

The Dragon in the Window
Historical Survey of 2802 Washington Street
Greenville, Texas

For many years, when drivers stopped at the traffic light on the corner of Washington and Wesley Streets in downtown Greenville they looked up at the second floor windows of the building at 2802 Washington Street. Looking down at them was a green Chinese dragon with a big grin. Maybe, that was why there were numerous car wrecks at that intersection.

Today the friendly dragon is gone, the windows upstairs are boarded up, and the beautiful Central Christian Church diagonally across the intersection catches the driver's eye. Yet, this street corner is filled with Greenville history. For starters, Washington Street was the main thoroughfare when Greenville was a frontier village. Known as the Jefferson Road or the Colony Line Road, it was the major east-west highway connecting the town to the inland port of Jefferson on Big Cypress Bayou and west to another small town, Dallas.¹

The building at 2802 Washington Street stands on land donated by McQuinney Howell (M. H.) Wright for the town of Greenville. It is the southwest corner of the Original Town Donation. At least seventeen changes in ownership of the property occurred between 1852 and 1966. Some held the property for a short time believing it would increase in value. Others actually occupied the one house and the only commercial building. Sanborn Fire Maps for years 1885, 1893 and 1898 show one residential structure modified twice, finally into a boarding house.²

As a result of the town donation, Wright bought several lots at public auction, including this one. In 1852, M. H. Wright sold the lot to Joseph Farber. When the town of Greenville was incorporated that year, Farber held the office of Town Constable. Two years later, Farber sold the lot to Andrew and Hugh Hale.

Shortly after, the Hales sold it to J. M. McCamant who then sold the same lot to a Mr. Nowell in 1856. Nowell, probably a wealthy farmer and slaveholder in Hunt County, sold the property to Richard W. Spencer in 1857. Spencer was elected mayor in 1859, the same year he sold the lot to Dr. Reuben DeJernette who built the first and only home on the site. DeJernette, a leading physician in Greenville at the time, was elected alderman the same year he bought the lot. The following year, 1860, he became a trustee of the Greenville Institute, a private school.³

In 1865, Dr. DeJernette sold his home to James Farr, local attorney and Confederate veteran. Ironically, Dr. DeJernette moved his family to Jefferson, in Marion County, in order for his

sons to obtain classical educations. Farr and his family lived in the home until 1876 when he sold it to A. S. Marshall. Marshall owned property across the street and held the lot at 2802 Washington for only a short while until he sold it to Alexander Cameron the same year. Cameron was County Clerk, owner of the Cameron Opera House, and former Confederate officer whose farm was nearby. Actually, in 1870 the Cameron cow barn was just north of the Farr home.

Cameron sold the property to J. M. Ball who then sold it to Judge V. W. Grubbs in 1886. The piece of property changed owners almost every year, continuing the frontier tradition of land speculation. By that time Greenville had four railroads, a thriving cotton business with cotton gins and a cotton compress. Cotton buyers from throughout the United States and Europe had representatives in town.⁴

Judge Grubbs was one of the more interesting characters in Greenville history. The attorney ran for county judge but was defeated; yet he retained the honorary title he relished. He was a passionate advocate of vocational education and prohibition before either issue became popular. He owned *The Greenville Headlight* in 1897-1899, which he used to expostulate his populist theories. Grubbs sold the property within a year or two to Joseph D. Lassater.⁵

Lassater was a director in Greenville's First National Bank, chartered in 1883 and remained in the banking business after that bank merged with the City National Bank in 1899. He was a partner in the King Opera House and close friend of Tom King, a successful Greenville businessman. Lassater owned a furniture store in the building on Lee Street behind the Grubbs home where the Cameron cow barn once stood. In a back corner of the furniture store, Lassater provided the Women's Review Club with space for a free lending library, the first in Greenville. Lassater expanded his furniture store into part of the Grubbs' property for use as a furniture warehouse and repair shop. The lot remained a one-story dwelling place with a well on the northeast corner of the lot near Wesley Street. One minor expansion occurred before 1892 when Lassater sold the property to Mrs. E. S. Peddy.⁶

Mrs. Peddy bought the lot and dwelling in 1892, specifically stating that it was for her own use and benefit. By 1898 the structure had a second floor with upstairs porches on the east and west sides. The business was known as the Peddy Hotel inhabited by railroad personnel and others. From all indication it was a respectable and comfortable boarding house.⁷

Prominent businessman G. H. Collins and his wife Ammon Collins purchased the boarding house and lot from Mrs. E. S. Peddy and her husband J. H. Peddy in December 1902. From information in the Deed Books in Hunt County, Mr. Peddy moved to Winn Parish, Louisiana,

shortly after Mrs. Peddy bought the dwelling. After living in Greenville for ten years, she decided of her own volition to also move to Louisiana.⁸

Collins and his wife held the property for eight years. There is no indication if the structure continued as a boarding house during that time period. In 1910 Collins sold the lot to the Knights of Pythias Lodge # 86 for \$2250; \$1500 in cash and the remaining \$750 at 8% interest for twelve months with 10% attorneys' fees. The Collins reserved the right to the annex of the Lassater Building on the south. They agreed to vacate the lot in sixty days and remove all improvements including the boarding house.⁹

The Knights of Pythias organized in 1888 where they first met in the Levy Building at the corner of St. John and Lee Streets. Later they met in the Graham-Fagg Building one block north of 2802 Washington on the northwest corner of Lee and Wesley Streets. Certificates issued and sold in Greenville to pay for the new lodge were redeemed prior to building the lodge in 1911. As was the custom in Greenville at that time, many public buildings were completely debt-free before occupancy.¹⁰

The structure at 2802 Washington Street has been in continuous use until today (2012). Like many fraternal lodges throughout the United States from the mid-19th Century to the mid-20th Century, the Knights of Pythias occupied the upper floor and rented out the lower floor to retail and commercial enterprises. In addition to regular meetings, the men enjoyed dominoes, pool or snooker during the daytime. At various time other groups used the lodge facility. In 1936 the Wright sisters had a speech and dance studio that lasted only a short time. In the 1950s the Woodmen of the World met in the lodge area. Young boys joined the Boys of the World, associated with the Woodmen of the World, and held meetings upstairs at 2802 Washington Street.¹¹ As soon as the building was completed, Duke Harrison, owner of a furniture store, opened an early undertaking enterprise. A funeral chapel occupied a space 37x40 feet in the south (front) end of the building. The room was furnished with druggets (heavy carpets), chairs, tables, and other amenities for the grieving family members. The remainder of the downstairs was used for casket storage. A mezzanine is located above the rear of the building. It was here that Mr. Harrison had his office.¹²

Occupants of the ground floor changed in 1923 when the *Greenville Messenger* moved their print shop into the space. George M. Dennis and T. S. Melton started the local weekly newspaper in 1894. Later Dennis became the sole proprietor until 1904 when J. A. Phillips purchased it. After

Phillips died in 1940 the business sold to Pat McMeans who continued the printing tradition until 1954 when publication ceased.¹³

Chester Bull worked for Mr. Phillips for many years at the 2802 Washington location. He remembered frequent labor problems caused the non-union shop to put paper over the windows and print at night to avoid harassment. Windows were always closed to prevent the newspapers from blowing while the press was running. All operations were done by hand; yet the weekly newspaper never missed a Wednesday issue. Phillips was editor and reporter; women were hired as linotype operators. A subscription for one year cost one dollar since advertising paid for the operation. The paper's logo was "Be Just and Fear Not!" In fact, the paper unabashingly printed the editor's opinions. If a person was arrested for overindulging in alcoholic spirits or driving too fast, Phillips listed the names in his paper. In addition to publishing and printing the *Messenger*, the office did a booming business in printing area newspapers, including the *Celeste Courier*, *Lone Oak News*, and *Commerce Monitor*, circulars, statements, letterheads, envelopes, placards for politicians, calling cards, and handbills for Perkins Department Store. With three to four other print shops in town, there was some competition and price-cutting, but local printers usually agreed upon prices.¹⁴

In 1928, Birdsong Motors, owned and operated by Fred L. and Al H. Birdsong, built the adjacent garage to the west and opened a Studebaker dealership in the front part of 2802 Washington. The print shop occupied the rear. Birdsong Motors remained in that location until sometime between 1946 and 1953. When the car dealership moved in, the Knights of Pythias Lodge relocated their entrance from Washington Street to the east side of the building at 2512 ½ Wesley Street. After the print shop moved out, the Bon-Ton Café occupied part of the ground floor.¹⁵

By 1953 Mutual Building and Loan Company and Burroughs Adding Machines shared the ground floor and remained there until January 1, 1960 when the savings and loan moved to a larger building. The loan company remodeled the exterior, replacing the large windows with smaller, tinted windows when air-conditioning was installed. The front door was relocated to the southeast corner of the building. An open walk way allowed customers



to enter from either Washington or Wesley Street. With the departure of Mutual Savings and Loan Company and Burroughs Adding Machines in 1960, the ground floor of the building stood vacant for nearly four years.¹⁶

Cam F. Dowell, Jr. owned the garage and office to the west previously occupied by Birdsong Motors. Mr. Dowell turned the space into a skating rink for a while before converting the former automobile salesroom into a parking garage. On July 24, 1964 Cam Dowell, Jr. purchased 2802 Washington from the Knights of Pythias Lodge # 86 for \$31,350 in cash. The deal included the entire building. Mr. Dowell, who was involved in insurance and banking in Dallas, operated a small insurance agency on the ground floor until closing it in 1977, using the second floor for storage. In 1966 Public Accountant James A. Rutherford moved into ground floor offices.¹⁷

The buff brick structure built in 1911 is an example of the Commercial style of architecture popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. Architecturally, these buildings were built to perform a practical function. The simple façade with a straight front, low-pitched roof disguised by a parapet along the edge of the roof, and large rectangular windows with more glass than brick on the front are features of this popular style.



Light, space, airflow, and strength were elements required by commercial businesses of the day.

As was typical of many Commercial style buildings throughout the United States and Canada, a cornice of modest projection divided the building horizontally into two distinct zones. The lower zone housed retail and banking institutions. The taller upper zone was utilized as a more private space for professional offices and/or fraternal organizations. As such, the façade of the upper zone seldom changed but the lower zone was often modified to meet the needs of retail establishments.¹

A cursory examination of the façade of 2802 Washington today immediately notes the change of windows and door. No attempt was made during the remodel to match the original buff brick. During the 1950s, the front door was moved to the southeast corner of the building and set diagonally to the intersection. In complete contradiction with original building materials, the new entry was faced with pink and maroon ceramic tile, highly popular at the time of the renovation.

The east and south sides of the building contain large, heavy hooks ensconced in metal ornamentation. These hooks are located just below the decorative cornice dividing the two zones. For many years heavy canvas awnings hung from the hooks; a fad used throughout the downtown Greenville area.¹⁸

Evidence found in Greenville City Directories indicated that the entrance to the Knights of Pythias Lodge # 86 was originally located on Washington Street. About 1925 the entrance was moved to 2512 Wesley Street, along the east side of the building. No photographs of the building when it was first built, or after any remodels have been found to exist.

No mention of the architect has been found; however, the Masonic Lodge was built one year earlier. The two lodge buildings resemble each other in style and building materials. As with all commercial buildings in Greenville today, 2802 Washington is anchored to the street with a sidewalk. A metal ring about four inches in diameter is embedded in the sidewalk along Washington Street. Some old timers believe it was used to tie horses and mules. The author knows of no other such rings in the downtown area.

In 2012 the Cam Dowell, Jr., Estate still owns 2802 Washington. Mr. Rutherford died in 2003, but the accounting firm of Rutherford-Taylor and Company still occupies the ground floor. The happy Green Dragon no longer occupies the window upstairs. He was the work of Mr. Dowell's artist son Jimmy who created the paper mache head for a Chinese New Year's Parade in New York City years ago. No one seems to know the whereabouts of the smiling dragon. But fender benders still occur with regularity.



¹Harrison, W. Walworth. History of Greenville and Hunt County, Texas. (Waco: Texian Press, 1977), 50.

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- ² Ibid, 48; Sanborn Fire Maps, Chadwyck-Healey Inc., roll 19, W. Walworth Harrison Public Library, Greenville, Texas.
- ³ “Cam Dowell Buys Pythian Building,” *Greenville (TX) Herald Banner*, July 29, 1964; 1860 Federal Census, Population, Texas, Hunt County; Harrison 91, 57, 65, 90, 160.
- ⁴ “Cam Dowell”; 1870 Federal Census, Population, Texas, Hunt County;
- ⁵ Harrison, 178, 207.
- ⁶ Harrison, 238, 245, 276; Sanborn Fire Map 1893.
- ⁷ Hunt County Deed Book 67, p 328; Deed Book 128, p. 282, Hunt County Clerk’s Office; interview with Jack Horton August 2009.
- ⁸ Hunt County Deed Book 128, p. 282.
- ⁹ Hunt County Deed Book 148, p. 383.
- ¹⁰ Little, William E. *A History of Greenville*. (Commerce, Texas: East Texas State Teachers’ College, 1938), 199.
- ¹¹ Author’s interview with Mary Rutherford, Greenville, July 25, 1979.
- ¹² *Greenville (TX) Morning Herald*, 22 February, 1911, 3.
- ¹³ Harrison, 207.
- ¹⁴ Author’s interview with Chester Bull, Greenville, TX, July 18, 1979.
- ¹⁵ 1928 Greenville City Directory, C. E. Dinkle, publisher; 1937 Greenville City Directory, C. E. Dinkle, publisher; 1939 Greenville City Directory, C. E. Dinkle. Publisher; 1946 Greenville City Directory, C. E. Dinkle, publisher; 1949 Greenville City Directory, C. E. Dinkle, publisher.
- ¹⁶ Author’s interview with Linton Bowman III, president of Mutual Savings and Loan, Greenville, TX, July 24, 1979.
- ¹⁷ Hunt County Deed Book, vol. 625, p. 413; author’s interview with Mary Rutherford, Greenville, July 25, 1979.
- ¹⁸ Longstreth, Richard. *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* (Washington, D. C., 1987), 24, 31; Whiffen, Marcus. *American Architecture Since 1780: A Guide to the Styles*. (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 63.