

Rocky Mount, once North Carolina's fastest growing town, has rebuilt before. But when the Tar River rose and flooded the place, new challenges emerged.



Rocky Mount: A town divided, uniting

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GRAFF

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TRAVIS DOVE

A complicated city that has seen better days — and worse — hopes for one thing: The best is yet to come.

Of all the places in North Carolina that are called home by a large number of people, Rocky Mount might be the easiest to leave. On any given night, two people can arrive at the downtown train station just before midnight and take the next two scheduled trains — one going south and one going north — and be four states apart by sunrise. By dinnertime, one will be in Miami and the other in Boston, bound only by where they began.

Looking at it from another direction, Rocky Mount also might be the easiest town to reach. Amtrak's *Carolinian*, *Silver Star*, *Palmetto*, and *Silver Meteor* all stop here. Sometimes the trains come from the west, places like Raleigh and Charlotte. Sometimes they come from the north, places like Richmond and Washington, D.C. Sometimes from the south, places like Savannah and Tampa. Nothing comes on tracks from the east; in that direction it's only a short trip to the sea, and that would require a completely different mode of transportation.

Other cities have airports, and roads are everywhere. But the train bestows upon its passengers a certain measure of ease — cheaper fares, no lines, no taking off your shoes at security, no traffic jams. Only a ride.

Four days a week, a young woman named Dionne Lockett watches it all come and go from Rocky Mount. Lockett is a barista inside the train station. She's from someplace else, too. She was born in southeast Washington, D.C., and came here to study English and religious theory at North Carolina Wesleyan University. But when school leaders kept kicking up tuition costs, Lockett couldn't afford to attend anymore, so last year she quit. But she decided to stay in Rocky Mount, where she spends her days working here, watching what the trains bring in and what the trains take out.

"Some people get off here and say they just wanted to take a train," she says. "And I think, 'Of all the places to go, you chose Rocky Mount?' But you know what? It's a place, like any



Misfortune into art: An ex-warehouse became a venue for sculptures (left), and hurricane debris was transformed into a shipwrecked boat (right).

other place, so why not?"

It is true: Rocky Mount is similar to

other places in that it, too, is a place. But even a casual look reveals something that isn't like most other places. It reveals a town that was once the fastest growing place anywhere in North Carolina, blowing up in population by 260 percent during the 1890s, a place that was going to be the grandest town east of Raleigh, riding can't-fail industries like cotton and tobacco and the railroad. And a closer look reveals a town that, despite the optimism of the young barista who first greets visitors, is a divided place. The train tracks run through the center of the city. On the east side of the tracks, Rocky Mount sits in Edgecombe County. On the west side of the tracks, the city is in Nash County.

It is impossible to talk about Rocky Mount without also mentioning another divide: race. Of the town's 57,433 residents, 61 percent are black — nearly triple the statewide average of 22 percent. As recently as 1990, whites outnumbered blacks. Racial tension remains a piece of local politics. The difference between rich and poor is vast, and the perception of the town varies by socioeconomic class.

Rocky Mount is the birthplace of Hardee's and home to the fast-food chain's largest franchisee, yet it is also a place where one in five people lives in poverty. It is one of the most Googled towns in North Carolina, but people quickly leave the website when they realize it isn't in the Rocky Mountains. The name actually refers to

the rocky mounds in the Tar River, which made this the northernmost navigable location on the river. Otherwise, the land here is some of the flattest on the east coast. Just outside of town is some of the most peacefully open landscape in the state.

The locals here say that Rocky Mount is on the move, which is true, given all those trains.

On either side of the tracks, major renovations are underway. On the west side, a new arts center is in an old tobacco warehouse. On the east side, an authentic Jamaican restaurant hums with smiles and jerk chicken. Underneath the surface is a current that could lead Rocky Mount to become one of the most culturally diverse small cities in the state.

Any recovery at all is remarkable, given what this bisected place has been through.

Throughout the 1990s — a century after it was one of the fastest growing places around — Rocky Mount endured a dismantling decade. In those 10 years, the majority of the city's tobacco market left and its landmark cotton mill shut down. And then, at a time when people were out of work, when everybody needed a break, when everybody needed a little bit of luck, all of Rocky Mount woke up one September morning in 1999 to find the entire town going underwater, black and white, rich and poor, hamburgers and all.

When Hurricane Floyd came through and dumped 15.5 inches of water in 24 hours and the Tar River crested its banks by some 30 feet, a city on the ropes was knocked out. Some people rebuilt. Some couldn't. Others just went down to the station and hopped on the train and went away. Rocky Mount was already segmented in so



Old and new merge: The Hardee's fortune of Mayo Boddie (with wife, Jean) helped him buy Rose Hill Plantation, which his ancestors owned in the 1700s.

many ways. But Hurricane Floyd split history. It divided the town

into two more sections: before the flood and after.

The first time I ever came to Rocky Mount was after the flood. In 2005, I worked here at the *Rocky Mount Telegram* as a sportswriter.

In the journalism industry, the *Telegram* had a fine reputation, but it was known as one of those places you went if you wanted to get to somewhere else. It is a small newspaper, with 14,000 or so subscribers, but it acts large. Just before I arrived, one of the sportswriters left for Orlando, Florida. He now covers UNC basketball for *The News & Observer*. Of my former colleagues, one now is among the top NASCAR reporters in the country, and two others are beat writers covering major college athletics in the South. The writer who replaced me when I left — we all left — is working on his first book.

We're all over the place, bound only by Rocky Mount and the memories of work and a few heated Wiffle ball games in the *Telegram's* parking lot.

I spent only eight months here before moving on. During that time, I covered Rocky Mount Senior's football team when it won the conference championship and advanced to the state quarterfinals. I remember those boys well — it was one of the most diverse teams I followed in eight years as a sportswriter. City residents followed the team passionately, high-fiving and hugging at every touchdown scored by boys with last names MacDonald

and Perry and Jenkins and Virgil. The Gryphons went 13-2 that year. And when it was over, when they ultimately lost to a team out of Alamance County, those boys cried together and wondered what was next.

I covered most of this from the press box inside the city stadium. Someone once mentioned that people had used that press box as a refuge during the flood. The press box was about three stories off the ground, and the water had nearly swept it away.

Two months after the season ended, I left Rocky Mount behind without ever getting to know it.

“Isn't that a beautiful sound?” says John Mebane, the former president of Rocky Mount Mills. We're in the basement of the old mill, and he's hearing the sound of power.

A six-foot-wide tube runs through the floor beneath us. The tube starts at the Tar River, just outside the building, and runs down into a large tub with fins inside. The rushing water spins the fins, which spin a shaft, which connects to an exciter at the top, which turns the force into electricity. The whole thing hums. One of the generators can produce 310 kilowatts of power. There are three generators in the building. Together they could have powered most of the operation at Rocky Mount Mills in its heyday.

Now the building is empty, except for the generators, and is owned by Capitol Broadcasting Company out of Raleigh. Capitol is developing plans for the mill and looking for businesses to lease it — shops and restaurants and universities — in hopes of turning it into something



like the American Tobacco Campus in Durham.

For now, though, it's all empty space and memories.

Mebane was the sixth-generation president of Rocky Mount Mills, and he was the last. His ancestors — the Battle family — started the operation in 1818 and kept it in the family for nearly all of its 180-year existence.

During the Civil War, Union soldiers burned the mill because the women there were making Confederate clothing while the men were off fighting in Gettysburg. The fire occurred on July 20, 1863, and it remains one of the most talked about events in Rocky Mount's history. Rocky Mount Mills was rebuilt only to burn down again in 1869. Finally, the Battle family erected a brick building that would stand stronger.

Business took off through the early 1900s, and at its peak Rocky Mount Mills employed 1,000 people. Working in three shifts, those workers kept the mill open 24 hours a day, spinning cotton into yarn on nine lines of spinning frames that covered the floors of the 300,000-square-foot building. Rocky Mount Mills, from its spot along the Tar River, produced 500,000 pounds of yarn a week.

This was where Mebane wanted to work his whole life. He graduated from Rocky Mount Senior in 1967 and studied textiles at N.C. State University. He came home,

started sweeping the floors, and worked his way up to management, just like his ancestors.

During the 1980s, though, other places began making yarn faster and cheaper. Mebane and the shareholders held on as long as they could.

On June 26, 1996, Mebane walked up the stairs of the massive building and stood over the floor. At 2 p.m., he made the announcement: Rocky Mount Mills was closing. An hour later, the 3 p.m. shift started, and he told them, too. Eight hours after that, Mebane was still there to break the news to the 11 p.m. shift.

"I worked here 33 years," he says now. "I was the president that pulled the switch. I was the sixth generation that didn't make it to seven."

Mebane took another job in business, and he works out of an office in Rocky Mount, a few miles up the Tar River and within sight of the mill.

Some days, he'll notice that the river is high or low. He'll call down to Tim Bailey, who manages the mill property for Capitol Broadcasting. One of Bailey's jobs is to run the generators — the power from them is sold to Progress Energy. Sometimes, Bailey opens the gates a little wider, allowing more of the Tar River to flow down through that tube to generate more power. Mebane sees it all.

"I can sit there and call Tim and say, 'I know which

generators you've got on,'" Mebane says.

There was one time, though, when the river rose and nobody could stop it, the time Hurricane Floyd sent water well over the banks of the Tar and the entire town went under. But what Mebane remembers most is what happened after that.

"After the flood," Mebane says, "we lost our self-esteem."

Go back earlier, though. Stand at the train station downtown with a young girl named Helen Gay in the 1930s.

It's during the Depression, and young Helen is 12, happily waving good-bye to her father. He's been hurt hard by the financial crash, has lost so much money that his family lost its home, moving from a development called Happy Hill into one named Cemetery Hill.

But on this day at the train station, Gay's father has a new job and hope. He's landed a contract position at Fort Bragg, 80 miles away. The whole family is at the station to see him off, waving as the train starts south.

The train station is segregated, with a white section on the north side and a black section on the south. Gay stands on the south side.

Both of Gay's grandmothers were half white and half black.

They were born into slave families and then married black men and had families of their own.

Now Gay is back in this train station to talk about Rocky Mount.

One of her distant cousins, a graduate of Booker T. Washington High School here, was the football coach Denzel Washington portrayed in the movie *Remember the Titans*. Rocky Mount has produced several famous black cultural icons. Buck Leonard, who was a star slugger for the Homestead Grays in the Negro baseball leagues, grew up working at the textile mill. Renowned jazz pianist Thelonious Monk also was from here. So was Phil Ford, the No. 2 career scorer in the storied history of Tar Heels basketball.

Gay knew them all. Her success story is a bit closer to home, though. Gay was the first black woman to serve on Rocky Mount's city council, from 1983 to 2003, before and after the flood.

But when I meet her as the trains come and go, the 91-year-old local icon is dressed in a 15-year-old women's suit from Sears and she holds a list in her

Artifacts remain: Remnants of brighter days still stand, such as a spinning frame in Rocky Mount Mills (left) and an old train car (right) open to tourists.



Plenty of icons: A piano sculpture coated in sheet music honors jazz legend Thelonious Monk, while Helen Gay has left her mark here for decades.

about troubled times. And she doesn't want to talk about Thelonious Monk. She wants to talk about the list. It has all of her notes about Rocky Mount's positive traits — good leaders and good churches and good civic clubs. It's a wonderful place to live, she insists.

That attitude is especially interesting when you consider her upbringing. Gay remembers being so embarrassed of her grandmothers' mixed skin color that she avoided sitting on the front porch in her company. She remembers how sometimes the city council would vote without including her.

"People said, 'You forgot Helen Gay,'" she remembers. "And I'm just sitting over there, black as I can be."

Gay, though, would rather talk about that list, all that positive stuff, nothing to do with struggle.

She remembers in 1962 when Martin Luther King Jr. came to Rocky Mount and spoke at Booker T. Washington, her alma mater. After the speech, King attended a dinner at a local reverend's house, and Gay, a well-known cook, was asked to prepare King's meal. She borrowed good china from several people in the neighborhood and made steak and potatoes. She still has a picture of him sitting at the head of the table, her standing over him.

Moments like that helped Gay learn to look upon her city positively. She remembers walking through her neighborhood as a schoolgirl, asking neighbors for money for a class ring. She raised enough cash, bought the ring, then went on to Barber-Scotia College in Concord. She remembers dressing up for the yearly German dances, held in local warehouses. She also remembers how people helped her when her son died in 1990. And how when she mentioned to a few people that she wanted to go to Africa,

hand. She doesn't want to talk about race. She doesn't want to talk

they raised money for her trip.

The trip, she says, turned out to be just OK. She worried about not being able to drink the water. Authorities tore through her luggage, thinking she had a bomb, only to find hair spray. Africa didn't suit her as much as Rocky Mount.

Before she went, though, she remembered to take one piece of her hometown with her.

"I took me some Nabs," she says.

Sometimes, when you've been through everything, from the Depression to racism to helping lead your city through a catastrophic flood as a city councilwoman, something as simple as crackers reminds you why you love a place.

This train station, by the way, where we're sitting and talking about all of this, was renovated in 2010. And when it reopened, the city dedicated it to the woman who could never see herself moving away, the woman who stood on the south side of the station and waved to her father as he left and white people waved to their families from the north side. The Helen P. Gay Rocky Mount Historic Train Station now serves four Amtrak lines, with eight trains stopping here every day, going west and north and south.

As she approaches her 92nd birthday in March, Gay has one wish for her town — go forward.

"I want to see us go back to have that enthusiasm and have that want-to-do back again," she says. "For them to name this after me shows we have come a long way. That's what I like about Rocky Mount, we're on the move."

What did Mebane mean, standing there at that old textile mill, when he said Rocky Mount lost its self-esteem after the flood?

A librarian pulls a few newspapers for me.

One is a 1911 edition of the old *Rocky Mount Record*,



reporting on Rocky Mount's growth from 810 residents in 1890 to 8,051 in 1910:

"Rocky Mount does not boast," the paper said, "she accomplishes."

Another is an old *Rocky Mount Telegram*, from May 14, 1967. It is an anniversary edition celebrating the town's 100th birthday that includes 112 pages, 13 sections, and eight special sections. It's filled with advertisements and personal congratulations from local companies:

- "We're so proud to have grown with Rocky Mount." — *Thomas and Howard Company*
- "Congratulations, Rocky Mount, on your first century of progress." — *Peden Steel Company*
- "We take pride in saluting Rocky Mount on its 100th birthday." — *Bunting-Hardy and Mingess Men's Clothing*
- "Congratulations, Rocky Mount!" — *Pepsi*

On and on the advertisements go, bursting with pride. There's one more, and it's also boastful, but in a more whimsical way.

The ad depicts a man in a chef's outfit pushing a wheelbarrow full of hamburgers. It reads: "This Lil' Chef went to market, and sold 135,237,815 Hardee's hamburgers."

"Have you had the chicken tenders?" Mayo Boddie asks as we stand beside his pool, which overlooks a lake, which is next to a field that stretches for miles at

Rose Hill Plantation, just outside of Rocky Mount. "You should get you some."

Boddie doesn't even recognize the juxtaposition of the scene — he's promoting fast food at a plantation on a lake, where inside chefs are preparing a five-course meal for a wedding on his property. He's just selling Hardee's, same as he has for the past 50 years.

Boddie is a short, bald man with a raspy voice. His wife carries a pack of cigarettes with her wherever she goes. They are a powerful couple, perhaps the most powerful in Rocky Mount. With more than 330 Hardee's, Boddie's company, Boddie-Noell, is the restaurant chain's largest franchisee in the country. Boddie is arguably the most successful businessman ever born in this city.

It didn't start this way, though. It started way back, before fast food was even around, back in that Depression, right here on this spot of land.

Boddie's parents owned the property at Rose Hill. It had been in the family since King George granted it to his ancestors. But during the Depression, they lost everything. And Boddie's dad sold the farm.

Still, Boddie went off to UNC. After one year in Chapel Hill, he became restless. One day in class, he thought to himself: "The whole damn world's passing me by, and here I sit."

He came home for Christmas his sophomore year and told his family he was finished with college. The country

was on the verge of the Korean War, and Boddie wanted to join the Navy. He'd been dating a local Rocky Mount girl named Jean. She suggested he not enlist as a full-time service member, but join the Naval Reserve. And then she said, "Why don't we get married?"

"I said, 'What? Get married?'" Boddie says now, eyes popping. "I'd never thought about it, but we did."

They wed on December 31, 1950. They borrowed his brother's car and drove to Florida for a honeymoon. They stopped at one hotel and asked for a room. The clerk said it would cost \$50. "Fifty dollars?" Boddie shouted back, and they drove on. They wound up finding a room for \$16. A nice one, too, Boddie says.

After the weekend, they drove home to Rocky Mount on a Sunday. Jean had to be at work at a commercial credit firm. That Monday, she got laid off.

She came home and looked at her new husband, a college dropout bound for the Naval Reserve, and he assured her that everything would be fine.

"Honey, we ain't got but one way to go," he told her. "Up."

While in the Reserve, Boddie went to work for \$45 a week at a lumber company. He watched how the business was run. Then he worked for a trucking company, again to see how the business was run. "I drove trucks, I cut pulp wood, I did a little of every damn thing," he says.

When he'd learned enough, he took a loan from his

aunt and bought a service station.

Then he bought two more. One day, while working at the service station, he was approached by a friend, Leonard Rawls. Rawls said that he and Jimmy Gardner were getting into business with a man named Wilbur Hardee, selling hamburgers. Boddie was skeptical — 15-cent hamburgers? — so he didn't join them. But after the first Hardee's was built in Rocky Mount, he was convinced. He and his brother and uncle opened their first Hardee's in Fayetteville in 1962. They used money Boddie inherited from stocks his mother had owned when she died. Then they opened a Hardee's in Durham. Then Kinston. And so on.

They kept building and building. And by the early 1980s, Boddie was able to buy the old plantation again.

Mayo and Jean Boddie still live in Rocky Mount, but on weekends they come to Rose Hill Plantation, about 15 minutes northwest in Nash County. It's now a popular wedding venue.

The sous-chef is Boddie's granddaughter, Jean Blair Boddie. She trained at Johnson & Wales University and later worked at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville. In her early 30s now, she was a vegetarian while living in Asheville, "but it's hard to be a vegetarian in Rocky Mount," she says.

Past and future: Stonewall Manor (left), built in 1830, still gets visitors, while the Imperial Centre for the Arts & Sciences (right) gets fresh paint and teaches kids.

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This past fall, Jean Blair held her first non-wedding dinner at the plantation. About 85 people showed up to eat a meal served with all local food, cooked by the granddaughter of the man who built a fortune on fast food.

As Jean Blair tells me about her career inside the mansion, her grandfather interrupts.

"You wanna see the most expensive piece of art here?" he says, pointing to a painting on the wall.

Jean Blair laughs at her grandfather's eccentricity and walks away. Before I leave, Boddie walks to his car. His wife is inside smoking a cigarette. Boddie searches the car for a minute.

"Here you go," he says, handing me a coupon for chicken tenders.

and the 143-acre facility holds major youth sports events that attract teams from all over the country. Some businesses have left. Some have come. The Jamaican restaurant has moved locations, too.

In this regard, Rocky Mount is a place like any other place. Things end here, and things then begin.

It is a place where, 80-some years ago, a black family lost everything in the Depression and a white family lost everything in the Depression. And out of those families came the first black city councilwoman and a man who owns more Hardee's than anybody.

It is also a place where, after the flood, people are starting again.

Go back to John Mebane, the last president of Rocky Mount Mills, the sixth-generation descendant who couldn't get the mill to the seventh. He's the one who said Rocky Mount lost its self-esteem after the flood. I tell him it looks like it's coming back. Standing on the banks of the Tar River, I ask him what Rocky Mount is missing.

"You," he says. "You left, didn't you?"

We walk into the building, past the generators that still churn, through the empty warehouse that might one day become something grand, and back outside to our cars. I thank him for his time. We shake hands. And then I drive away from Rocky Mount again, thinking of all the possibilities.

Michael Graff is a writer-at-large for Our State magazine. His most recent stories were "Living Moving Art" and "Ready for Takeoff" (January 2013).

On my last day at the *Rocky Mount Telegram* in January 2006, my sports editor, a friendly man who now works for CBSSports.com, gave me a gift card to a restaurant in Fayetteville. "Have a good meal when you get there," he wrote on it. I thanked him for his help and for the gift card. We shook hands, and I told him I'd be back.

We say that when we leave a place.

I never did return to Rocky Mount, not until I started working on this story, seven years later.

When I did, I found a town that had changed. I found a town that had moved forward. The newspaper had moved its offices, for one. And the city motto says as much: Rocky Mount is moving.

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