

Wilson- Elm City

The History

- of -

Toisnot-Elm City

From 1873 to 1932



BY J. T. WATSON

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Toisnot - Elm City



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Elm City, N. C.

Perhaps it will be of interest to some to know that the town of Elm City was first named Toisnot. It was in the year of our Lord 1873 that Toisnot came into existence. It is situated in the Northeastern part of Wilson County, on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, 116 miles north of Wilmington and 47 miles south of Weldon—and, geographically speaking, it is the highest point on this railroad. Topographically it might be described a basin upon a hill, as may be remembered by the number of ditches it took to drain it. Toisnot is an Indian name that was given by them to a swampy creek a short distance north of Wilson, which has always been noted for the abundance of fish and snakes that abound and habitate therein.

Tradition tells us that when the Indians inhabited this section that they were crossing this swamp at or near where the railroad crosses it, that they came to a shady ledge and decided to rest, that while sitting there an Indian Squaw espied a huge snake lying on a boulder nearby, sprang to her feet and exclaimed "Toss not," meaning in their language to "Tarry not." From that day to this the stream has been known as "Toisnot Swamp." It is spelled T-O-I-S-N-O-T and pronounced Toss-Not.

There was a reason why Toisnot was ever built and perhaps it would be unfair to the gentle readers not to tell that reason. Prior to this time there was a small town one mile north of the present site called "Joyner's Depot," and from its natural topography would have been a more desirable location for a town. This property was owned by two people—one owned one-fourth and the other three-fourths. The larger owner would neither sell any lots nor lay out a town. There were no streets. The only thoroughfare was the county road and it was on either side of this road that its inhabitants

dwelled and transacted business. These were a progressive people and wanted to own their own homes and business houses, but being assured they could never do so at this place they began to look for another location. Judge George Howard, a very influential man of Tarboro, North Carolina, was a frequent visitor, and the business men acquainted him with their desires and sought his aid and council. After some investigation he informed them that he could get an option on a site one mile south of that point where he could lay out a town and sell lots at a small price. This information was highly pleasing, and after this assurance from Col. Bridgers, President of the Railroad, that he would move the depot and recommend a removal of the post office, they instructed Judge Howard to proceed at once.

He secured this land from Messrs. Thomas Gray Dixon and Jacob H. Barnes, two pioneers and outstanding men of this section. The survey was made by Mr. James W. Taylor, who laid out a plot one-half mile square, the Railroad traversing the center of the plot. After the forest was cleared off the plot, the streets were laid off. The center street running East and West is known as Main or Town Creek Street. At a point in the center of this street and in the center of the R. R. track is the center of town, and it is from this point the survey was made. North from Main Street we have Nash Street, Church Street, and North Street; south from Main Street are Wilson Street, Dixon Street, and Taylor Street. On both sides of the Railroad, running north and south, we have Railroad or Broad Street and east from this street we have Pender Street, Branch Street, and Emma Street; west from Broad Street we have Parker Street, Anderson Street and Barnes Street.

The streets are 66 feet wide and

each residence block contains sufficient land to make ten lots 66 by 132 feet. This does not apply to the business section which is on Main Street between Parker and Pender Streets and on Broad Street between Wilson and Nash Streets.

In the spring of 1873 the lots were sold at auction and the purchasers began to build and in the fall moved to the new town.

Judge Howard, realizing that no town could properly function without churches, schools and lodges, donated a lot on the corner of Church and Pender Streets for a Methodist Church, and a lot on the corner of Wilson and Anderson Streets for a Missionary Baptist Church, and a double lot on the corner of Branch and Wilson Streets for a school building, the top story of which was long used as an Odd Fellows Hall. He also donated a lot on Church Street at the rear of the M. E. Church lot to the Good Templars and Masons jointly with an understanding that the surviving order held the property. On this lot was built a two story house, the Templars occupying the ground floor and the Masons the top floor. To the writer this building served a double purpose—the ground floor as a school room and the top where I was made a Mason. It is now the beautiful home of Mrs. Amanda Parker.

Judge Howard also donated the square in the rear of the depot to the town for a cotton yard. All of these donations were highly appreciated and were soon in use. The old school building is now the magnificent home of Dr. E. G. Moore.

In the fall of 1874, Mr. Harris Winstead, one of the pioneers of the town, upon the completion of the Winstead Hotel, instituted a lottery sponsored by himself and other public-spirited men of the town in which a number of prizes were offered. Among them was a brick hotel at Joyner's Depot, a small farm near Farmer's Mill, a piano, a gold watch,

and many cash prizes ranging from \$1 to \$10. The tickets were sold over a wide area at one dollar each and the drawing was held on the upper side porch of the Hotel on December 24, 1874. The wording on the ticket appears here:

THE HOLDER OF THIS TICKET WILL BE
ADMITTED TO THE
GRAND GIFT CONCERT AND
FREE DINNER.

at Toisnot, N. C., Thursday, December 24th,
1874, and will be Entitled to such Gift as
may be Awarded to the Number below.

J. W. CROWELL, Secretary.

NO. 3248.

There was a large crowd present, among whom was your humble servant, a lad of thirteen summers, who held a ticket but drew nothing. Mr. Jack Weeks drew the Brick Hotel; Miss Belle Sharp, the farm; a member of the family, the piano; and a man whose name I do not recall, the gold watch. He was a stranger but was pronounced by the Judges to be the ugliest man in the crowd.

It did not take Toisnot long to establish itself as a business town. Its churches and good schools attracted many fine families to make their homes here. With men of such sterling worth and business ability as John D. Wells, John L. Bailey, R. S. Wells, W. S. Parker, J. W. Crowell, J. T. Sharp, and others at the helm the town was soon drawing trade from a large scope of country extending from near Tarboro to Bailey, including the sections of Stanhope, Springhope, and Nashville, and from near Wilson to Rocky Mount.

Toisnot had one of the largest retail stores in Eastern Carolina, and before the introduction of tobacco was the second largest cotton market on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad.

The Town of Toisnot was chartered by the Legislature on December 18, 1873, and the following governing body was named to serve till the next election: Mayor, W. S. Par-

ker; Commissioners, J. T. Sharpe, J. W. Crowell, John D. Wells, B. R. Brinkley, and R. S. Wells; Town Constable, W. D. Carter.

In the new town it was necessary to have shade trees and as the Elm and Stringwood were naturally adapted to this soil, they were set on most of the streets and grew very rapidly, soon making a beautiful shade and adding much to the beauty of the town. The town was built very rapidly and, as timber was cheap and much of it was secured within the corporate limits, every home was built of wood and mostly of one story type. We have two dwellings in our midst that are much older than the town—the home of Mr. and Mrs. R. A. Strickland, which was the home of Mr. John D. Wells, was moved from Joyner's Depot. The home of Rev. W. P. Campbell was moved from Batts Cross Roads and was formerly the home of Mr. J. W. Taylor, who, soon after moving it here, traded it for one on the lot where Mr. W. M. Wells' store now stands. At that time Mr. J. W. Friar lived on the lot where the Post office and J. T. Watson's Store now stand. In some respects the personnel of Toisnot was different from most towns. They were of local or near-by products. Lawyers and Jews found poor encouragement here and never remained long. Our people always took a prominent part in political affairs and furnished many of the county and legislative officers who served with distinction.

I will now attempt to give you some early history of Toisnot. The first Postmaster was Mr. G. W. Griffin; the post office was on a lot near Mr. L. S. Farmer's Store. The first Railroad agent was Cap't. W. A. Farmer. The first newspaper, The Sunny Home, was published by Mr. Theodore Hobgood. The first doctors were Dr. John Johnson and Dr. E. S. Gordon. Dr. Johnson had his office in the old Viverette Store that still stands on Railroad Street and is used by Mr. W. M. Wells as a hay house. Dr. Gordon built a two-story

combination house on Main Street where Braswell Motor Company is now. His office and drug store were in front and their living quarters were in the back. The upper floor was known as Gordon's Hall where all public entertainments were held. They were followed by Drs. N. B. Herring, E. G. Moore, Wright Barnes and R. B. Whitley.

The first resident Methodist preacher was Rev. L. J. Holden. During his pastorate here he built and occupied the home now owned by Mrs. Ella Sharp. The first barber for white trade was George A. Gaston. His first work was to shave Mr. R. S. Wells. His shop was located on R. R. Street about where Mr. Wells' wareroom is located. The first sawmill was operated by Mr. James Davis and was located on part of the lot owned by Chief J. J. Farmer. During his stay here, he built the Wiley G. Barnes house on the corner of Wilson and Pender Streets. The first sales stable was on the corner of Main and Pender Streets where Dr. E. C. Moore's office now stands. It was owned and operated by J. W. Taylor and J. F. Stokes. The first coach and repair shop was located on Anderson Street on the lot recently owned by Mrs. Sarah Winstead and was owned and operated by Mr. Ed Winstead. The first box of fresh fish ever shipped to Toisnot was shipped to J. D. Wells and Company, and on the day before its arrival, two clerks were sent over a wide territory to notify the people of its expected arrival. The first car of ice was shipped to Mr. J. L. Bailey from the state of Maine and it took more than a year to dispose of it. The first boarding house was on the corner of Wilson and Railroad Street. It was owned and operated by Mrs. Mahaly Bailey, mother of Hon. J. L. Bailey and Mrs. Lillie Bailey Pridgen. It was long the favorite boarding-place for the single men and newly married couples. The first undertaking establishment was on the corner of Main and Parker Streets where the City Service Station now stands. Mr. J. F. Winstead

was the proprietor, who also operated a wood and blacksmith shop. The front of this shop was once a bowling alley. There was once a small store house on the lot where Mr. J. W. Cox's home now stands. It was built and operated by Mr. Dempsey Eurs. As the sale of whiskey was legalized then, it is perhaps no discredit to state that the first business house built in Toisnot was a barroom, owned and operated by Mr. Daniel Armstrong, on a lot where Stedman's Store now stands. The first brick store for Toisnot was built by Mr. D. A. Batts, father of Mrs. O. J. Harrison. It is now the Elm City Pharmacy. The brick in the building were made by Mr. Cleophus Parker and his brothers on the farm now owned by Mr. Josephus Parker.

Last, but not least is that sacred spot known as Cedar Grove Cemetery where many who are near and dear to us rest in silent repose. This hallowed spot was first bought by three of our far-sighted, public-spirited men, Messrs. J. D. Wells, R. S. Wells, and J. T. B. Hoover, who had it laid off in suitable lots with walks and driveways. About 1884 this property was bought by the town and enlarged and enclosed by a fence. The writer was a member of the town board when this deal was made and has always felt a just pride in its acquisition.

Methodism has long been the predominating factor of this section and Toisnot feels a just pride in having been the home of such distinguished preachers as Rev. Dr. William Close, J. H. Cordan, L. J. Holden, J. S. Nelson, and a host of others too numerous to mention. The congregation outgrew the capacity of its first church; therefore, in the spring of 1884 under the pastorate of Dr. Cordan, a lot was secured and a much larger church was erected on the corner of Church and Railroad Streets. In this church a Conference was held soon after its completion. The old church was sold to the Primitive Baptist who have since

used it for a place of worship. Their first pastor was Elder A. J. Moore. The Missionary Baptist is also a strong factor of the town and feels a just pride in having had such able ministers as Rev. Geo. W. Duke, Dr. Huffman, Dr. Carroll, and many others to guide them.

Toisnot always had good schools and was proud to have such noted teachers as W. A. Barbrey, E. G. Conyers, Geo. W. Arrington, Billie Barnes, and James W. Hays, whose worth is attested by many who profited by their wise counsel.

Toisnot also enjoyed the reputation of having more wealth, and more beautiful young women of marriageable age than any town of its size in the state. It will perhaps not be out of place to state that the first trimmed hats for Ladies sold in Toisnot were trimmed by Mrs. John D. Wells and were sold in her husband's store. At that time Ladies wore straw hats and the only trimming was ribbon and flowers. The first exclusive millinery store was operated by Mrs. M. C. Hoover and Miss Hattie Norman in the Hoover Store which was the second brick store built in Toisnot. The people of Toisnot were progressive but were not immune to disaster for in November 1884 it suffered a great loss by fire which consumed every building from Dr. E. G. Moore's office to the old Post Office. Toisnot did not have the modern conveniences that Elm City has; such as, electric lights, water, and sewerage, telephones, and banks; but it did have a personage that any town might feel justly proud of. Its laides were chaste, modest, and refined. Its young men were industrious and honorable and valued character above wealth.

But as all material things must pass away, so the name of TOISNOT will soon be a memory. I am not quite sure who first proposed the change but am of the opinion it was Mr. John I. Pridgen, husband of Mrs. Lillie Bailey Pridgen. My reason for thinking so is because in the

summer of 1890 when the trees were at the beauty stage, he and I were commenting on the beauty of them. He remarked how nice and appropriate it would be to change the name to Elm City. This suggestion must have struck a responsive cord that caused the circulation of a petition to that end. The change was made by the Legislature on February 25, 1891. This change did not meet the approval of many as may be seen by an act of the Legislature on March 11, 1895 changing the name back to Toisnot. This change would have disrupted the Postoffice and Railroad office had not the sponsors of Elm City petitioned these departments not to make the change. Thus for many years we lived in Toisnot and got our mail, express and freight from Elm City. Doubtless this condition would have continued indefinitely had it not become necessary for the town to sell bonds and the bonding company would not buy bonds from a small town under two names. So at a special session of the Legislature on October 11, 1913, the name was changed to Elm City and so remains. Toisnot had the elms without the city. Elm City has a city without the Elms.

Elm City has made some permanent improvements that Toisnot did not have: to wit: paved streets, all business houses are brick, many brick veneered residences, a brick M. E. Church, a brick school, and a magnificent stuccoed Woman's Club Building, its electric lights, water, and sewerage sytem. The people feel

proud of the progress of Elm City—but there is a tender spot in the hearts of many older residents for Toisnot and to perpetuate that memory, we have a Toisnot township, a Toisnot Banking Co., a Toisnot Pressing Club, and a Toisnot Masonic Lodge, and a Toisnot Junior Order Council to remind us of the cherished old name.

In concluding I will say that this sketch has been compiled from personal knowledge, having known the town from its infancy, and while I am not the oldest citizen, nor did I make it my home at the start, but at this writing it has been my home longer than any other white person who ever lived here, except Mrs. Nora Taylor Williams, to whom I concede that honor by a very few years.

If in my feeble efforts, I have recorded anything of interest to the present or future generations, I shall feel fully compensated. I have endeavored to make it as plain as possible without any display of words or elaborate phraseology, and dedicate my effort to my wife and mother.

J. T. WATSON

1931.

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