

DOWNTOWN GAINESVILLE

The 5th Deadliest Tornado in American History

On Monday, April 6, 1936 at 8:27 AM, two tornados struck downtown Gainesville. One bearing down on the town from Dawsonville Highway and the other from Atlanta Highway, the two funnel clouds converged just west of the city and ripped through the unsuspecting town's center. Two blocks from the square, the tornado collapsed the multi-story building that held the Cooper Pants Factory, killing over seventy workers.

The combined tornadoes continued to the square, destroying the Hall County Court House, businesses, churches, and homes. Students at Gainesville High School were spared with only a few injuries from flying glass as the windows were blown in. Some high school students had taken shelter at a department store on the square while walking to school. They were killed when the building collapsed. The bell from the Courthouse was blown through the residence of Dr. Hamm at the corner of Green Street and Spring Street, destroying it (The bell can now be found hanging outside of the Hall County Court Annex on Spring Street). The two funnel clouds separated east of town in front of the Catholic Church, sparing it from devastation.

The death toll in Gainesville was officially 203, though some accounts place it higher. Property damage was in excess of thirteen million dollars. More than 1,600 persons were injured and more than 750 homes were damaged or destroyed. The storm that hit Gainesville on April 6, 1936 remains the fifth deadliest tornado in U.S. history.

*Self-Guided Walking
Tour of*

"A City Laid Waste"

1936 Tornado



PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT
Visits Gainesville



President Franklin Roosevelt visited April 7 to offer support, but local citizens were already pitching in to rebuild stores, churches and homes. He spoke to the residents from the back of his train. In his remarks, he praised the city for its monumental effort and promised federal aid to help rebuild the city. The tornado had destroyed lives and property, but it had not touched the spirit of Gainesville.

When President Roosevelt returned to Gainesville on March 23, 1938 to dedicate the new Court House and City Hall, he found a thriving and recovered community. A crowd of over 20,000 people listened to Roosevelt as he voiced his gratitude and, once again, expressed his pride in the city's triumphant spirit. Roosevelt praised the local citizens, saying, "You determined... to build a better city. For this, you, the good people of Gainesville, deserve all the praise." Roosevelt's speech marked the end of the city's rehabilitation from the great tornado disaster and served as a powerful symbol of Gainesville's return to greatness.

Want to learn more?

**Visit the Northeast
Georgia History Center**

Open 10 AM - 4 PM
Tuesday-Saturday,

The Northeast Georgia History Center preserves and shares the story of those who came before with its 26,000 square foot facility including exhibits, The White Path Cabin, a blacksmith shop, and the American Freedom Garden. A special exhibit highlights the 1936 Tornado and includes a Tornado Simulator!



322 Academy St. NE
Gainesville, GA 30501
www.negahc.org
770-297-5900

So Much. So Close.

Now that you have experienced our past, take part in our wonderful thriving downtown today! With over 50 great shops and restaurants, there is something for everyone in Downtown Gainesville!



The book "A City Laid Waste" is available at the History Center Gift Shop.

The 1936 Gainesville Tornado

DISASTER AND RECOVERY

A Survivors Tale:

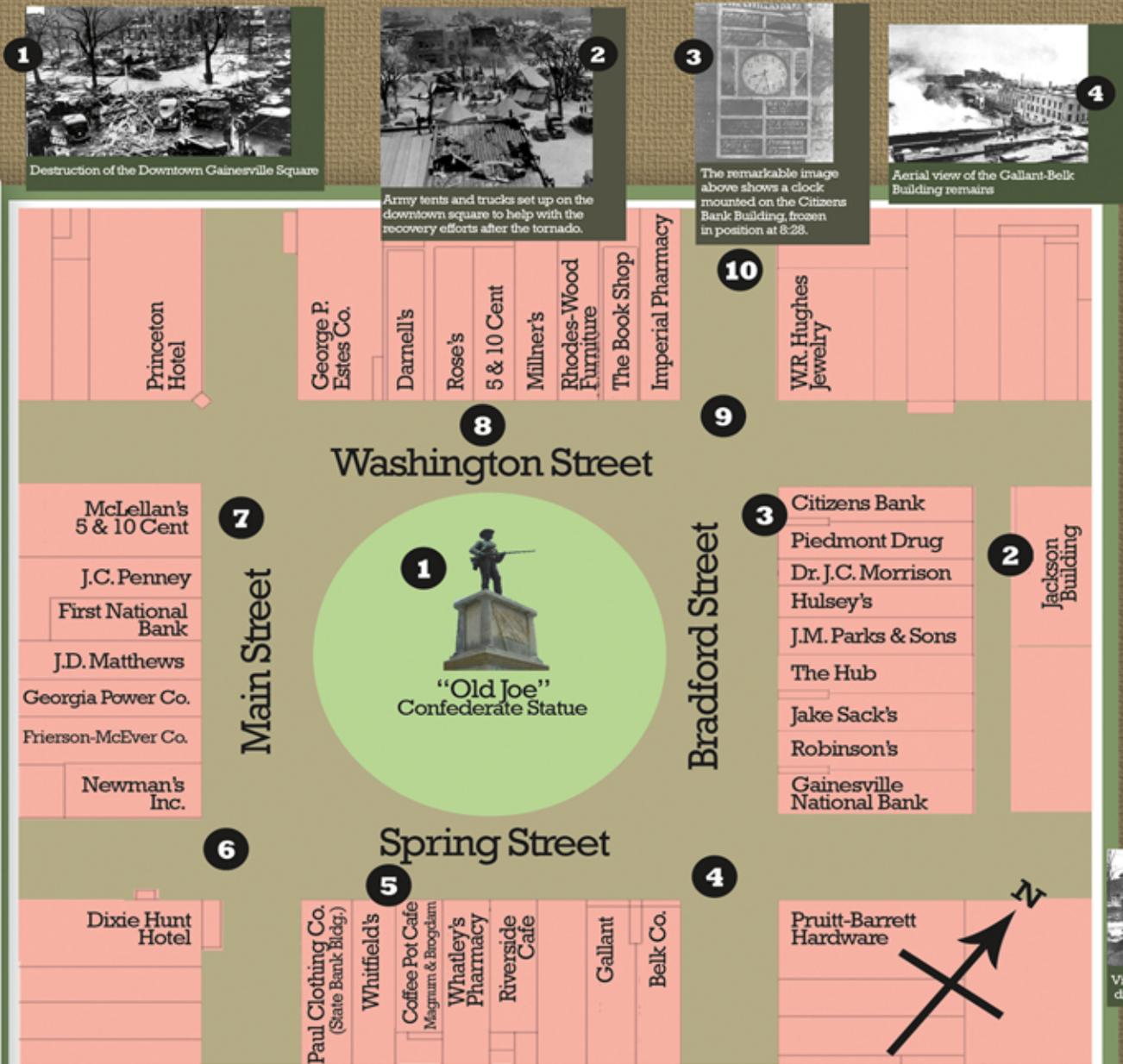
John Wesley Jacobs Jr.'s account of the great tornado.

It was just a little after 8 o'clock that morning when I left home for my morning walk to Gainesville High School. I was a thirteen-year-old, eighth grade freshman. I quickly noticed that, even though it was daytime, the sky has turned as dark as night, and as I recall everything seemed unsettled and scary. I even felt a storm was brewing.

Shortly after 8:15, I walked past the Imperial Pharmacy but did not go inside. I knew Dad wasn't there yet (he probably had been up late filling prescriptions). A little before 8:25, I arrived at the side door of the school, where a teacher calmly told me to hurry upstairs to the library and get underneath a table. As soon as I made it to the table, I heard a roar that sounded like a freight train barreling down on us. All at once, glass from the library windows started blowing all over the room.

Two or three minutes later, the noise stopped. Everything was quiet. "What happened?" I asked, slowly getting to my feet. Someone said we had been hit by a tornado. But what was a tornado? There were no tornado warnings to keep you updated: for example, the same tornado that hit Gainesville rolled through Tupelo, Mississippi, the preceding day and killed 216 people, but no one knew it was coming our way. In those days, radio and newspapers would normally report more on what had happened rather than forecasting what was to happen... Still dazed, I hurried to the same door I had entered and I looked outside. The houses across the street were gone. The ground was littered with power and telephone lines, utility poles, trees and debris of every nature. As I walked through the devastation, someone warned me to avoid the fallen power lines (I did not want to get electrocuted).

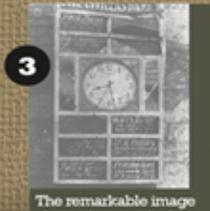
As I looked toward the downtown square, a block away, I saw smoke coming from several buildings. And then it started to pour rain. "What about Dad?" I thought. "Had he made it to the drug store? Was the drug store damaged? What about my mother and sister? Did the tornado hit our home on Boulevard?"... I started to become afraid. I prayed that my family was alright. Pandemonium filled the streets. People were going in every direction, many not even knowing where they were headed. I can still hear the blaring sirens... Looking and wondering, I continued up Washington Street and turned onto Green Street to see what had happened. Where was my family? ... That's when I saw Dad's Buick coming down Green Street. Mother and Sister were with him as well. But they had to stop because there was no way to drive on the downtown streets, which were littered with debris. We all ran at one another in the pouring rain - crying, but happy to be alive.



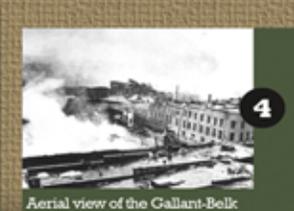
1 Destruction of the Downtown Gainesville Square



2 Army tents and trucks set up on the downtown square to help with the recovery efforts after the tornado.



3 The remarkable image above shows a clock mounted on the Citizens Bank Building, frozen in position at 8:28.



4 Aerial view of the Gallant-Belk Building remains



5 Street View of the Coffee Pot Cafe



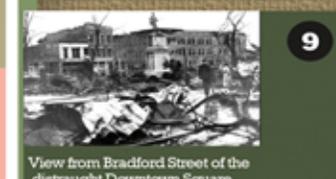
6 Debris caused by the tornado, blocked automobiles, and several buildings on Bradford Street caught fire.



7 View from the corner of Washington and Main Streets. The Estes Building, shown in photograph, later became Burtons.



8 Aid workers in front of George P. Estes, Darnell's, Roses 5, 10, 25 Cents Store, Millner's, and Rhodes-Wood Furniture.



9 View from Bradford Street of the distraught Downtown Square.



10 The tornado caused a chain reaction of destruction. The above image shows the Bradford Street buildings erupting into flames.

Did you know?

The sturdy Confederate soldier statue stood unmoved to tower above the destruction and litter left on the Downtown Gainesville Square by the tornado of April 6, 1936.

An excerpt from
The Longer You Live
 By John Wesley Jacobs, Jr.
 Available for Sale at the Northeast Georgia History Center