

# Ahoskie grew from railroad, mill town to thriving city

**By Centennial Committee**  
 What was Ahoskie like 100 years ago? What kinds of businesses did it have? What kind of homes? Here are some of the answers.

By late 1898, Ahoskie has become the railroad center of the area, and a half-dozen or so merchants were doing business. However, the first major commercial development of the town took place in the years immediately after the town's incorporation. The Mitchells cut up a portion of their farm into lots and streets and sold off the two blocks adjacent to the west side of the railroad between Church and North streets. Soon small frame stores went up on North Railroad Street facing the depot.

In 1900, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad was formed by a consolidation of several smaller rail lines, including the Norfolk and Carolina, and dominated rail transportation in the Coastal Plain.

Rail transportation, which became one of the major factors in Ahoskie's founding and development, was available to what became the town of Ahoskie by accident.

In 1885, when the first logging trains passed through the area, there was no Ahoskie. There was only a Baptist church, Dr. Jesse H. Mitchell's house, the Hayes house and probably a few other white and Negro families in the immediate area.

A logging siding and loading stations were built near the St. Johns Road (now Church Street) crossing, and one or two commissaries to supply the loggers were started.

The town's first recognized store had its beginnings at this time and was operated by J.P. Freeman and J.D. Riddick under the name of Riddick and Freeman.

Although there had been a cotton gin and sawmill on the Luke McGlohon place earlier, the first large-scale mill was erected in 1888 across Church Street from the Baptist church.

J.C. "Cad" Jenkins sold timber rights on the Jenkins plantation to Wright Powell, a Powellsville sawmill operator, bringing in outside capital to develop Ahoskie's first industry.

Later in the year, the mill boiler blew, destroying the mill, killing the foreman and injuring Powell.

The firm of Cockey and Powell began operating in the fall of 1888, with the commissary at the corner of Church and Catherine Creek Road being the third in the expanding mercantile firm's lineup.

Other early businesses in Ahoskie at the time were Freeman and Riddick on Church Street; Garrett, Downs and Harrell on Main Street; and J.A. Copeland's post office and store on Main Street.

The post office was in a small frame building at the southeast corner of what became Main and Railroad streets, the site of the current Ahoskie Centennial Museum.

In 1892, Copeland moved his family into a three-story house built for him by J.R. Garrett on the north side of the 100 block of East Main Street.

After a big fire on March 16, 1901, which destroyed the entire block of North Railroad Street between Main and North streets, Fletcher Powell built the town's first brick store on his site near the middle of the block.

The two-story building was later purchased by J.R. Garrett, who, in 1926, included the building into the three-story Garrett Hotel.

The second brick store was built in 1905 for W.B. Newsome at the southeast corner of Main and Catherine streets. The second floor

of the two-story building, known as Newsome's Hall, served the town for a number of years as its public meeting place.

Besides the growth in retail stores, other businesses in the early 1900's were sawmills, cotton gins, ice plant, laundry, and many stables.

Traveling salesmen, or "drummers," came to town on trains, putting up here for a week at a time, making daily trips to smaller community stores by horse and buggy.

Thus the livery business became a flourishing trade in Ahoskie, and all of the livery owners operated "horse jitney" lines as one of their services.

During this period, blacksmith shops, coachmaking shops and woodworking places also did thriving business, because they were essential to the horse-and-buggy days.

The second disastrous fire occurred in the business district on Feb. 23, 1906, burning all of the buildings on the south side of the 100 block of West Main Street.

In the early 1900's, Ahoskie became a loading and shipping point for peanuts from Hertford and Bertie counties.

### Tobacco market

Tobacco had just entered the picture but growing was mainly confined to the southeastern part of the county, making Ahoskie the logical location for a local tobacco market.

Late in 1906 money was raised to promote a local tobacco market and buy a lot for a warehouse. The deed to the lot on the northeast corner of Main and Lloyd streets was given to J.W. Harrison and K.H. Watson of Wilson, who built "The Hub" warehouse and had the first tobacco marketing season in 1907.

The warehouse closed in 1910 and was re-opened in 1915, with tobacco marketing continuing to be an important part of the economy to the present time.

By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, Ahoskie had arrived as a town, the largest in Hertford County and the marketing and railroad center for the surrounding territory.

The town's enterprise and spirit were reflected by the way its citizens started a tobacco market, built markets for locally produced cotton and peanuts and supported public education through voluntary subscriptions to a local tax levy.

### Baker promotes growth

Raleigh James Baker moved from Harrellsville to Ahoskie in 1906 and became one of its greatest boosters, erecting a sign near the depot proclaiming "Ahoskie — the Coming Town Between the two



### Business leaders

Ahoskie business leaders gather in 1948 for a photograph. They were (front row, from left) J.C. Evans, Hunter Sharp Jr., Charles Pierce and Milton Flythe; and (back row, from left) Robert Rowe, Rufus Mitchell, Claxton Early, Bob Carter, Arthur Green, W.H.

Rivers." Baker actively promoted the town's development and helped the westward movement of residential business property with his intense real estate operations.

His first major project was a 1909 auction of residential lots in Donovan Heights, about 700 yards west of the new school site and north of St. Johns Road (North Street). The new streets were named for members of his family — Baker, Raleigh, Ruth, Talmage and Pembroke.

A general holiday was declared in Ahoskie, and the auction was accompanied with a brass band and drew "one of the largest crowds Ahoskie ever entertained," it was reported. Even school was let out, and the children scrambled for dimes pitched into the crowd by the auction company.

Baker continued this promotion of development with the slogan "keep your eyes on Ahoskie. Watch her grow. Buy lots in the coming town between the two rivers."

Ahoskie property owners continued to make land available for development, and Baker bought a tract of land from Ernest and Nina Hayes in 1910 for another real estate auction sale.

This tract, named Haysellon, included the area from the railroad west to McGlohon Street, between

North and Gerock streets. There were 140 lots offered for sale at the auction in July, 1910, the last to be held in Ahoskie.

Baker bought the lot on the southwest corner of Main and Railroad streets and built a two-story brick building. It had a double storefront on Main Street, and Baker had his real estate and insurance office on the second floor. The post office leased the east side of the first floor beginning in 1912.

From 1909 through 1912, much of the business district developed with new one-story buildings replaced earlier frame buildings that were torn down or leveled by fires.

J.T. Parker built a store next to Baker's building, and J.W. Powell built between Baker's store and the Hotel Comfort, leaving a narrow alley for the hotel windows.

In 1910, Dr. Jesse H. Mitchell

Basnight Sr., Dan Miller and an unidentified man. If you know his name and the organizations they represent, drop by or mail a card to 'The News-Herald' office. (Photo courtesy of Carolyn Mitchell)

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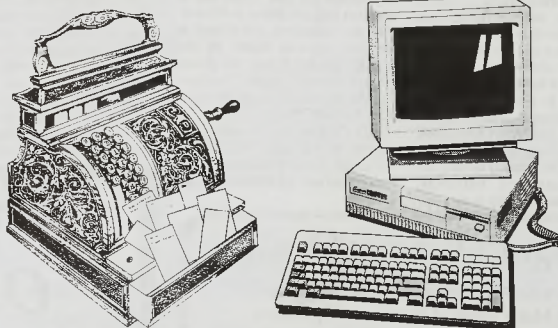
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The Village of Cofield is a fledgling in Hertford County, being incorporated in 1969. It is with honor that we congratulate Ahoskie on its 100th birthday as we continue to achieve the common goal of bettering the lives of all citizens.

### Town Council Members

Julia M. Whitaker, Mayor  
 Horace R. Spivey  
 Herbert Smith, Sr.

George J. Mitchell  
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