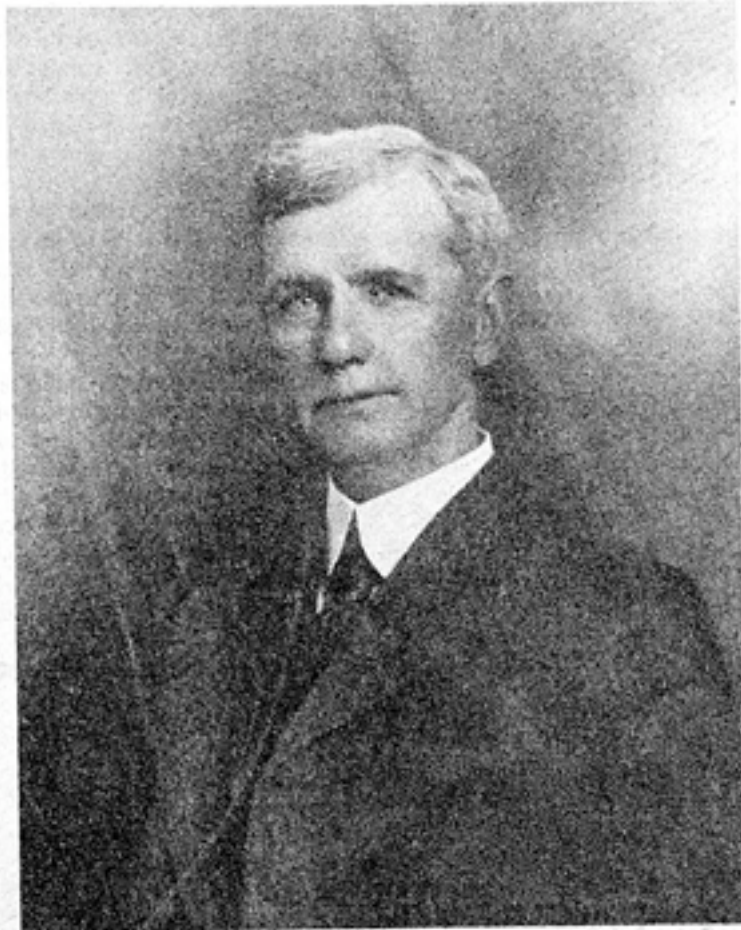


Founding Fathers gave town faith in the future



CAPTAIN JAMES MADISON HARRIS

“No enterprise was ever started with which he was not connected,” it was said of Freeman Epes, who was called the Father of Blackstone when he died in 1916.

In the coming months of Blackstone’s year-long centennial celebration many “founding fathers” will be remembered. Freeman Epes stands out because he was the first store owner to build a brick building on the east side of the tracks in the tiny village then called Black’s and White’s. His dry goods store at the intersection of Broad and Main Street became the cornerstone for a town.

But a town if it is to live beyond one hundred years must be made of more than brick and stone. A town must have spirit and a character to give that indwelling light a shape. It is for this spirit that the founding fathers are remembered, not the brick buildings.

The decade of the 1880’s was an age of great explorations. But not everyone could explore Africa and Greenland. Author and lecturer Russell Conwell inspired the nation with his book “Acres of Diamonds” in 1888. He spoke to the adventurers who stayed at home and planted seeds in their own small towns that “consisted of opportunities for Americans who worked alertly at their everyday tasks, paid attention to

business, and had strength of character.” In one sentence he provided the blueprint for those who were to give Blackstone its guiding lights.

To early downtown merchants of Blackstone the muddy intersection of streets next to the train depot was an unplowed are promising a rich harvest. From the beginning there was vision in the seed. As more stores were added next to Epes’s store he encouraged the merchants to lay wide sidewalks for he believed the crop would be larger than anyone expected. “Possessing an active far seeing mind he was able to outline the future and success of most any enterprise,” his friends said of him.

Just as brick attracts brick, men of like vision planted their dreams along with Epes. H.H. Seay, whose first job as a youth was making bricks for Epes’ new building, was able by 1885 to buy the store that was to mature into the Seay-Bagley Company.

While Blackstone was becoming an official town in the decade of the 1880’s another founding father was testing the soil next to the Epes cornerstone. Captain James Madison Harris was looking for a place to start a business. Had it not been for Epes’s commitment to the future he might have decided that his native soil was unprofitable. Blackstone’s loss would be unmeasurable had he not stayed and opened the Harris Hardware Company In its maturity it would become the Dillard-Crawley Hardware Co.

Thanks to men of wide interests like Epes and Harris Blackstone would become a town with a balanced economy. When Epes sold his dry goods store, he invested in tobacco warehouses. Blackstone would become famous for its tobacco warehouses as well as its businesses.

Nor would Captain Harris be content to stay in a hardware store all his life. He would go on to build the cornerstones for industries and education that would carry this young town through the next century.

After selling his interest in the hardware store, Harris started the Blackstone Manufacturing Company, described as “without a peer in Southside Virginia” as a provider of every kind of wood building material for a house.

The company’s destruction by fire only gave Harris new opportunities. His involvement in the Blackstone Land Improvement Company with Freeman Epes—described as he “yokefellow”—insured that the soil of Blackstone would grow strong industries. Because of their vision Blackstone reaped the benefits of the Blackstone College for Women, the Hoge Academy, the Roller Mills, and the Klotz Silk Manufacturing plant, which was to become the Velvet Textile Mill.

Captain Harris used to think of Blackstone as “the biggest little city in the state.” He was “always ready to contribute liberally of his time and means in fostering what was for the interest of this community and was obsessed with this spirit to the last,” a friend said of him.

Like Freeman Epes before him Harris could see with his “penetrating blue eyes” far into the future. Elected by write-in as Mayor in 1925 Captain Harris in his two years of office devoted all his energies to the establishment of a municipal light and power plant. Harris wanted his “little city” to be assured of a steady income in the future. Though frail in body Captain Harris was strong in making his town self-reliant. He also helped the town achieve its one bank, The Citizens Bank and Trust Company, and became its president in 1910.

By the time he died in 1930, Captain Harris had become a cornerstone of character for all citizens in Blackstone to model themselves after. “When Captain Harris

applied his intellectual processes to the solution of their problems many felt there was no need to take them to a higher court,” an associate said.

Like the large brick home they lived in, these founding fathers stand above our modern houses with a timeless dignity. And it was from these higher windows that they must have viewed their town and the future we have come to be.