

Backstory: Watauga Hotel and Memorial Park

The Watauga Hotel



Constructed in 1884 by J.G. Finely and an unnamed associate, The Watauga Hotel was the first of its kind in Blowing Rock. Tourism to the village was beginning to explode thanks to the Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike and the nearby Western North Carolina railroad stop in Lenoir. For years Blowing Rock had been host to cottagers, summer residents who resided in various boarding houses and summer homes, but the Watauga Hotel would usher in a new era for the town. The Blowing Rock Hotel would later open in 1889 followed by the Green Park Inn in 1891. The little town of 200 (by 1889) would grow to as much as 600 inhabitants during the summer. An August

12th issue of The Lenoir News reported, "...the hotels at Blowing Rock and Lenoir were so crowded that they could not take any more boarders, and tourists were advised not to go farther than Newton or Hickory. There was never such a rush for Blowing Rock as there is this year!" (Above image: The Watauga Hotel circa 1910. Right image: The Watauga Hotel cottages circa 1910).

The Watauga Hotel was built on Main Street and located where Memorial Park can be found



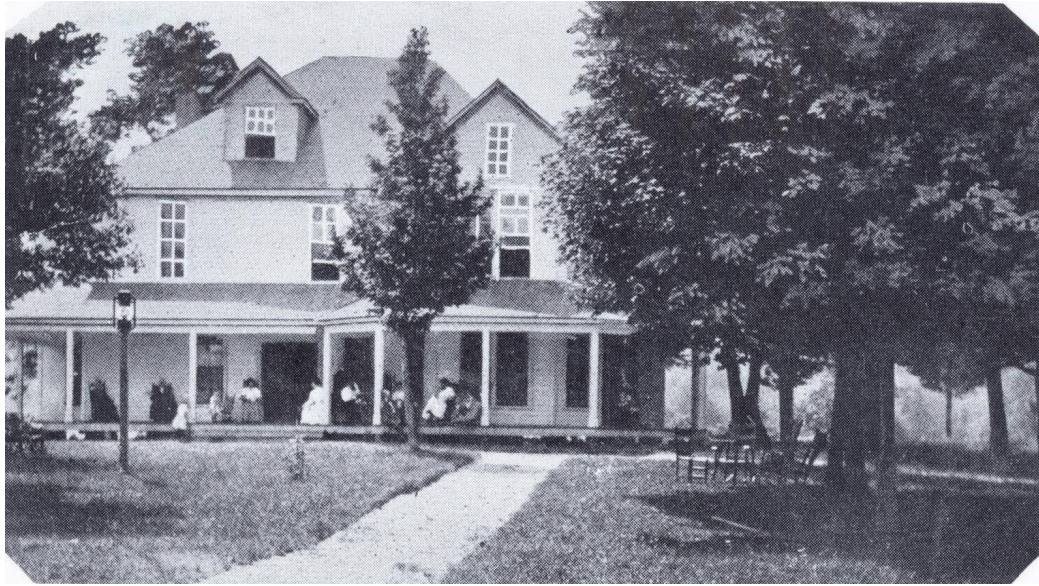


today. In 1888 multiple cottages were added on to either side of the hotel allowing for even more guests. These single rooms rented for \$15 a month, had no running water, and guests could take their meals in the main hotel. A barbershop was conveniently located across the street from the Watauga Hotel with a shower and shave only

costing 25 cents. If you're curious what one of the Watauga Hotel cottages might have looked like you happen to be in luck! The 1888 Museum Historical Hotel Cottage located at the south end of Main Street is the last surviving cottage from the Watauga and the only remaining structure associated with the hotel. (Above image: The 1888 Museum on Main Street.

Right image: The 1888's historical marker). The 1888 is owned by the Town of Blowing Rock and is managed by the Blowing Rock Historical Society. The museum is open 9am - 5pm and on winter weekends for self-guided tours. The cottage was originally two separate hotel rooms that did not connect but today, visitors are able to walk through the connecting rooms and see what one may have seen when renting a room at the Watauga Hotel so many years ago. One room is furnished as a replica of what one of these units may have looked like while the connecting room features information and photographs on other interesting historic Blowing Rock hotels.





The Watauga Hotel was equipped with a stable for visitors to rest their horses during their stay and later even had a tennis court on its front lawn. Additionally, Blowing Rock's main

doctor's office was established in Watauga Hotel in 1899, securing the hotel's position as a hub for both locals and tourists alike. The Watauga was unfortunately fairly unlucky as time went on. In 1906, the hotel burned down in a fire. Thomas Coffey, the hotel's new owner, took this opportunity to rebuild it with electricity and other modern comforts to keep up with the town's rapid growth. With the new building, the Watauga Hotel was renamed the Watauga Inn, but the Inn was just as unlucky as its predecessor. In 1926, the hotel caught fire from a spark on the second floor. (Above image: The Watauga Hotel with visitors on the porch circa 1900. Image below: The gazebo at Memorial Park in downtown Blowing Rock). Because Blowing Rock had not built a fire department yet, the town itself had to come together as an impromptu fire fighting force. Many people worked in a collaborative effort to save pieces of the hotel, including students from the in-session Blowing Rock School. However, the ragtag firefighters were only able to save some furniture and the cottages. The Watauga Democrat reported on the 1926 fire, "The frame building burned so rapidly that it was only by fast work and with the greatest difficulty that the furnishings were removed before the flames reached them. Heroic work on the part of almost every citizen in town



resulted in saving all of the furnishings, with the exception of some that were broken in throwing them from the second floor windows. Among the first to reach the fire were the pupils of the Blowing Rock School. Post office employees, businessmen and workers in every store on the Main Street did everything possible to help prevent the fire from spreading.” The Watauga Hotel’s place as the center of Blowing Rock has been remembered long after its destruction with the 1888 Museum ensuring that this piece of the village’s history is not forgotten.

Memorial Park

It’s hard to picture Blowing Rock without Memorial Park. Lying in the center of town, the park is a popular spot for visitors and residents alike. As previously mentioned, the Watauga Hotel once stood where Memorial Park is now. Before the site became Memorial Park it had been left vacant since the hotel’s demise. (Below image left:



Memorial Park in the fall. Image via VisitNC.com. Below image right: The playground at Memorial Park. Image via The Watauga Democrat). The Town of Blowing Rock purchased the property in 1939 and following the end of World War II the town dedicated the park to those who have served in the armed forces, officially making it known as Memorial

Park. Today the park is at the center of downtown Blowing Rock with a litany of amenities for park guests.

Memorial Park has two tennis courts, two basketball courts, a gazebo that makes for a popular concert venue, a playground for little ones, a picnic area, a low climbing wall, volleyball courts, and is host to a variety of annual



events including: Art in the Park (May through October annually), Winterfest (held in January with ice carving taking place under the park's large gazebo), the Fourth of July festival, and Santa even makes an appearance under the gazebo around Christmas.

On your next walk through downtown Blowing Rock take a stop in the 1888 Museum, rest for a minute on a bench at Memorial Park, and take in the beauty and history of this fascinating little town.