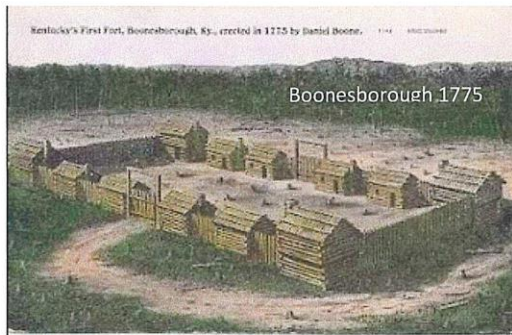


Williamsburg and Whitley County have a rich cultural heritage and on April 25th, 2019, the downtown was listed in the National Registry of Historic Places by the Department of the Interior.

Historical Overview

The settlement of Kentucky began during the colonial era and “Kaintuck” soon became the colony’s frontier. Harrods Town (Harrodsburg) and Boonsboro being founded in 1774 and 1775.



Daniel Boone blazed the Wilderness Road in 1775 but it remained a trail through the forest unsuitable for wagon traffic until 1795. Approximately 300,000 people came on the trail through Cumberland Gap by foot or horseback to start a new life.

Kentucky was fiercely contested during the Revolutionary War

In 1818, forty years after Boonsboro was formed, Whitley County was formed from part of Knox County to the north. With travel and communication being what it was, smaller counties were easier to administer. Although just 35 miles south of the Wilderness Road and closer to Virginia and North Carolina, little of this migration flowed south to the present location of Williamsburg as mountain ranges were unfavorable to travel.

The sparse bottom lands and coal rich slopes of the area could not compete with the allure of the bluegrass farther westward. Two years later the town was laid out with a central courthouse and 45 surrounding lots. The population of Williamsburg was only 20 people and the town grew slowly during the next half century.

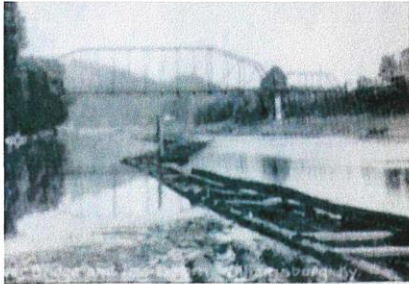
Over the following years, the Williamsburg resembled other small communities in Appalachia with wood frame houses, several log cabins, and dirt streets until 1882. With the arrival of the Louisville and Nashville railroad, development would accelerate and by 1895 a central business district was established.

Downtown Williamsburg was composed of a range of businesses including stores, grocers, livery stables, dry goods and millinery shops. Two churches, a Baptist and Congregational Church sought adherents.

One of two schools, the Williamsburg Institute was the forerunner of the University of the Cumberlands.



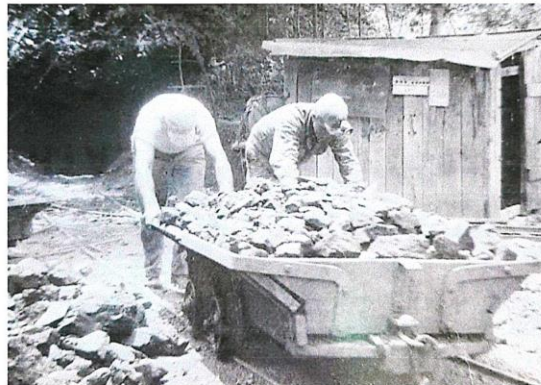
The arrival of the railroad provided access to the region's natural resources. Prior to that time and to a significant extent for the next one hundred years, transportation in eastern Kentucky was an obstacle to commerce and economic development.



The lumber industry flourished and great rafts of logs were floated down the river each spring to sawmills located on the banks of the Cumberland River. Coal, present in abundance, brought a great deal of wealth and culture into the town in the late 1800's.

Electricity became available in 1906 twenty four years after its arrival in Manhattan. As Williamsburg continued to grow in the 1900's, disasters struck including three floods and two great fires in the downtown district.

Coal mining at the turn of the 19th Century and for some time afterwards was labor intensive.



With the railroad and demands for steel and coal in the two World Wars, periods of prosperity occurred interspersed with periods of poverty including the crash of 1929. Coal, and today strip mining, have had mixed economic, cultural and environmental repercussions. It has been estimated that Whitley County has had 91.4 million tons of coal extracted and 804 million tons remain.



A rich local culture evolved in the relatively isolated Appalachians and one author claims that it was the last bastion where Elizabethan English was spoken.

Wonderful music evolved from Celtic origins

Williamsburg always had a reputation for racial tolerance. While perhaps not perfect, incidents were isolated and usually dealt with personally by the affected parties.

In 1955, the district became was among the first school systems in the state to racially integrate and it was uneventful.

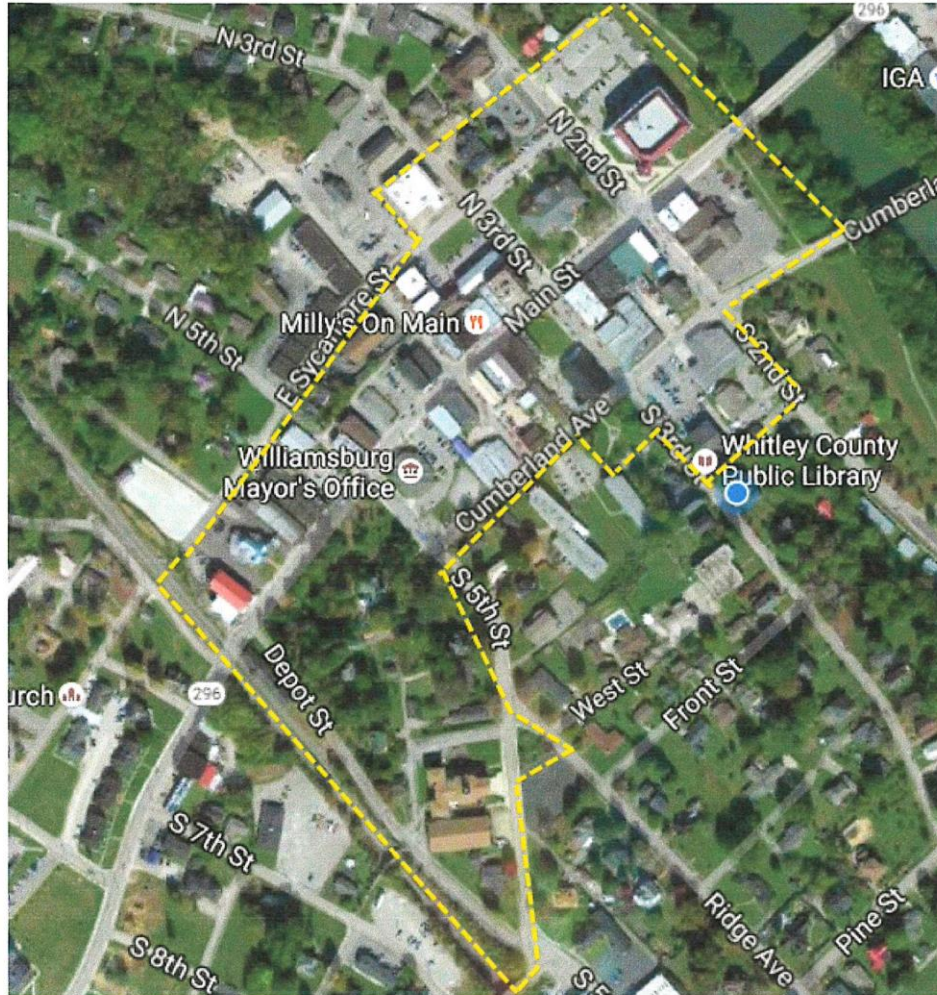


Mayor Roddy Harrison recognized the benefits that accrue to a community from a National Historic District when validated by the Department of the Interior and the Park Service. An enabling ordinance was introduced before the City Council and passed in February 2016. The Historic Preservation Commission held its organizational meeting in May of that year.

After attending meetings and receiving help from the Kentucky Heritage Council in Frankfort, steps were taken to begin the process of application to become a National Historic District. The original plan extended west from the river at Main Street past the railroad and on to 11th street. The plan included historic homes on Main Street and numerous buildings on the campus of the University of the Cumberlands.

After completing over 3500 hours of committee work and with development of new stores, restaurants and residential units downtown, the decision was made to use the railroad as the western boundary of the proposed district. This would allow the application for the district to proceed and provide the benefits of tax credits to those engaged in renovation. The benefits of tax credits are discussed in the Economic Development portion of this web site.

On April 25, 2019, the Kentucky Heritage Council announced that Williamsburg had been entered into the National Register of Historic Places. Eighty one structures are included within the boundary of the District of which 60 are considered as contributing to the historical significance of the town.



The Preservation Commission serves in an advisory capacity on renovation in the historic district as well as seeking additional ways to preserve our heritage. The Commission can be contacted at Preservation@williamsburgky.com