

Statement of Significance

The Dixie Highway Hotel (Edgefield Hotel)

The former Dixie Highway Hotel, most recently named the Plantation House Hotel, is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. It sits on the site of former hotels that welcomed guests and served the community since the town was established. It tells the story of economic and social transitions in the town's history and its participation in a national movement to better connect towns and cities across the country. And because the Plantation House Hotel was conceived of and built by the people of Edgefield, it has always been a source of community pride.

Edgefield District was established in 1785. It included the contemporary counties of Aiken, Greenwood, Saluda, McCormick, and Edgefield. It was part of the original Ninety Six District, an agricultural area settled by colonists from both the north and the southern part of South Carolina. After the Revolutionary War, new county and local governments were established. Edgefield was the designated county seat where the courthouse would be constructed.¹ However, even though construction of the jail and court house started in 1785, the two acres of the current Courthouse Square were not purchased by the judges of Edgefield County until 1792.² The village of Edgefield sprang up around the courthouse and jail.³ Moses Harris bought the lot on which the present-day Plantation House Hotel stands, and built the first tavern there in 1787.⁴

The tavern predated schools and churches, and likely attracted people who knew there was a place to stay and eat while they attended to court matters. By 1826 there were about 300 people living in the village. The stores in the village met the needs of residents and planters in between trips to larger commercial centers of Augusta and Hamburg. Edgefield was not a market town, but still a necessary commercial center. In 1839, the current masonry court house building was constructed, replacing two previous frame structures.

As a center of law and politics in the early 19th century, Edgefield attracted lawyers and politicians who practiced in the village but maintained plantations outside the village.⁵ Edgefield has produced a number of important political figures, including ten South Carolina governors, five lieutenant governors, and several U.S. Congressmen and Senators, including Benjamin Tillman, Preston Brooks, and Strom Thurmond. Thurmond owned the Plantation House Hotel, the Ryan Hotel's successor, for a number of years.

¹ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 2.

² Edgefield County, SC Deed Book 9, 258-264.

³ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 3.

⁴ Edgefield County, SC Deed Book 2, 69-72.

⁵ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 4.

Industries thrived outside the village in the antebellum years, including pottery and textile operations.⁶ In 1850, five successful pottery manufacturing concerns operated on a commercial scale. One slave potter in Edgefield District, Dave Drake, distinguished himself not only by excellent artistry, but by the verses he inscribed on his stoneware. Stoneware from Edgefield had olive green or black-brown glazes and were valued for both their beauty and usefulness. Edgefield also had a carriage-making plant in the 1850s. The Graniteville Company, a textile mill in Edgefield, was one of South Carolina's most successful factories. It was able to compete with northern mills.⁷

In 1845, B.J. Ryan announced the opening of Ryan's Hotel, equipped with new furniture and "commodious Stables."⁸ The hotel stood in the location of Moses Harris' tavern, and was built around 1812.⁹ In 1852, the estate of John Doby advertised the sale of Ryan's Hotel, also called Planters Hotel, and all its contents. An ad in the *Edgefield Advertiser* noted fifty rooms, a bar, a brick kitchen, a smoke house, stables with 120 stalls, an "abundant well," out buildings, and a vegetable garden on 2 ½ acres.¹⁰ A deed filed on January 18, 1856 showed many of items from the hotel being purchased by B.J. Ryan, the hotel proprietor, and likely the son-in-law of John Doby.¹¹ (B.J. Ryan had married Frances A. Doby in 1841.¹²) In 1856, B.J. Ryan announced his plans to improve the hotel and stables as well as food, drink, and service.¹³

Ryan's or Planters Hotel also housed various businesses. A dentist advertised the location of his office at the hotel in 1856.¹⁴ In 1867, a new bar room opened in the Planter's Hotel. In 1882, J.M. Cobb's shoe store opened, and in 1884, a grocery store joined the other businesses. In 1919, the builders of Edgefield's new hotel would replicate this model of rooms upstairs and commercial space at street level.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Edgefield's political, social, and economic status shifted and changed. Edgefield and other towns in the district developed into commercial centers and began to prosper again.¹⁵ As recovery from the Civil War progressed, Edgefield suffered great setbacks as several fires wiped out its commercial district, the first two in 1881 and 1884.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 279-280.

⁸ "Ryan's Hotel," *Edgefield Advertiser*, January 8, 1845, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historicnewspapers.sc.edu/lccn/sn84026897/1845-01-08/ed-1/seq-3/>.

⁹ "THE DIXIE HIGHWAY HOTEL - A large modern hotel for Edgefield," *The Edgefield Advertiser*, August 8, 2016, accessed January 6, 2018, <http://www.edgefieldadvertiser.com/2016/08/the-dixie-highway-hotel-a-large-modern-hotel-for-edgefield/>.

¹⁰ "Planters Hotel for Sale, at Edgefield C.H., S.C." *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 29, 1852, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historicnewspapers.sc.edu/lccn/sn84026897/1852-12-29/ed-1/seq-1/>

¹¹ "Estate of John Doby Deed, Matilda Doby Admr., Box no. 73, pkg. no. 2960," January 18, 1856.

¹² "South Carolina, Compiled Marriage Index, 1641-1965," *Ancestry.com*, accessed March 14, 2018.

¹³ "Planters' Hotel!" *Edgefield Advertiser*, November 26, 1856, accessed March 28, 2018, <http://historicnewspapers.sc.edu/lccn/sn84026897/1856-11-26/ed-1/seq-2/>.

¹⁴ "Dentistry," *Edgefield Advertiser*, August 6, 1856, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1856-08-06/ed-1/seq-4/>

¹⁵ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 8.

Railroad service arrived in other towns, reducing commercial activity in Edgefield. Additionally, new county boundaries reduced the size of Edgefield County. The agricultural economy of the county weakened.¹⁶

The Ryan family continued to run the Ryan hotel and rent its commercial space. An 1884 Sanborn map shows a barber, insurance office, and paint store in the hotel. Additionally, that map shows a commercial center, almost completely rebuilt after the 1881 fire. The Tillman Hotel had burned in 1881, but the Edgefield Hotel, the Ryan Hotel, the Whittaker Hotel, and the Anderson Hotel survived and were serving people coming into or passing through Edgefield until 1892. A number of stores and saloons continued to do business. An 1889 Sanborn map shows new buildings, still of wood frame construction, and businesses filling in the area around Courthouse Square. In 1888, the railroad reached Edgefield and the town finally had a local depot. Prosperity returned to the town.¹⁷

In 1891, the *Edgefield Chronicle* reported that B.J. Ryan's son, Elbert, bought the hotel for \$4,900. A few months later, an ad appeared in the same paper requesting that contractors apply to E.L. Ryan to repair the hotel and livery stable. Work began that summer.¹⁸

In January 1892, fire once again struck the commercial area of Edgefield, this time starting on the side of the square where the Ryan Hotel stood. Buildings on the southern and western side of the square, including the Ryan Hotel, burned. "The Ryan Hotel, the old Gray house, the Whittaker Hotel, the contiguous wooden buildings at the corner of the square, the old Bryan brick store (Kearsey saloon), the large brick building, owned by Mr. D.A. Tompkins, were all swept away."¹⁹

As soon as the smoke cleared, ideas for improvement were shared. The *Edgefield Chronicle* reported that a Town Council member embraced what he saw as an opportunity to improve Courthouse Square. With much of the south side gone, the slope could be leveled, and the square itself cleared and beautified. He presented numerous reasons why it was necessary and prudent to build a first-class hotel. About a month later the *Edgefield Chronicle* reported that a plan was forming to build the hotel. Another, later article roused people of Edgefield to build a new hotel for "rich Northern invalids and tourists." The article identified many reasons why people in the past had lodged in Edgefield, and the money made by local businesses.²⁰

The citizens of Edgefield did begin rebuilding immediately, but this time following an ordinance requiring brick construction. After the previous fire in 1884, a town ordinance was passed requiring that all new buildings constructed within 500 feet of the square be built of brick.²¹ Courthouse Square and Main

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 22.

¹⁸ *Remembering Edgefield 1891 Through the Keyhole Series: Book 1*, n.d., Old Edgefield District Genealogical Society.

¹⁹ John A. Chapman, *History of Edgefield County from the Earliest Settlements to 1897* (Newberry: Elbert H. Aull, 1897), 414.

²⁰ *Remembering Edgefield 1891 Through the Keyhole Series: Book 2*, n.d., Old Edgefield District Genealogical Society.

²¹ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 8.

Street began to take on the look and character that remain today, but without the new hotel that the Town Council member had hoped for.

Restaurants, groceries, a pool hall, dry goods stores, a furniture store, etc. continued to surround Courthouse Square. But missing were the Ryan and Anderson Hotels. The Edgefield Hotel remained right off the square and by 1894 a new wood frame hotel, the Jackson Hotel, was built on Plank Road, not far from the square. The Jackson Hotel's demise was quick; it is gone from an 1899 map, possibly succumbing to fire.

By 1899, the Dubose Hotel joined the Edgefield Hotel on Buncombe Road. In 1909, only one year after a new proprietor leased the building, the Edgefield Hotel burned, leaving the Hotel Dubose and a new Hotel Grice to service the area around Courthouse Square. A 1918 Sanborn map identifies only one hotel around Courthouse Square: The Hotel Dubose. That map also shows a former store used as a garage, indicating that the automobile was entering the region's transportation arena.

As the 20th century opened, Courthouse Square continued to be a busy place. Wagons filled the square on Mondays, "sale day," when land was sold, estates auctioned, and property foreclosed upon.²²

In 1905, Mr. B.J. Crooker purchased the lot where the Ryan Hotel had stood, but with no stated plans for improvement.²³ In 1908 the lot was still empty and Miss Coy Wood rented it to Edgefield citizens to erect hitching posts there.²⁴

A number of hotels had survived fires and changes around Edgefield, but by 1918, only one remained. Citizens called out for a more modern hotel. The old hotels serviced regional people who came to Edgefield to shop or attend to legal matters or concerns. While this market continued to support the commercial district of Edgefield, a new market and opportunity presented itself – tourism. That market promised to improve conditions for local businesses and farmers.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, cars and trucks became important components of economic growth. Immediately after the Civil War, railroads moved products to markets across the country, but no proper road system yet existed. Farmers relied on a network of dirt roads leading to town railroad depots. As farmers diversified cash crops, they sold more crops to local markets. They required roads to navigate regionally.²⁵ Farmers needed to travel where railroads did not go. Textile mills also depended on getting cotton from fields to the mills.

When people could not get to the railroads because of impassable dirt roads, the railroads were useless.²⁶ Additionally, "...railroads had monopolies in rural areas, so they could charge steep rates for

²² Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 6.

²³ "Local News," *Edgefield Advertiser*, May 10, 1905, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1905-05-10/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1789&index=0&rows=20&words=Crooker+purchased&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=crooker+purchased&y=7&x=12&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

²⁴ "Will Provide Hitching Posts," *Edgefield Advertiser*, February 5, 1908, accessed February 12, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1908-02-05/ed-1/seq-3/>.

²⁵ Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

short hauls to neighboring market towns while charging lower rates on long hauls for customers in more-competitive urban markets.”²⁷

The Good Roads Movement began to attract the attention and support of farmers and automobile industrialists in the 1910s and 1920s.²⁸ And Edgefield joined in. In 1911, a “good roads” train visited Edgefield to demonstrate the importance of good roads and how to build and repair them. The train cars carried exhibits and models, and one car was set up as a lecture room.²⁹

Carl Fisher, an “automobile magnate and highway promoter” purchased beachfront properties in a yet undeveloped Miami Beach, Florida, and by 1914 he wanted to market his property to wealthy tourists.³⁰ With support from the automobile industry, he proposed a tourist highway from the Midwest to Miami Beach.³¹ The Dixie Highway Association, a private organization funded by individuals, businesses, and local and state governments first met in 1915 to plan the highway from Chicago to Miami.³²

With no national road network in place, Fisher marketed the idea of hundreds of thousands of northern tourists driving through southern states, stopping on the way to Miami for food, gas, rest, and entertainment. The potential network of roads was named the “Dixie Highway.”³³ It was the first successful program to construct permanent highways, and the precursor to a national highway system. Regional and local businesses along the potential route were strong supporters of the project.³⁴

Early during World War I, a majority of the country’s railroads were nationalized, limiting access to the railroads by industries and individuals who had previously depended on them. The Goods Roads Movement and the Dixie Highway construction took on greater importance. Not only would local industries and municipalities benefit from tourism, but farmers would have a more dependable method of getting goods to market.

In 1918, the South Carolina State Highway Commission reported that it had completed surveys and plans for an 8.42 mile stretch of the Dixie Highway between Edgefield and Greenwood. The Commission was also looking at an additional fourteen miles in Edgefield County. Edgefield County was slated to receive over \$12,000 in federal aid.³⁵

The Dixie Highway Association published updates on road conditions in a monthly magazine, which advertised hotels and services along the routes. It also provided maps and guides.³⁶ Edgefield

²⁷ Ibid., 9.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ "Good Roads Train," *Edgefield Advertiser*, September 11, 1911, accessed February 22, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1911-09-20/ed-1/seq-1/>.

³⁰ Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 28.

³¹ Ibid., 47.

³² Ibid, 76.

³³ Ibid, 48.

³⁴ Ibid, 49.

³⁵ South Carolina State Highway Commission, *Second Annual Report of the State Highway Commission to the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina for the Year Ending Dec. 21, 1918* (Columbia: Gonzales and Bryan, 1919), 22.

³⁶ Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 112.

participated in distributing the Dixie Highway map after having committed to build a portion of the road through the town. The town believed that the highway would help increase tourist travel through Edgefield and were supportive of efforts to build it.³⁷

The need for a new hotel in Edgefield on the Dixie Highway route became more urgent. Citizens formed the Dixie Highway Hotel Company, headed by J.C. Sheppard, a former South Carolina governor. The company sold stock beginning in August 1919.³⁸ Later that month the Dixie Highway Hotel Company announced that the architect, G. E. Lafaye from Columbia, South Carolina, had attended a meeting with the board of directors and had presented a sketch of the hotel, a three-story structure with thirty rooms and space for three stores. The board approved the plans and authorized construction drawings by which the architect could obtain bids. The board collected a portion of stock so that construction could begin.³⁹

But by November, only \$32,000 of the necessary \$50,000 was raised. A meeting of Edgefield citizens was called, stressing that without more money, Edgefield would have no hotel.⁴⁰

The board raised the money. By the end of November, 1919, the directors of the Dixie Highway Hotel Company announced that a contract for the construction of the hotel was signed. The expected opening was the summer of 1920.

By March of 1920, Edgefield was the scene of much activity and advancement. The Good Roads Movement was making life easier for farmers and Edgefield citizens who looked favorably on the improved roads. Mr. G.D. Mims noted of the people of Edgefield, "They want to get out of the mud." Stores in the commercial center were in demand, including those of the unfinished Dixie Highway Hotel. Water and sewer were added to the town. And hotel construction was underway.⁴¹

At the end of June, the *Edgefield Advertiser* announced that Mr. Foy A. Vause had leased the Dixie Highway Hotel beginning in September 1920. The article described the hotel as having thirty rooms with steam heat, hot and cold running water, and an electric elevator.⁴² Mr. Vause's experience in running hotels made him a good fit in this hopeful town.

³⁷ "Greenwood and Edgefield Join in Distributing Official Guide Map," *Edgefield Advertiser*, May 11, 1921, accessed February 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1921-05-11/ed-1/seq-6/>.

³⁸ "THE DIXIE HIGHWAY HOTEL - A large modern hotel for Edgefield," *The Edgefield Advertiser*, August 8, 2016, accessed January 6, 2018, <http://www.edgefieldadvertiser.com/2016/08/the-dixie-highway-hotel-a-large-modern-hotel-for-edgefield/>.

³⁹ "Hotel of Thirty Rooms," *Edgefield Advertiser*, August 27, 1919, accessed March 24, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1919-08-27/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1919&index=9&rows=20&words=Dixie+Highway+hotel&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=South+Carolina&date2=1919&proxtext=dixie+highway+hotel&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

⁴⁰ "Edgefield's Imperative Need A Modern Hotel," *Edgefield Advertiser*, November 12, 1919, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1919-11-12/ed-1/seq-10.pdf>.

⁴¹ "Local and Personal," *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 3, 1920, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1920-03-03/ed-1/seq-8/>.

⁴² "Mr. Vause to Leave Belton," *Edgefield Advertiser*, June 30, 1920, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1920-06-30/ed-1/seq-1/>.

The hotel opened to great fanfare on December 12, 1920. Vause, known for providing excellent turkey meals at his previous hotel, served a turkey dinner and supper to about 150 people.⁴³ The hotel was beautifully appointed, said to be one of the best in the state outside of cities. The community rallied around the hotel, holding parties, meetings, and many events there. The *Edgefield Advertiser* regularly listed guests of the hotel. The hotel transformed Edgefield to a modern town that attracted new residents. In 1880, Edgefield's population was about 500. In 1920, it had risen to 2500.⁴⁴ The citizens of Edgefield who had funded the project took great pride in the improvements the hotel brought to the town. The people were so excited about this new situation and the outlook for their futures that they turned their attention away from a looming disaster - the boll weevil infestation.

A long economic decline began in the early 1920s when the boll weevil devastated the cotton crops on which Edgefield's economy was based, prompting a mass exodus. Edgefield lost about 15 percent of its population.⁴⁵ This initial downturn was compounded by the 1929 market crash and the Great Depression.

In December 1922, thirty years after the fire that destroyed the Ryan Hotel, and only two years after the opening of the Dixie Highway Hotel, The Farmers Bank of Edgefield foreclosed on the Dixie Highway Hotel Company, selling all the contents in January 1923.⁴⁶

The newspapers grow silent about the Dixie Highway Hotel after the announcement of the foreclosure. The building does, however, show up on the 1925 Sanborn map, with electric lights, steam heat, and an open elevator noted, and three stores apparently occupied. With the town still active in the Dixie Highway Association, the hotel would have provided some economic opportunity for the town.

In 1937, then state senator Strom Thurmond purchased the hotel and ran it until 1947.⁴⁷ The hotel remained the site of many public meetings and events. It housed long-term tenants, including a blind Baptist minister. The commercial space on the first floor was always occupied. Helen's Beauty Salon, Rita Patterson's dance and piano instruction, a funeral business, among others, rented space there.⁴⁸

In 1960, W.W. Mims purchased the old Dixie Highway Hotel and changed the name to the Edgefield Hotel and Plantation House. The name would later be shortened to Plantation House. By this time, the hotel required repairs and upgrades. Mr. Mims refinished the floors, put in new carpet, chandeliers, and locally-made furniture, installed a new boiler that promised uniform heat, and installed a new elevator. He introduced a coffee shop and soda fountain that became a favorite among locals. Two other restaurants offered diners food and atmosphere options. The hotel identified the Camellia Room as a cafeteria. It was decorated with burlap paneling and paintings of camellia gardens in Edgefield. The

⁴³ "Dixie Highway Hotel Open For Business," *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 5, 1920, accessed February 11, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026897/1920-12-15/ed-1/seq-4/>.

⁴⁴ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 9.

⁴⁵ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 485.

⁴⁶ "Sheriff's Sale Under Execution," *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 13, 1922, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://historicnewspapers.sc.edu/lccn/sn84026897/1922-12-13/ed-1/seq-8/>.

⁴⁷ Edgefield County Historical Society, *The Story of Edgefield* (unknown: Edgefield County Historical Society, 2010), 32.

⁴⁸ Suzanne Derrick, interview by Carolyn M. Coppola, January 19, 2018

more formal Colonial Room required reservations. It was decorated with hand-painted murals depicting plantation living and beautiful crystal chandeliers. The hotel still offered thirty rooms to both travelers and permanent guests.⁴⁹ It later appealed to the retired, offering food served to individual rooms or dining in the Camellia Room.⁵⁰

A full-page ad in the *Edgefield Advertiser* in 1961 called for the promotion of Edgefield on highway approaches as a leading tourist attraction. It listed places to stay and eat in Edgefield. One of them was the Edgefield Hotel and Plantation House.⁵¹ The hotel serviced another market as well. It began to rent to retired veterans. The Department of Health and Environmental Control required wide halls. Mr. Mims constructed a rear addition that could accommodate stretchers and wheelchairs. It was at basement and first-floor levels only. The addition contained a separate lounge and fireplace. Mr. and Mrs. Mims took the veterans on trips and ensured that they participated in community activities and events. The Mims also lived in the hotel until Mr. Mims's passing in 2006.⁵²

In 2007, the hotel was sold to Plantation House LLC, which promised to refurbish the building. The new owners removed many of the interior finishes as they prepared for new work, then they abandoned the project and the building. After years of neglect, portions of the roof collapsed, and so did the floors beneath those parts of the roof. By 2014, the town declared the building dangerous, opening the way for demolition.

The building is now stable and is awaiting a plan for its future. The story of the Plantation House is the story of Edgefield. It was constructed not only to replace the hotels that came before it on that site, but to embrace a new future and to propel the town into modernity. It enabled Edgefield to participate in the transition to a national highway system. In anticipation of new economic opportunities the hotel would bring, the town paved its roads and introduced water, sewer, electricity, and phone service. Through economic challenges, the hotel remained a center of social activity. It was a place where decisions were made, events were celebrated, and futures were planned. It now has the opportunity to continue that role.

⁴⁹ "Plantation House Formal Opening Friday Afternoon," *Edgefield Advertiser*, July 19, 1961.

⁵⁰ *Edgefield Advertiser*, November 4, 1961.

⁵¹ *Edgefield Advertiser*, June 21, 1961.

⁵² Suzanne Derrick, interview by Carolyn M. Coppola, January 19, 2018.

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