Historical Downtown Greenville, South Carolina
Self-Guided Walking Tour

1-The Hyatt Regency Hotel

This building and business is the original cornerstone for the revitalization of downtown Greenville originating with the ideas and vision of Greenville Mayor, Max Heller, beginning with his first term of office in the early 1980s.

2-Coffee Street/One City Plaza

This open area was developed as Bergamo (International Sister City to Greenville) Plaza in the 1990s. The space became available when West Coffee Street was cut off for automobile traffic, thus creating the first downtown pedestrian-centered and casual sitting area in the heart of Greenville. This was a big step in continuing Greenville’s vision for attracting visitors and residents to the mid-city.

Recently refurbished the now One City Plaza is surrounded by upscale retail with restaurants and cafés offering general and eclectic cuisines. -Steve Richardson

3-Woolworth Building/Sterling Square

"You can't erase history," said Ruth Ann Butler, one of the teens who sat on a Woolworth's stool in the protest. "You can't change the fact that the Woolworth's was what it was. It will be in the history books. It might not still be standing, but it will be."

In Greenville, the downtown corner where the demonstration and other acts of the civil rights era took place is marked by a bronze statue of two students from Sterling High School, the city’s first all-black high school until it burned in 1967. The statue was moved and put in storage to prevent damage during the demolition. The statue — sculpted in 2006 — is the city’s expression of remembrance for the Woolworth’s sit-in, Mayor Knox White said. The decision to have a statue wasn’t a difficult one when a group of leaders met to decide how best to remember Greenville’s civil rights history — but where to put it was, White said. Ultimately, the corner was named Sterling Square and the statue placed there. –Eric Connor

The building presently on this site is home to the Haynsworth Law firm on the 4th floor. This old Greenville firm hired “Miss Jim” Perry, graduate of the Greenville Women’s College and the University of California Law School. On May 18, 1918, she won the first case in the state to be argued by a woman, and began a new day for women and the law in South Carolina. -Judith Bainbridge

4-Westin- Poinsett Hotel and statue of Joel R. Poinsett

Opened as the Jack Tar Poinsett in 1924. The hotel’s namesake is honored with a statue in the block immediately south of the hotel. Joel R. Poinsett was a Charleston native who kept a summer residency in Greenville during the 1820s to 1840s. He was a Representative to the U.S Congress, South Carolina statesman, served as the U.S.’s first Minister to Mexico, and was
Secretary of War under President Van Buren. He discovered the “Christmas Eve Plant” (Flora de Nocha Buena) later named the Poinsettia in his honor. Poinsett was an energetic force in promoting transportation and general internal improvements throughout South Carolina. – Abe Hardesty

5-Greenville County Courthouse/M Judson

The Courthouse, a Beaux Arts building, built in 1916-18, was the fourth Greenville County Courthouse, from 1918 to 1950. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

The largest lynching trial in U.S. history was held here May 12-21, 1947. Willie Earle, a young black man accused of assaulting white cabdriver Thomas W. Brown, had been lynched by a white mob on Bramlett Road in Greenville. The trial of 31 whites, 28 of them cabdrivers, was rare at the time and drew national attention. Though 26 defendants admitted being part of the mob, all defendants were acquitted by an all-white jury. Rebecca West’s “Opera in Greenville,” published in The New Yorker on June 14, 1947, interpreted the trial and its aftermath. Widespread outrage over the lynching and the verdict spurred new federal civil rights policies.

M Judson Bookstore is an ode to Mary Camilla Judson, a teacher and principal at the Greenville Female College in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Judson studied at the Yale College Library, but she couldn’t take classes at the male-only school. Her brother, Charles had become president of the Greenville Female college’s in 1864, when the enrollment in primary, secondary and college classes had been reduced to 75 students by 1874, her brother, who remained the school’s president even while he had returned to Furman, asked her to keep the floundering institution going. –Judith Bainbridge

In October, 1914, a group of local female writers, publishers, a book store owner and a retail business woman announced the store would make its home in the historic Family Court building, a neoclassical Beaux Arts architectural style structure built in 1918, originally serving as the Greenville County Courthouse. –Eric Connor

6-Vardry McBee Statue

Diagonally to the north across Main Street from the courthouse is a shaded area which was part of the original Courthouse Square in Greenville’s beginning years. Near the center of that area is the statue of Vardry McBee, an individual who provided a great deal of support for much of Greenville’s early development. McBee, a native of Lincolnton, North Carolina, purchased hundreds of acres in and around Greenville in 1815. By 1818 he had built a corn mill and a grist mill on the banks of the Reedy downtown.

As still a North Carolina resident he donated land for Greenville’s Male and Female Academies and for four of the churches downtown. McBee, in 1835 finally moved to Greenville and constructed a cotton mill, McBee’s Factory, a few miles south of Greenville which included a stone dam and mill village. He remained involved with progressive opportunities lending major support to the building of the Greenville-Columbia Railroad, as well as operating a Paper Mill and Tannery. Throughout, his philanthropic efforts regarding Greenville and its citizens remained consistent.
7-John Wesley A.M.E. Church

The church was founded in 1866, under the name of Silver Hill United Methodist Episcopal Church, celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2016. In 1902, the name was changed to John Wesley United Methodist Episcopal Church. The church got its current name in 1968, after a merger with the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church. The physical church, built between 1899 and 1903 as a “vernacular version of the Gothic Revival style” architecture, was named to the National List of Historic Places in 1978. Members said the church may be the last of an era when black-owned businesses, homeowners, and rental units dominated the areas of Broad and Falls streets. Hattie Duckett, the founder of the Phillis Wheatley Center, was among the many prominent black leaders, educators, and dignitaries who’ve gone through John Wesley UMC. -Angelia Davis

8-Workingman’s Benevolent Temple/Phillis Wheatley-Four corners of African-American Businesses

The Working Benevolent Temple & Professional Building at Broad and Falls streets (now housing Erwin Penland Advertising Agency) was built in 1922 as offices for black professionals, including doctors, lawyers and morticians and served as a meeting space for leaders of Greenville’s civil rights movement. It also was the location of The Phillis Wheatley Center, at one time. Clustered within a block either direction from the intersection of Spring/Falls and Broad Street, African American businessmen owned and operated restaurants, dry cleaning services, a curb market, night clubs, a dental office, and other businesses and services. Many of these were maintained in this area for several decades following the First World War. -Judith Bainbridge

9-Peace Center and Steps to Riverwalk

This building and venue established the corresponding anchor on the south end of Main Street to Hyatt’s northerly location in the scheme of Greenville’s revitalization. Opening November 30, 1990, it secured the promise for development all along downtown’s Main Street from the Reedy River to College Street at the opposite end of Main. In addition, the plaza in its front and the amphitheater down the steps behind are natural gathering spots for demonstrations and public entertainment as well as magnets for community discourse. Beginning with a large donation from the family of Bony Hampton Peace, the full funding was realized with a combination of public and private contributions. -Judith Bainbridge

10-Huguenot Mill/Carriage Factory

To the right at the foot of the Peace Center steps, you will the south elevation of Huguenot Mill and Office with a distinctive tower on its front. Built in 1882, it is a distinctive red-brick building that was the first textile mill in the city to be powered by steam, and the first to use electric lights. The Huguenot Mill was distinctive in its production of textile materials in plaid. It now houses a number of offices, the largest tenant being an engineering firm. - Judith Bainbridge; Donna Isbell Walker

To the left of the steps rises the 1857 brick addition to The Greenville Coach Factory, a 3 ½ -story shed-roofed combination blacksmith shop and “carriage repository” (a display/storage space), constructed with bricks made from red clay along the river’s edge and 30-foot beams
attached with wooden pegs. It now houses one of Greenville’s many successful restaurants, Larkins on the River. The Coach, or Carriage, Factory was an enterprise begun on the river in 1835 by entrepreneurs Thomas Gower, Ebenezer Cox, and later Henry C. Markley. The business thrived for decades, eventually providing caissons and ambulances for the Civil War. - Judith Bainbridge

11-River/Railroad pillars

As you follow the path behind Larkins you soon turn right and cross the foot bridge which spans the Reedy River at that point. Look down to your left and you will see a series of rectangular concrete pillars rising at the same level above the surface of the river. These stanchions supported the railroad spur which formerly supplied access for shipment of materials to and from the Carriage Factory and the later Camperdown Mills on the far side of the falls.

12-McBee ruins/Camperdown Mill Foundation/ Pearis Trading Post

Just below the top of the falls on the right you will see the city’s oldest foundations. In 1817, Vardry McBee, the city’s founding father, had a brick corn mill built along the south riverbank below Main Street and just below the top of the falls. By 1829 he had built a stone grist mill beside it and imbedded in the bank side, pierced now by a huge pipe, the outline of the brick mill's back wall clearly remains. The two mills used undershot waterwheels to power the turning of the mills' stones and belt works.

Looking directly across the top of the falls and the bank following the drop of the falls you can see the foundation of Greenville’s earliest large-scale mill with a mill village. This mill began operation in 1876. This became Camperdown Mill No. 1. It operated sporadically and was closed for at least a decade before Alan Graham purchased it in 1906. In another five years another mill was added adjacent to the original and with the expansion of mill houses (now all destroyed) this dual factory became known plurally as Camperdown Mills. It was closed in 1956 and all buildings were destroyed in 1959.

If you will look across the river further to your left towards the Main Street bridge, and beyond towards Court Street, you will scan the general location of the house, corral, and trading post of Greenville’s earliest known resident, Richard Pearis. A native Virginian, at some point in the 1770s Pearis received, somewhat underhandedly, a grant for 10,000+ acres of land surrounding Greenville. He was an opportunist playing on the side of the Native Americans and British and switch quickly to side of the settlers when it was beneficial. Paris Mountain, just a few miles north of downtown, is named for him with the spelling which had been adjusted over the years. -Judith Bainbridge