

**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #549
WILLIAMS, Gary L.**

WILLIAMS, Gary L.

Description of interviewee: Gary Williams is a local businessman for Rock Hill, through his efforts he has redeveloped the Cotton Factory, and is currently as of 2017 working as a developer for University Center.

Interviewed: June 24, 2017
Interviewer: Alex Windham
Index by: Alex Windham
Length: 00:27:18

Abstract: Gary Williams is a local businessman for Rock Hill, through his efforts he has redeveloped the Cotton Factory, and is currently as of 2017 working as a developer for University Center. In the interview he details the process by which he came to move his office to the old Rock Hill Cotton Factory Building and how he has helped in the redevelopment of the Rock Hill Printing and Finishing Company known as Knowledge Park along the Textile Corridor. He also talked at length about Rock Hill, SC's development as well. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Springs, race, seniority, gender relations

Interview Session (June 24, 2017): Digital File

Time Keywords,

00:00:00 ***Beginning of Interviewer's Introduction***

Gary Williams said eleven years ago Rock Hill Mayor Doug Echols asked Gary to move his business Williams & Fudge to downtown Rock Hill. Gary said he told Echols there was not any space. He was showed the Cotton Factory which hosted Pledge's Fabric outlet for many years and Gary was initially not impressed calling it "The ugliest thing downtown and it looked unsafe." He changed his mind when he took a trip to Durham, North Carolina to work with his clients at Duke University. The clients had moved location to an off campus site. His business is in student loans, and he was dealing with Duke. Durham had a Salem Cigarettes factory and it had been refurbished and repurposed for office space. Gary said the interior was "perfect," because it had a rustic but modern look. He returned to Rock Hill and saw potential in the Cotton Factory and asked Echols to revisit the idea. Williams & Fudge moved into the Cotton Factory in July 2007. Gary embraced Rock Hill and said he loved the town. He was upset by the delays and stagnation of the Bleachery's redevelopment and so he went to Harold P. "Skip" Tuttle, his current partner a real estate agent with the Tuttle Company, and told him they should renovate the Lowenstein Building to become office space. They agreed and dealt with the city, who

decided on a master developer who was more ambitious and would renovate and develop all twenty three acres of the Bleachery site. SOAR Development group out of Baltimore, Maryland were chosen by the city. The City of Rock Hill wanted the developers to engage local business and so Gary and Skip were asked to assist these last four years and their focus is the Lowenstein building. SOAR has many different projects and so Skip and Gary bought into the partnership and so they were designated as owner-operators and get advice and instruction when needed from SOAR executives. Skip and Gary have developed a master plan for the Bleachery site. (At the time of the interview they were in the process of implementation)

00:04:06 The process of their procurement of the property came after Lynn Stevenson and her investment group bought the property in a tax sale. As a result of years of stagnation, fires and economic recession the Stevenson group failed to redevelop the site. Following her death the City of Rock Hill rebought and acquired the property and still currently owns it and will continue to hold the property while it is being redeveloped.

00:05:15 Skip and Gary have met with many civic and local leaders from the City Manger David Vehaugn, Mayor Doug Echols, and City Council. All four years of the development thus far they have met in both open and executive sessions, he has had these people on site. David Vehaugn was their major contact at the City of Rock Hill.

00: 06:15 The first project in the development is the redevelopment of the Lowenstein Building with its first tenants expected in October 2017 and they are Atlas Copt Co. They will be on the fifth floor of the structure and Gary said there are also three to four other office and retail settings for the building. They have gutted the building and he said it was a well-built building built in 1953. He said the purpose of the development is to bring downtown Rock Hill together. The Cotton Factory where his building is was built in 1881 by some of the founding fathers of Rock Hill and was built there because it was a railroad junction. The Knowledge Park initiative is to connect downtown to Winthrop. University Center is what the Bleachery's twenty three acre site has been dubbed and is meant to bring Winthrop University into the city and have the student interact and become part of the community that is Rock Hill. He said when Winthrop was built a fence was built around it to keep the men out when it was an all-women's college, by 1973 when the college integrated to coeducation a lot of Rock Hill had already been built effectively shutting Winthrop off from its community. He said the University of South Carolina, and Clemson University built up around their campus. This project is meant to open Winthrop up to the greater community and Winthrop's President Dr. Dan Mahoney has been very supportive and helpful with the development. The 1939 Building and the athletic facility are also part of the development which will have eight full basketball courts and a championship court which allows for ten basketball games to be played at once. The city has invested in the 1939 Building and there are plans for a large community room which can seat around three hundred people for dinners and special events. Along with these three projects currently being done on site, Gary said the roads are being built. There is also a hotel under contract to be built. The existing building with the smokestack is expected to be converted into a brewery. He said there are plans for two dormitories for Winthrop students. Also in the plans for the future are apartments two

parking decks, and active adult living apartments. He sounded very excited especially the potential for the sports complex. He said a stipulation for the federal funds was that the buildings both old and new have to have an industrial architecture because it was part of the preservation aspect of the redevelopment. Gary mentioned a history area, and talked about the Bleachery Heritage Committee. He said there is a roller print machine to celebrate the history, and the plan to use artist to turn it into a focal point telling the history of the Bleachery. He said there were no plans for a museum but instead the talks were for a history walkway, and he plans to put historical objects to commemorate the past in the lobby of his building at the Cotton Factory. He mentioned many people want a walking tour. He said it was a remembrance idea and not a museum because of the overhead costs.

00:17:12 Gary mentioned a transit system and its potential to bring together the city. He talked about Family Trust Federal Credit Union wanting to put its mark on the redevelopment of downtown and they rebuilt their headquarters across from the Bleachery site. He said that Piedmont Medical Center has also invested in the site and plan to have a health clinic on location. He said other things that are planned for the sports complex area are several restaurants and also Winthrop University planning to have their physiology major on site. The revitalization of the Bleachery is a continuous process simultaneously with the redevelopment of Rock Hill's downtown. He said in order to have success they have to have people living in the area, so residential sites at both the Bleachery are important. He made parallels to the Riverwalk Community which is on the site of the old Celanese plant and how its sports complexes both their bicycle motocross track and the velodrome and walking trails attracted residents and built a community. He feels that sports are very important to Rock Hill's future.

00:21:00 A study was done to see how many people would want a public transit system. They found it was possible for five electric battery-powered buses to be used. They will come with a bus phone app which tells the exact location of each bus for commuters' information. He said there will be a total of four bus routes and how at the center will be University Center being the central hub for all the buses. They are projecting the fall of 2018 to begin this bus service. Gary said University Center will become part of the hub and focus of the city bringing a centralized attention back to the downtown area.

00:22:45 He said another issue they are trying to fix is a walking trail to get to the downtown area from University Center. Dave Lyle Boulevard, and trains and railroad "might as well be a mile wide river because it creates a barrier shutting off downtown." So in order to fix this issue the city is looking into options of how to build a walking bridge over Dave Lyle Boulevard. He said there might be a parking deck built that has a bridge attached to it so visitors have the option to get over the road. He said the overall goal is to make all of Knowledge Park from Winthrop University to Fountain Park on the opposite side of downtown one continuous and accessible area.

00:23:50 When asked about the impact of building University Center so close to downtown, (main street Rock Hill has experienced a decline in recent years due to other attractions such as Manchester,

and the Rock Hill Galleria Mall) and its potential to further draw attention away from downtown, Gary responded that the goal is to “enhance downtown.”

00:26:26 Comporium, (Rock Hill’s self-described local technology giant) is invested also In Knowledge Park and according to Gary they are responsible for the Fountain Park area and will continue to expand businesses and build on the area. They have plans to construct an arts center in the Fountain Park area. Also they have plans to further modernize the Bleachery site by installing fiber optic cable, and high speed internet.