



CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

In celebration of its fifty-year anniversary June 29, 2023

by Christopher M. Reid, City Historian

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

THE MAYOR AND BOARD OF ALDERMAN



Back row (from left to right): Keith Dennis, Alderman Ward 2; Sammy Williams, Alderman Ward 1; Gavin Gill, Alderman Ward 6; James Thompson, Ward 5; Casey Foy, Alderman Ward 4; Front row (from left to right): John McHenry, Alderman-at-Large; Jake Windham, Mayor; Johnny Steverson, Alderman Ward 3.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

A NEW COUNTY

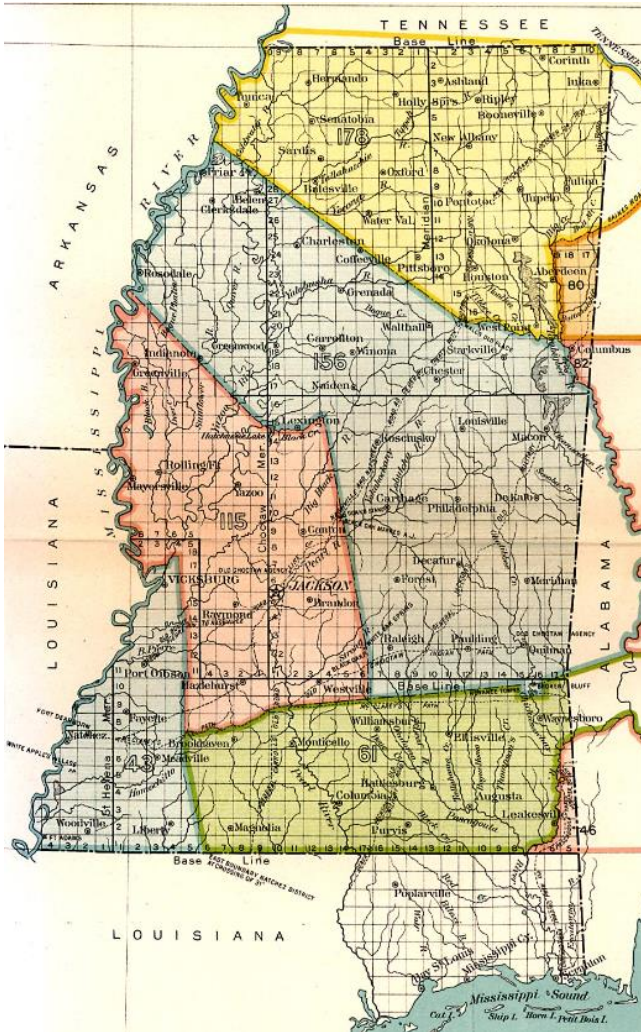
On December 10, 1817, Mississippi was admitted as the 20th state of the Union. Consisting of 14 counties from the old Natchez District of the Mississippi Territory, most of the state as we know it today was still occupied as ancestral land by several Native American tribes. In October 1820, pursuing a policy of national expansion and under great pressure to acquire fertile farming land in Native areas for white settlement, the United States Congress dispatched Andrew Jackson and Thomas Hinds as commissioners to negotiate a treaty with the Choctaw for a large portion on their ancestral lands. The commissioners met with leaders of the Choctaw Nation at Doak's Stand, a tavern on the Natchez Trace in present-day Madison County and signed the Treaty of Doak's Stand on October 18, 1820.

The terms of the treaty stipulated in exchange for new lands in present-day Arkansas, the Choctaw would cede some 5.5 million acres of land to the U.S. government. This entire tract of land was initially designated as Hinds County but because of its enormous size, it was subdivided several times in the coming years, contributing area to 15 different counties. Rankin County was one of those subdivisions and was established by the Mississippi Legislature on February 4, 1828, named in honor of Christopher Rankin, a distinguished lawyer and politician who served Mississippi in the U.S. Congress from 1819 until his death in 1826.

The newly formed county did not yet have a seat of government, and it would be several years later before Brandon was chosen and a courthouse built. In the interim, the Legislature directed that the county, probate and circuit courts of Rankin County be held in the home of Harry Long, a prominent businessman from Jackson.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

According to U.S. Bureau of Land Management records, Harry Long was granted 80 acres in 1825 in present-day Rankin County, just off Old Brandon Road behind the Skyway Hills subdivision. Thus, Harry Long became the first documented settler in the area of present-day Pearl.



Indian Land Cessions (Treaty of Doak's Stand is highlighted in red)

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

TRANSPORTATION

In those early years, the landscape of the county was rugged and undeveloped. Transportation infrastructure was non-existent and the largest obstacle to eastward settlement into Rankin County was the Pearl River. There were no bridges spanning the river, therefore, ferry construction quickly became a priority to facilitate water crossings. The Jackson and Brandon Railroad and Bridge Company, chartered in 1836 and again in 1841, was contracted to build a bridge and a 14-mile railroad line to connect Brandon to Jackson. The railroad was opened for normal operation in 1849, and the bridge was completed in June 1850.

Work was also well underway to widen the primitive horse trails prevalent in the area into roads capable of accommodating supply wagons and later stagecoaches. Financing roads was difficult, so conscripted labor was used to construct these early highways. Individual road supervisors were appointed to oversee the improvement of each road, with the power to summon any male over 18 years of age to work for a maximum of 10 days per year.

PEARSON

A community began to emerge in 1882 when John W. Pearson and his wife Jennie sold land to the Vicksburg and Meridian Railroad Company to construct a track through the area to provide both passenger and freight service. This new track would later spur the construction of a railroad depot, post office, general store, cemetery, church, and a public school. This economic development became known as Pearson in honor of John W. Pearson, who originally conveyed the land and was murdered by an unknown assailant in 1883.



Pearson School circa 1910

EARLY SCHOOLS

By the turn of the 20th century, people began to settle more in the area around present-day Highway 80 and Old Brandon Road, and Pearson school was the only public county school at the time in the immediate vicinity. A private school had been started in the area of present-day McLaurin Mart to facilitate the education of children from a few select families, but it was abandoned by 1910. Due to its more remote location, Pearson school became increasingly difficult to attend.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

In 1911, Mitchell Childre petitioned the Rankin County Board of Education for the creation of a more centrally located school to be called Pearl. The petition was granted and Joseph Valentour provided one acre of land for the schoolhouse which was a one-room wooden structure with a belfry. Miss Louise Andrews, a niece of Paul Biederman, was the first teacher of the inaugural class of 25-30 students.

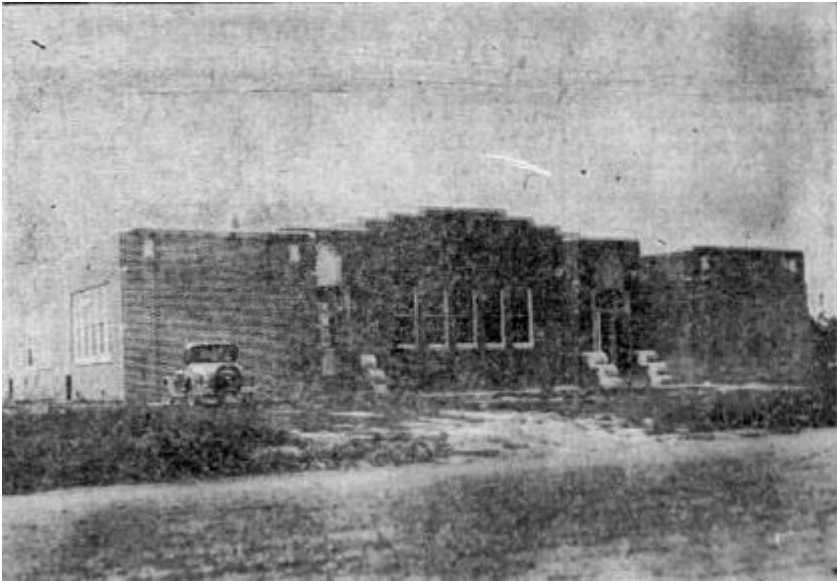


Pearl School circa 1916

By 1924, enrollment at Pearl School soon reached around 50 students and the one-room schoolhouse could not accommodate them all. Pearl School contracted with the city of Jackson to provide all educational services for Pearl children, on the condition that Pearl School provides the transportation. This arrangement continued until 1929 when Jackson could no longer handle Pearl elementary students due to overcrowding.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

In 1929, a new school was opened on the grounds of the present-day City Hall complex called Pearl Consolidated School at a cost of \$30,000. This complex sat on nine acres and consisted of 7 classrooms and an auditorium. Pearl Consolidated School taught grades 1-7 and had an ending enrollment of 155 students. As before, Pearl students in grades 8-12 were still transported to Jackson schools, primarily Bailey Junior High and Central High. The school burned in the spring of 1932, but a new one was constructed in time for the start of the fall semester.



Pearl Consolidated School circa 1929

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

NATURAL GAS IS DISCOVERED

In the late 1920's, natural gas deposits were discovered in Hinds/Rankin counties and this new natural resource resulted in an economic boom for the area. More beneficial for Rankin County was the development of heavy industry that allowed Rankin County to build and capitalize on the abundance of natural gas.

By 1928, the Gulf States Creosoting Company announced its plans to build a plant in Rankin County on the banks of the Pearl River. The plant represented a capital investment of \$1 million (more than \$17 million in 2023 dollars) and had an employment capacity of up to 400 people, making it the largest creosoting plant in the South. The 141-acre site was located in the vicinity of present-day Puckett Machinery on Flowood Drive and was powered largely by the natural gas being pumped nearby.

In anticipation of the plant's opening, local business leaders formed the Rankin Side Development Company in order to develop affordable housing and residential amenities in close proximity to the plant. This development called East-Side Subdivision No. 1 was divided into 16 blocks and included residential lots along with commercial properties reserved for a general store, filling station, restaurant, church, school, and park. East-Side Subdivision No. 1 would later be known colloquially as "Oil Town".

In 1930, the residents of Oil Town petitioned for incorporation and Governor Theodore G. Bilbo issued a proclamation declaring the area as a village named Pearl City, appointing Walton A. Speights as Mayor. Today we know Pearl City by another name...Flowood.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

SCHOOLS RETURN

With industry on the rise and a lower cost for Jackson residents to live and commute across the river, the population of Rankin County rose by nearly 70% in the period between 1930 to 1950 mostly in the area of Pearl. To handle the increased population of educable children in the district, plans were made to return area students back to Pearl and handle their education locally.

On September 20, 1948, for the first time in area history, high school students began their term in a newly constructed building on the grounds of Pearl Consolidated School. Leland W. Bright, the former Superintendent of Ingomar School in Pontotoc County, was hired to be the high school's first principal. The campus continued to expand with additional buildings as student enrollment increased over the next 10 years and would later become the City Hall complex that we know today.



Pearl Consolidated School

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

In 1958, elementary student enrollment had surpassed the capacity of the Pearl Consolidated School campus. The Rankin County Board of Education renamed Pearl Consolidated School to Pearl Attendance Center and approved the construction of a new elementary school called McLaurin Heights Attendance Center on present-day Mary Ann Drive. The first classes were held there in 1959.

In 1961, the names Pearl Attendance Center and McLaurin Heights Attendance Center were abolished and all facilities formerly owned by the two schools were designated Pearl-McLaurin Attendance Center, to include the newly constructed junior high school. This combination was unique among other schools across the state at that time in that though there were two separate campuses, the Pearl-McLaurin Attendance Center was reported to the State Department of Education as one school.

By the spring of 1967, principal Buren T. Akers reported that enrollment at the Pearl-McLaurin Attendance Center had grown from 444 in 1948 to 3,070 students, making Pearl-McLaurin the largest school in the state. By 1973, the name McLaurin was dropped from all school designations.

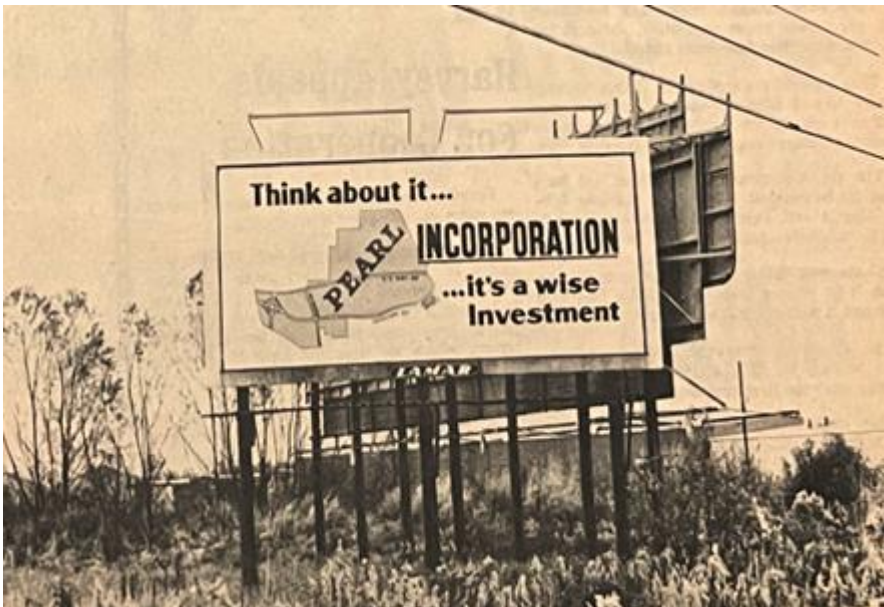
SALES TAX

By 1967, the area of Pearl had grown significantly with an estimated population of 15,000. Public infrastructure problems were abundant and citizens did not feel they were adequately represented when county tax dollars were disbursed. Public safety was also a concern, as law enforcement support had to be obtained through the Sheriff's department and fire services were handled by a small local volunteer fire department.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

In 1968, State Senator William J. Caraway of Leland authored SB 1634, which became the foundation for the Sales Tax Law of 1968, signed into law on July 29, 1968. The bill was designed to provide \$48 million dollars in additional sales tax revenue to finance educational improvements, the most significant of which was a \$1,000 across the board salary increase for teachers.

The bill also standardized the way sales tax was being collected across the state, raising it from 3.5% to 5% and mandating that it be collected in all municipalities, which some had previously not done. Finally, the bill required all tax dollars to be turned over to the State and the state would refund each municipality 19% of its collections.



Highway billboard promoting incorporation

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

A movement began, led by Lindell D. Boling, the local Justice of the Peace and Dr. John Mohr, President of the Rankin County Chamber of Commerce, to incorporate the area so that the 19% tax rebate could be applied directly to the community where it could do the most good. A public meeting was held on September 11, 1968, at the Pearl-McLaurin Attendance Center auditorium to gauge public interest in the incorporation. It is estimated that as many as 700 citizens were in attendance and the event was broadcast over the radio on local Brandon station WRKN 970 the following Sunday. All but 6 citizens voted yes.

On January 6, 1969, city boundaries were laid out, a government elected and the city name was chosen from among three nominations; Pearl, Riverview and Brightsville (in honor of Leland W. Bright, the former high school principal and prominent business leader). The following individuals were selected as the first city government of Pearl.

Harris Harvey – Mayor

Jimmy Joe Thompson – Ward 1 Alderman

W.D. McAlpin – Ward 2 Alderman

James E. Netherland – Ward 3 Alderman

Ophelia Byrd – Ward 4 Alderman

W.L. Maddox – Ward 5 Alderman

Mack T. Morgan – Ward 6 Alderman

Bobby Joe Davis – Alderman-at-Large

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH



First Mayor and Board of Alderman

LEGAL TROUBLE

The road to incorporation was not to be an easy one and was plagued with legal battles. On March 12, 1970 the Petition for Incorporation was filed with the Rankin County Chancery Court and later ruled upon favorably. However, the City of Jackson wanting to annex Pearl for itself, appealed to the Mississippi Supreme Court on November 23, 1970, and the Chancery Court's decision was reversed due to a technicality regarding individual petition forms.

On May 1, 1971, a new petition was filed with the Chancery Court, but Chancellor L.B. Porter denied it on the grounds that the petitioners had not adequately explained their reasons for wanting to incorporate. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court and the petition was upheld, thereby forcing the Chancery Court to hear the case.

On September 18, 1972, the case was argued in Chancery Court and denied by Chancellor Porter again. In his ruling, he wrote:

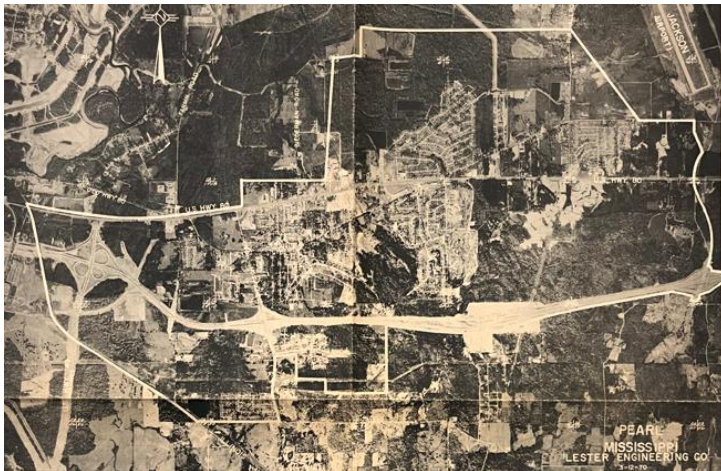
CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

“the shape of the proposed city is not square, that no proof is given to show that the required number of signatures on the petitions have been collected and that little or no consideration is given to estimating the costs of operating or maintaining a city.”

The case was appealed to the Supreme Court a third and final time and on June 5, 1973, the Supreme Court reversed Chancellor Porter’s ruling and ordered the incorporation of the City of Pearl.

STARTING A CITY

Charter Day was held on June 29, 1973 in the Pearl Junior High School auditorium. Lt. Governor William Winter was the principal speaker, and he presented the City Charter and individual commissions to the Mayor and Board of Alderman. Oaths of office were administered by Supreme Court Justice Stokes V. Robertson Jr. and immediately after the ceremonies, the first Board meeting was held with several hundred in attendance.



Map of original city boundaries

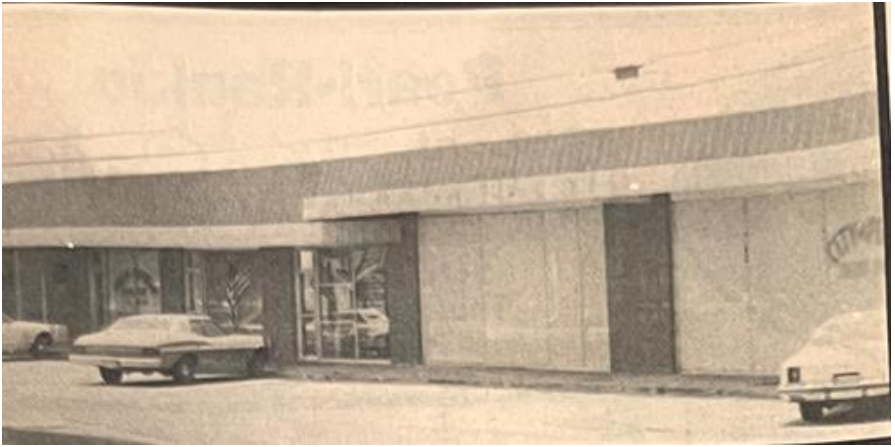
CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH



Mrs. Shirley Rogers, being sworn in as first City Clerk

As a new city, there were no public buildings to speak of. City government took up residence in the Bright Shopping Center and the first police station was a trailer on Old Brandon Road, located behind the Masonic lodge. Toby Wood, formerly the Chief of Police in Belzoni, was hired as the first police chief and Eugene Adcock as assistant police chief.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH



City Hall (in the Bright Shopping Center)



Police station on Old Brandon Road

In the summer of 1962, a volunteer fire department was organized and would be responsible for all fire-fighting needs in the area for the next 14 years.

CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH



Assistant Chief Gary Butler and Chief Bill Milliken

In April 1976, a full-time paid fire department was established in Pearl, using the existing volunteer fire station of Mary Ann Drive. Harvey Stevens, former assistant fire chief of the Jackson Fire Department was hired as the first chief.



CITY OF PEARL – A HISTORICAL SKETCH

A NEW SCHOOL DISTRICT

On May 18, 1976, the Board of Alderman voted unanimously to create a new school district called the Pearl Municipal Separate School District, with Joe Wade, David Reiger and Bill Chaney as the first board members. The Rankin County Board of Education gave its approval on May 31, pending final approval from the State Department of Education, which came in late June. Henry F. Shepherd was hired as the first Superintendent.

CONCLUSION

Much has changed over the 50 years of Pearl's history as a city. While that history cannot be completely summarized in a few pages, Pearl has grown from a sleepy little community to a thriving urban center. Since its incorporation in 1973, Pearl has always worked hard for its residents, businesses, and visitors and as it looks forward to its next 50 years, Pearl remains committed to shining as the "Jewel of the Crossroads".