

History of the Town of River Bend

Circa 1988

By:

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Chapter I – Farmland

The roots of what we now know as the Town of River Bend start near the turn of the century. This robust tobacco plantation of 1,200 acres was owned by the Odd Fellows, a fraternal group of black tenant farmers collectively working and farming together raising the golden leaf, which was the backbone of Eastern North Carolina's economy. During the recession of 1914, this hardy, proud group was forced to sell its land to the “company store” for supplies and debt. The W.S. Clark Company was a leading supplier of farm supplies and general merchandise to the farming community. During the first half of the century the Clark Company obtained nearly 70 farms, large and small, through barter and exchange for debt.

During the 1960s with the beginning of the decline of small tenant farms, large tracts with high tobacco allotments became inefficient for absentee owners. The Clark family, at this point, was beginning to age and die out. It was timely for them to convert their low production large tracts into cash and move on into newer fields.

In 1964, Frank Efird and family moved to New Bern to begin a new career. The family came from Salisbury, NC. Mr. Efird was Personnel Manager with the Stanley Works, which was the first of the industrial expansion in New Bern. With him came his wife, Margaret McCanless Efird, daughters Jan Elizabeth and Cynthia Ellis, son J. Frank Efird, Jr. Born later in New Bern was their last child, Margaret Ellen Efird. After one year Mr. Efird decided that with the size of his family it was time to discontinue the industrial pursuit and settle down in this quiet eastern N.C. town and raise his family and go into the real estate business.

March 5, 1965 the Efird Company was organized to build single family houses. It soon became evident that the coastal area was very attractive to people in the Northeast for retirement. Mr. Efird began his search for a large tract of land with water and soil conditions that could be developed into a total living planned community. The Odd Fellows farm was found and the initial contract to purchase the land was made in late 1965. Due to the death of several seniors in the Clark family from 1965-1967, and the fact the company was not incorporated, it became a difficult task to get 18 family members to finalize and close the sale. This was finally accomplished in October 1967 and recorded in the office of Craven County Register of Deeds in Book 722, Page 116 by Jane Holland, Register of Deeds. The purchase price was \$486,000 and thus was the beginning of a 25-year development plan announced by Mr. Efird, for River Bend Plantation.

Chapter II – River Bend Plantation

The first 5 years were spent planning, developing the 18-hole golf course, 36-stall riding academy with all support facilities, a marina, Plantation Canal, Island Lake, paved streets with lights and underground wiring. The Robert Loveridges were the first family to move to River Bend in July, 1969.

Gradually at first, and then with increasing speed, the Efirid concept was successfully marketed throughout the Northeast and Midwest. Primarily, the message was delivered to groups of people nearing or at retirement age. The response was excellent and, as demand grew, new sections of the project were opened. For those desiring a life style without yard and house maintenance, there were the Quarterdecks. For those wishing a single family home and a separate lot, single family homes were available. In addition to retirees, many working and military families settled in River Bend. A convenience store and gas station - the "Bread and Bait" - opened for business. This was the predecessor for the current "Scotchman."

The picturesque barn, riding ring, tack shop, and the caboose reflected an aura "where with all" that a city park will never achieve. To complete the original impression, was to view the present marina as an open water way. This was a canal created by the thrust of a sea going tug's screws which blew a navigable channel to the Trent River.

The barn and riding ring accommodated local and non-resident boarders. The caboose, originally a security officer's quarters, was functional as a unique play house. The tack shop, subsequently destroyed by fire, served as a community center. All newcomers made their River Bend "debut" to a most active welcoming committee working out of these quarters. Community fund raising activities were centered around the tack shop to the point that enlargement and improvement were under consideration.

On Shoreline Drive, the school bus stop was marked by a most adequate and spacious shed. Location of this on a future building lot dictated a move across the street to the now paved entrance to the country club. This was a typical symbol of community concern and cooperation. Community funds paid for building and maintenance material, the neighbors provided labor for the construction as well as daily supervision, ground policing, and the club rented the land for one dollar a year.

It is timely to note that the community paid for the paving of the club driveways for this was a prerequisite for the school buses to come into River Bend. This was a one stop pick up and discharge center.

Plantation Drive, in section three, was a dirt road esplanade with crepe myrtle planted in the middle. Channel Run's development, again, was a drawing board concept. So, essentially River Bend was a small cohesive community in an average pleasant climate.

A most valuable asset was the citizenry, and collectively, their combined efforts to utilize the community association as a vehicle made River Bend one big happy place to live.

In the same vein, two distinctive cooperative projects that will survive, as others have faded, are the time capsule and the Rhems volunteer fire department. The Rhems fire department merits

special reference in consideration of the River Benders who participated in the conception and ultimate realization of this valuable adjunct. Talented neighbors quarterbacked the necessary paperwork, piloted actions through a maze of bureaucracy, and co-signed loans as collateral to underwrite seed money for the original construction. They were also very much in evidence as coolie labor since the contracted construction work covered only major and specialized building.

The community had fun working together and they also had a great time playing together. A series of neighborhood progressive dinner parties about over-ran volunteered home facilities and seventy-five couples at one attendance finally dictated a limited turnout.

With these community activities, it is easy to understand why and how the Association could serve as a forum for either impartiality, or with member direction to explore, assemble, and present data pertinent to the community's benefit.

Following the River Bend town incorporation efforts the Community Association did not retain the momentum that peaked with the vote getting effort. Several "spark plugs" moved, athletic and social programs weakened, and the only manifestation of cohesiveness was the monthly edition of the River Bender.

Chapter III – Town of River Bend

In 1977, after much discussion of the matter, some members of the River Bend Community Association met to discuss the possibility of incorporating the Town. A great deal of time and effort went into the project and it was decided to take a straw vote of the residents to see if they would support the idea. Such a vote was held and the residents decided against incorporation.

Early in 1980 the idea was revived and the Committee for Incorporation of River Bend was formed. Members included Lou Colombo, Art Fovargue, Kathy and Dick Long, Helen and Jack Iliff, Carl Johnson, Jack Spellman, Caroline and Dick Dunham, Charlotte and John Tharrett and Andy Tyndall. The law firm of Sumrell, Sugg, Carmichael and Martin was retained to advise and guide the Committee. Many meetings were held by the group and information on incorporation was received from State officials, the North Carolina League of Municipalities and the North Carolina Institute of Government.

In spite of what seemed to be a wide element of support for the idea, some residents felt otherwise about incorporation. Accordingly, a Concerned Citizens Committee, opposing the concept of incorporation, was formed. In ensuing months each group issued communiqués to residents, espousing their particular positions.

A petition with a sufficient number of names was submitted to the State by the Committee for Incorporation calling for referendum on the matter. The request was granted and on November 4, 1980, 522 River Bender voters – out of a total of 710 registered to vote – went to the polls. There were two items on the ballot – "yes" or "no" on incorporation and the selection of a mayor and three councilmen who would assume office if the "yes" votes prevailed. Prior to the election the Committee for Incorporation sponsored a "Meet the Candidates Night" at which those running for office gave their views.

Right up to and including Election day the matter of incorporation was hotly contested. In the end, the voters approved incorporation by a vote of 298 “for” versus 224 “against.” In terms of percentages the vote was split 57.1% for and 42.9% against.

Prior to incorporation there were no viable means of taking care of our roads. Everybody owned them and nobody owned them. They no longer met standards so the state highway department would not assume responsibility for them in their present condition. The school buses would not use our roads because they were not under municipal control. As previously described a central location on the country club premises had been designated as the pickup spot for school children. This however proved to be unsatisfactory because of the problem of getting the children to the pickup spot. In the absence of an approved road system, it was not possible to obtain VA or FHA loans for new home construction or State funds to repair the streets. Powell Bill funds were not available without incorporation.

River Bend had no zoning ordinances. There were various sets of restrictive covenants but they did not address many of the problems being faced. We needed zoning and subdivision regulations to control our growth in an orderly manner. We needed to ensure that future roads would be built to acceptable standards. Incorporation was the answer.

Police protection was another concern of the residents. Coverage was provided on a rather limited basis by the county sheriff's department. Given the size of the county and the small staff available at the time plus the diverse duties imposed upon the department, response to problems in River Bend was not acceptable to the residents. It was felt that a local police department with only River Bend to be concerned with would be better suited to our needs. Incorporation was the way to get such service.

The voters elected Daniel T. DeBow as Mayor and John F. Findley, William M. Depriest and William A. Smith as Councilmen. The election results were certified by the County Clerk subject to the granting of a charter by the State Board of Municipal Control.

The Charter was approved effective January 14, 1981 and the first Council meeting was held on January 19, at which time Magistrate Raymond R. Brock swore in the new officials. The Council appointed Ruth Moors as Town Clerk and Tax Collector and Ward and Smith as Town Attorney. William A. Smith was elected Mayor Pro Tem.

Meanwhile the Committee for Incorporation still had unpaid bills to contend with. Legal and printing expenses came to around \$3,000. Financial help was solicited from River Bend residents to pay off this debt. The response was excellent and not only were the debts paid, but a surplus of \$423.09 was donated to the Town by the committee on January 22, 1981.

The City of River Bend Plantation (the name was changed in April 1981 to the Town of River Bend) was in business! And what a start it was. The Town had no money except for a donation of \$423.09 from the organizing committee. However, the Community Association came to the rescue with a donation of \$1,500. A yard sale at the Barn brought in a further donation of \$925.32. These monies helped keep operations going until some tax income could be received. In May of that year, the first tax bills covering the period from February to June were sent out. Much work at the County tax offices checking assessments preceded the mailing of the tax bills.

The Council assigned various areas of responsibility to each member, a practice still followed. John Findley had budget and finance and public health and safety. Mike Depriest had planning and zoning and recreation. Bill Smith had roads, street lights and governmental relations. Mayor Dan DeBow took care of administration and public relations.

In May 1981, the Town's Zoning Ordinances, seven months into preparation, were certified by the Council. A Town Code was also installed. A Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment were appointed by the Council. Calvin D. Yaggy was appointed Town Administrative Officer. River Bend's organization was in place.

On July 25, 1981 River Bend celebrated its incorporation with a festival and picnic in what is now the Town Park. Governor Jim Hunt and a number of State legislators were present. A time capsule noting the event was buried near the gazebo in the park. A live oak in honor of Frank Efird was planted by the Efird family.

1981 also saw the establishment of the River Bend Police Department – one officer. The Citizens Watch organization was created. In November of that year the second River Bend municipal election was held. Mayor DeBow was reelected. The members of the first Council, who had done so much to get the Town going, did not run. The voters named Robert J. Runge, Helen L. Iliff and Kenneth L. Stultz as Councilmen.

By this time all the streets in the Town, with the exception of those in the Quarterdecks, which are private property, had been deeded to the Town by the Efird Company. The Council asked the State to turn over to the Town that section of Shoreline Drive from Route 17 to Rockledge Road which had been State maintained, and the transfer was made. With a modest influx of Powell Bill funds work started immediately on road repair.

As the Town grew it became apparent Council responsibilities were too much for three people to handle. Early in 1982 the Council was increased to five members, following the example of the majority of small North Carolina communities. Alvin E. Pittman and Dwight G. King were appointed to the Council.

It was decided to proceed with the development of a Land Use Plan, which would offer guidance for the future development of River Bend. This was accomplished with a State grant plus a minor contribution by the Town. Street and traffic signs were installed throughout the Town and development of the Plantation Landing project got underway. Additional Quarterdeck town houses were constructed and more and more single family homes were built.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) initiated a flood study in River Bend in late 1982 working closely with Cal Yaggy, Town Administrator. The report, which was finally issued early in 1986, established flood level criteria for the Town, and became fully effective on August 19, 1986. River Bend was the first community in Craven County to have this work done.

Dan DeBow resigned as Mayor on December 31, 1982, so he could have more time for family priorities. The Council elected Robert Runge as Mayor in January, 1983 and John Tharrett was appointed to fill the Council vacancy.

More changes took place in the makeup of the Council early in 1983. Helen Iliff resigned to devote more time to her family's health. Kendell L. Bearnes, who had been the first chairman of the Planning board, was appointed to fill her Council seat. To the regret of his many friends Ken Bearnes died suddenly in April and he was succeeded by Robert H. Strandburg. In November 1983, the town's third municipal election was held. Robert Runge was elected Mayor. Lou Columbo, Al Pittman, Dough Spear, John Tharrett and Dwight King were elected to the Council. Councilman Pittman was elected Mayor Pro Tem by the Council.

In March 1984, Dwight King resigned from the Council as a consequence of his move to Raleigh. Arthur S. Cleary was appointed to succeed Mr. King. In the same month, Nancy C. Orr was hired as Town Clerk and Tax Collector, succeeding Mary Pound, who had held that position for three years.

The Land Use Committee, as part of its report, recommended that the Town acquire land on which a Town Park could be established and also property where a future Municipal Building could be located. It was decided to apply for a \$50,000 federal grant to go toward the building and the park. Councilman Spear and Cal Yaggy were assigned to write the request. Together with monies obtained from developers for recreation purposes, the grant money would provide for completion of the park. An agreement was reached with Frank Efird for the sale of 3.9 acres on Shoreline Drive. In September 1984, the U.S. Interior Department approved the grant and the Park was completed and officially dedicated on July 4, 1985.

In December 1984, the Town also bought property adjacent to the Town Park from Mr. Efird as a site for the proposed Municipal Building. Also in December 1984, the second official River Bend census was taken. The first was in May 1981, when a committee chaired by Jack Iliff did the work. At that time the population was 1,057. The 1984 effort headed by Lloyd Matthews and Chuck Fields who directed a number of volunteers to determine that River Bend's population had risen to 1,644. The increase had the effect of securing for the Town added Powell Bill funds, since the State's allocation is based on population as well as road miles.

In February 1985, John H. Loomis, who had served on the Planning Board was hired – on a part-time basis – as Town Administrative Officer succeeding Cal Yaggy who had held the job on volunteer basis for almost four years.

In July 1985, Lou Columbo resigned from the Council to accept an appointment to the North Carolina Parole Board. William Smith, who had been a member of the initial Council was appointed as his replacement.

The question of proceeding with the erection of a Municipal Building and methods to finance its construction was occupying the Council. In May 1985, Councilmen Cleary and Tharrett met with members of the State's Local Government Commission to discuss the matter. They were advised to follow the procedure used by other municipalities and authorize the issuance of a municipal bond to secure the needed funds. This meant the holding of public hearings and a voter referendum approving the bond at the November election.

In the months that followed the necessary steps were taken to put the matter to a vote. By a two to one margin the bond referendum was approved at the November 5, 1985 election.

While the amount authorized by the bond referendum was \$175,000, the Council decided to ask for a bond issue in the amount of \$100,000 which, together with some \$45,000 in other funds would suffice to pay for the Municipal Building. The remaining \$75,000 that was authorized can be presented as another bond issue in the seven years ending in 1992. However, any such issue would be applicable only to the Municipal Building to provide for an expansion.

In addition to the bond referendum the municipal election was held on November 5. The Mayor and all incumbent members of the Council ran and were reelected.

In May 1986, work began on the Municipal Building. As completed, the structure has offices for paid employees, Council Chambers, and a 99-seat capacity meeting and recreation hall. The Town Government moved into the new quarters on September 12, 1986. Formal dedication, attended by about 200 residents, took place on October 12, 1986.

As the Town area grew in size through annexation and influx of new residents, the need for an expanded police force was apparent. Working with the Police Chief, the Council approved the expansion of the Department to the point where it now is capable of providing around-the-clock protection.

Latest official estimate of River Bend population has it being 1,821 as of July 1, 1986. Updating best guess is that this figure currently is near 2,000.

In the November 1987 Municipal Election, 676 (roughly 50% of those registered) voted. Arthur Clearly was elected Mayor. Elected as Councilmen were Alvin Pittman, John Tharrett, Jean Brack, James Perry and Philip Rader. By subsequent vote of the Council, John Tharrett was designated Mayor Pro Tem.

Lastly, the Council appointed Joe B. Seagle to fill the seat vacated in January 1988 by the sudden demise of Councilman Pittman.

It would be nearly impossible to reconstruct an honor roll of all the many citizens who have contributed unstintingly of their time and effort to make River Bend an outstanding place to live. They are the ones who have helped create solutions to the problems. They are the ones, who by their interest in civic affairs, have helped mold a TOWN from a collection of dwellings.