

About the Mostly Sofas Building...

The "Mostly Sofas" Building (207 Bullitt Avenue, SE) is 100 years old this year, so this is a great time to be researching its history. Perhaps there could be a big birthday celebration! From my research I have learned that the large brick structure was built by the Nelson Hardware Company as a warehouse in 1910. The company's retail store was on Campbell Avenue, and apparently a thriving operation. I have found information about Alexander Nelson and his sons who participated in running the hardware business, as well as information about the other homes and businesses in the neighborhood

My search for clues took me to the Virginia Room (Roanoke City Library), the Roanoke Museum and Historical Society (Center in the Square), the office of the City Engineer (David Dearing), and several of my favorite bookstores (including Too Many Books and Rams Head Book Shop). I have also gotten some much needed practice in navigating the GIS resources available on websites for both Roanoke City and Salem City, allowing me to make copies of numerous old Sandborn Insurance maps. I am hoping to be in touch soon with Nelson Harris, Bev Fitzpatrick and others who are well informed about Roanoke history and who might be able to steer me to some additional photographs.

It is easy to locate Bullitt Avenue on old maps since it borders Elmwood Park, a prominent landmark for more than 120 years. The earliest map I found, from 1888, drawn as advertisement for a land development company, shows Nelson Street running next to the park ,and Holliday Street a block over to the east. Later city planners decided to call these streets 1st and 3rd, respectively. Elm Street and Jefferson Street were named during the 1880s, as was Bullitt Avenue, and those names have continued to the present day. Railroad tracks for the Roanoke and Southern (now N&S – the Winston Salem branch) did not appear on maps until the 1890s, when they could be seen running north and south between 1st and 3rd. The addition of railroad tracks made this a desirable location, ideal for the commercial warehouses to load and unload freight at the docks, but perhaps less attractive as a residential neighborhood.

When the Nelson Hardware warehouse was built (c. 1910) automobiles were becoming increasingly popular, and gas stations began to appear. By the 1950s, a Greyhound Bus Terminal was built nearby (between the park and the railroad tracks). A few decades later the Greyhound Bus Terminal disappeared, and Williamson Road extended to that location, creating a wide intersection. As best as I can tell, the original brick warehouse stayed in place through ten decades, with relatively few changes, except in ownership. By the 1980s a company called American Chemical Co. occupied the space, selling janitorial supplies. A map from 1994 shows the encroachment of I-581, but the main warehouse structure remained untouched.

Several Roanoke natives have mentioned the fact that when Mostly Sofas first acquired the building (c. 2004) the owners painted it pink, and some say they would love to see it pink again. Others have told the story a little differently, saying that it was painted orange with blue shutters at the windows (perhaps because the owner was a fan of the University of Virginia?), but that it faded to pink after a few years. People are curious to know about the new plans for use of this interesting old property. Maybe condos, art studios, or what?

To understand the history of the building it helps to know something of the social and economic history of Roanoke, so I have revisited a number of books that are available, including **Roanoke, Virginia, 1882-1912: Magic City of the New South** (Rand Dodson),

Roanoke 1740-1982 (by Claire White); **Roanoke Past and Present** (Carolyn Hale Bruce), and **A History of the City of Roanoke** (Raymond Barnes).

The transition from a sleepy little town called Big Lick to “Magic” City of Roanoke has been well documented in a variety of books about this region. Here is what Claire White had to say about it, borrowing from several selected passages, starting with the Roanoke Land and Improvement Company...

The actions of the Roanoke Land and Improvement Company determined the future site and shape of the City of Roanoke. Up to **1881**, the town was on the high ground west of the marsh known as the Long Lick which extended from below the Trout House to the site of the N&W shops. The main street was what was then and for many years to come, known as Commerce Street (Second Street, SW) and portions of its extension, Franklin Road, which later joined Commerce at the future site of Lee Junior High School.

...Streets were laid out by the land company and named for past Virginia governors and lieutenant governors. According to a history of the N&W, between February, **1881**, and June, 1882, seventy-eight frame and sixty brick houses were built by the company, with sixty-two additional brick ones to be constructed as soon as contractors could be found.

...Southeast Roanoke was a more fashionable part of town with houses built near City Cemetery on Tazewell Avenue and in and around adjoining Woodland Park, which overlooked the railroad tracks and the rest of the town from its hill. An even more exclusive residential area developed in the **1890s** west of the city, particularly on Campbell and Church Avenues, where large privately built Victorian houses were erected on big lots in what was then the outskirts of the city. Some of them may still be seen, although the iron deer that decorated the front lawns are long gone.

1887...At a mass meeting the Roanoke and Southern Company was formed to construct the northern half of a railroad to Winston Salem, N.C. No sooner was the line completed than the N&W took it over; it persists in the twentieth century as the Pumpkin Vine, named for its torturous route.

...Building during **1892** included the Academy of Music, the Terry Building at the corner of Jefferson and Campbell, the Rockledge Inn on the top of Mill N=Mountain, and extension of fifty-two rooms for Hotel Roanoke, and over 500 new residences. Many of the streets were at last paved with bricks, and the Roanoke and Southern to Winston-Salem was opened.

...A library, Roanoke's first, was opened in **1921** in the old Terry house at Elmwood Park, and Roanoke's first radio station, WDBJ, came on the air in 1924, ushering in a new era of communication.

...The 400 bed Community Hospital of the Roanoke Valley was completed in **1967** on Elm Avenue in downtown Roanoke, replacing Jefferson Hospital which had been opened in 1908 on Franklin Road.

...Also in **1964** a portion of the 1956 plan was revived with the Downtown East project, a conception finally nearing reality in the 1980s with the clearing of the property east of Jefferson Street in the downtown area. Two high-rise buildings, Colonial American National Bank and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Southwestern Virginia, have been constructed on the East side of South Jefferson Street, each with landscaping to enhance its setting. Elmwood Park is being redone to be compatible. An addition to the library in the park has been approved and an existing building on the Market square is being remodeled as an arts center, Center in the Square. Further plans for the area include an apartment house and a hotel, neither a certainty.

Crossroads Mall, 1960s...The centers, with plenty of parking spaces, kept many of their stores open at night and offered repeated special events to keep the customers coming, as downtown Roanoke suffered in a malaise that was affecting city centers across the nation. The Downtown East project was one of the panaceas offered, along with the development of the old city market square and, most recently, Center in the Square to locate cultural interests in downtown Roanoke. To rejuvenate old residential areas, both black and white, near downtown, neighborhood alliances were encouraged. Old Southwest has seen considerable improvement and so have some of the northwest black sections.

Excerpts from various sources:

According to an entry in History of Roanoke City by George S. Jack and E.B. Jacobs, in 1912, there was a warehouse on Bullitt Avenue belonging to Nelson Hardware Company...

The quarters now occupied by the Company consist of a building twenty-five feet front by three hundred feet in depth on Campbell Avenue, **with a wareroom one hundred feet by one hundred and ten feet and two stories high located on Bullitt Avenue on a tract of ground owned by the Company comprising a whole square.** (see full article)

According to the **Roanoke City Business Directories**, for successive years, starting in 1907, the north side of the block on Bullitt Avenue lists a firm called Krantz Coal and Wood Company (#122) and a residence occupied by a Mrs. Snyder (#126). On the south side (where the Mostly Sofas building now stands) there was only one residence listed (#125) – for J. L. Board:

1907 122 Krantz Coal and Wood Company
125 J. L. Board
126 Mrs. E. J. Snyder

1908 122 Krantz Coal and Wood Company
125 J. Board
126 C. E. Creasy

1909 122 Krantz Coal and Wood Company/N. T. Preas/ George Weidemann Brewing Co.
125 Mrs. S. L. Board
126 J. E. Brown

But in 1910...the Nelson Hardware Company had put up a warehouse!

1910 *121-123 Nelson Hardware Company's Warehouse
122 George Weidemann Brewing Company
125 Mrs. S. L. Board
126 J. A. Brown

1911 Bullitt Avenue (cont.)

*121-123 Nelson Hardware Company Warehouse
122 George Weidemann Brew Company
125 Mrs. S. L. Board
126 J. A. Brown

1916

*115-121 Nelson Hardware Company
122 vacant
125 Chase C.A.
126 Robbins LF, Ratcliffe, Lee

1924

*115 Nelson Hardware WH
122 Dominion Coal Company
125 Warner, W L/ Roberts, H L
126 Patton, Mrs. Millie

1929

*115 Nelson Hardware Company Warehouse
122 Dominion Garland Coal Company
125 Dunbar, Mrs Nannie
126 Madison, Mrs. Mary A.

1934

*115 Nelson Hardware Co.
122 Rockhill H. L. and Co. Coal/ London L. T. Transfer Co.
125 Vacant
126 Calvert, Roy L. Filling Station

1944

(1st Street intersects N & W RW crosses)
*115 Nelson Hardware Co. (Whse)
120-124 Roanoke Paper Company, Inc.
126 Thomas, Mrs. Rosa – grocer

1954

44 Greyhound Bus Terminal
*115 Nelson Hardware Co. (Whse)
202-208 Dillard Paper Co.
212 Thomas Grocery

1964

44 Greyhound Bus Terminal
(First intersects)

*105 Top Value Enterprises, Wholesale (Apparently the Nelson Hardware had sold it!)

N&W crosses

202 Vacant

212 Thomas Grocery

1974

44 Greyhound Station

202 Armour & Co.

*207 American Chemical Co., Inc (Janitorial supplies)

212 vacant

1984

(Williamson Road...)

202 Treadmark Rubber Co.

*207 American Chemical Co.

1994

*207 Southern Maintenance Supply Co. -Neil and Dot Novak

2004

*207 Mostly Sofas – furniture dealer retail – Jeff Rorer, owner

Attachments:

Biography of Alexander M. Nelson (1912)

Map made by the Roanoke Land Development Company – 1888

Copies of the deed cards

Series of Sandborn insurance maps

Photographs from Bruce's [History of Roanoke](#)