

the fire. You have to his young friend Timothy vor slowly fades and Church in Pelham.

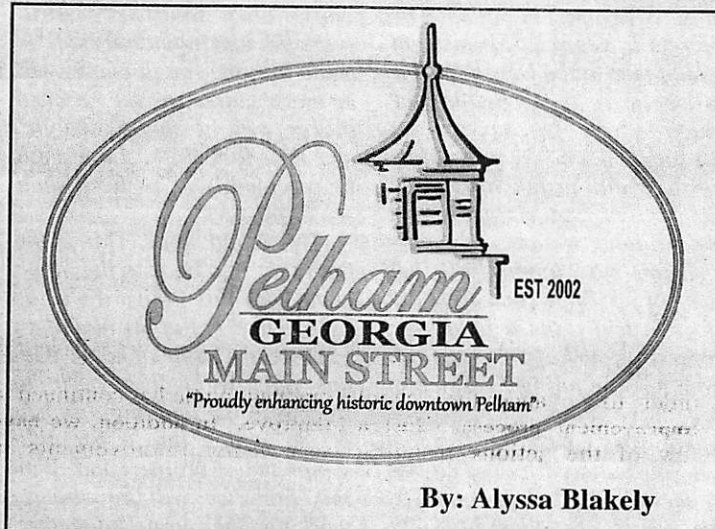
Pelham Main Street News

My First Week as Pelham's Main Street Director and the Mystery of the Big Tomato

In search for employment, I discovered that Pelham's Main Street Manager position was open. Pelham also happens to be my hometown, where my father grew up, his mother, and my great-grandparents too. During childhood, I got the privilege to live in town with my mother and in the country with my father, and felt I got the best of both worlds. Once selected for the position, I quickly told friends and relatives. Immediately I received a mixture of emotions, concerns, and opinions of what they would see happen once I started employment.

One concern was my father explaining how he would like to know what happened to the "big tomato statue" that was once on display downtown. I had heard about the statue, but it seemed like folklore and a distant memory for most. I approached the city manager about it and then went to social media with the request to locate it. By Friday of my first week on the job, I traced a photo I found of the statue to Lee Willis, and the attractive woman in the picture happened to be his mother, Virginia Willis. With his permission to share, this was his explanation of the photograph which details the history:

"Back in the fifties and sixties, my hometown of Pelham, Ga, was known as the Tomato Capital of Georgia. What we do for tomatoes is what Vidalia does for onions. There's just something about the soil around there that imparts the best flavor to be found in a tomato. In fact, there was a big, red sheet metal tomato that sat out on the mall



By: Alyssa Blakely



Picture Courtesy of Lee Willis

in front of the depot and Hand Trading Co. that paid homage to that fact. Circa 1956 a freelance reporter came to town to do a story on the storied tomatoes of Pelham. I was uptown with Mama when the reporter saw us, and came over and asked my mama, Virginia, if she would pose for a picture by that big tomato. She readily agreed, went home and changed into something more "photogenic", then took me back up with her for the shoot. This is the resulting picture that ran in several regional publications. I still remember being there, and her on that ladder. Oh, she didn't tell Daddy about it until after he got home that afternoon..."

Now that I had proof that the statue actually existed, on to finding out what exactly happened to it years later. Mr. Willis also had an article that ran in the Pelham Journal on June 28, 1956 about the famous statue. The article stated it had been removed from its resting place by teenagers and was missing for about a year until discovered in a wooded area off the Camilla-Moultrie Highway. Where the remains of the statue went is still a mystery today, but I'm glad I got to discover and relive a little bit of Pelham's history during my first week.

My hopes are to find someone who might could recreate the "Big Tomato?" This time we will make sure it's set firmly in place.

I look forward to working back in Pelham and keeping the community updated on all the progress that is yet to come with Pelham's Main Street program. To contact email: ablakley@cityofpelhamga.com or (229) 294-7900.

Historic Dixie Highway