the 1930s and 1940s to the town’s heyday, the late 1940s-early 1960s. Though this era was not the peak time for Frisco City’s population, many residents’ perceptions are that it was the busiest, most prosperous time for their town. Many

⁴⁴ *Monroe Journal*, August 16, 1928.

⁴⁵ “Coca-Cola Official,” *Monroe Journal Centennial Edition*, 1966, 5B.

⁴⁶ “Visions,” *Monroe Journal*, February 28, 2002. Lee Motor Company’s Frisco City location closed in 1941; the business is still open today in Monroeville. Thomas McAdory Owen and Marie Bankhead Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*, vol. 2 (Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing, 1921), 1035-1036. Monroeville had taken the title of county seat from Claiborne in 1832.

⁴⁷ Charles Florey’s building would become the two-story drugstore in the film.

⁴⁸ Inez Williams, “Frisco City” (Term paper, Huntingdon College, 1929), Monroe County Heritage Museum.

remembered getting everything they needed in downtown Frisco City, with no need to shop elsewhere. Dell Walston, who moved to the nearby Excel area in the late 1950s (and later to Frisco City), remembers: “The businesses were wonderful. Mrs. Norris had her beauty shop, and that’s where you went, and you could do everything in Frisco City.”⁴⁹ Anne Brown, who grew up in Megargel, remembers frequenting downtown Frisco City with her family to get clothes and school supplies because, besides a grocery store, there were no retail businesses in her community.⁵⁰ Tim Taylor explains that even residents of Frisco City were satisfied with the town’s businesses in the heyday years: “The people in Frisco, they shopped in Frisco. They didn’t go anywhere else; there was no *point* in going anywhere else. It was only ten or so miles to Monroeville, but there was nothing we didn’t have here that was available in Monroeville.”⁵¹ A business list from a Frisco City High School student’s 1950 paper confirms the self-sufficiency of Frisco City’s downtown. The paper lists at least 52 businesses operating in the downtown area, not including the public buildings like the city hall, fire station, jail, and post office.⁵² During this prosperous era, the community of Frisco City began embracing economic and social changes that would gradually have profound effects on community life.

⁴⁹ Dell Walston, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, February 24, 2011.

⁵⁰ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

⁵¹ Tim Taylor, interview by author, October 14, 2010.

⁵² Joyce Wiggins, “History of Frisco City,” term paper, Frisco City High School, 1950.

POST WORLD WAR II YEARS
THE “PROSPEROUS” ERA OF CHANGE

Even through the 1940s, Frisco City and its residents occupied a predominantly rural area where small, individual farms populated the landscape. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, out of 1,021 people living within Frisco City’s town limits, 447 people were counted as rural farm dwellers. In Monroeville’s town limits, just ten miles from Frisco City, out of a total population of 1,355, only 52 persons were considered rural farm dwellers.⁵³ In that year the Frisco City civil division had the greatest number of farms of any division in the county, at 609.⁵⁴ However, the total acreage of Frisco City’s farms was much smaller than many other divisions in the county; the farms in Perdue Hill, for instance, between Frisco City and the old cotton empire at Claiborne, were more than twice as large as the ones in Frisco City.⁵⁵

Tenant farming had been prevalent in the area from its early history, and, white or black, tenants were poor. Jimmy Tatum remembered some people buying merchandise on credit at a downtown store in the early 1940s, hoping to be paid enough to cover their debts in the fall when the cotton cash crop came in: “Sometimes they took a title, or a lien on a piece of land, and [if the crops, or cash from them, did not materialize] the person would lose the land, and other

⁵³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930 Census of Population and Housing, Vol. 3, Part 1. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932). The 1930 census did not yet reflect the town’s name change and still listed Frisco City as “Jones Mill.”

⁵⁴ Monroeville’s division came in next at 451 farms. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930 Census of Population and Housing.

⁵⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1930 Census of Population and Housing. Perdue Hill’s 341 farms spanned 43, 079 acres, while Frisco City’s 609 farms occupied only 26,378 acres.

people would own it.” Tatum asserted that some larger farmers, specifically a family in large-farm country in Perdue Hill, got much of their land that way. Faye Taylor, who worked at People’s Bank in town, saved this 1935 note that reveals the often very personal nature of such property liens.

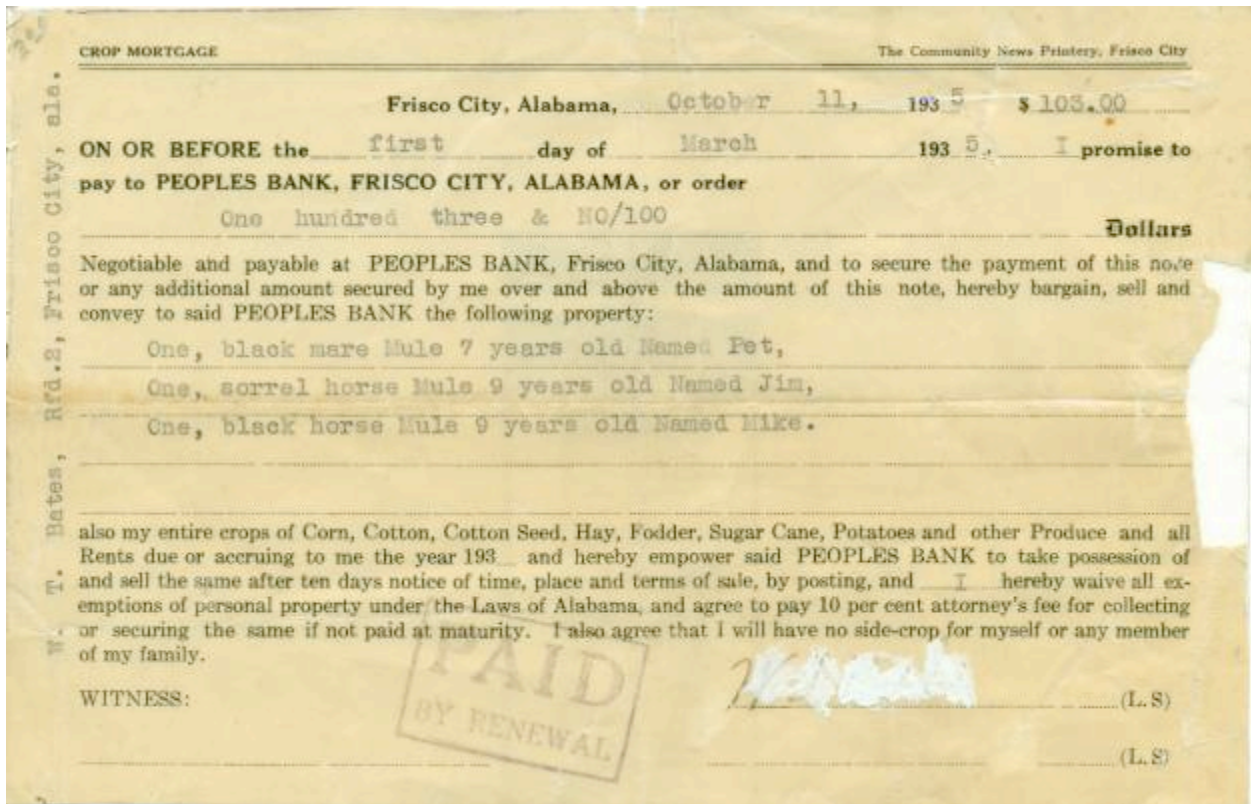


Figure 3. Crop Mortgage Contract. Courtesy Faye Taylor, personal collection.

The New Deal era seemed to affect tenant farming in the area only minimally, but a couple of notable events happened in the 1930s that would bring economic growth to the region.⁵⁶ The New Deal’s regulations for infrastructure encouraged the paving and cutting of roads everywhere, and Frisco City’s location on Highway/road 11, which would later become

⁵⁶ Wayne Flynt, *Poor but Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 331-332. Long-term effects of the New Deal seemed to have little effect on most poor whites anywhere in Alabama.

Highway 21, earned it a paved main street in 1937.⁵⁷ In the same year, a transformative economic booster arrived in Monroe County in the form of Vanity Fair Mills, a women's intimate apparel manufacturer from Reading, Pennsylvania, and Monroe County residents—especially women, many from Frisco City—found employment and hope for an improved quality of life there. Vanity Fair had moved its lingerie manufacturing and distribution operations to Monroeville to take advantage of the cheap, largely union-free labor environment there.⁵⁸ Vanity Fair's presence boosted the area's economic confidence and made the area more attractive to other businesses and potential residents.⁵⁹

Though the jobs Vanity Fair provided offered the ideal of steady income, rather than dependency on rainfall and crops that might not yield well enough to even cover money borrowed for seed, much of Frisco City's community, like that of many other areas, remained tied to cotton and its schedule, even into the 1950s.⁶⁰ In 1941, cotton was still picked by hand in most areas of Alabama, and Frisco City was no exception.⁶¹ Jimmy and Fredia Tatum remembered the activities of the town's cotton gin, where at picking time farmers sometimes stayed in line all night in anticipation of their first cash of the season (often their first since the beginning of the year).⁶² The waiting farmers brought their cotton to the gin with tractors pulling

⁵⁷ Joseph M. Himes, ed., *The South Moves into its Future: Studies in the Analysis and Prediction of Social Change* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 7. Annie Laura Tatum, interview by author, October 18, 2010. Tatum's husband "Tate" worked for the road-paving crew as "grading foreman."

⁵⁸ "From concept to construction," in "Vanity Fair, Half a Century in Monroeville," *The Monroe Journal* supplement (June 11, 1987), 4. The Monroeville operation was the company's first plant location in the South

⁵⁹ "A real opportunity for Monroeville and the county," *The Monroe Journal*, February 11, 1937.

⁶⁰ Daniel, 5-6.

⁶¹ Alabama State Planning Commission, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, reprint ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 79.

⁶² Jimmy and Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010. Daniel, 5-6.

trailers that usually held just one bale each, because that was usually as much as one could hand-pick in a day.⁶³

Because as many hands as possible were needed for cotton-picking in the late summer and fall, the town's connection to the cotton economy even affected the activity of the Frisco City school. Fredia Tatum explained that the school's starting date was flexible because

kids had to pick cotton in order to earn the money to buy their school clothes and books. So if the crop was a little late—usually it didn't start till the Tuesday after Labor Day. That was the target date, and sometimes they would extend it another week or so!⁶⁴

The school schedule's dependence on local crop cycles demonstrates the close relationship of the community and the school. Instructors and administrators, themselves members of the community, understood their neighbors' dependence on cotton for survival and were lenient—even making dress code exceptions for shoeless children, as the following class picture from the school's 1948 yearbook indicates.

⁶³ Jimmy and Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010. Cotton was, according to Jimmy Tatum's memory, the only cash crop of the area.

⁶⁴ Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.



Figure 4. First Grade class of Frisco City School, 1948. The boy second from right on the first row (in suspenders) is interviewee Lou Dunn. 1948 *Crimson-White* yearbook. Courtesy Dot Sims, personal collection.

During and immediately after the World War II years, agriculture in the South changed dramatically. Mechanization caused the consolidation of many small farms; the cost of running tractors and mechanized cotton pickers required more acreage to make a profit, so it became less feasible to operate small farms.⁶⁵ These changes began affecting agriculture in Monroe County, however slowly. While Frisco City took longer than some areas to mechanize fully (many farmers in the area were still picking cotton by hand into the 1960s), its county certainly

⁶⁵ The number of southern farmers fell from 14 million to just 3 million between 1940 and 1970. “The wartime boom and military draft absorbed the rural population surplus, and the South’s farm population dropped 22% between 1940 and 1945. The average family size on Alabama farms decreased from 5.8 to 4.5 people during those 5 war years” Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1989).

reflected the South-wide decrease in the number of small farms.⁶⁶ In just five years after the war, small Monroe County farms (those under 70 acres) steadily decreased in number, while the number of the county's largest farms (1,000+ acres) increased.⁶⁷ Tenancy also declined in Monroe County between 1945 and 1950, from 50.7% to 43.1%.⁶⁸ In 1950, an active farmers' cooperative market formed in Frisco City and made farming there a more "professional" venture.⁶⁹ It opened a feed and seed store and a new cotton gin that eventually replaced the old one established at the start-up of Jones Mill, and, within a few years, the co-op added a cattle barn and sale barn to its property as livestock farming became more popular in Frisco City and the surrounding area.

Though the area remained agricultural, the post-war economy began changing life in the rural town and subtly altering the way members of the community related to each other. For a decade or two, the town embraced these changes in its busiest, most civically-connected time. The Southern Pine Electric Cooperative, begun by the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) came to Frisco City in the mid- to late-1940s, bringing electricity to many people in the community who had not previously experienced it.⁷⁰ Jimmy and Fredia Tatum named one of the advantages of the electric cooperative's arrival as the addition of freezers to many homes in Frisco City, which dramatically changed the way people preserved—and, consequently, shopped for—their food. Previously, the train brought large blocks of ice to the depot in Frisco City, where a man named Leon Pugh transported them to the town's ice house nearby. Townspeople

⁶⁶ Lou Dunn remembered picking cotton for his uncle during summers, and he remembered when his uncle got a mechanized picker in the mid-1960s. Interview by author, November 15, 2010.

⁶⁷ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1950 Census of Agriculture (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government and Printing Office, 1952). The smallest farms in the area (under 10 acres) decreased from 343 to 280 from 1945 to 1950.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

⁷⁰ Running water and sewage system had already been established in town in 1933. Borum, 7.

could buy ice for their “ice-boxes” there.⁷¹ People embraced the coming of grocery stores, where milk and chickens could be bought without their rural trappings of milking cows or killing and plucking chickens.⁷² Without refrigerators and freezers, the canning of foods had been a necessary part of domestic activities in Frisco City’s rural setting; most people grew their own fruits and vegetables and preserved them by canning. Fredia Tatum described a special program at the Frisco City school that was active during the canning era and that again illustrates the close relationship between the school and the community:

People canned their own foods--the garden stuff? A lot of people had pressure cookers and things that they’d can their vegetables in. And also the *school* had what they called the ‘canning plant’ [in a building on the campus, with large canning equipment inside during the summer] “so that you could can in large volumes, which you couldn’t do at home.” You could take tremendous amounts of tomatoes or butterbeans or whatever, whole families would go over there, especially the women, and do their canning--in *metal* cans--like you can buy at the store now?

Tatum remembered that it did cost something to use the school’s canning facilities but that the price was “very little.”⁷³

In residents’ accounts of the town’s heyday, the strength of the community-school relationship is often used, like the activity surrounding downtown businesses, as a gauge of community connectedness in the town. Anne Brown described Frisco City in the 1950s and 1960s as a “close community, a thriving community. I remember when we had the Glee Club concerts right out there in the [downtown] median! The school was marvelous. It was the center of our world—where everything happened.” Brown’s immediate transitions from life in town to

⁷¹ Leon Pugh was Lou Dunn’s uncle, and Dunn recalls childhood memories of Pugh unloading the several-hundred-pound ice blocks from the rail cars with large hooks. Interview by author, November 15, 2010.

⁷² Fredia Tatum’s father embraced the changes that came with electricity, gas, and store-bought food: “My daddy always said...as long as he could afford to pay the gas bill or afford to go to the grocery store and buy a quart of milk, he was not gonna have a fireplace or a milk cow.” Tatum felt the same way. As a child she had been afraid of growing up because she didn’t want to have to kill chickens to eat, which her mother did. “After I got married and you could buy chickens at the grocery store, I thought, ‘Hallelujah, I’m not gonna have to kill chickens’.” Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

⁷³ Ibid.

life at school, and back again, exhibits the interconnectedness of the school and community, which, in her mind, characterized the era. Lou Dunn’s first description of the town is similar:

Frisco City was a real nice town to live in—a lot of interested people in the school system, you know, the school system was good, had a good sports program in the high school, some good teachers that were concerned about the teaching as well as people behaving when they were there, so it was a good place to live.

Dunn’s description of the quality of life in the town centered on the town-school connection.

Dell Walston, whose children attended school at Frisco City, described her experience as a parent in the school community:

A lot of people feel that the community life centers around the school. I know as long as we had children in school, that was the case, because you’re in PTA, you’re in band boosters, and every time the doors open you’re over there—you’re there for the football games, the baseball, the basketball, on and on!⁷⁴

From the school’s earliest days as Jones Mill High School, sporting events at the school usually drew large crowds from the town and were a source of community pride.⁷⁵ The author of an article in the *Mobile Register* in 1947 described a four-day, thirty-two game basketball tournament at Frisco City High School. He said that, although two teams from larger schools in Mobile won the tournament, the whole town of Frisco City was “infected” with “basketballitis.”:

Although Frisco City would have a little trouble mustering 1000 people for a quick census, they packed the high school gym for every session...Long before the start of any session paying customers were queued up in front of the gym despite almost constant rain...With proper seating accommodations, the meet could have drawn well over 1000 customers for each session.⁷⁶

The overwhelming community support at this school event further illustrates the two communities’ close connection.

⁷⁴ Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

⁷⁵ George Thomas Jones, “Jones Mill Girls’ basketball teams were best ever,” *Happenings in Old Monroeville*, vol. 1 (Monroeville, AL: Bolton Newspapers, 2003), 63. Jones, a Monroeville resident, described the 1922-1928 girls’ basketball seasons: “Read on and marvel. During the first seven years that [Jones Mill High School] fielded a girls’ basketball team, they won 71 out of the 76 games played and four state championships out of five entries.” The team remained undefeated for four consecutive years. Even today, photos of the teams are on display in the Jones Mill Post Office building.

⁷⁶ Vincent Johnson, “Tournament handled excellently all the way,” *Mobile Register*, March 11, 1947.

By the 1950s, a plethora of new houses had sprung up in a former cotton field across from the school campus, and the post-war economy in the little town encouraged the starting of new businesses and relocating industries.⁷⁷ The downtown area was the center of the town's activities, and residents seem to use its bustling as a gauge of the success of the town's community connections. The residents interviewed about the downtown's heyday stressed that the town's businesses were dedicated to service to the community. Tatum Furniture Company, for instance, stayed open late at night to accommodate late-working customers, and its employees often delivered furniture to townspeople on Christmas day.⁷⁸ Annie Laura Tatum's father, who was a justice of the peace, sometimes held court meetings in the back of the furniture store: "They'd go back in the office and he'd hear their cases, and then he'd fine them whatever it was supposed to be. And when the people that he'd just had court with would get up to leave, he'd shake their hand and say, 'come back to see us!'"⁷⁹ This care to avoid wounding the "customer's" pride further demonstrated the community-mindedness the residents describe as a characteristic of the heyday era.

Tatum also remembered her first job as a clerk in a new five-and-dime store in town, and the experience of her first several days there illustrated the social nature of business dealings downtown. Mrs. Kilpatrick, who owned the store, hired Tatum because she needed someone who could introduce her to the people in Frisco City:

She didn't know a *soul* when she moved here... She told me, "now, when somebody comes in the door, call them by their name—Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. So-and-So—

⁷⁷ Jackson, 16. After WWII, industries prospered, as did economies near military bases. Frisco City seemed to profit most from residents who were returning from those areas. Resident Faye Taylor shared in a conversation with me on March 11, 2011 that many people from Frisco City (including Taylor) moved south to mobile to work at Brookley Field (AFB) during the war years. Annie Laura Tatum said that she and her husband (and their young son Jimmy, also interviewed), had moved to Mobile, where Mr. Tatum worked at a shipyard during the war. Tatum explained that her family returned to the prospering Frisco City to start Tatum Furniture Company and to allow Jimmy to have "a good start" at the Frisco City school. Annie Laura Tatum, interview by author, October 18, 2010.

⁷⁸ Jimmy Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

⁷⁹ Annie Laura Tatum, interview by author, October 18, 2010.

and let them know who I am.” I did, and introduced them to Mrs. Kilpatrick, and that was the way she got to know people in Frisco City.

Tatum’s story about Mrs. Kilpatrick, the new-in-town business owner who, in order to gain entrance into the ultra-connected community, hired Tatum on the basis of her social connections, illustrated the importance of community ties and one’s ability to participate civically.

Civic connection occurred in formal settings as well. Fredia Tatum listed several civic groups that were “very active” then, which included the Women’s Study Club, the Jr. Study Club, and Kiwanis Club. Jimmy Tatum explained that the Kiwanis group, made up of businessmen of the town, and the Frisco City Chamber of Commerce were active in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the buying of property for recruitment of industry to Frisco City.⁸⁰ Frisco Manufacturing, a furniture manufacturing company from Monroeville, moved to Frisco City in 1948 as a result, Tatum said, of the merchant group’s recruitment activities: “They also bought property to bring plants in. The furniture factory came to Frisco City *from Monroeville* (it had burned there), because the property was on a long-term lease and they had a place to build.”⁸¹ That large patch of land south of downtown Frisco City served as the site of other industries in addition to Frisco Manufacturing, such as King’s Lumber Company, and Chamber’s Lumber Company, two sawmill operations that began in the late 1950s. The merchant groups also recruited Frisco City Sportswear, Inc., a women’s sportswear manufacturer, and took responsibility for providing and preparing a separate location for it. Tatum remembers:

Now these were merchants that did all this, and they supervised the building of that plant [downtown]. Each of them took something as a project. Like Daddy took the sprinkler system for it. He made contacts about having it done and how to finance it. The day was filled with activities.⁸²

⁸⁰ Jimmy and Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

⁸¹ Jimmy Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2011.

⁸² Ibid.

Ronnie Ray, who worked with his father at the hardware store he would one day inherit, remembered some other activities undertaken by these merchant groups. He said that “almost every Saturday there’d be some kind of promotion going on,” when winners of drawings from week-long raffle competitions were announced.⁸³

The downtown businesses often offered more than their advertised services (and even the special ones on holidays); their spaces were gathering places, “central places,” where news and ideas could be traded.⁸⁴ Of a downtown barbershop, Fredia Tatum remembered that, in addition to the shaving, cutting of hair, and shining of shoes, “lots of gossip went on there, too [*laughs*]-- Didn’t have coffee places!” Jimmy corrected, “Of course, Fredia says gossip—there was an awful lot of *talking*. [*Fredia raises eyebrows*]” Since appointments were made by simply occupying the next chair, Jimmy explained that “while [customers] were waiting, they talked a lot. Also, the people that didn’t have anything to do would go in there and sit and listen.”⁸⁵ The Frisco City Coca-Cola Bottling Company also provided means for community interaction at the businesses downtown. Jimmy Tatum remembers,

Fredia’s father was a farmer, but at a certain time of the day he would come to the Williamses’ business. And [the Coca-Colas] were cooled by ice, and you’d reach in there and get one, and you would bet on who had the furthest one out. ‘Cause most of ‘em would be bottled in Frisco City, you know. And he had to pay for the drink. Or they’d flip a coin and call it and whoever lost had to pay for it. But they’d just stand there, I’m sure thirty minutes, and just drink that Co’Cola...It was a social *event*—*everybody* drank Co’Colas.

Fredia concluded, “It was the Starbucks of the day!”⁸⁶ The Tatums’ stories illustrate how the bustling downtown businesses served as social meeting places from which people could derive a community identity.

⁸³ Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010.

⁸⁴ Hart, 307-313.

⁸⁵ Jimmy and Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

⁸⁶ Jimmy and Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

The following website provides a sense of what the downtown area was like for residents who experienced it as “our town.” The website examines several buildings and businesses, and residents’ memories of them, in the downtown area in Frisco City’s heyday of the 1950s and 1960s. Like the introduction’s film, it uses rephotography and oral history interviews to begin reconstructing some of the downtown spaces through residents’ memories and to begin opening opportunities for conversation and questions about the changes that have occurred in those spaces. The interview clips on the site also reveal the connections between residents’ memories, emotions, even identities, and the downtown buildings. A navigation bar on the left allows viewers to choose any building to begin a downtown area “tour,” which (if the buildings are chosen in descending order) travels in a counterclockwise direction, beginning at the D&D Furniture buildings on the south end of Bowden Street and traveling up the west, and then down the east, lines of the storefronts there. Since the site is designed to be able to stand alone, it includes an overview of the rephotography project, a brief history of Frisco City, and a short bibliographic essay on the field of rephotography, all accessible by a horizontal navigation bar at the top of the site’s page.

SEE WEBSITE

Website URL: <http://friscocityrephotography.blogspot.com>

Another social event, a practice called “vis’tin” (pronounced “viz-tin”), was a common memory volunteered by nearly every resident interviewed about the heyday era. The residents’ stories about this activity are remarkably similar, a telling sign that it was a common activity (but one significant enough to be remembered as a hallmark of the era), and that participating in it

was a way to affirm one's membership in the downtown community. Dell Walston, who lived in Excel at the time (1950s), remembered that "the Saturday afternoon thing to do was to get in your car and drive to Frisco City, and either you sat in your car and watched people go by and you talked to them, or you'd go in the various department stores."⁸⁷ Annie Laura Tatum remembered:

On Saturdays you would drive your car downtown and park, if you could find a parking place, and watch people go by... You'd go around to other people's cars—just go sit in the *car* with them! If you had two seats—a front seat and a back seat—they were always filled, with four people. Four *ladies*, not men. Men didn't care about that sort of thing. They sat on the sidewalk to watch people go by—and commented about every one of 'em!⁸⁸

For the residents who remembered it, this simple event seemed to characterize the close-knit bustle of the downtown area's community; for our purposes, it is an effective example of how existing downtown community bonds, previously celebrated in such ways as meeting for Cokes around a downtown business's cooler, adapted with the changes of the era. Cars (which grew in availability in the town after the war) became the new places for socializing, and could, in effect, move the "downtown center" anywhere, perhaps setting in motion the mobilization that eventually became a factor in taking people and businesses away from Frisco City.

This increased mobility and the addition of modern conveniences began to change the way people in the community related to each other and to downtown businesses in Frisco City. Tatum Furniture Company sold washers, dryers, refrigerators and freezers, as well as the usual furniture fare, adapting to the arrival of the new conveniences in the changing town.⁸⁹ Residents' experiences at the town's retail businesses, especially grocery stores, also reflected the changes that were beginning in the area. People began bargain-shopping, like Fredia Tatum's family, who

⁸⁷ Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

⁸⁸ Annie Laura Tatum, interview by author, October 18, 2010.

⁸⁹ Annie Laura Tatum, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, October 18, 2010.

patronized McCrory's Supermarket for everything except canned pineapple, which they bought at the town's Yellow Front Store for 9 cents, one cent cheaper than pineapple at McCrory's.⁹⁰

With the addition of cars, bargain-hunting Frisco Citizens were now mobile, able to shop in neighboring towns, and local businesses faced more competition from larger retailers nearby.

Fredia Tatum names the coming of a Monroeville five-and-dime franchise store as a factor in the decline that would occur in the "traffic" (activity) downtown in the following decades:

I would say probably up 'til the late '60s there was a lot of traffic in town. So really, probably, early 70s is when things began to--Monroeville got T.G.&Y.'s, a...combination of things happened around the early '70s that things really began to go downhill...when it really began to thin out.⁹¹

The tone of many residents' descriptions of the town change similarly when they describe the late 1960s-1970s era. All of the residents interviewed pointed to this era as a turning point in the town's history; the "combination of things" that contributed to both the town's physical decline and its community's unraveling seems, according to residents, to have begun surfacing then.

⁹⁰Fredia Tatum, interview by author, Frisco City, AL, October 16, 2010

⁹¹Ibid.

LATE 1960s-1970s

WHEN “THINGS REALLY BEGAN TO GO DOWNHILL”

The late 1960s did bring significant changes to Frisco City’s school and downtown business area that would begin disrupting the community bonds that were so strong during the town’s heyday years. Desegregation would prove difficult in the county’s schools, and, in 1969, a special mandate from a federal judge in Montgomery ordered integration in the county, overturning the previously (un)kept freedom-of-choice plan.⁹² It seems that white residents of Frisco City struggled to renegotiate their definitions of community in “their” spaces that now had to accommodate black and white communities. The decisions of some white residents not to adapt to the changes in their community began unraveling the once tight-knit social fabric of the town. In addition to the school’s changes, the downtown area, officially desegregated in 1965, also began changing in response to increased mobility and shifts in the local economies of the town and the surrounding area. All of these changes began the “downhill” turn in the community that residents had once identified solely as their own.

In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, encouraging the desegregation of the nation’s schools.⁹³ The Monroe County Board of Education had unanimously adopted the “freedom of choice” plan for desegregation on June 17, 1965, but had not been very active in encouraging its implementation. The racial makeup of the county schools had not changed much

⁹² “Judge orders changes,” *Monroe Journal*, July 17, 1969.

⁹³ Daniel, 204.

by 1967, when Alabama federal court judge Frank Johnson, Jr., ordered all schools in the state that had not complied with the desegregation mandate to do so.⁹⁴ In 1968, several black students appeared in Frisco City High School yearbooks, indicating that some freedom-of-choice compliance began in Monroe County schools, but in 1969 the U.S. Supreme court struck down the freedom-of-choice plan and forced the last of the nation's public schools to integrate.⁹⁵ Judge Johnson threatened Monroe County Schools with court action after receiving a report for the upcoming 1969-1970 school year that indicated little obedience to the new integration law. Under the county's old freedom-of-choice plan, only 239 of 2,019 black students in the county had chosen to attend formerly all-white schools, and no white students had elected to move to previously all-black schools. Johnson's new mandate would meet with about as much success; according to the 1969-1970 report, black students were being bussed past the all-white schools in Uriah (south of Frisco City), Frisco City, and Excel to previously all-black Union High School in Monroeville.⁹⁶ In 1969, however, those Monroe County hold-out schools responded to Johnson's court-action threat and finally complied with the federal mandate. Frisco City's black school, the Mary Gardner School, which had existed between Snider and Lufkin, became the campus for the integrated Frisco City Elementary School, and black students joined the white classes at Frisco City High School. White flight from the school was an almost immediate result; many Frisco City families pulled their children from Frisco City schools and sent them to Monroe Academy, a new white private school founded in Monroeville in 1970.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ *Monroe Journal*, July 10, 1969.

⁹⁵ Daniel, 204.

⁹⁶ "Judge orders changes," *Monroe Journal*, July 17, 1969.

⁹⁷ The event of "white flight" reflects a trend that happened across Alabama. In Chambers Co., east of Monroe County, when Lafayette High School desegregated, "white parents, claiming that integration lowered academic standards, founded an academy to preserve 'quality' education. The high school became 90% black, while the Academy, Chambers Academy, took the name 'Rebels', the color gray, and flew a Confederate flag as its symbols." Pete Daniel, 205. The Monroe Academy/Frisco City School story would be quite similar, except Monroe Academy adopted the Revolutionary War's Minute-man "Volunteer" as its mascot, and "Dixie" for its fight song.

Though many of these families continued to live in Frisco City, their flight from the school signaled a harsh disruption in the previously tight-knit school community, which would affect other aspects of community in Frisco City. Some residents' feelings about integration and white flight were powerful enough to shake even faith communities in town. Martha Taylor, an elementary teacher at the Frisco City school at the time, noticed a change in her church when several church members moved their children to Monroe Academy:

Several families who were regular attenders...left [the church] in the 1970s. It seems like there were some hard feelings—I don't know if some people the church didn't agree with them moving their children to Monroeville, but even though they kept living in Frisco, they stopped coming to church.⁹⁸

The “hard feelings” that Taylor sensed from church members revealed that, for some members of the Frisco City community, perhaps black students' attending school with their children seemed less of an evil than did the community's deterioration that began because of some white members' decisions to leave it. Nickey Gaston shared a similar story that even distanced members of her family from each other:

Especially when Monroe Academy was built, *so* many people left Frisco City and went to the academy. I think that's when a lot of it started, too—like my brother-in-law and his family, they wouldn't *go* to M.A., even to a football game or anything until Jesslyn [Nickey's daughter, a senior in high school there currently] got them to come to one of her basketball games. They *would not go*—they hated Monroe Academy.⁹⁹

Gaston explained that her relative's reaction was so bitter because he felt that Monroe Academy's opening caused many people, including teachers and administrators, to “abandon” the school, and consequently Frisco City, rather than “stick it out” and adapt to its changes.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Martha Taylor, conversation with author, Frisco City, AL, February 12, 2011.

⁹⁹ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Social capital built up at both black and white schools was destroyed by bussing and other changes. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 2000) states that social capital everywhere was dealt a tremendous blow with forced integration. Social capital, loosely defined, is the value of social networks and connections that motivates people to contribute to a group to which they belong. It is increased when there is mutual trust between community members and facilitates cooperation and

Tim Taylor seemed to agree that people who left the school gave up on the community it represented:

They abandoned the community because they abandoned the school. Forced integration...changed the way people related to one another. It changed the way the community itself was held together. The quality of education went down, and the people who cared about decent education started M.A. [Monroe Academy], but when they went to M.A., they started a new community there and left the one here.¹⁰¹

White reactions to integration indeed began a shift in the Frisco City community, signified by a decline in school involvement that would continue in the following decades.¹⁰²

While the most volatile change of the 1960s-1970s era would be the school change, economic changes that had roots in the previous era of “vis’tin” in cars and merchants’ enthusiastic recruitment of industries began surfacing on (and off of) Bowden Street. New industry had appeared in the area in 1960, when Frisco City Sportswear began its operations in a building downtown. In 1972, Frisco Sportswear expanded and became Landlubber of Alabama, Inc., and moved to a larger site away from Bowden Street. The Frisco Manufacturing furniture industry continued to prosper, employing 200 people by 1969.¹⁰³ Industries in the surrounding area also prospered, and attracted increasingly mobile workers away from Frisco City. Arvin Industries opened a tailpipe manufacturing plant in Monroeville in the late 1960s, and many people from Frisco City went to work there, including Tim Taylor, who said that he and many of

mutually supportive relationships in communities. When black and white communities were suddenly thrown together as a result of forced integration, separate (black and white) networks of trust crumbled and were not easily rebuilt. White flight reinforced mutual distrust among members of the new school community—and among the existing, though deteriorating white community in Frisco City.

¹⁰¹ Tim Taylor, conversation with author, December 28, 2010.

¹⁰² In the mid-1960s, James S. Coleman, a sociologist studying and beginning to define social capital, published a study that became known as the “Coleman Report,” which concluded that “family and community background characteristics tended to outweigh factors related to the nature of the school itself.” Coleman, et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966). Coleman later lamented that the report had led some of its readers to conclude that bussing and other forced integration measures (because the children still had “peer groups” that were more important than school communities) would be the best solution to the country’s desegregation dilemma. Actually, Coleman said, those measures had detrimental effects on social capital in newly-integrated communities, causing white flight, distrust, and general non-meshing of races in public schools everywhere. *Equality and Achievement in Education* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 69-74.

¹⁰³ Frisco Manufacturing advertisement, *Monroe Journal Centennial Edition*, 1966, 1G.

his classmates got jobs there when they graduated from Frisco City High School in 1967.¹⁰⁴ Vanity Fair continued to grow in Monroeville, where the company's civic interests led to its building of a park and a golf and tennis club there, complete with swimming pools and a "Community House," which also proved attractive summer job opportunities for young Frisco Citizens.¹⁰⁵ In 1978 another industry that would dramatically change Monroe County over the next decades, Alabama River Pulp Company, came to the area. The pulp mill, located on the Alabama River near Claiborne, joined Vanity Fair as one of the county's largest employers; many Frisco City citizens began working there, moving more of the work force away from businesses on Bowden Street.¹⁰⁶ It seemed that Frisco City residents enthusiastically embraced the coming of larger industries to their town and area; a 1969 ad from the Frisco City Chamber of Commerce described the town as a place perfect for opening new industries—a town full of "intelligent" workers who were "eager to get—and keep—jobs in industry."¹⁰⁷ However, this growing reliance on industrial jobs and the expansion of existing local industries began depopulating Bowden Street.

In addition to the changes occurring in the large-industry environments of Frisco City, important changes in the two downtown soft-drink bottling companies accelerated their end and soon led to the vacating of their buildings. Through the 1960s, the Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Frisco City had continued to expand; at a 1966 count, the plant provided Cokes for 38,000 people in Monroe, Escambia, Conecuh, and Baldwin counties.¹⁰⁸ Though the plant then only employed 24 workers, it bottled Sprite, Tab, Fresca, and four flavors of Sunrise Soda in addition

¹⁰⁴ Tim Taylor, conversation with author, December 28, 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Lou Dunn, interview by author, November 15, 2010; Jimmy Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010; Tim Taylor, conversation with author, November 14, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁰⁷ "Opportunities are good for living in Frisco City, Alabama -- Good schools, Churches, Clubs" *Monroe Journal Centennial Edition*, 1966.

¹⁰⁸ "Coca-Cola Since 1900: 58 years in Monroe County" advertisement, *Monroe Journal Centennial Edition*, 1966.

to Coca-Cola. In a 1966 ad, the plant touted its home-town roots; a description of Wiley Long, the plant's current president and son of one of the original owners, called him "a resident of Frisco City, [who,] being deeply interested in the welfare and prosperity of the county, [is] active in community and civic affairs." The plant's employees, according to the ad, felt that "we are working not only with each other, but for each other and for the community we serve." A change happened in the early 1970s, however, that disrupted the plant's close connection to the community and reversed the 1966 ad's prophecy that it "fully intend[ed]" to continue operating in the area well after its 100th birthday (in 2024).¹⁰⁹ Wiley Long sold his half of the Coca-Cola plant to his partners in Mobile in 1972. Within just two years the plant's bottling operations moved to Andalusia in neighboring Escambia County, and the Frisco City facility became a distribution center (previously it had handled its own bottling and shipping operations).

This change in operations affected fewer than the plant's 24 employees, but it dealt Frisco City's community pride a hard blow. Tim Taylor, who worked at the plant, called the moving of bottling operations a "terrible mistake" for local Coca-Cola quality, corroborating other residents' claims that "Frisco had the best water in the area—that's why Frisco City Cokes were so well thought-of in this area."¹¹⁰ According to Taylor, the company became less attached to the Frisco City community because, after Long's sale to his Mobile partners, operations of the company were no longer managed by local citizens who were heavily invested in Frisco City's interests (i.e. Wiley Long and Earl Sawyer, a long-time Coca-Cola employee who "defected" to the Royal Crown bottling company in town when the Mobile owners took over operations). In the mid-1970s, a larger Coca-Cola company in Montgomery bought the Frisco City distribution

¹⁰⁹ "Coca-Cola since 1900: 58 years in Monroe County" advertisement, *Monroe Journal, Centennial Edition*, 1966.

¹¹⁰ Tim Taylor, interview by author, October 14, 2010. Other residents' thoughts about Frisco City water can be found on this project's website, at <http://friscocityrephotograph.blogspot.com/2010/12/coca-cola-bottling-co.html>.

center, and by the early 1980s, all of the company's operations in Frisco City had closed.¹¹¹ Bowden Street's days of gatherings for "Co'Colas" bottled in Frisco City were officially over, and the large two-story building (one of the three downtown) that housed the company would never be re-occupied.¹¹² The downtown RC-Nehi plant had similarly stopped its bottling operations by the mid-1970s, though it continued to operate through at least 1987 as a distribution center.¹¹³

The trend begun in 1940s and 1950s toward franchised grocery stores joined these changes on Bowden Street and contributed to the vacating of other downtown buildings. The IGA Frisco City Supermarket, though an independent grocery store, opened in 1959 as Frisco Foods, Inc., and served as a second marker of chain stores' foothold in Frisco City (Yellow Front Store had been the first in the mid-1950s, along with a brief stint by Jitney Jungle).¹¹⁴ The IGA's grand opening in 1959 was a large event, according to residents, that drew large crowds from the neighboring towns of Uriah and Excel.¹¹⁵ This increased mobility allowed Frisco City residents to shop anywhere nearby; by 1969, at least, Monroeville had welcomed a Greer's Food Market and T.G.&Y., which Fredia Tatum named as a turning point in "traffic" in Frisco City.¹¹⁶ Individually-run stores like Barnes' Grocery and McCrory's Supermarket in downtown Frisco City would soon close. By 1974, Barnes' Grocery was the only downtown grocery store left, and within a couple of years it, too, would leave an empty building on Bowden Street.

¹¹¹ Tim Taylor, conversation with author, December 28, 2010.

¹¹² Jimmy Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

¹¹³ Tim Taylor, conversation with author, December 28, 2010. Royal Crown regularly bought advertisements to support the Frisco City High School *Friscola* yearbook production. After 1987, R.C. ads no longer appeared in FCHS yearbooks.

¹¹⁴ IGA advertisement. *Monroe Journal, Centennial Edition*, 1966, 1F; Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

¹¹⁵ Rachel Jones, conversation with author, Frisco City, Alabama, February 12, 2011; Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010; Tim Taylor, telephone conversation with author, April 1, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

When people in Frisco City were able to go elsewhere to work or shop, it seemed that they did; geographic proximity to necessities mattered less, and supporting local businesses seemed an option, rather than a necessity.¹¹⁷ The late 1970s would see downtown Frisco City's activity slowly eclipsed by nearby industries and retailers, particularly in Monroeville, and the "traffic" Fredia Tatum remembered through downtown Frisco City dwindled significantly.¹¹⁸ Residents who took their children to Monroe Academy found it convenient to shop in Monroeville, where some larger retailers' wares seemed cheaper than those sold by independent merchants in Frisco City.¹¹⁹ The economic shift that occurred as mobile customers ventured away from the downtown center changed the way businesses there had to operate in order to stay alive. Ronnie Ray, whose hardware store once kept china, items, and toys in its inventory, explained the changes his business encountered in the decades following the late 1960s:

In the mid- to- late 1960s we had a very active merchants' organization that worked together to promote business and to promote the town...Everybody shopped at home—that's why we carried so many different product lines. Everybody shopped here... Of course, over the years as times changed, all that changed. A lot of the businesses have moved out to other locations and bigger cities. People have gotten more mobile... We had to adapt our merchandise to what people buy. We had to adapt our stock—we can't stock nearly what we used to...I don't have near the number of employees I used to have, and therefore we can't offer the services that we used to... We've had to do that to remain viable, to keep the doors open. We've had to go to the service items that people need and are going to *have* to have rather than carrying a lot of product lines of stuff we *hope* they need.

When a variety of cheap items was increasingly available elsewhere, and decreasingly available in Frisco City as merchants either closed their businesses or pared down their merchandise selections, mobile buyers' pride in the heyday community's prosperity (with its variety of stores and luxuries that were available then) could have been compromised. If Frisco City businesses could not compete with other retailers' inventory selections in nearby towns, its residents may

¹¹⁷ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Fredia Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

¹¹⁹ Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010; Jimmy Tatum, interview by author, October 16, 2010.

have been motivated to distance themselves, both socially and physically, from the (no-longer) self-sufficient small town identity that the emptying downtown buildings represented.¹²⁰

One last event of this era dealt another significant blow to the downtown area; in the mid- to late 1960s, the completion of Interstate 65 from Georgiana (in adjacent Butler County) to Atmore (in adjacent Escambia County) drew much traffic away from Frisco City, according to Lou Dunn, who worked on an I-65 road construction crew for a summer in the early 1960s:

When I-65 was being completed...that really changed Frisco City. Highway 21...came right through Frisco City from Mobile to Montgomery, and that was the main route up there. And it deterred a lot of traffic from coming through, and it was not nearly as desirable a place to live then from that standpoint, as it would be closer to the interstate or something.¹²¹

Because I-65 construction was underway at the same time that some stores, as well as the people who formerly shopped in them, had been leaving downtown Frisco City, travelers had few incentives to choose the Highway 21 route through the town. This redirecting of traffic from the downtown area, according to Dunn, certainly affected the people who drew sparer livelihoods, shifting identities, and declining civic enthusiasm from the dwindling number of occupied buildings downtown.

Despite the changes occurring downtown or at the school in this era, one women's civic group, the Mid-Century Club, continued working for community activity—interestingly, through downtown beautification efforts and one historic preservation project. The club's main project, the 1976 restoration of the Jones Mill Post Office, was a (white) community-wide project that involved the Frisco City Council and the Frisco City Chamber of Commerce, as well as many

¹²⁰ Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) 90. The variety of the new stores' inventories perhaps led to mobile buyers' feelings of greater consuming power and modernity may have influenced them to identify with spaces and stores elsewhere. Decentralization of retail businesses and an increase in generalized advertising taught consumers that they could be more modern by buying certain in-vogue items.

¹²¹ Lou Dunn, interview by author, Nov. 15, 2010.

citizens unaffiliated with the club. Several men in the community donated equipment and materials to move the shabby building from its location on an unused lot to Jones Park; W.T. King, who owned a lumber mill in Frisco City, offered the use of his workers and trucks to move the structure, and the Southern Pine Electric Cooperative made special accommodations to lift the power lines out of the path of the passing building.¹²² Though none of the women who worked on the project remembered the long-vacant building as an operating post office (which it had been from 1890 to sometime in the 1920s), they and other members of the community spent significant amounts of time and money in order to restore it to its ‘original’ state.¹²³ The Club’s enthusiasm demonstrates that, though the downtown area of memory-containing buildings was deteriorating, the Mid-Century Club women (and the residents who helped them with their project) invested meaning in a structure where they shared no experiences. However, these residents still tied their identities to the old Post Office by creating a community whose special responsibility it was to preserve the old building, an early scrap of Frisco City’s past.

The Mid-Century Club also installed medians and flower boxes in the downtown area—significantly, decorating the *roads*, the avenues of mobility that were so affecting their town. The planters on the downtown sidewalks also pointed to an effort to restore this increasingly-detached community’s pride in the waning downtown area, which would only continue to its bleak decline over the next three decades.

¹²² Annie Laura Tatum, interview by author, October 18, 2010.

¹²³ Ibid.

CRISES OF IMAGE

1980s-1990s

In the 1980s Frisco City's industry continued to grow, and so did its population, which reached its peak in the 1990 census.¹²⁴ However, the changes in mobility, shopping/business patterns, and the school in the late 1960s and 1970s had made their mark on the community. The residents I interviewed glossed over the 1980s and 1990s as a period of general decline. Interestingly, however, Frisco City's public relations writings from the 1980s seem to indicate that residents there, particularly white ones, still subscribed to an image of Frisco City as an active, thriving, ultra-connected community. It seems that when white residents in the town began feeling the pull of memory against the changes their town experienced in the 1960s and 1970s, they became preoccupied with preserving a positive image of their town—and their own community—, briefly reviving a focus on civic pride that dominated the town's public relations in a period of boosterism. Frisco City exalted itself as a “nice, quiet town...a good place to live and raise a family,” with a “stable economy” and a bright future.¹²⁵ The town's emphasis on its civic activity and connectedness culminated in Frisco City's centennial celebration in 1988. It seems, however, that the community and historic ties residents claimed in the 1980s would not be enough to restore the unraveling community in the 1990s. Businesses continued to leave the

¹²⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Census of Population and Housing* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990).

¹²⁵ Ray Owens, Frisco City Police Chief, interview by Buddy Smith, “Frisco City: A railroad's promise changed its name,” *Mobile Press-Register*, August 18, 1984, 12C.

downtown area, but residents' descriptions of that decade seem to concentrate less on the decline of the downtown built environment (which was certainly still happening—even accelerating) and focus more on the disintegration of the town's community.

Since my interviewees were relatively silent about the 1980s, readings of two public relations pieces from that decade examine the image the (still mostly-white) community marketed of itself.¹²⁶ A 1984 issue of the *Mobile Press-Register* featured Frisco City in its “UpHome Alabama” column, a special column by reporter Buddy Smith that examined towns in eight southwestern Alabama counties. The article outlined Frisco City's early history—the Lufkin and Snider settlements, the Jones family, the railroad, and the town's name changes—before describing its major businesses and industries. In Smith's account, Frisco City is a “low-key town” based in a region where a rural lifestyle still reigns supreme. The out-of-town reporter, interestingly, did not describe any downtown buildings or businesses, but focused on Frisco City's industries, the Farmer's Cooperative, and the United Bank, which had, just that year, moved from its location in the downtown center to a new building at the edge of Bowden Street's core area.

The article describes the success of Frisco City's industries, Frisco Manufacturing and M.C. Hoffman, a work pants company that took over Landlubber in the early 1980s. The article expressed optimism about business and economic growth in the town, especially since Frisco (furniture) Manufacturing had doubled in size since 1966, listing 400 employees in 1984, and since M.C. Hoffman employed 195 and was currently “hiring more.” Many people, according to the article, happily found work at “nearby industries,” especially Alabama River Pulp Company in Claiborne and Vanity Fair (which reached its peak employment of 2,500 workers in 1995) in

¹²⁶ I chose the following pieces because of their length and heavy quoting of Frisco City residents.

Monroeville. Elliot Hendrix, a Frisco City resident and businessman interviewed for the article, said that unemployment in Frisco City was very low—perhaps lower than the county average.

Even though garment manufacturing dominated Frisco City’s industry scene, the town joined the rest of the county in marketing its proximity to the “woodlands” of the Alabama River. The *Press-Register* article highlighted Frisco City as one town in a whole county of agricultural, hunting, and fishing opportunities. According to a resident interviewed for the article, “Cotton has been the main crop in Monroe County, though there’s not nearly as much grown now.” Soybeans, an increasingly popular crop in the area, looked “real good,” and pecan orchards in the area were given brief mention.¹²⁷ The article also stated that “residents of Frisco City do a lot of hunting and fishing” at the river, creeks, and woodlands nearby.

A new business appeared in Frisco City in August of 1984 that capitalized on this returned-to-rural image: Dixie Sporting Goods. Located in a camouflage-painted building on Bowden Street, the retailer began with a small product line of hunting and fishing supplies. In March of 1988, the store’s selection expanded to include “anything from a 12-foot aluminum boat to a 24-foot Gulf boat...[and] clothing, guns, ammo, and outboard motors,” and the business moved to a larger building north of downtown Frisco City.¹²⁸ Its old camouflage building downtown was painted white in coming years, but not reoccupied. Whether the “Dixie” in its name had intentions of reclaiming a white past for the city in light of the racial changes of the 1960s and 1970s is impossible to tell.

The boosterism (and its whiteness) that dominated the town’s activities in 1988 at the town’s centennial celebration revealed that some members of Frisco City’s black and white

¹²⁷ Ed Holder, manager of Hendrix Tractor Co., interview by Buddy Smith, “Frisco City: A railroad’s promise changed its name,” *Mobile Press-Register*, August 18, 1984, 12C.

¹²⁸ “Dixie Sporting Goods celebrates 10 years,” *Monroe Journal*, August 19, 1994. T.K. & Mike, “redneck” comedians and television personalities, came to the store’s tenth anniversary celebration.

communities still struggled to find their places in the spatially-combined communities of the downtown area and the school. The county newspaper's coverage of the town's 1988 centennial celebration included few black voices or histories, but racial cooperation was exalted as one of the town's growing strong points.

The town celebrated its 100th birthday with its own supplement issue of the county newspaper, the *Monroe Journal*, which offered history and current news about the town. The supplement announced the centennial celebration the town had planned, and the events of the weekend celebration showed that the event's planners still valued the downtown built spaces in the preservation of their memories. Even the vacant buildings were decorated with red, white, and blue pennant flags and balloons, and crafts and food booths occupied the sidewalks in front of them. The old downtown two-story hotel building became a museum of sorts for the weekend; its "historic" first-floor lobby served as a "tea room" for guests and visitors. The Jones Mill Post Office building also opened its doors for tours and viewing of its display cases filled with old Frisco City memorabilia.¹²⁹

Like the 1984 *Mobile Press-Register* article, the *Monroe Journal* supplement issue used Blanche Haigler Borum's (white) "History of Frisco City" paper for its historical information, and it added interviews with several (white) elderly residents who remembered Frisco City's "horse and buggy" days.¹³⁰ The only information that the supplement issue included about the school was an account of the 1920s state championship sweeps by the Jones Mill girls' basketball team. Only the history of the first Jones Mill school (between Jones Mill and Excel)

¹²⁹ Anna Thibodeaux, "Celebration! Frisco City makes big plans for 100th birthday festivities" *Monroe Journal*, October 20, 1988.

¹³⁰ Borum's "History of Frisco City" paper seems to be the only source of written Frisco City history, and it does not mention black residents.

and that of a white school in Lufkin made it into the 1988 centennial records.¹³¹ However, journal entries about 1980s life in Frisco City, written by students at Frisco City High School (comprised of a roughly even racial mix by then), did make it into the town's time capsule, buried in Jones Park in December 1988. Though the capsule contains the histories of only white families in Frisco City, perhaps at least some black voices will be unsilenced upon the capsule's opening in 2088.¹³²

The only black voice in the *Monroe Journal* supplement edition belonged to Juanita Richardson, a retired Frisco City Elementary School teacher and first African American elected to the town council. Her statement about the future of Frisco City reveals much about the town's political past, even since integration. "On the political side, blacks have never been really involved. Now, I feel like since the [1970s] change [council members elected by districts rather than at large], we'll play a vital part and make this a better place for all citizens." Largely inactive, perhaps consciously (or unconsciously) shut out by the white community, the black community, half of Frisco City's population, seemed to desire representation in civic involvement.

Though the celebration of the town's history largely excludes the history of black residents, several photographs taken at the blocked-off downtown area during the parade and "street dance" show that black residents were present and tolerated by the white community in the open space on Bowden Street, perhaps signaling a step toward a shared community, beginning with shared space.

¹³¹ "Monroe County town celebrates 100th birthday," Supplement to the *Monroe Journal*, October 20, 1988.

¹³² The capsule also contains a 1988 telephone book, current newspapers, unopened commemorative Coca-Cola bottles bearing Frisco City's name (though bottled after the Frisco City plant's closing), current (1988) photographs of the town, and church rosters, among many other things, even a 2-oz. bottle of Dr. Tichenor's mouthwash from the downtown drugstore. "Frisco saves history in time capsule" Anna Thibodeaux, *Monroe Journal* December 22, 1988



Figure 5. Entertainment on Bowden Street, Frisco City Centennial celebration, 1988. Photograph by Ronnie Ray.

Two statements from white townspeople featured in the centennial newspaper pointed toward—even claimed for the present—this shared community. Concerning the school’s recent history, a statement from former Frisco City High School principal, Jeremiah Driscoll, reiterated the cooperative spirit exhibited by some members of both black and white communities during integration-era change. At the centennial celebration, Billy McCrory, mayor of Frisco City and owner of the two-story downtown drugstore, told a *Monroe Journal* reporter, “I see a better future than we’ve had for the past 20 or 30 years. I see new life being pumped into the community. The attitude of the people is good; they’ve all pulled together. I see all good things ahead for Frisco City.”¹³³ These small steps toward acknowledging town-wide cooperation did not lead to an immediate bright future; in fact, the next decade seemed to contradict predictions or shared communities.

¹³³ Diane Shaw “Looking back...Looking forward” *Monroe Journal*, October 20, 1988

The carefully-nurtured image of the mid-to late 1980s—one of strong community connections and steps toward the inclusion of African American residents—plummeted by the 1990s. Industries began leaving; the school “went downhill,” barely skirting a try in the mid-1990s by the County Board of Education to relocate its alternative school to the Frisco City High School campus; and Frisco City residents seemed to become disinterested in civic activities. Many of the town’s young population, according to several residents I interviewed, began leaving because there “just weren’t jobs here anymore.”¹³⁴ Though loss of townspeople and businesses certainly dealt hard blows to the town, residents seem to choose deterioration of community as the town’s most detrimental change. According to several residents, the town got a “bad rap” from surrounding communities toward the end of the 1990s.¹³⁵ Nickey Gaston remembered the image change the town suffered:

Especially in the past 10 to 12 years, that it’s kind of become like a “little Pritchard.” That’s horrible to say that, but “if you’ve got troubled people, send ‘em to Frisco” is just the stigma that we got...you know, “all the bad kids come out of Frisco.”

Pritchard, an African-American community in the Mobile area, is perceived by many, said Gaston, as a dangerous area characterized by drugs and crime.¹³⁶

Drugs would indeed become an growing problem in Frisco City, and it seemed that, in other Monroe County towns, particularly places that were becoming known for their whiteness (like Monroeville and Excel, according to Gaston), Frisco City began gaining a reputation as a black “hood” characterized by drugs and poor education.¹³⁷ According to several residents I interviewed, this “little Pritchard” image stemmed partly from the school’s decline after

¹³⁴ Marilyn Busey Williams, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹³⁵ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011; Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

¹³⁶ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011

¹³⁷ Charles Runnells, *Monroe Journal*, May 11, 1995. In May of 1995, the town council considered a drug dog purchase, because, according to councilman Jerry Watts: “We do have a drug problem in Frisco City.”; Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

integration. By the late 1990s, Monroe Academy remained white, while Excel and J.U. Blacksher even lost some black students, and the three school gained reputations as the county's "white public schools."¹³⁸ Frisco City's school system eventually became identified county-wide as a "black school," and, consequently, the identity of the town the school represented followed. Some residents, like Gaston's relative, blamed white residents' "abandoning" of the school for the institution's decline, citing disinterest and distrust as factors that led to a loss of accountability that caused many problems with drugs and crime for the community at large.¹³⁹

In June of 1995, Frisco City's label as "little Pritchard" would receive further county-wide public confirmation when the Monroe County Board of Education announced its consideration to relocate its alternative school to the band building of Frisco City High School. A directive from the State Board of Education had ordered the establishment of an alternative school program in 1994 for the 169 Monroe County students who needed an alternative facility in which to learn. When the directive came, the Monroeville Planning Commission granted the County Board temporary permission to open the Alternative School in a house on the back side of the Monroe County Junior High School campus, which is very close to the Monroeville town square. Residents in the Monroeville neighborhood had "expressed concerns, though there have been no incidents in the first year of operations."¹⁴⁰ Frisco City residents were affronted by the Board's consideration, which, to them, implied, "you've got troubled people, send 'em to Frisco."¹⁴¹ A group of more than one hundred "Concerned Citizens of Frisco City" immediately

¹³⁸ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹³⁹ Lionel J. Beaulieu, Glenn D. Israel, and Ronald C. Wimberly, "Promoting Educational Achievement: A Partnership of Families, Schools, and Communities" in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. David L. Brown and Louis E. Swanson, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) 273-302. According to Beaulieu, et al., educational expectations remain low if local schools have no community support or interaction--schools suffer when they are not embraced by the community.

¹⁴⁰ Landon Sawyer, principal of Monroeville Jr. High School. "Alternative school debate," *Monroe Journal*, June 15, 1995.

¹⁴¹ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

threatened a petition opposing the alternative school's relocation, asking the town council to do the same.¹⁴² The County School Board president at that time, George Elbrecht, also rose to defend Frisco City, suggesting that the alternative school should not be moved to any existing campus. He added that he "used to live right across from the band room in Frisco City, and that neighborhood is full of little old ladies." After several weeks of deliberation and more complaints from offended Frisco City residents (not identified as black or white in newspaper accounts), who seemed less worried that the school might suffer than that the safety of their community might be compromised, the county board finally decided to place the alternative school near Monroeville behind Monroe County High School, where vacant buildings were already available to use.¹⁴³ Though the county Board of Education's attempt did not succeed, the debate surrounding it brought negative perceptions of Frisco City's school and community to the county's public eye and aided in tarnishing the town's carefully-built image.

A few downtown economic changes also contributed to the further decline of Frisco City's perceived (and advertised) community. In the early 1980s, a fire destroyed the M.C. Hoffman building (and operations), and Nickey Gaston, who worked there as mender (inspector) during her summer vacations, explained that "when the building went, a lot of people had to get other jobs."¹⁴⁴ Medline Textiles, a healthcare-apparel manufacturer, promised it would open operations in a new building on the site to "keep jobs in town."¹⁴⁵ Medline did build a new building on the old Frisco Sportswear/Landlubber/M.C. Hoffman site in 1992. In 1994 Medline had 204 employees and announced its intentions to expand to bring 200 more jobs to Frisco City

¹⁴² "Alternative school debate," *Monroe Journal*, June 15, 1995.

¹⁴³ *Monroe Journal*, July 13, 1995.

¹⁴⁴ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

by the end of 1995.¹⁴⁶ This expansion does not seem to have materialized, and Gaston remembered that the company moved to Monroeville suddenly.¹⁴⁷ In 1990, more capital moved to Monroeville, where the county's only Wal-Mart opened, drawing more crowds of shoppers from the few remaining retailers in Frisco City.¹⁴⁸

As community ties at other places and schools in the county grew stronger, the downtown area's decline continued, resulting in a growing detachment to the people and spaces of the downtown area. The "little Pritchard" label of the mid- to late 1990s continued into the 2000s, and it seemed that distrust among residents in Frisco City reigned; the image of a "nice, quiet town" that had been embraced by many residents was effectively shattered. And the events of the next decade, including city council bickering and a disastrous change in the downtown landscape, only reinforced the surrounding areas' (and residents') negative opinions of Frisco City, and fighting this declining image eventually "tired" the residents who wanted to believe they still lived in a nice town.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ "200 jobs in Frisco expansion," *Monroe Journal*, August 18, 1994.

¹⁴⁷ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Wal-Mart Stores, "Monroeville Supercenter Adds Grocery and Expanded Merchandise Selection/WalMart Supercenter Brings 120 New Jobs to Monroeville" (March 11, 2009), walmartstores.com/pressroom/news/9029.aspx (accessed March 29, 2011); Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010.

¹⁴⁹ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

GOODNIGHT, OUR TOWN:
DECLINING IMAGE AND THE END OF A COMMUNITY INSTITUTION

On November 15, 2001, the front page of the week's issue of the *Monroe Journal* read, in large, bold print, "Fire erupts in Frisco City." A fire in the old two-story drugstore building destroyed that building and two adjacent ones before the blaze could be contained by the 75 firefighters from six counties who responded and, according to residents, saved the rest of the downtown buildings from certain destruction.¹⁵⁰ This news seemed as if it would damage the town irreparably, saddening residents and affecting the town's image for years to come. Residents still describe the occurrence as "sad" and point to it as a landmark day when part of Frisco City's identity was lost.¹⁵¹ However, the drugstore had been closed for several months, and the building next to it had housed Barfield's Jewelry store, which was in the middle of its going-out-of-business sale.¹⁵² The third building destroyed, adjacent to the Coca-Cola building, had been vacant for a number of years. The businesses that had occupied them were already gone, but for residents, the structures themselves symbolized the old community's past, and their places in it. Named by several residents as the social center of the town, the large old drugstore had acted as a gathering spot for decades of schoolchildren and their families, and its destruction would be, according to some residents, the "last straw" for downtown Frisco City.¹⁵³ Several

¹⁵⁰ "Fire erupts in Frisco City," *Monroe Journal*, Nov. 15, 2001.

¹⁵¹ Vincent Ferraro, conversation with author, Frisco City, AL, October 16, 2010.

¹⁵² *Monroe Journal*, Nov. 29, 2001.

¹⁵³ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011; Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010.

Bowden Street businesses left Frisco City soon after the fire, leaving the contiguous stretch of buildings in the downtown area almost completely vacant. Ronnie Ray called the fire “a big economic blow to the town,” and Viola Nettles, a video rental store owner who closed her store downtown two months after the fire, confirmed his statement: “The fire has really affected the town’s business. There’s just nothing left. A lot of people used to visit the drugstore or shop at Barfield’s. I was just tired, so I closed up and went home.”¹⁵⁴ Their thoughts indicate that the deteriorating business environment downtown was making it hard for any businesses to survive. Ronnie Ray named the difficulties facing businesses that must continually adapt their merchandise, advertising, and services to accommodate changing consumer habits: “People have gotten more mobile, and they shop at home on the internet—it’s made business a little more difficult for anybody that’s in a small business now.” According to Ray, when the downtown business environment started changing, the town’s merchant group, which had scheduled promotions and drawings for the crowds that once flocked to Bowden Street on Saturdays for “vis’tin” and entertainment, had to devote more of their time and efforts into staying afloat.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, they became less civically-involved, and promotional events and prizes faded away. When these merchants’ customer bases began shopping elsewhere, the ties between merchants and townspeople began dissolving.¹⁵⁶ The increased mobility Ray mentions also made less time

¹⁵⁴ Ronnie Ray, interview by author, Oct. 13, 2010; Viola Nettles, interview by Connie Bagget, “After the fire: South Alabama Town cleans up,” *Mobile Press-Register*, February 18, 2002.

¹⁵⁵ Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010.

¹⁵⁶ Terry L. Besser, and Susan K. Jarnagin, “Corporate Social Responsibility: Small Businesses and Small Towns,” History of Corporate Responsibility Project, Working Paper No. 5. (Minneapolis: Center for Ethical Business Cultures, 2010). In 2010, Besser and Jarnagin published a study of business social responsibility and performance in small towns in the Corn Belt and Plains states. Their study examines the relationships of small business owners to their surrounding communities, where they are more heavily invested in local activities and civic welfare than are large companies with operations in large or multiple locations. They state that small business owners who are connected to their communities foster community growth by their level of investment in local activities and civic welfare. Ronnie Ray illustrates Besser and Jarnagin’s claims when he explains that he chose to remain in business in Frisco City, despite the hardships that came with the town’s changes, because of his connection to the community: “Frisco City’s been good to *me*. The community *needs* a good grocery store. The community *needs* a good hardware store. The community *needs* a few other businesses. It’s nothing any of us are gonna make a fortune at; I think those

for *residents* to be involved in civic activities, at least in town.¹⁵⁷ Much of their time, perhaps at one time only invested in Frisco City's community, may have been spent forging new community ties elsewhere. Marilyn Williams explained that after she and her husband moved back to Frisco City in the late 1990s for retirement, their enthusiastic attempts at being involved in various community groups and activities met with a degree of apathy they had not anticipated from "tired" townspeople in the city council and the Kiwanis Club, the latter of which only remained active for about two more years. Williams decided to join a women's group "Community Bible Study," which met in Monroeville, and found an active, connected group in which she could whole-heartedly be involved.¹⁵⁸

This distancing between merchants and shoppers in the downtown area perhaps led to growing disconnects between residents who no longer met with each other on Bowden Street, and, the week after the drugstore burned, its story took a surprising turn that further blighted Frisco City's reputation in the county and fueled many residents' growing distrust of one another. The sadness residents felt at the loss of the drugstore turned to anger that week when investigators determined that arson had been the cause of the fire.¹⁵⁹ No arrests were made then, but in April of 2005, after several years of investigations, former Frisco City mayor and most recent owner of the drugstore for 18 years, Billy McCrory, was accused of being the arsonist. Several eyewitnesses corroborated accounts of McCrory's suspicious activity around building on the day of the fire, and an ex-employee said that McCrory had threatened to burn it down rather than see his wife receive any part of it in his recent bitter divorce. McCrory was not convicted,

days are gone, but it's a business where if you work at it, you *can* make a living. It's nothing I really encourage a lot of young ones to come back into, because it's getting harder and harder." Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010.

¹⁵⁷ Putnam, 213-215 states that "each additional ten minutes in daily commuting time cuts involvement in community affairs by 10 percent." The time Frisco City residents spend traveling to do shopping or, now, to attend school in another area must also affect civic engagement.

¹⁵⁸ Marilyn Williams, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ "Arson cause of FC fire," *Monroe Journal*, November 22, 2001.

but the scandal caused by his arrest cast an unfavorable light on Frisco City, especially its downtown politics, which had already begun declining into petty squabbling amongst town leaders.¹⁶⁰

The week after the fire, the town council voted not to allow the town to spend any more money until financial information could be gotten from current mayor Dot Sims, who, according to several council members, had been too reticent to show the town's financial records to the council. Doc Moye, city councilman and owner of D&D Furniture Outlet said, "We lost \$2,900 this month, and we can't continue to lose money. This is a business. We need to be better informed on the town's finances."¹⁶¹ Another *Monroe Journal* article entitled "Talking trash in Frisco City" highlighted a bitter debate between Sims and a councilman about the placement of a garbage dumpster in the town maintenance area. The councilman sued the mayor because she would not allow the dumpster to be moved outside the maintenance area fence so that town residents could have better access to it. The mayor cited aesthetics as the reason for her refusal; the dumpster was hidden behind the fence, and bringing it out, she said, would be unsightly. Coverage of debates like this dominated Frisco City's appearances in the *Monroe Journal* post-2001 and contributed to the town's unfavorable reputation.¹⁶²

The town's declining image seemed to get even worse when, just a month after the fire downtown, an article appeared in *Monroe Journal* stating that a book had been found in the town maintenance shop about how to grow marijuana.¹⁶³ The next week, a rash of break-ins, harrassments, and drug arrests happened in Frisco City.¹⁶⁴ Reports like this seemed to

¹⁶⁰ Associated Press, "Former City Mayor Accused of Setting Fire in Monroeville, Alabama" April 7, 2005. <http://www.firehouse.com/stateprovince/alabama/former-city-mayor-accused-setting-fire-monroeville-alabama>

¹⁶¹ "Frisco City puts hold on spending issue," *Monroe Journal*, November 22, 2001.

¹⁶² *Monroe Journal*, January 10, 2002.

¹⁶³ *Monroe Journal*, December 13, 2001.

¹⁶⁴ *Monroe Journal*, January 17, 2002.

characterize the decade for Frisco City and served to reinforce its “little Pritchard” label. Drugs would still be a problem in 2009, when Frisco City Police Chief Ronald Marshall promised upon filling his post that he would work on shutting down drug activity in the town. In April of 2009, Marshall asked the town council to approve a town ordinance to “pull up saggy pants,” to “limit the exposure of underwear in town.”¹⁶⁵ Such reports continued to tarnish Frisco City’s public image and fueled distrust among black and white residents of the town. Such distrust led to declining support for local institutions, especially the school, which had followed the town’s image in its decline.

The disconnect between the school and the community again came to the forefront of the county’s consciousness in November of 2001, when a group of concerned Frisco City residents began calling on the Monroe County School Board to examine its laxity in enforcing school district lines. The residents said that some (mainly white) students whose primary residences were still in Frisco City were crossing district lines to attend other schools in the county, particularly Excel and J.U. Blacksher, whose racial scales were tipping to a whiter side as Frisco City’s enrollment dwindled and became predominantly black. In response, the Board (reluctantly, according to many Frisco City parents) began verifying public school students’ residences.¹⁶⁶ It seemed, however, that the Board’s measures changed little for Frisco City’s school. The school’s white—and black—enrollment dwindled steadily until 2009.

In January of that year an article appeared in the *Monroe Journal* that bore a hint of foreboding about a shakeup in the Monroe County school system. Alabama Governor Bob Riley had announced in October 2008 what became a 9% proration rate of state educational funding, which, in conjunction with the nation-wide recession, proved detrimental to the state’s

¹⁶⁵ “Council asked to help pull up saggy pants,” *Monroe Journal*, April 16, 2009.

¹⁶⁶ “Frisco City questions district violations,” *Monroe Journal* February 14, 2002.

educational funds.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, the article stated, a mandate from the Alabama State Department of Education directed all county school systems to develop plans to establish their own reserve accounts equal to at least one month of their operating costs. For Monroe County, the amount that would need to be raised for the reserve account approached \$2.5 million. The county system became one of 20 other systems in the state that, for the 2007-2008 school year, had not met the required reserve mark. Melanie Ryals, the Monroe County Board superintendent, stated that the proration, the recession, and a continuing decline in enrollment had kept Monroe County from coming up with sufficient funds. The State Department of Education representative, Eddie Hill, warned that if the county did not meet its reserve, the state would take over the system. Ryals stated, “[The system’s financial situation] is the worst I’ve seen it in 19 years. It’s going to take a lot of hard work and drastic decisions by the board in order for us to live to see another day.”¹⁶⁸ At the end of February, the board announced what it would do, and it spelled doom for Frisco City’s school.

At the Monroe County Board of Education meeting on February 9, 2009, Ryals announced that the Frisco City school would be closing at the end of the 2008-2009 term. Ryals claimed that a “benefit cost analysis” led to the decision, and that the Board had no choice but to “act swiftly and aggressively.” She said it was “no longer financially feasible to operate” the school, following a consistent drop in enrollment (which residents said the board could have prevented by enforcing district lines). Logistically, this closure would, according to Ryals, save the Board \$1,172,268 annually.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “School board has big decisions ahead.” *Monroe Journal*, January 8, 2009. The state legislature’s budgets for 2008 fiscal year projected a growth of 6% in the state’s economy for the 2009 (October 2008-September 2009) fiscal year. By the time of the Jan. 2009 article, the first quarter’s growth had only been 1.53%.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Because of proration, the Board had received \$2.3 million less than it was scheduled to receive for the 2009 fiscal year.

¹⁶⁹ “Frisco City High School to close,” *Monroe Journal*, February 26, 2009.

The next issue of the *Monroe Journal* was filled with outcries from Frisco City residents. Some parents and other townspeople formed the “Frisco City Committee to Keep Frisco City High School Open.” The spokesperson for the group said that the committee believed that money was not the only reason for the county Board’s decision; the committee cited favoritism of the county Board for other schools in the county, particularly Monroeville and Excel schools, as well as the Board’s earlier laxity in enforcing district lines. The group also complained that the Board had neglected the school facilities by “ignor[ing]” the needs of Frisco City’s schools and spending money “at the other schools in the county, especially at Excel.”¹⁷⁰ The committee felt that economic “tough times” were not a legitimate excuse to “throw away” Frisco City High School; that the Board had done nothing to stop the chain of events that led to this decision.¹⁷¹ The article closed with the committee spokesperson’s prediction: “If they close the school, they will kill the community.” An anonymous Letter to the Editor from the same day said that, though the earlier decisions of the Board were partly to blame, Frisco City’s community was not entirely free of guilt:

Even when the Whippets football team was racing through an undefeated season a couple of years ago, the home stands were half full at best. In many situations, the visiting teams brought more fans to the game. This might not be a good way to measure community support, but if you won’t attend a home game for an undefeated team, why would anyone think there would be more support for the school’s academic programs?

This description of the crowds at Frisco City athletic events is a far cry from the 1947 “basketballitis” that once infected the town. Interestingly, the letter points out that the only recent instance of heightened community support for the school’s athletic program occurred in the

¹⁷⁰ Amongst Monroe Countians, Excel was often called the “private public school.” Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011. “School closing will hurt community,” *Monroe Journal*, March 5, 2009. An anonymous editorial claimed that the Frisco City High School facility needed “hundreds of thousands of dollars to bring its facilities up to par.”

¹⁷¹ “Parents Challenge Frisco City HS closing,” *Monroe Journal*, March 5, 2009.

previous school year, when the Alabama High School Athletic Association took away seven of the football team's wins. Though the Association cited a player's ineligibility as its reason for reclaiming some of the school's games, the Letter to the Editor writer explained "the community [got] excited and united" in complaints against the Association. The writer explained, "And [the citizens'] biggest issue was that it was racial, because Frisco City is a predominantly black school."¹⁷²

The loudest protests surrounding the school's closing also seemed to be about race, but the handful of black protesters seen picketing in front of the county courthouse in Monroeville with signs that read "A school is a terrible thing to waste" and "Keep our students at FCHS," seemed to just be concerned with having a local school: "We love our school...[we want the Board to] try to take a different approach to deal with our money problems than just closing the school...We just want to keep our community school going."¹⁷³

These black parents' identification with the school as "our community school," much like the connection described by interviewed white residents, may indicate that the school continued to provide a space for community connections, just in different ways than those white parents identified with. The new school community seemed less tied to the downtown built spaces, perhaps because its members may not have had experiences together there. White residents I interviewed may have felt that no community then existed at the school in 2009 because it wasn't their community—one with which they could identify in the old way (connection to community through sports events and Glee Club concerts in the downtown medians).

An interesting illustration of the school's changing relationship to the downtown community is a survey of the back pages of the school's yearbooks. These pages in older

¹⁷² Anonymous letter to the editor, "School closing will hurt community," *Monroe Journal*, March 5, 2009.

¹⁷³ "Parents protest closing," *Monroe Journal*, March 26, 2009; .Jeffrey Williams, interview by Kimberly Curth, reporter, WKRG News 5, March 23, 2009.

yearbooks (from the first in 1948 to ones published in the early 1990s) contained large advertisement sections with ads and pictures of students shopping in downtown businesses. These advertisements primarily came from Frisco City businesses in early years, but in the mid- to late 1970s (that “downhill” era) more businesses from other towns, particularly Monroeville, supplanted Frisco City’s presence in the ad sections’ pages. In these later years, photographs of businesses and students with business owners all but disappeared.

Sometime between 1992 and 2008 (my yearbook lenders did not have books from those years), the tradition of including ad sections disappeared from Frisco City’s yearbooks. The 2008-2009 yearbook, the last one published by the school, looks dramatically different from the pre-1992 books; no ad section appears in its final pages, and that striking absence is perhaps suggestive of a growing detachment of the school community from the downtown community. Indeed, there were few downtown businesses left in Frisco City in 2008, even in the 1990s, but yearbooks from that era continued to sell ad space to businesses in Monroeville. Frisco City’s last thin, ad-less yearbook appears very insular when compared with older books and seems to illustrate a non-relationship between the school students and the downtown and county businesses—or merely a lessening importance placed on interactions between the downtown and school communities, which, in Frisco City’s heyday, were supported by the same group of white residents. Perhaps the yearbooks’ changes illustrate, in addition to the mere vacating of the downtown area, differing generational and/or racial ideas about community and members’ roles in community institutions. In either case, the young yearbook-makers (whether black or white), had different downtown experiences from those of the older white residents I interviewed. Therefore, the yearbooks’ compilers may have had no similar ties, and pursued none, to the town’s businesses or spaces through their school community.

Through many eras of change and decline in the downtown area and the school, all residents of Frisco City (black and white) seemed to be losing ties to the communities to which they once belonged. However, they still shared one constant connection: their geographic location. Even after the demise of the bustling downtown and the school, residents' interpersonal ties were, unwittingly or not, maintained in other built spaces; residents still saw each other at the post office, the IGA, and local churches. Several groups of people even formed new small communities in town, like the spectators and buyers at livestock auctions at the Farmer's Cooperative, or the Friday lunch crowd at Larry's Drive-In. According to rural sociologist Kenneth P. Wilkinson, "community locale...provides the associations that comprise the local society; it gives direction to the processes of collective action, and it is the source of community identity."¹⁷⁴ If this is true, Frisco City still harbors the essential component of community—place—, and, since 2009, a group of residents has been making waves in the town because of their belief that the town of Frisco City can be a community, of people connected through the spaces they share, again.

¹⁷⁴Kenneth P. Wilkinson, *The Community in Rural America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 31.

EPILOGUE

REVIVING FRISCO CITY, 2009-2011

REBUILDING IMAGE AND SHARED COMMUNITY “ONE BUILDING AT A TIME”

After the school closing, and the negative image surrounding Frisco City in the decades prior to that event, it seems that some residents awoke to a responsibility to save their town from further decay. In May of 2009, a group of women interested in “reviving” Frisco City’s community formed a non-profit organization with plans to mobilize the community to restore the deteriorating downtown buildings—and then, through small business recruitment, use those spaces to rebuild Frisco City’s community. This group’s efforts at recreating downtown spaces for community gathering reveal the value its members still place on their memories of the downtown built environments of Frisco City’s past, but with one important change: a beginning step toward cooperative renegotiation of space to include another group—Frisco City’s African-American community.

Revive Frisco City, Inc., began a year after two women in Frisco City, one a long-time resident and one a new Frisco Citian, met and became friends. Nickey Gaston, who grew up in Frisco City but was a 1980 Monroe Academy graduate, and Linda Woods, a Baldwin County (south of Monroe) native, met through their husbands, who had grown up as best friends in Frisco City. Linda and her husband, Chip, moved to Frisco City from Mobile, in order to open

Larry's Drive-In, the restaurant at the north end of town.¹⁷⁵ Linda had been a member of the "Keep Mobile Beautiful" organization, which is responsible for coordinating Mobile's city improvement projects and public relations, and, in her, Nickey found a kindred spirit.¹⁷⁶ Nickey had long been concerned about the "looks" of Frisco City, the "stigma" attached to its decaying downtown, and what seemed like weekly reports of drug arrests there in the county newspaper. She explains that in a pre-2009 conversation, she and Linda concluded that "if we as citizens of town don't start caring, there isn't going to be anything left standing, really."¹⁷⁷ Nickey and Linda named the 2009 opening of the new Frisco City Senior Center as their inspiration for giving free rein to their vision for improving the town. Frances Gray, a Frisco City native who had moved back to Frisco City in the late 1990s, worked tirelessly to establish and maintain the old Senior Center, which met in the town's outdated former Fire Department and Rescue Squad building and served meals—and bingo prizes—to the town's elderly population. Gray worked doubly hard against countless frustrations to raise funds to build a new Senior Center in Jones Park, by the red caboose.¹⁷⁸ For Nickey and Linda, the Senior Center served as an example of what could be done with hard work and vision—and, most importantly, that something *could* be done in Frisco City to effect positive change there.

Gaston and Woods began approaching other women in Frisco City about their idea for a non-profit organization and discovered that many of those women were similarly excited about the positive boost the town had received in the new Senior Center.¹⁷⁹ Anne Brown, a life-long Megargel resident, but one who claimed Frisco City (where she attended school) as her home, joined the group after it formed in May of 2009: "Before that I had just thought: 'Frisco City's

¹⁷⁵ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁷⁶ Mary Tomlinson, "Frisco City citizens work to revitalize their town," *Monroe Journal*, February 24, 2011.

¹⁷⁷ Nickey Gaston, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁷⁸ Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

¹⁷⁹ Tomlinson, *Monroe Journal*, Feb 24, 2011.

just gone, I'll forget about it.' Now, I know it's not a dead town. So don't let people tell you that, because it's not. It's in need of repair."¹⁸⁰ Dell Walston, whom the group names as their "dreamer," joined enthusiastically with several other women.¹⁸¹ Revive Frisco City, Inc. (RFC) has 20 board members and, in January 2011, opened its membership to all Frisco City residents.¹⁸²

Revive Frisco City joins a list of civic groups that have been active in Frisco City at different times in its history. Except for the Kiwanis Club, the Jaycees, and a short-lived Lyons Club, the organizations focused on town improvement belonged to the community's women.¹⁸³ A chapter of the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, the Women's Study Forum, organized there in 1934, and served as a mother organization for the Junior Study Club, a similar organization for young girls. Marilyn Williams remembered her membership in the Junior Study Club in the 1940s, when one year it "put together" a music program at the Frisco City School.¹⁸⁴ Scrapbooks from the Women's Study Club indicate that its activities ranged from meetings for presentations on current events or town happenings in members' houses, to town beautification projects. The Women's Club became the Mid-Century Club in 1950, and this organization acquired and landscaped the two medians for the downtown area, along with the sidewalk flower boxes.¹⁸⁵ The Club's 1976 restoration of the old Jones Mill Post Office was its largest project; though the Mid-Century Club continued to meet through the 2000s, the scale of its activities never matched that of its earlier ones. Revive Frisco City members continue the upkeep of the

¹⁸⁰ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

¹⁸¹ Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

¹⁸² Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

¹⁸³ The Frisco City Lyons Club, established in 1940, stopped its operations after World War II. The Frisco City Kiwanis Club, the longest-lived of the men's groups, was active at least from post-War years through the 1970s. It experienced a brief revival in the 1990s before "fizzling out," according to Marilyn Williams, whose husband had been active in the group in the late 1990s. Fredia Tatum remembers the Jaycees operating for a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s. Borum, 8 corroborates these dates.

¹⁸⁴ Marilyn Williams, interview by author, February 22, 2011.

¹⁸⁵ Annie Laura Tatum, a charter member of the Mid-Century Club, interview by author, October 18, 2010.

downtown planters and medians and occasionally open the old post office building for visitors, building on the history of civic activity by women in the town.¹⁸⁶

Revive Frisco City's unofficial motto is, according to Anne Brown, "changing Frisco City one building at a time;" its main focus is the "repair" of the vacant and decaying downtown buildings. In a press release for RFC, Dell Walston stressed the importance to the group of repairing the built environment as a booster of community pride:

"Revive is interested in preservation of the history of Frisco City through restoration projects, especially the downtown storefronts. Knowing that people driving through town may never see anything but the unoccupied, abandoned, and decaying buildings, we are encouraging the owners (primarily out of town owners) to clean up their property."

The other goal Walston mentions is related—cultivating a small business environment (rather than "beating the drum for that large industry we're unlikely to attract"), attracting small business owners and their families with "cleaned-up" buildings and "stronger [community] cohesiveness."¹⁸⁷ Ronnie Ray explains that he keeps his small hardware store's buildings as updated as possible for that reason: "Looks mean a lot, you know...First impressions, when you see something, if it doesn't strike you as somewhere you want to stop, you're not going to stop. Everything has a little impact. Nowadays you've got to have every little edge you can."¹⁸⁸

RFC has begun its mission of reviving "one building at a time" by working to create downtown spaces for the community to gather again—by writing grants, contacting out-of-town owners about donating their "eyesore" buildings to the group, and even picking up saws and

¹⁸⁶These women's groups join a history of reclaiming and preserving community, through the preservation and upkeep of historic places and monuments to past that they felt needed to be remembered. The RFC women seem less concerned with preserving the historic buildings in Frisco City than with improving the image associated with them; however, their decisions about which spaces to preserve, and with whom to preserve them, are informed by their own experiences of Frisco City's built environment. Many of its members are middle-aged women who remember Frisco City's bustling days of the 1950s and 1960s. See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12-54.

¹⁸⁷ Dell Walston, Revive Frisco City press release, given to author February 24, 2011.

¹⁸⁸ Ronnie Ray, interview by author, October 13, 2010.

hammers themselves. The group began its restoration of a small barbershop building on Bowden Street in late 2010 and hopes to open a book exchange in the building in late 2011.¹⁸⁹

Many of RFC's members' motivations for "reviving" these buildings began with history—their memories of the connected downtown "community" of earlier times, so even the decaying buildings are important as physical reminders of that community. Anne Brown explains, "We're not going to bull-doze [the decaying buildings] down like has been suggested to us. We've got too much history here; we're not going to do that."¹⁹⁰ One story of a current downtown business's expansion reveals the value of the past of a built space, even if the current occupants share no memories of common experiences there. The Norwood family, owners of Lasting Creations, the sewing and crafts supply shop at the north end of the downtown area, are preparing to expand their shop and move to a larger building downtown in order to accommodate a handmade pottery selection and the growing quantity of quilting orders the mother-daughter team has received. The Norwoods' February 2011 clean-up efforts created quite a stir in town, especially when they replaced the building's windows and doors, which had long been broken and covered with plywood. The pictures below illustrate the visual impact of such a simple change.

¹⁸⁹ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.



Figure 6. Changes to the old theater building between November 2010 and February 2011. Photographs by author.

When the Norwoods power-washed the side of the building, the peeling paint revealed the words “Theatre,” much to their surprise, and to the shock of other residents who also did not know that a theater had ever existed in Frisco City. The conversations the simple lettering prompted between questioning young people and older residents who remembered the theater illustrated the significance of the downtown built structures in aiding the sharing of memory and identity between generations of Frisco Citians. The Norwoods, fascinated by the power of the letters to generate conversation, interest, and therefore community pride, in Frisco City, decided not to paint over them.¹⁹¹ The picture below from February 2011 shows that the line of lettering that the Norwoods found is merely one of several that, at different times, identified the building.

¹⁹¹ Conversation with Norwoods, Frisco City, AL February 18, 2011.



Figure 7. Four lines of old lettering discovered on the theater building. Photograph February 2011 by author.

According to the RFC members, interest in the town “becomes contagious” when “one or two people step forward” in enthusiastic commitment to the mission of reviving Frisco City. Interest often becomes involvement; Anne Brown stated that the idea of “bunch of women in [the old barbershop building] with power tools” proved unnerving enough to recruit some men in the community, who volunteered some time, building materials, and labor to help RFC with that project and who have since become increasingly involved in the group’s activities. Walston ventures this statement about other curious townspeople:

We are seeing people become more interested in Frisco City. It’s almost...as though people are saying, “They’re at the jumping-off place. Do I want to be on board with what is about to happen? Do I really believe that it is going to happen here in Frisco City?”¹⁹²

¹⁹² Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

Anne Brown agrees:

The more you're involved, then more interested people become, and when you have interested people you have things going on. Nobody wants to come in and put a business in a dead town, and when they see things going on, they think, 'Well, maybe Frisco City ain't dead after all. I'm gonna get in on the bottom line.'¹⁹³

RFC's downtown efforts, along with those of the Norwoods and Frances Gray, have shown how conversation about physical changes in buildings begins bringing back memories, and generating new waves of civic-mindedness. In the two years of its existence the RFC group has also sponsored several community events that are not so related to the downtown built environment, including a seasonal farmers' market in Jones Park, two plant sales, a home and garden tour, and a "Live Drive-Through Nativity Event." These community events, especially the latter two, focused on showcasing the talents and creativity of all residents of Frisco City's community. Dell Walston, who introduced the ideas for both the home and garden tour and live Nativity, stressed that the group's vision is for both white and black residents to be included in RFC's activities, the first indication of hope for a new combined community in Frisco City. Though the leaders of the group are white women, and the supporters of the group have largely been white residents, RFC's efforts are beginning to reach toward the African-American community in hopes of involving everyone in the geographic community of Frisco City. Anne Brown stated: "we don't *want* to do it all. We'd never be the group that just does what they want to do—this is everybody's town, and we need *everybody*."¹⁹⁴

The Frisco City Tour of Homes and Gardens occurred on June 12, 2010, and featured eight homes and/or gardens, two downtown buildings, and Shiloh Primitive Baptist Church (in Lufkin). Garden owners gave demonstrations on pecan tree grafting, care of daylilies, and

¹⁹³ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid..

sustainable gardening; a Monroeville bookstore owner gave a review of famous Alabama authors; and an area pianist provided 1950s (significantly, Frisco City’s heyday) music at one home. Downtown, the old hotel and old McNeil’s department store, whose owner turned the latter building into a “museum” of sorts by displaying Frisco City High School memorabilia and old photographs, were opened for visitors, in addition to the buildings and caboose in Jones Park.¹⁹⁵ The tour was remarkably successful for a first endeavor, drawing over 200 visitors, and proved that RFC’s focus on using tidy, cared-for built structures—and the histories and memories they contain—could work in at least beginning to improve the town’s image (to its own residents and to those in surrounding towns). Dell Walston recounted her “sales pitch” to the RFC board about organizing a tour of homes:

I approached them about doing it, and the reaction I got was the same across the board: “TOUR OF HOMES?!? FRISCO CITY?!?” [laughs]...Some people had had one in Monroeville, and they said, ‘I hate to tell you, but it’s not gonna be successful.’ [grins] And you know, you don’t say that to Dell!

Though some RFC members were hesitant, and though the proposal met with criticism from the more populous and historic home-dotted Monroeville, Walston says that the tour created “chatter” about Frisco City, which was just what the Frisco City community needed.¹⁹⁶ People from many surrounding counties attended the tour and realized, according to Anne Brown, that “Frisco City *can* pull something off after all!”¹⁹⁷ One thing Dell Walston was “disappointed” about, however, was that no black residents’ homes were included in the tour. She expressed that she had contacted several black residents about participating and had been encouraged that two showed interest in participating, but a couple of weeks before the tour, both homeowners

¹⁹⁵ Revive Frisco City, Inc., Frisco City Tour of Homes brochure, June 12, 2010. The downtown buildings opened for the Tour of Homes provided more opportunities for inter-generational community socialization, allowing old and young residents to recognize a common identity through their shared history

¹⁹⁶ Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Anne Brown, interview by author, February 21, 2011.

“backed out.” Walston cited the very recent school closing, which had been a racially-charged matter for some Frisco City residents, and pressure from other unwilling residents as possible reasons she could for the residents’ sudden decisions.¹⁹⁸

However, a glimmer of hope in the possible cooperation of the black and white communities occurred several months later at RFC’s Live Nativity Drive-Through Event, a reenactment of scenes from the biblical Christmas story. RFC’s plan was to assign responsibility for constructing and “peopling” each scene to participating churches. The scenes, ten in all, were arranged facing outward around the perimeter of the old Frisco City High School football practice field, bounded on all sides by paved streets. For the two nights the Nativity was displayed, spectators drove around the field, visiting each scene in their cars while listening to a CD recording of the Christmas narrative. Eighteen area churches, white and black, participated in the event, which drew 1,709 visitors, according to the “census-taker” at the welcoming station.¹⁹⁹

Walston said that from the outset, she actively worked to recruit the town’s black churches:

I told Anne [Brown], “we’re wanting to give back to the community; we have got to involve the black churches in this.”...I was not getting the feedback I thought we should be getting, so I told Anne again, “Ok...we’ve got to have a meeting. We will invite the black churches, we will invite the white churches, and we will have it at the Methodist church in Frisco City [where Walston is a member].

Walston admitted that her nervousness in proposing the Nativity idea to the church leaders was compounded when she witnessed the timid, uncomfortable glances between the black and white ministers, who “may not have ever been in a *room* together, much less *worked* on something together.” She interpreted the bewildered expressions on at least the white ministers’ faces:

¹⁹⁸ Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Dell Walston, “Revive Frisco City, Inc.” Given to author by Dell Walston, February 24, 2011.

“Here we are, sitting in our church with black people.” It’s [smiles] I mean, [laughing] you’ve got to appreciate this! I mean, this is Frisco City! But, I said, to myself, “We’re not going to let this stop us. We are *Christians*. This is an opportunity for us to pull together. And it is an opportunity for us to work together. To worship together. Because this is something that will bring *people*, not black people, not white people—it will bring *people* to Frisco City. [begins to cry] We can *witness* through this.” I get teary at that point!

The awkwardness of this meeting as black and white ministers occupied the same space (albeit a white-owned one) illustrated the history of tension the groups would have to overcome if a shared community was to be created.

The ministers’ discomfort with each other revealed that even as late as 2010, despite sharing geographical space on the Monroe County map for perhaps Frisco City’s entire history, black and white communities in the town had existed relatively separately, with little interaction with each other or mutual support of common causes. But integration threw those communities together and prompted adjustments in the ways both groups used, and now shared, space. For many white residents, this change forced them to renegotiate their old communities (the ones tied to spaces—the school and downtown) and to begin searching for new ones in other institutions.²⁰⁰ This search brought both black and white groups together at the school’s closing in 2009, when they rallied around their shared institution, but after the school closed, many people in these groups turned to local churches, where communities already existed, for civic involvement. That Revive Frisco City’s biggest success was a church-related event indicates that the collective local church community may be the new searched-for institution. The Live Nativity found residents sharing responsibilities as they designed scene props and costumes, baked cakes and cookies, and practiced communication in preparation for a large community

²⁰⁰ See A.E. Luloff and Jeffrey C. Bridger, “Community and Agency in Local Development,” in *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. David L. Brown and Louis E. Swanson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 203-227. Luloff and Bridger explain that the commonly-held concept of social capital posits that “community” is dependent only on social interactions, not locally-oriented.

event. In addition to building “new friendships” between black and white workers, the Live Nativity experience drew 1,709 people, all of whom witnessed those “churches working together for the first time ever.”²⁰¹ Dell Walston gushed: “Nobody ever dreamed that people would come from great distances. People were just elated: ‘We’re so happy we did this; we just know that Frisco City’s going to be put in a positive light now.’”²⁰² This cooperation among local church institutions seems to be the beginning of a shift away from Frisco City’s racially-divided “little Pritchard” image, both in the eyes of the county and in those of the Frisco City community. The Nativity event points to ways that existing communities (the local churches) can use shared spaces to build community among previously-divided groups in the town.²⁰³ When school sporting events no longer drew crowds, when people could no longer buy milkshakes at the drugstore or Frisco City-bottled Coca-Colas at businesses downtown, residents turned to churches, already-formed communities, and in December 2010, they gathered in a new locale that both groups had experienced in the same way. This new space was not at the already-“owned” white space of the Methodist church, or even downtown, but at the school’s football practice field—a space already once shared by black and white students.

The space-sharing that happened on the football practice field places members of both black and white groups in position to see what their contributions toward “put[ting] [Frisco City]

²⁰¹ Dell Walston, “Christmas Comes Alive: Frisco City’s First Annual Live Nativity Drive-Through, Co-Sponsored by Revive Frisco, Inc. and the Town Council.” Report to Revive Frisco City. December 30, 2011.

²⁰² Dell Walston, interview by author, February 24, 2011.

²⁰³ The “interactional theory” approach to community, according to Luloff and Bridger, follows not social capitalists’ (i.e. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000) approach of regaining community connections that have been lost (creating new institutions to replace old ties), but instead posits that community connections are rooted in place and can use already-existing local institutions (though they may be different from the primary ones the community was previously built upon) because “community can emerge wherever people share a common territory.” Luloff and Bridger, 213.

in a positive light” can do for their collective community.²⁰⁴ If the Live Nativity experience was a portent of things to come, an April 2011 development will be an interesting story to follow in the coming months. The Family Life and Youth Center, a county-wide service organization that aims to habilitate troubled youth of the county with “spiritual and practical lessons” that would enable them to live as community-minded citizens, is relocating to Frisco City. The Center is managed by an African-American woman, Sara Bradley, and many of its program’s beneficiaries are area black youth.²⁰⁵ While the Center’s relocation could potentially be viewed as an image-killer for Frisco City (like the 1995 debate surrounding the county alternative school relocation), so far it has been embraced in Frisco City and shows signs of being another example of interracial cooperation in a shared space. Originally located in Monroeville, the organization’s programs outgrew its buildings there, and the Center will begin renting an outbuilding of Frisco City First Baptist Church, a majority-white church (although with a few black members), in May of 2011.²⁰⁶ The story of the commonly-owned space will be interesting to watch unfold—to determine if the two communities sharing it may perhaps come, through shared memories of the space, to identify with each other and form a new race-crossing community.

²⁰⁴ “Locality-based interaction also provides an explanation for the convergence of self and collective interest because ‘each actor has a real interest in the local aspect of social life. This interest...is pursued in social action and is thus shared.’” Luloff and Bridger, 210-211, quoting Wilkinson, 39.

²⁰⁵ Amy McCullough and Martha Taylor, Minutes from Frisco City First Baptist Church business meeting, April 3, 2011.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

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