



Main St S 125 years ago

ATHENS CELEBRATES 125 YEARS

By Sally Smid

“Farmersville has outgrown the swaddling clothes of infancy and has put on the garments of a stalwart boy. The village needs a name suitable to its exalted position as a centre of learning and business.” Athens Reporter, 1889

Athens started as Dixon’s Corners in 1784 when John Dixon built a tavern near to the present day Stedmans. Many Loyalists received land grants in the area including Joshua Bates who named the four corners Farmersville, considering it to be farming centre. There were always various private schools, but many larger schools were established after the mid 1800s, including a grammar, public, high school and even a model school for teacher training in what is now the Lions Hall on Wellington St. Many students travelled into the village on the B & W Railway and boarded in the village so that they could attend school. By the late 1800s many felt that the name Athens would be more sophisticated and appropriate, reflecting its role as a “centre of learning”.

In 1888 a well signed petition was presented to the Township of the Rear of Yonge and Escott and the Counties Council asking for the village’s name to be changed. This was agreed upon in 1889, but it took another year for Athens’ separation from the Township and its own incorporation. There seems to have been quite a lot of antagonism between the township and the village, there was also a concern that the farmers would be offended by the name change as well. Many felt that the township would never grant the many improvements that the village wanted. Arza Parish, the first Township Reeve and the son of one of the first settlers, William Parish, was very instrumental in the development of schools and promoted this name change. His son Watson G. Parish was elected as the first reeve on Jan. 1, 1990 when it was officially incorporated. He lived in what is now the Hill House and constructed the stately front addition to what was his father’s home.

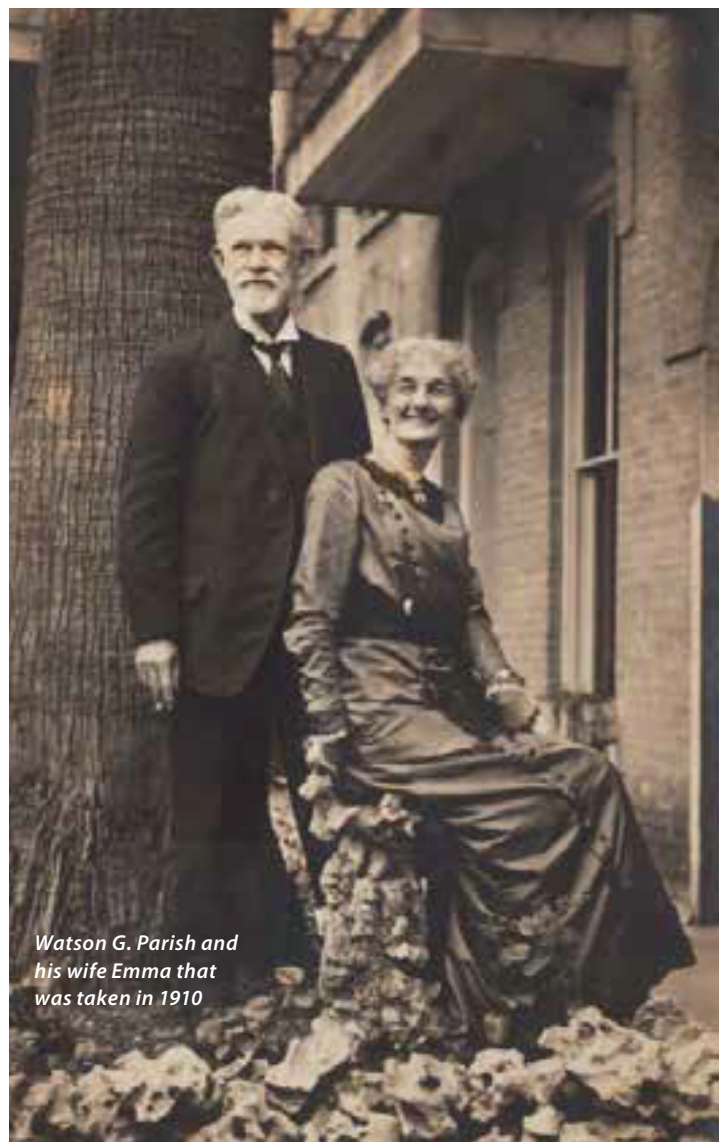
The first “Town Hall” was in the township building on Central St., which now houses the Athens Library. Noted artist Crawford

Slack must have considered the importance of Athens’ incorporation as he created a painting entitled the Town Fathers in 1990. Reeve Parish is seen at the centre of his four new council members at what could be their first council meeting. Slack’s painting is now on display in the present Athens Council Chambers.

This name change came during what was considered to be the “Golden Age” of the village when small thriving businesses worked together selling “all they could produce”. Many had the latest innovations, including Fisher Carriage Works’ Champion Gear, the Gordon Carding Mill, the Wing Process of making cheese, Lamb’s Medicines, and Earle’s Gas Works. Of course the oldest business has to be Judsons’ Funeral Home, which began in 1865. In 1889 this was one of the first areas to have telephone service. There was the Reporter newspaper, an orchestra, three schools, and many churches. Athens was a center of commerce and people came from quite a distance to trade, shop and do any business. Many older residents today can still recall the years when



Above: The Athens B & W station near present area was hub for business 125 years ago; a typical ad in Athens 125 years ago; Store owner S. A. Taplin was so distressed with the Farmersville name change that he resigned from council



Watson G. Parish and his wife Emma that was taken in 1910

Athens bustled on a Friday night as everyone came to shop and socialize.

Much has changed in those 125 years since the village became Athens. There are still schools, but students also travel to Brockville for high school. Many Athens residents are employed in larger centers and choose to shop in malls and big box stores. The town has been a place for small businesses, hockey, cottagers, and some tourism, especially during Corn Fest and the Farmersville Steam Fair, echoing back to its farming roots. It has also been known for Maple View Lodge, the “Tackaberry Collections” and as the “Home of the Murals”, which reflect the town’s colourful heritage. Perhaps there are some important things that have not changed in Athens; one would probably be the strong community hometown spirit. It’s easy to know your neighbour and people are there for each other in good times and in bad. This close knit atmosphere has attracted many young families and could perhaps be considered as the town’s best asset.

It is interesting to note, that when the village of Athens amalgamated with the Township of Rear of Yonge and Escott to become the Township of Athens in 1991, this was really a reversal in many ways to what took place in 1890 when Athens separated from the township. 125 years ago some of the major concerns of the council would have been the institution of a law that fences be built around properties to contain wandering livestock that often travelled the dirt roads and yards. There was also a concern for proper walkways, so board sidewalks were built and later gas streetlights were installed. Today the council deals with more complex problems relating to the Ministry of Health regulations, accessibility, rising costs for road and rink repairs and much more. Money is limited and it is difficult for rural municipalities to acquire needed funding.

Athens has come a long way in 125 years. The Athens and Area Heritage Society is helping to organize a variety of ways to help observe this milestone, including a contest, displays, a history of education program at ADHS on May 14 and a heritage fashion

show and tea in the fall. Athens is certainly a place worth celebrating for many reasons. Perhaps it is the pride for the town that encourages many to shop locally and drives local service groups and many volunteers to work so hard to support and improve their much loved community. [LH](#)

EDITOR’S NOTE: This 125th Anniversary year is something truly special and we at Living Here offer our Congratulations to the Town and its residents on this historic milestone.

We encourage readers this summer to visit the town during the Farmersville Exhibition and Corn Fest but also take a drive and visit during other parts of the upcoming year to take in the farmers market, the Communities in Bloom projects, or if you have never seen “The Murals” you should do so and enjoy the atmosphere the town and residents offer.