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## Warren County Historical Tidbits: Warrenton's Downtown - The Old Brick Store Has Seen It All (Almost).

Part 1 of Many...

The story of Warrenton's downtown – I have started to tell it a number of times and, well, every time I thought I had a clear picture, something popped up that told me that even telling a "simple" story of "what used to be in that building" was going to be a whole lot more complicated than I thought. In fact, the simplest way to show you how this downtown became what we know and love today would be to gather round the Chamber's Magic Mirror and watch it unfold over 238 years...but, unfortunately, as I was bringing that Mirror to the office yesterday, I slipped on some ice and it broke! ☹️ So, with the easiest route now unavailable, please join me in the telling of Plan B: we'll set an anchor in time, get our bearings and then see where that takes us over several of these Historical Tidbits.

Our anchor has landed in the year 1835 and Warrenton's Main Street. This is the year that Warrenton's 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest standing commercial building (the Peter Davis Tavern on Front Street being the oldest) was built: "Oldest Brick Store c. 1835" at the corner of Market and Main Street as painted on a little white sign on the front of the building. You know it...red brick, two-story...once the home of Diamond's Department Store...more recently "Old Timer & Lily" and then "The Picket Fence Antiques" and then...and then... Got it?



It has always struck me to be an odd name for us to call a building that has stood sentinel over that important corner for 182 years – but then, as I read through Lizzie Montgomery's "Sketches of Old Warrenton", I found out that that is exactly what our town has called the store for more than 100 years! (Well, in 1924 they hadn't added "oldest" to the name yet, it was just the "Brick Store"). In fact, remembering that until fairly recently in our history, downtown Warrenton was primarily a collection of wood-frame businesses, buildings that were ravaged by the "Great Fire of 1881" and others to follow,

"Brick Store" would have been the best way to identify it at the time.

Even so, I've still wondered since nearly our first visit to Warren County 3 years ago, "Who built it? What has been there since then? Surely we know something more about it?" And thanks to Lizzie Montgomery, I've found at least some of the story. So we'll tell it, as well as pass along more about the catastrophic fires in downtown Warrenton that gave us our present town.

In 1924, Miss Montgomery recalled that our storied building was the first brick house ever built in Warrenton and for years "'the only brick store, was known and identified' as the Brick Store, which in my childhood was called the Hyman Store." So now at least we know who the first owner was: a Mr. Hyman! With that start, let's see what else we know...

It apparently was built by a Mr. Osborne for Robert Hyman of Edgecombe County. He was joined at some date by his brother, Frank Hyman, who also came west from Edgecombe to join the business. Frank married Miss Ella Jones, daughter of William Duke Jones, from here in Warren County and at some point moved to Norfolk to run a mercantile business there for a short time until finally returning to Warren County and the family business. Robert remained here until he was lured by the opportunities in Chicago and left the "Brick Store".

"Sketches" continues, "After the retirement of Robert Hyman from the firm, Richard T. Arrington and Edward W. Best joined Frank Hyman in the business. This firm did business in that store until after the war, when Richard Arrington moved to Petersburg, and joined his father, Dr. John Arrington, and his brother, S. P. Arrington, in the cotton commission business. When quite an old man Mr. Best went to the Grove Hill section of the county, and joined William Morgan Powell in general merchandise business."

But wait, you're probably thinking the same thing I am...what was their business? No one's telling! It seems that in later years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was primarily a General Store...and that would make sense. In the 1885 Sanborn Fire Maps of Warrenton (the earliest I have available) it shows the corner portion to be vacant, a dwelling still upstairs and a Millinery in the other half of the downstairs. So for now, we'll put it in the "General Store" category...I'll keep searching!

To set up the next parts of our story, let's take a quick look at the fires that shaped the look and makeup of Warrenton's downtown. While, no doubt, there were earlier fires in town, the first conflagration of note was the "Great Fire of 1881".

The Great Fire of 1881 seemed to have started in the block across the street from our "Oldest Brick Store". Miss Montgomery notes that on the night of June 21, 1881 a store in the center of the block occupied by T. C. Williams was where "the largest and most destructive fire in the history of the town started." And rather than making a crude attempt at re-writing her tale, please allow me to turn the podium over to Miss Montgomery: "It was said some young men were having a night supper in the basement, and through carelessness the conflagration begun. About one o'clock, at night, the alarm bell, that hung over the Market House on Court Square, begun to ring. There was then very poor equipment, only hook and ladder company in the town. So when the citizens assembled, the fire had made such headway, notwithstanding it was a very quiet night, no wind at all, that there was little hope of being able to put it out entertained by any one. Especially so, when they realized that only wooden buildings were on both the north and the south of the White store block. The fire spread rapidly, both ways, when it burned the old Rowlett store, the cinders fell on the roof of Mrs. Maxwell's cottage, igniting its several times. There was some hope that the break in the buildings between the Bellamy Hotel and the Montgomery (Katzenstein) store would, save that block, but not so, the fire consumed every building on it, to the corner store, later known as the N. L. Shaw store. Some goods from the various stores were saved, also some books and valuables. This fire was a terrible disaster to the town, and one from which its people were years in recovering. The good store buildings that were destroyed were replaced by small and cheap wooden structures. It has been only in the past twenty years that commodious brick stores have re-placed the wooden ones."



*Aftermath of 1926 Warrenton Fire. The buildings burned housed a Shoe Shop, a Cafe and one other business with living quarters above.*

Hunter Drugs (now Friends Two), the Gardener Memorial Lot and possibly the building now housing Awesome God Christian Book Store.

And so it begins...a Brick Store that has seen and survived 3 massive fires in downtown...that has watched the original courthouse give way to Jacob Holt's version and finally our current courthouse...that has seen the horse and buggy give way to the car and massive logging trucks...that housed the Warrenton Police Station attached to its Market Street side for some years...and still remains, looking for a new owner today to once again fill its four walls.

Stay tuned for the next installment in our downtown Warrenton story in several weeks. Experts and downtown business gurus Jack Smith and Owen Robertson are conferring on some recent history of the business district, so hopefully I'll be able to count on their expertise to guide us as we continue our tale.

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...

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And it seems that within the next 15 years, another fire consumed many of the "small & cheap wooden structures" noted above. But still, there remained some wooden structures throughout downtown Warrenton. Not long after Montgomery's book was published in 1924, it seems that one day in July of 1926, what the fires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hadn't razed, a new fire destroyed. The buildings across the street from our "Brick Store" were lost, clearing the way for an addition to Citizens Bank (now BB&T), a new