
CHAPTER 3: JUSTIFICATION FOR EXPANDED PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE

DEVELOPMENT OF BLACKSBURG AFTER WORLD WAR II

The 1989 NRHP Blacksburg Historic District nomination defines the period of significance from 1789 to 1940, encompassing its development from the establishment of the town's original sixteen-block grid plan through its continued growth in the nineteenth century and subsequently its alteration and virtual rebuilding associated with the establishment of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This period of significance also applies to the local historic district. As the town and college experienced tremendous growth following World War II, it is recommended that the period of significance be expanded to 1965 to recognize those properties associated with this continued development as contributing resources to the district. The Blacksburg Historic District, as it developed through the mid-1960s, remains unique as a mid-size town sustained by its close association with the university rather than serving as a county seat.

Blacksburg continued to grow during World War II and in the period of nationwide prosperity that followed. Between 1940 and 1950, the town population increased by 53 percent from 2,133 to 3,358. In 1941, the Radford Army Ammunition Plant (RFAAP) was established in Montgomery and Pulaski counties. The arsenal was built in an effort to increase ammunition production in anticipation of US involvement in World War II. Located only 10 miles west of Blacksburg, the arsenal brought an influx of new residents to town to aid the war effort. Blacksburg continued to grow after World War II, as it experienced both the national population boom and the flood of returning veterans to Virginia Tech taking advantage of the GI Bill. In the following decade, the town experienced its most dramatic growth as it increased by more than 100 percent to 7,070 in 1960. This growth in population continued an additional 33 percent by 1970 to 9,384. Meanwhile, enrollment at Virginia Tech more than doubled in the first year after the war from 2,331 in the 1945-1946 school year to 4,971 in 1946-1947. While this growth slowed in the following years, it remained steady with a total increase of 65 percent in the first decade following the war. With the increased enrollment, Virginia Tech's employment also increased dramatically during these years and contributed significantly to the growth of the town.

Although the majority of new construction related to this dramatic growth in population took place on the Virginia Tech campus and in post-World War II residential developments outside of the historic district, residential and commercial buildings continued to be built within the original sixteen-block grid of the town. As noted in the 1989 nomination, the two blocks of College Street were fully developed with commercial buildings by 1950. Notable new buildings on Main Street included the National Bank of Blacksburg at 100 North Main Street (1942), the Montgomery County Savings & Loan Building at 103 Jackson Street (1950) and Rose's Department Store at 125 North Main Street (1965). Two new apartment buildings, located on Progress Street and Church Street, were constructed in 1948 in response to the growing demand for housing with the increased population. These buildings, along with other smaller commercial buildings and residences built throughout the district in the two decades following World War II, illustrate the continued growth of the town. While they may differ in architectural style, form and materials from the earlier structures, these mid-twentieth century buildings continued the development patterns of the district and contribute to its density and cohesiveness. Contributing status should be given to these resources, as they represent the continued development of the town within the recent past.