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EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

## HOMES WITH HISTORY: Old Mebane furniture plant to be reborn as apartments

Katie Jansen Nov 14, 2015



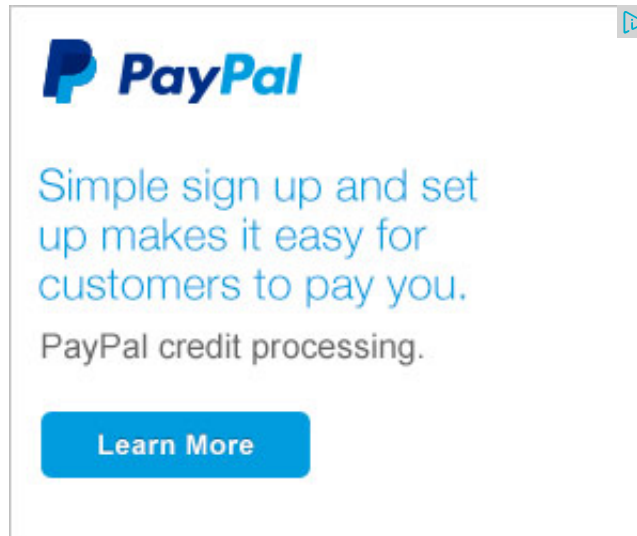
The Herald-Sun | Christine T. Nguyen

Fletcher Holmes, left, and Ernest Richmond walk past the The Lofts at White Furniture in downtown Mebane on Thursday, Nov. 12, 2015. The apartment complex is located in the former White Furniture factory, where the two men worked. The Herald-Sun |

**MEBANE** — As Fletcher Holmes walks through the White Furniture Company factory, he sees things just as they used to be more than two decades ago.

“That used to be the storage room,” he says to his friend, Ernest Richmond. “Look.”

Both men worked at the historic factory in its heyday, when White Furniture was known for its quality and craftsmanship.



The factory closed in 1993, eight years after it was purchased from the White Family, ending 104 years of family ownership.

But now, after 22 years sitting empty in the heart of downtown Mebane, the building is abuzz again with contractors and construction workers as Durham-based D3 Development, Inc., turns the factory into 156 apartments owned by Durham-based WFP.

City council member Everette Greene said seeing all the workers around the building is reminiscent of the factory years, when factory workers would take their lunch break under a magnolia tree that used to stand across the street.

“The economic impact started day one when they started,” Greene said, adding that most of the project’s workforce and materials are local. “This is a made-in-Mebane project.”

Greene added that the \$24 million project, to be called Lofts at White Furniture, will be an asset to the city as it continues to grow. He said more people in downtown will lead to more restaurants and nightlife, just as they did in downtown Durham.

Tenants will begin moving into the apartments in January, said Shannon Moser, project manager for D3 Development. The apartments will offer everything from studios to three-bedrooms and monthly rent will range from \$795 to \$1,400.

White Furniture Factory was organized in 1881, the same year the town of Mebane was incorporated, making it the first industry in Mebane.

At its peak, White Furniture operated both the Mebane factory and a plant in Hillsborough, employing about 450 workers total.

At that time, the population of Mebane was only about 2,500, Greene estimated.

“That’s how people paid their bills,” Holmes said.

“Everybody who wanted to work could get a job,” Richmond said, adding that the factory also employed the children of employees during the summers when they were home from college.

White’s former employees remember a tight-knit workplace where everyone was like family.

“We carried on a lot of junk and got the job done too,” Holmes said.

He started working at White when he was 19, in 1964, and worked there until it closed.

Both men recounted days that started at 7 a.m. when the whistle blew and wrapped up at 4 p.m. — always with an hour break for lunch.

Many departments worked together to make the furniture — the lumber yard, where Richmond worked as a supervisor, the sanding room, the cabinet room, the machine room, the finishing room, rub and pack and an office area.

Holmes worked in purchasing.

“I knew what it took of everything to make a thousand suites,” Holmes said, and to this day, he can still rattle off materials he ordered — poplar, mahogany, cowhide.

Pieces made by White were seen as pieces of prestige, Holmes said. Both men still have White pieces in their homes.

“Big places wanted White,” Holmes said. The company filled many large contracts, including building furniture for military personnel on the Panama Canal and furnishing Asheville’s Grove Park Inn.

The factory holds a special place in the personal histories of its workers, but it also carries statewide significance.



The building, standing since 1924, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, meaning it must be preserved and cannot be torn down.

Moser said the distinction comes with certain rules that must be followed in developing the property.

The team had to take photos to document what was historically important about the property and submit the photos, along with its plans for the building, to the State Historic Preservation Office and the National Parks Service.

When they’re finished, the team will submit completed photos to verify they’re in compliance with preservation specifications. Among the features they’re keeping intact are some exposed brick walls, columns in main hallways and the original window frames.



The property qualifies for historic tax credits at the federal level and North Carolina Mill Rehabilitation Tax Credits at the state level.

It also has landmark status, which protects the exterior of the building and comes with a half-off discount on property taxes, Moser said.

As Holmes and Richmond walked the halls of the property, they marveled at what had changed, as well as what hadn't.

Richmond left the factory in the '80s before it closed down, but Holmes remembers that after the company was bought by a furniture company in Hickory, White Furniture suffered from declining quality and low employee morale.

When the employees learned the factory was shutting down, Holmes said, "It was a sad time. I grew up here basically and knew everybody."

The men swapped memories, with Richmond telling stories about the old days — a lumber cart that got away from his crew, a fire that almost burned the place down.

"I'm tickled to death to see it being preserved," Holmes said.



Contact Katie Jansen: [kjansen@heraldsun.com](mailto:kjansen@heraldsun.com), 919-419-6675

## Katie Jansen

Katie Jansen covers Orange County for The Herald-Sun. She graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2014, where she studied journalism, English and creative writing.