

Aurora's Historic District Plan



**A Report of Aurora's Historic Background
and Steps for National Historic Recognition**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Town of Aurora, NC has historically been on a negative trend with many aspects of community planning and growth. What once was a productive area of trade, commerce, and agriculture, is almost a ghost town. Natural and national economic disasters have caused most recent efforts to fail. New ideas from outside organizations have sparked new interest. By reviving past efforts for historic designation, Aurora can take the steps necessary to revive its town and once again be a thriving destination.

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PURPOSE

Defining the of Issue

The focus for this project will highlight the process for establishing historical recognition for the Main Street/Downtown area of Aurora, North Carolina and providing funding avenues for the renovation of the downtown economic area.

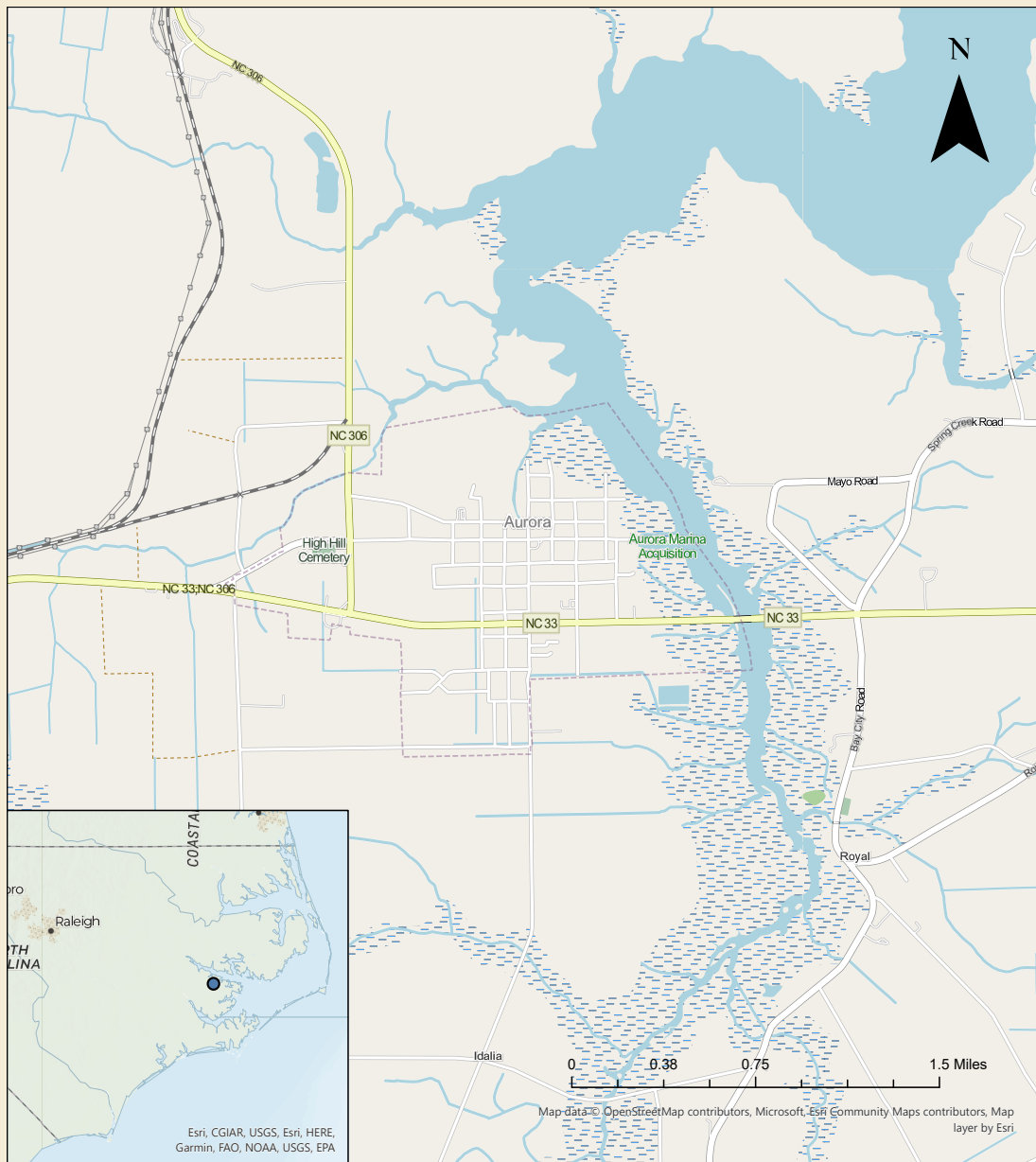
Historic Planning Importance

Historic building and districts can be a symbol of a community's heritage, character, and sense of place. Rehabilitating and repurposing historic properties can be critical for promoting investment, revitalizing neighborhoods, and attracting tourism. Additionally, retrofitting historic structures helps to reduce the carbon footprint, when compared to tearing down and building with new material.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Location

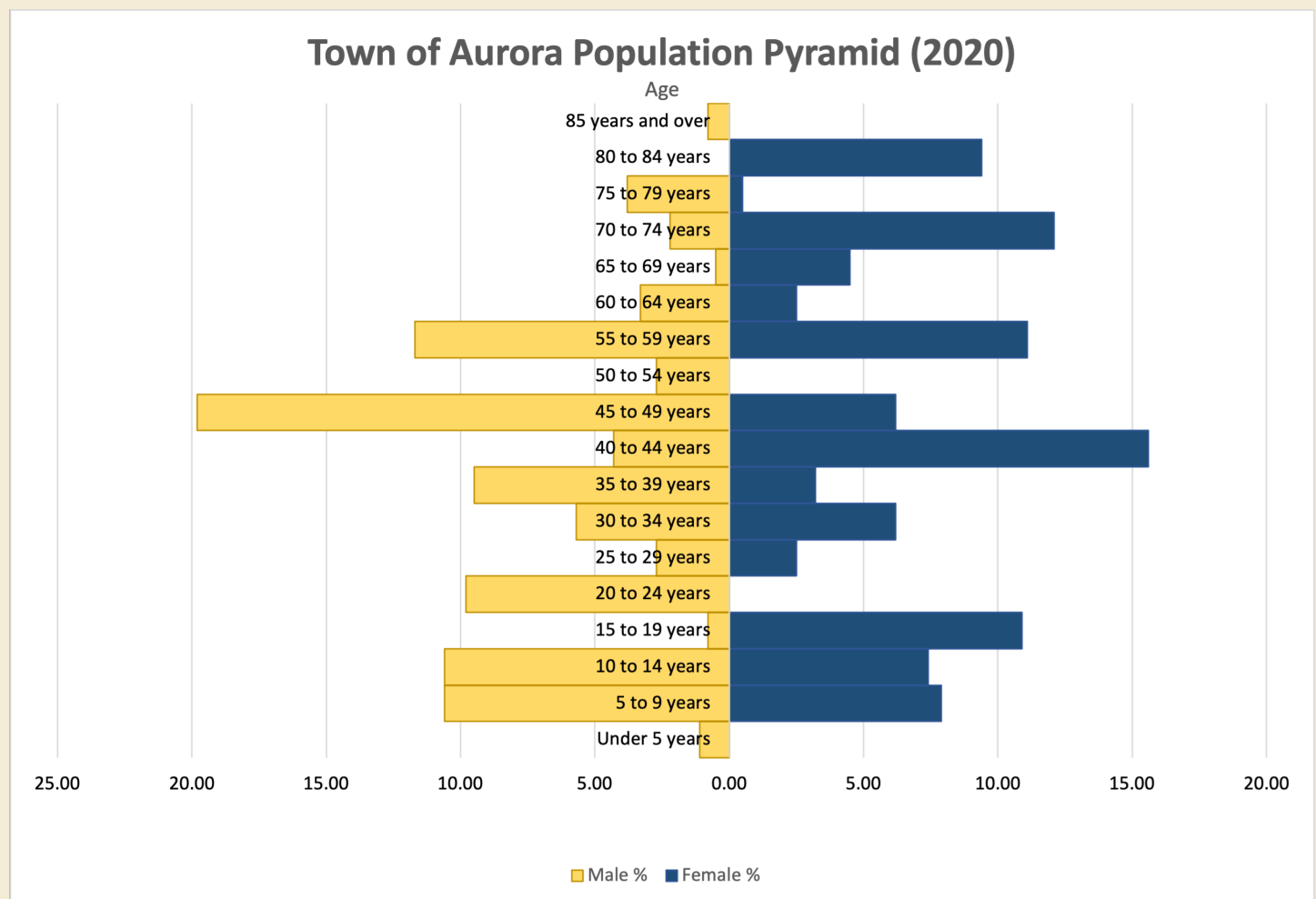
The town of Aurora is situated on the south side of the Pamlico River in Richland Township, twenty-five miles east of Chocowinity, in Beaufort County, NC. Fifteen miles east of Aurora, NC highway 33 ends at the Intracoastal Waterway, which separates mainland Beaufort County from Goose Creek Island. Aurora's incorporated area is roughly bounded by Railroad Street on the north, South Creek on the east, Peedtown Road on the south and NC highway 306 to the west.



Aurora, NC

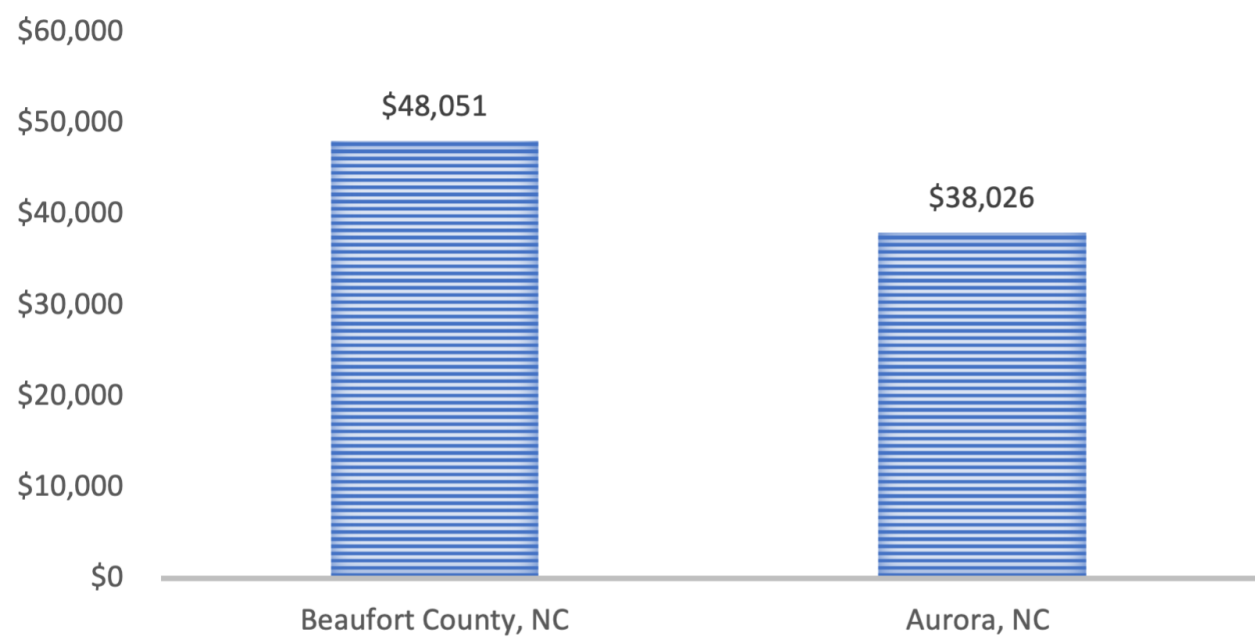
DEMOGRAPHICS

The Town of Aurora, NC had a population of 772 as of 2020, which about 47.6% males and 52.3% females. The distribution of ages varies. The population pyramid below shows no district trends. 24.7% of the population is school aged or younger, 55.1% are of working age, and 20.2 are at retirement age or older (ACS, 2020). For household income, the median for Aurora is \$38,026, which is about \$10,00 less than Beaufort County’s median income. For Racial distribution, Aurora has 53.6% Black or African American and 41.7% White, which make up most of the population, and 4.7% as two or more races (DEC,2020).

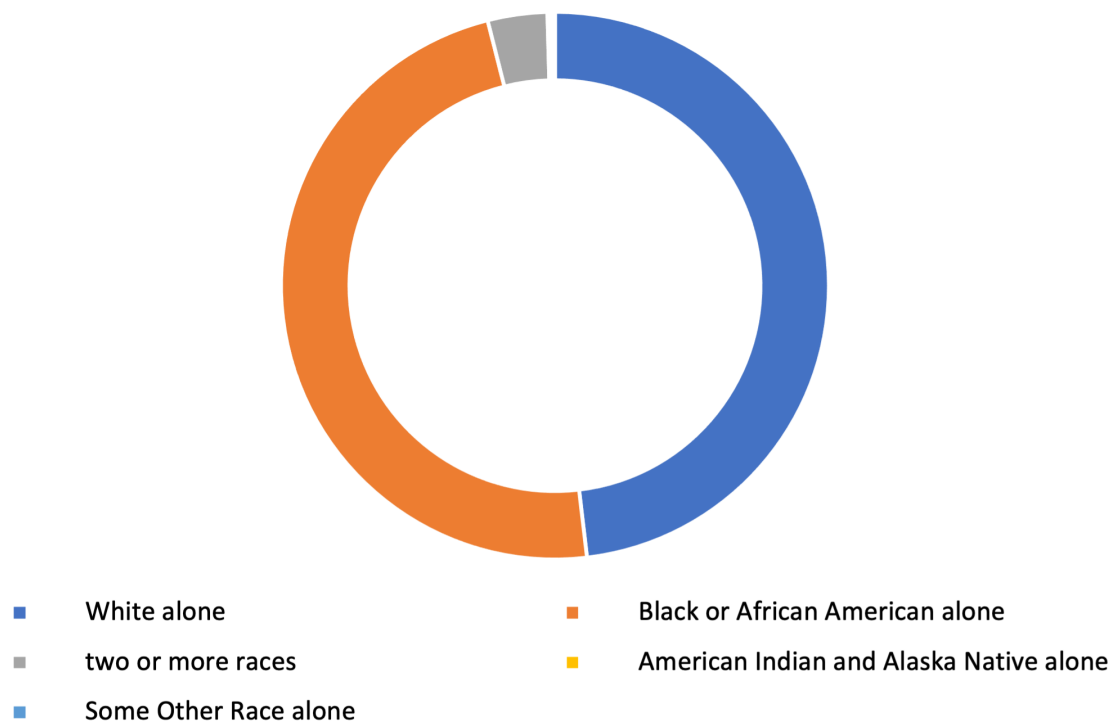


DEMOGRAPHICS

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME



Aurora's Race Distribution



HISTORY OF AURORA

**BF is the survey site number, preceded by a two-letter county code, in the case of Beaufort County. The survey site number referenced the HPO's tracking and file organizational system.*

In the past, the southeastern portion of Beaufort County has contained an abundance of natural resources. Some of these assets consist of navigable waterways, commercial fishing, fertile black soil, hard and softwood forests, and underground phosphate deposits. The economic, social, and environmental aspects of Aurora today are directly impacted by the elements of the past.

“Methodist minister W.H. Cunningham arrived in southeastern Beaufort County around 1856 from Lenoir in Caldwell County. He is credited with being the first to call the area by the name “Aurora.” The name is said to refer to either the Aurora Borealis light displays of the Earth’s polar regions, or, “such a dark and dismal place that it needed light and was therefore called Aurora.” Neither of these claims--often repeated and counter in nature--could be confirmed.

Secondary sources state that Cunningham visited Beaufort County while recruiting students for his school, the Lenoir Institute. Accounts vary, but Cunningham either purchased or traded for a farm near South Creek. The land in this area was already known to be fertile and highly desirable. Cunningham and Reverend John W. Litchfield founded the Aurora Methodist Church in 1860. (The congregation’s stone sanctuary ca. 1949 (BF 1019)* stands at 327 Main Street today.) Cunningham is also credited with laying out the town’s grid pattern of streets around 1860. Cunningham moved to Raleigh during all or part of the Civil War. Upon his return to Beaufort County, Cunningham became involved with the

forcible removal of the free black settlement on South Creek (now Aurora) known as Betty Town (Powell Gazetteer, 16; Located; HPO files). Some of the blacks forced from the land are said to have returned to the area from Ohio in the mid-1880s and filed an unsuccessful suit to reclaim their property. The history of Betty Town and the lawsuit merits a more in-depth treatment than can be presented in an architectural survey report.

Land surveyors R.T. Bonner and R.R. Bonner followed Cunningham’s early plan and expanded the town’s grid when surveying for the town’s incorporation on March 29, 1880. Bonner and Bonner formalized Aurora’s layout, with Main Street acting as Aurora’s main east-west thoroughfare and numbered streets bisecting it. During the decades of the 1870s and 1880s Aurora was described as “a quiet, peaceful little village” with less than one hundred inhabitants. The 1880 U.S. Census population schedule lists only twenty households in Aurora. All but one of the heads-of-household worked as farmers, farm laborers, or in an agricultural-related job such as blacksmithing or harness making. Forty-three-year-old John B. Bonner was listed as a physician, living with his wife and daughter.

While Aurora began as a trading center for local farmers, the town developed into a social community for the farmers of southeastern Beaufort County. General stores, groceries, feed stores, and planing mills were the earliest businesses established. Among the first merchants were J.B. Bryan, W.O. Watson, and John B. Bonner. With the success of the busi-

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ness climate, merchants built fine houses, and additional businesses opened to cater to the growing in-town population.

In 1890 the population was 150 persons. Yet Aurora was the third largest town in Beaufort County at the time, whose 17,471 residents were mostly rural dwellers. The North Carolina Yearbook and Business Directory for 1890 lists a post office, four churches, nine general stores, three grocery stores, three feed stores, a drug store, three physicians, thirty-five farmers, and a school in Aurora. There was even a newspaper called *The Progressive Age*. Clearly, by 1890 Aurora had already become a regional market. An early-twentieth-century unpublished memoir by William Frederick Harding, who lived in Aurora as a boy, described the setting and populace of the town as follows:

“It was in the midst of a rich agricultural section and the inhabitants of Aurora were farmers who owned farms adjacent to the town or situated nearby, and who gathered together in the village for convenience as well as social enjoyments and educational and religious advantages.”

Seventy-five households, both black and white, were enumerated in Aurora for the 1900 census. The listing of occupations clearly shows that Aurora had grown from a small farming village to a prosperous small town in a span of two decades. Farming remained the dominant occupation, but there were approximately twelve “merchants” listed—a category not used in Aurora in the 1880 census. Shop owners, grocers, a horse dealer, and

hotel operators are some of the non-farming occupations listed. Women were employed as teachers, clerks, dressmakers, “sales ladies,” midwives, and domestics.

By 1902 Aurora’s population had grown to 314. The Bank of Aurora was established in 1903 followed by Richland’s Farmers Bank ca. 1910. Both the 1910 and 1915 Business Directories list Aurora’s population as 800, with 450 white and 350 black residents. In addition to its service-based businesses, the 1915 edition lists several industrial concerns. A lumber company and a ginning company processed agricultural products from the surrounding area, and a “manufacturing company” is also listed.

By the 1920s Aurora’s economy was fully diversified. Northerners came to hunt in the fall and winter and stayed at the Cherry Hotel at 499 Main Street (BF 1032) and McWilliams Hotel on Fourth Street (gone). The town had clubs and fraternal organizations found in any small town such as a Masonic Lodge, American Legion, and Order of the Eastern Star. There was also a town baseball team.

Cotton, rice, corn, and most importantly potatoes were grown in the fertile lands near town. The 1910 Agricultural Census recorded 2,981 farms in Richland Township in 1910. Potato cultivation was concentrated in the northeastern part of North Carolina, and the state’s production of the crop increased twenty-six percent between 1900 and 1910 (www.agcensus.usda.gov 11 September 2009). Due to the fine sandy loam and high mineral content of Richland Township’s soils, Aurora

HISTORY OF AURORA

came to be known as “the potato capital of North Carolina.”

Fishing and seafood processing were also an important part of the local economy. Pine, oak, cypress, and gum trees were the foundation of the area’s timber industry. All of these products were shipped to market by way of South Creek, and later by the A.C.L. rail line. (HPO file; *The Past and Present History of Aurora*; *The Eden of North Carolina*).

A school has been in Aurora since the 1870s (Oakley 4). Not much is known about educational buildings in Aurora prior to 1915. A frame school was built by Beaufort County in 1916 for Aurora’s African American children. It has been demolished and its location is not known. (*Schools of Aurora*; Loy and Worthy 491; Peed interview). The large tract north of Middle Street between NC 306 and Seventh Street has been used for public education since 1915, when a school building, long since demolished, was built there. In 1928 a two-story brick

Colonial Revival-style graded school for white students was constructed. The brick school consolidated several rural schools near Aurora. Grades one through twelve were taught in the building until 1968 when Beaufort County schools were integrated. After integration, the building housed grades nine through twelve, and elementary students were moved to a new building, now abandoned, at the western edge of the parcel, closer to NC 306 (outside survey area). Part of the elementary campus includes an extant yet altered one-story brick schoolhouse built for black

children sometime after 1934 (Van Camp, Beaufort County, 85). The building appears to be modeled after a plan provided by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation; however, a school at Aurora does not show up in Fisk University’s online database of schools funded by the foundation. S.W. Snowden Elementary School, built in the 1990s and named after the principal of the African American school in the 1960s, is built on the approximate footprint of the 1928 consolidation-era school, which burned in 1980 (Peed and Litchfield interviews). East of the Snowden School is a 1930s gymnasium/shop building (BF 999). A 1950s gymnasium with a barrel-vaulted roofline also survives.

Although barely visible from town today, South Creek was essential to Aurora’s economy. The creek was navigable and led into the broad Pamlico River. The intersection of the Pamlico and the Pungo Rivers east of Aurora forms the Pamlico Sound and provides access to ports along the eastern seaboard. The Tar River, which forms the headwaters of the Pamlico River at Washington, was navigable eastward to Greenville and Tarboro. South Creek was a stopping place for both freight and passenger vessels and many boats used Aurora as their home port. A boat captain and the three sailors were listed in Aurora in the 1900 census. The steamship Aurora traveled between Aurora and Washington in the 1890s. At the turn of the century, Bryan Tripp Bonner owned the two-masted schooners the Cobb and the Virginia Dare. In the 1920s the Litchfield family owned and operated the

HISTORY OF AURORA

Dependence, which hauled groceries and farm supplies between Aurora and Washington, and a tug, Lola. The Hatteras, a passenger steamer, operated between Washington and Aurora. During the 1930s Esso-Standard and Sinclair Oil had docks on South Creek at Aurora before tank trucks rendered them obsolete in the 1930s (Loy and Worthy 490-491).

Over the years fish and crab packing houses were also located on South Creek in Aurora. The Bay City Crab House is still in operation to this day, one of only two remaining seafood processing concerns in Aurora. Its concrete block pack houses are located at the west end of Bridge Street and its offices and shipping headquarters are at the southwest corner of Main Street and NC 306. Both complexes are outside of the recommended historic district boundary and survey area.

The Atlantic Coast Line Railroad (A.C.L.) passed through Aurora between Washington and its terminus at Vandemere in Pamlico County. Its arrival in Aurora around 1908 further established the town as a center of trade. By 1900, the A.C.L. was one of the state's three consolidated rail companies. The arrival of the railroad allowed another mode of transporting agricultural and timber products in addition to shipping.

The tracks to Aurora were taken up in the 1940s and their removal had a tremendous impact on the town by severing an important transportation connection (Powell 416; 1917 Rail Road map; Loy and Worthy 491). NC 33 connecting Chocowinity and Aurora was finished sometime after 1931 and was shifted

south from Main Street to its current corridor in the late 1940s. It was at this time that the concrete bridge over South Creek was completed, replacing a wooden bridge that crossed the creek at the end of Main Street (Ormond 53; Litchfield; Peed interview).

There are approximately ten churches in Aurora today. Denominations include Methodist, Episcopal, and several Baptist congregations. Two historic church buildings remain within the district boundary today, the Aurora Methodist Church (BF 1019) at 327 Main Street and the Church of the Holy Cross (BF 1041) at 640 Main Street. Aurora Methodist Church was the first church to be established in the town. It was founded by Methodist minister W. H. Cunningham and J.W Litchfield around 1860. A frame chapel was built, and in it blacks and whites worshipped together. In 1933 and 1948 two rural Methodist congregations consolidated with the church in Aurora. In order to accommodate the growing congregation, the original frame building was demolished and the existing stone church and attached education hall was built on-site ca. 1949. This building was dedicated on November 25, 1956. There are 108 members of the church today (Church History 2; Peed interview). A small cemetery containing roughly a dozen marked graves is located behind the sanctuary. Stones date from the 1870s through the 1970s and are inscribed with the names of the prominent families in Aurora's history such as Swindell, Bonner, Hollowell, and Hooker.

In 1882 J.B Bryan gave a lot in the 600

HISTORY OF AURORA

block of Main Street for the construction of an Episcopal church. Built in 1885, the frame church was called Chapel of the Cross, as it was a “chapel of ease” of St. John’s Parrish in Bonnerton. Trustees of the congregation were Bryan, J.B. Bonner, C.S. Dixon, Joe Peed, and C. F. Buck; Francis Joyner was the first priest. In 1917 a new brick Gothic Revival-style building was erected and the original chapel was moved and converted into the parish house. The frame parish house was replaced in 1932 by the existing brick one east of the chapel. The two buildings were connected by a brick breezeway in 1935. A ca. 1900 rectory stands immediately west of the church. It is not known if this building was built as such or acquired later for the purpose.

Around 1999, Aurora’s African American Episcopal congregation, St. Jude’s, was closed due to declining membership. The remaining members merged with the Church of the Holy Cross. St. Jude’s church stands altered at the north terminus of Fifth Street (outside survey area). The continued presence of an Episcopal church in Aurora is in jeopardy due to the shrinking congregation. There are currently only six active members of Holy Cross church (Douglas interview; Holy Cross 1-2).

By the mid-twentieth century, Aurora’s population began to decline from its high of around 800 in the 1910s and 1920s. Sweeping changes in agriculture and rural life fundamentally altered the community. Mechanized farming was replacing manual labor; produce was being transported by gasoline-powered trucks

rather than rail. After World War II many young people moved to larger towns and cities seeking nonagricultural jobs and left farm life behind for good. In the 1940s the potato market declined due to a combination of factors. A soil-based blight was decreasing Beaufort County’s potato yields. Competition from California, Idaho, and New England was increasing at the same time U.S. potato consumption was decreasing. Per capita consumption, 198 pounds in 1910, was quickly falling with the rise of truck farming, which made a wider variety of non-locally grown foods available to the consumer (www.ncagr.gov 11 September 2009).

By 1960 the population had dropped to 429, less than in 1905. In the early 1960s deposits of phosphate, a mineral used in making fertilizer and animal feed were discovered near Aurora. Beaufort County is situated on the Albemarle Embayment covering the northeastern part of North Carolina. The embayment contains the fossilized remains of reptiles, fish, and sea mammals. In the mid-1960s Texas-Gulf, Inc. began purchasing land near Aurora for an open-pit phosphate mining operation. Railroad tracks to service the mine were re-laid on the old A.C.L. route that had been taken up around 1950 (Peed interview). Local residents hoped that the industry would reverse Aurora’s economic decline. Many farmers sold their land to Texas-Gulf for above-market price and were happy to do so, as agriculture was no longer a viable source of income (Future Worries). Aurora’s leaders prepared for an influx of new residents associated

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with the mine.

The mining operation has been a mixed blessing for the town. It is the county's largest taxpayer and employer, employing over 1,300 workers and contractors, and is responsible for roughly one-third of its tax revenue. However, Aurora never grew as anticipated; most upper-level managers and professionals chose to live in Washington or New Bern. Today there are three businesses open in downtown Aurora and the population is roughly 600 (Douglas interview). Texas-Gulf was purchased by Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan (PCS Phosphate) in 1995. The company now operates one of the nation's largest phosphate mines in Aurora.

Its continued operation is in question as to the company, state, and federal authorities negotiate a controversial permit for the continuation of the mining operation, (Beaufort County Municipalities Survey, 2009)

Before the 1850s, the region was inhabited by Native Americans that belonged to the Algonquian ("Algonkian") linguistic family. The Algonquian was a tidewater people who lived along the sounds and in coastal areas. A few sub-groups of the Algonquian people inhabited the area (and nearby) of what is now Aurora, were the Pamlico ("Pomouik"), Bear River (or Bay River), and Machapunga tribes, (fossil, 2021).

CURRENT CONDITIONS

Aurora's economy has struggled in the latter half of the twentieth century, and as a result an unknown number of homes have been demolished because of neglect or abandonment. Eight buildings are known to have been demolished since 2004, mostly on the east side of town. A significant number of residential and commercial properties appear to be vacant and are deteriorating (Beaufort County survey, 2009). Pictured below and to the right are selections of structures from around Aurora's Downtown area.



Aurora, NC

CURRENT CONDITIONS



CURRENT CONDITIONS

Within today's downtown area, the Aurora Fossil Museum is a popular attraction. Established in 1976, this nonprofit science education resource center strives to educate the public about paleontology in an engaging manner, while emphasizing the natural and cultural history of Eastern North Carolina. The specimen in the museum showroom and the fossil digging pits are provided by the neighboring phosphate mines. The North Carolina Fossil Festival is a two-day event held at the end of May. This event is sponsored by the museum and brings many visitors to downtown Aurora, (fossil, 2021).



PUBLIC INPUT

ECU's Rise29 Internship Program has teamed up with the Town of Aurora to work on developing their strategic plan. Rise29 is a partnership between ECU and Beaufort, Hyde, Martin, and Pitt counties. This partnership matches students to projects that support community-driven needs. Ty Clark is a Rise29 intern working with Aurora's Strategic plan initiative. He developed a survey, focusing on the community's opinions, and released it for the residents of Aurora.

After 44 online responses were received, "what things are needed in town?" was an open-ended question that received many replies related to cleaning up the town, revitalization, and economic development. The designation on the National Register of Historic Places allows access to certain historic funds and federal tax breaks, which can be used to revitalize these historic structures, improving the community character and aesthetic. The image below shows an abstract of words and phrases submitted by respondents.



EXISTING PLANS

Main Street Aurora

Main Street Aurora: A Humanistic Approach to revitalization was a 1977 plan that focused on an overall effort to economically compete with other neighboring towns in Beaufort County. The phosphate mine was about to start operating and the residents became involved in planning initiatives. “Natural, social, and economic inventories were completed. Goals were set. Plans were discussed at town meetings. The Planning Board debated growth and locational options. A Land Use Plan and Zoning ordinances were adopted. – A health Program brought the first two full-time doctors to Aurora. Houses were rehabilitated with assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Aurora won the State Governor’s Award and received recognition from the American Society of Landscape Architects: a national merit award for the planning effort of the town.”

Riding on these accomplishments, this Main Street plan highlighted future initiatives. Upgrades to the marina, improved parking and sidewalks, fixin’ up main street structures, and improve transportation circulation are some of the recommendations to be achieved. Unfortunately, these efforts were cancelled due to economic malaise of early 1970s.

The Walker Plan

The 2008 Walker Plan is a hand drawn map of Aurora. This map shows the occupied and vacant properties located within the town. Additionally, this plan includes a potential future development site north of the town, adjacent to Bailey’s Creek. This development would be residential, with low-impact affordable housing. The plan gain momentum a few months before the recession of 2008 and was postponed. Webster Walker, retired nutrient phosphate company engineer and designer of this plan, actively updates this plan and hopes to pursuit this plan soon. 2011 – Main Street Waterfront Development Plan



EXISTING PLANS

Waterfront Development Plan

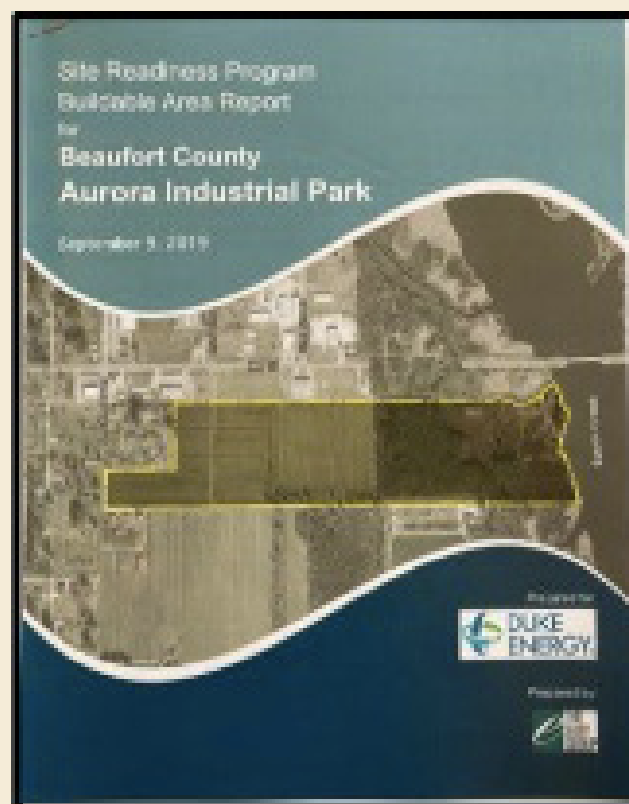
The Main Street Waterfront Development Plan of 2014 focused on improving the waterfront area of town by, expanding the NC Wildlife boat launch on the south creek and allow watercraft access dockage at the east-west running canals. The overall hopes of this project were to attract visitors by way of the water to dock, explore, and potentially stay overnight. This plan was approved by the town's commissions, but implementation was cancelled due to the destructive effects of hurricane Irene in August of 2011.



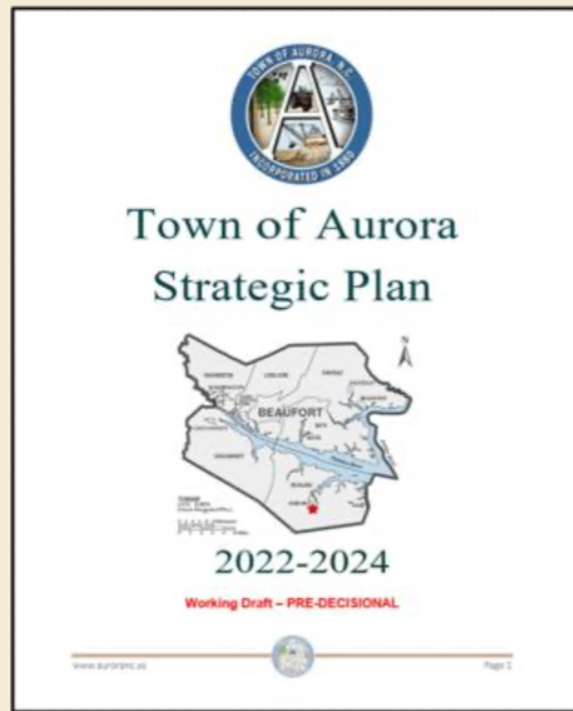
Aurora Industrial Park

The Aurora Industrial Park project has been in the works since 2019. The aim of this project is at businesses that wish to be in the Aurora area, also hopes for a satellite of Beaufort County Community College (BCCC) facility. Additionally, the BCCC satellite could provide local training for those who aspire to work at the Nutrien phosphate mines.

The planned industrial park will cover 41 acres or more of space for new and existing businesses and contractors to come to the area. The town estimates the park will provide at least 20 full time positions for new employees and add 50% to the tax base once completed. Development of the project was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but now has picked back up, (Hoffman, 2021).



EXISTING PLANS



The Town of Aurora Strategic Plan

The Town of Aurora Strategic Plan was drafted in 2022 but has been years in the making. This plan strives for broad economic opportunities, affordable housing choices, well-run limited government, strong relationships with employers of the area, and preparedness for climate-related weather impacts. This vision for the future includes elements of diversity, history, authenticity, and a balance of the built and natural environment. By 2035, this plan illustrates the communities hope to allow Aurora to be the premier destination place for Beaufort County. Steps and funding options offered later in this report will be considered to be add in section 1.7 of this Strategic plan.

This plan is one of the first plans with support and contributions by the Aurora Leadership Council (ALC). ALC is a group of 9 community supported volunteer committees that focus on Business, Tourism, Real Estate, and Education Development, Faith-Based and Civic Organization Initiatives, Diversity and Inclusion, Resources/Grants, and Government Relations. ALC's hope is to initiate a rejuvenation of the town and induce a positive influence on Aurora's future.

EXISTING PLANS

Historic Recognition Initiatives

In 2004 a survey of Aurora was undertaken by East Carolina University interns Naomi Winkleman and Martha Baldree, under the guidance of the HPO Eastern Office staff in Greenville. The project's purpose was to gather information on which to base a National Register inventory list. The students produced survey files using state issued Historic Structures Data sheets and 35 mm photography. However, the files were not assigned survey site numbers, nor were they accessioned into the statewide architectural survey records in Raleigh (Wood interview). The 2008-2009 survey consisted of updating the files created by the interns with Access database entries and digital photography. A total of ninety-two survey site numbers were assigned to all primary resources identified during the 2004 survey, including those that were demolished, during the 2008-2009 survey. Fieldwork was performed over two field days on December 12, 2008, and January 16, 2009. A total of eighty-seven properties were recorded.

The interns did a thorough job researching the history of many of the properties in Aurora. Neither Sanborn maps nor city directories were made for Aurora. The students relied heavily on interviews, North Carolina Business Directories, newspaper articles, and published and non-published local histories to develop the historical background for the more significant buildings. This information was incorporated into the Access database. Circa, Inc. did additional research for the churches proposed for the study list. (Beaufort County survey, 2009).



EXISTING PLANS

Aurora Commercial Historic District

In 2003, the Aurora Commercial Historic District was placed on the study list at the request of the mayor. The district boundary is described in the study list application as follows: “From and including 2nd Street down Main Street to and including 7th Street, also including side streets of 4th Street and 5th Street.” This area remains eligible for the National Register, except for the blocks east of Third Street where approximately seven buildings have been demolished since 2004. A revised boundary has been drawn to reflect these demolitions and to include as many contributing buildings as possible.

A map of the 2009 district boundary is shown above. The district as it is currently identified in the State Historic Preservation Office records is the Aurora Commercial Historic District. If a nomination were prepared, the area would be more accurately called the Aurora Historic District, as it is comprised of commercial, residential, religious and other types of buildings. The district is potentially eligible under Criterion C, for its architecture. Criterion C highlights sites that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction (Beaufort County survey, 2009).



Aurora United Methodist Church (BF 1019)
327 Main Street

This Methodist church was Aurora’s first congregation, established by the towns’ founder Reverend W.H. Cunningham around 1860. The existing church building was erected ca. 1949. It is a gable-front stone building with a massive projecting central belltower with stone buttresses and a recessed, arched entry. Associated with the church is a small cemetery located at the rear of the churchyard. The property is one example of a potentially eligible for a National registered site under criteria A and C.

EXISTING PLANS

Staley-Rutledge House, BF 173, 295 Main St.

The Staley-Rutledge House was placed on the state study list in 1977. The Queen Anne-style dwelling has fine Colonial Revival interiors. The town acquired the house in the late 1970s and renovated it for use as the town hall. As a result of the renovations the house lost significant exterior characteristics. Vinyl siding now covers the exterior obscuring the weatherboards, window surrounds and projecting eaves. Window openings and half-round vents have been covered on both the front and rear elevations. The original windows have been replaced with vinyl sashes. The half-round entry porch with square posts, which was not original, was rebuilt with Ionic columns and a reduced frieze. A shed porch on the west side was also rebuilt with fewer details. The sidelights and transom surrounding the entry were covered and replaced with a Colonial Revival broken pediment surround.

The interior retains some historic features including: the asymmetrical floor plan, mantles with classical motifs and mirrored over-mantles; a dogleg paneled stair with turned spindles and square newel topped with an egg-and-dart molding, and an Eastlake spindled frieze in the main hall. Dentil moldings have been added to many of the door surrounds and the five-panel Craftsman doors have been replaced with six-panel Colonial Revival ones. While the Staley-Rutledge House retains some high-quality interior woodwork, the cumulative effect of the numerous 1970s alterations has adversely impacted the building's historic appearance and integrity. The building no longer retains sufficient integrity to be eligible for the National Register.



NATIONAL HISTORIC RECOGNITION

What is a National Historic District?

The National Register Instructions defines a historic district as an area “that possesses a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures, or objects united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development.” An historic district may be a commercial downtown, a residential area, a large industrial complex, a large farm or group of farms, or a large and diverse portion of a town. Although the National Register nomination form for an individual property and a district are identical, the survey and inventory of properties within a district is more involved than for individual properties.

National Historic Register vs. Local historic district designation

The National Register of Historic Places and local historic landmark and historic district designations are two very different programs that recognize and protect historic properties. Some historic properties and districts may receive both types of designation in communities where local historic preservation commissions have been established according to North Carolina’s local commission enabling legislation. However, there is no direct correlation between National Register listing and local designation.

THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The National Register of Historic Places is a federal program administered by the National Park Service in partnership with state governments. The National Register was cre-

ated by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 to recognize and protect properties of historic and cultural significance that warrant consideration in federal undertakings such as highway construction and urban renewal projects, and to provide incentives for local and private preservation initiatives.

In each state the program is administered by a State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), who is usually an official in a state historical or environmental agency. In North Carolina, the State Historic Preservation Officer is the Director of the Office of Archives and History within the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. The SHPO is responsible for conducting the statewide survey of historic properties, coordinating nominations of eligible properties to the National Register, and conducting environmental review of federal and state projects that may affect properties listed or eligible for listing in the National Register. Nominations of properties to the National Register are prepared and reviewed at the local and state levels, but the final decision to list a property or district in the National Register is made by the National Park Service. National Register listing is primarily an honorific designation, meaning that a property has been researched and evaluated according to established procedures and determined to be worthy of preservation for its historical value. The listing of a historic or archaeological property in the National Register does not obligate or restrict a private owner in any way unless the owner seeks a federal benefit such as a grant or tax credit. For a private

NATIONAL HISTORIC RECOGNITION

owner, the chief practical benefit of National Register listing is eligibility for investment tax credits that can be claimed against the cost of a certified rehabilitation. If the property is income-producing, the owner may be eligible for a total of 40% in tax credits (20% federal and 20% state) claimed against the costs of a qualified rehabilitation. If the property is non-income-producing, (typically owner-occupied residential) the owner may be eligible for a 15% state income tax credit claimed against the costs of a certified rehabilitation, up to \$150,000 in rehabilitation costs.

LOCAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSIONS AND LOCAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS AND DISTRICTS

The Preservation Commission. Local governments may establish a historic preservation commission under North Carolina G.S. 160D-303. A preservation commission may carry out a comprehensive preservation program, including recommending individual properties and areas for designation by local governing boards as landmarks and historic districts. While a preservation commission works with both districts and landmarks, there are also commissions that work solely with districts (called historic district commissions) and those that work solely with individual properties (called historic landmarks commissions or historic properties commissions).

A local government is not obligated to create a preservation commission, regardless of how many National Register properties and/or districts there may be in the community. Preservation commissions are generally es-

tablished only where there is sufficient local interest in historic preservation and the local planning environment is responsive to this interest. A preservation commission is established by an ordinance passed by the local governing board. The organization, operations, and powers of the preservation commission are prescribed by the state enabling legislation. The commission makes recommendations to the local governing board that certain historic landmarks or districts be designated, and such designations are made by local ordinance.

A community may designate local districts and landmarks that are not listed in the National Register. Since the state enabling legislation requires that a designation report be prepared before a local landmark or local district is designated, some local preservation commissions use a National Register nomination as the basis for the local designation report. (For this reason, the two types of designations are sometimes confused.) However, National Register listing does not mean that local designation will necessarily follow.

Local Landmarks.

Landmark designations apply to individual buildings, structures, sites, areas, or objects which are studied by the commission and judged to have historical, architectural, archaeological, or cultural value. Designation is an honor, meaning the community believes the property deserves recognition and protection. The local government designates landmarks through passage of an ordinance. Owners of landmarks are eligible to apply for an annual 50% property tax deferral if the property's

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important historic features are maintained. Recapture penalties may apply if the owner destroys the property or damages its historic value.

Local Districts.

Historic district designation is a type of zoning that applies to entire neighborhoods or other areas that include many historic properties. The zoning provides controls on the appearance of existing and proposed buildings. Designation is an honor, meaning the community believes the architecture, history, and character of the area are worthy of recognition and protection. Historic district zoning can help to improve property values by stabilizing and enhancing the neighborhood's character, and it benefits property owners by protecting them from inappropriate changes by other owners that may destroy the special qualities of the neighborhood. Unlike landmark designations, local historic district designation has no effect on local property taxes for property owners within the designated district.

Certificates of Appropriateness.

Owners of local landmarks and of property in local historic districts are required to obtain a certificate of appropriateness from their preservation commission before making significant changes or additions to a property, before beginning new construction, or before demolishing or relocating a property. The commission's review of proposed changes ensures that work on property in districts or on a designated landmark is appropriate to the special character of the district or landmark. A certificate of appropriateness for demolition cannot

be denied unless the property is deemed to be of statewide significance by the State Historic Preservation Officer. In all other cases, the commission may delay demolition or relocation for up to 365 days to explore alternatives to demolition or relocation.

Federal Tax Benefits and Local Designations:

Locally designated landmarks and properties located within local historic districts are generally not eligible for federal historic preservation tax credits unless the landmark or district is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The only exceptions are those properties in local districts which are not listed in the National Register, but which have been certified by the National Park Service as essentially meeting National Register criteria. There are only three such certified local districts in North Carolina.

An owner of a property that is both locally designated and listed in the National Register who is seeking federal investment tax credits for a rehabilitation must acquire a local certificate of appropriateness and federal tax certification through separate applications. Approval for one does not imply or guarantee approval for the other, though in most cases local design review guidelines and federal rehabilitation standards are in concurrence and are mutually reinforcing (Kidd, 2017).

STEP

National Register Listing Process

1. Become educated on the National Register and the Nomination Process.
2. Contact the Eastern Regional Field Office of the NCSHPO in Greenville, NC to request a study list application
3. Once Received, Carefully Follow Instructions on the Application
4. After Completed, the Application is sent to the National Register Advisory Committee to be Reviewed
5. Preparation of the National Register Nomination Document – Hire Consultant
6. HPO Staff Review of Draft National Register Nominations
7. After the National Register Nomination is Deemed Complete and Correct, Owners and Public Official are Notified, the Certified Local Government (CLG) Reviews the Nomination, and a Public Meeting is held for Residents and Stakeholders within the Historic District.(Aurora, Richland Township, and Beaufort County does not have a CLG)
8. Nomination is Reviewed by the Nation Register Advisory Committee, then Forwarded to the State Historic Preservation Officer for Official Approval
9. The Keeper of the National Register at the National Park Service lists the Nomination
10. Nomination Review by the National Park Service, Washington D.C.
11. Listing is Officially Approved and Located in the National Register

Additional Historic District Nomination Requirements

- Establishing the Historic District Boundary
- Conducting the Historic District Survey
 - o Compiling Summary Reports from all the Properties Located within the District
- Creating Survey Files
- Completing Database Entries and Printing Historic Property Survey Summary Reports for the Files
- Historic District Property Owner List and Owner Notification
- Public Information Meeting for Historic Districts

These steps and requirements were provided by the “Practical Advice for Preparing National Register Nominations In North Carolina”

INCENTIVES

Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits

Income tax incentives for the rehabilitation of historic structures are important tools for historic preservation and economic development in North Carolina. A federal income tax credit for the rehabilitation of historic structures first appeared in 1976 and today consists of a 20% credit for the qualifying rehabilitation of income-producing historic properties. Since 1976, over 3,100 completed “certified rehabilitation” projects have been reviewed by the N.C. State Historic Preservation Office, representing almost two billion dollars of investment in historic properties. The spinoff from all this activity includes job creation, downtown and neighborhood revitalization, improved community appearance, and greater community pride. Historic preservation is smart growth, and smart investment.

Assistance with Preservation

Technical Preservation Services

TPS is a program of the National Park Service, is the nation’s leading provider of technical information and guidance on the care of historic buildings. Questions regarding preservation issues are answered by phone, letters, or e-mails. TPS also publishes bulletins dealing with a wide range of preservation topics, as well as advice on Historic Preservation Tax Incentives.

The Section 106 process requires that all development projects or other actions funded, licensed, or initiated by Federal agencies, are thoroughly reviewed. The review may result in modifications to the project to avoid, mini-

mize, or mitigate possible harm to the historic property. Examples of undertakings that would receive Section 106 review might include levee construction and other flood control measures that could destroy archeological sites; construction of a new four-lane highway through a rural historic district; and demolition, alteration, repair, or rehabilitation of deteriorated homes in a historic neighborhood.

Each year, a limited number of NHL buildings may be selected to receive in-depth site inspections funded and coordinated by the National Park Service regional offices. These inspections analyze the condition of the Landmark, identify and prioritize recommended work treatments, and estimate the costs of this work. Information derived from the in-depth inspection may be compiled in a building condition assessment report.

FUNDING

Federal Grants from Historic Preservation Projects require your community or county to be a Certified Local Government (CLG) for Historic Preservation, and Aurora is not within a CLG boundary. For State Grants from Historic Preservation Projects, the State of North Carolina currently does not have any available. The following funding options cater to small and rural town for the up-fitting and revitalization of vacant buildings.

The Rural Transformation Grant Fund (RTGF)

This grant provides local governments with grants and expert guidance to improve economic vitality and overcome the unique challenges many rural communities face. Open to local governments in the state's Tier 1 and Tier 2 counties, as well as qualified census tracts in Tier 3 counties. Aurora is located within a qualified Tier 1 or 2 county.

Rural Transformation Grants can support, Main Street and downtown investment and revitalization efforts, Initiatives that help create resilient neighborhoods, Community enhancements that spur economic growth, Professional development, and education programs to build local government capacity. The Fund, created by the North Carolina General Assembly in Session Law 2021-180 (S.105), has an available pool of \$48 million for grant-making.

The maximum grant amount is \$950,000 per grantee, with some restrictions for specific activities. There is no minimum grant amount. Applicants should consider fea-

sibility as it relates to the overall cost of any project. Grant administration costs are limited to five percent (5%) of the awarded grant total. Applicants that receive funding approval for project(s) may charge the cost of application preparation to a current RE&I program if procurement procedures consistent with Uniform Guidance (2 CFR 200) and 09 NCAC 03M are followed. No more than \$3,500 may be charged to the RTGF for the preparation of the application if a grant is awarded. This cost would be included in the maximum of five percent (5%) allowed for administration. No other costs incurred prior to grant awards are eligible for reimbursement.

As North Carolina recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and applies lessons from the public health emergency to improve community resiliency, the Rural Transformation Grant Fund offers a new resource to local government leaders as they guide their communities toward a brighter future. Deadline for applying is May 2nd, 2022.

FUNDING

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)

This fund is for renovation and up-fitting of vacant industrial and commercial buildings for economic development purposes. The building reuse program is designed to return vacant industrial/commercial buildings to economic use for new and/or expanding business and industry. The ultimate goal of the Building Reuse program is to provide jobs for low and moderate-income persons (LMI).

The North Carolina Small Cities Community Development Block Program provides funds to local governments to develop viable communities, “by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities, principally for persons of low and moderate income.”

The program reflects purposes of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, as amended. The Department of Commerce (DOC) has administrative responsibility for the CDBG program. The Rural Economic Development Division (REDD) administers the economic development (ED) category for the Department of Commerce. State rules related to the CDBG program are found in North Carolina Administrative Code 4 NCAC 19L and specific CDBG economic development rules are found at 4 NCAC 1K.

A local government applicant must propose a project in conjunction with a private for-profit business that proposes to restore a vacant building to economic use resulting in the creation of permanent, full-time jobs by

the project company. A job is considered full-time if the employee works at least 1600 hours per year. To be eligible, documentation must be provided showing the building has been vacant thirty (30) consecutive days or more prior to the date of the pre-application conference. CDBG funds for this category are limited to a maximum of \$750,000 per unit of government. The grant amount is calculated based on \$20,000 per job for eligible businesses (see chart below) and \$12,000 per job for all other businesses. To be eligible, a business must also meet all of the eligibility criteria specified in GS105-129.80. Building Reuse funds may be applied for at any time during the year, however the Rural Infrastructure Authority which meets six times a year must approve the application.

DELIVERABLE

Goal

Key Task 1.7 - Establish Main Street Historical District – Revitalize Historic Downtown

Objectives

- 1.7.1 – In coordination with the NC State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO), initiate completion of the 2009 Aurora Historic District study.
- 1.7.2 – Request designation of the district be placed on the National Register of Historical Places (NRHP) under criterion C.

Strategies

- 1.7.1 – Steps to complete the 2009 Aurora Historic District study:
 - Update the existing Historic District boundary and Survey
 - Compile an architectural list of all buildings in the district
 - Compile an updated mapping and photography submission
- 1.7.2 – Apply to be on the National Register of Historical Places (NRHP) under criterion C
 - Hire a National Register Consultant to Prepare and submit a Nomination Document

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