

The Molly Brooks Story

Town Governed by Women Commissioners

Progress and development was the movement of the early 20th century. Bath joined in this idea and began to petition for change. Several different buildings in the town had served at one time or another as a schoolhouse. A meeting was held at the Red Men's Hall on Monday night, December 8, 1919 for the purpose of buying land to erect a high school in the town. Committees were formed and subscriptions taken to start the fund-raising process. A motion was also made to sell three acres of the town commons and apply those proceeds to the fund.

While progress was the goal for the small town, the men still had to be active in the day to day operations of their own businesses and that made any development slow. Just a few weeks prior to the town elections set to take place in January 1921, the men realized that the only hope for the move forward was to approach some of the town's women to actually fill the positions as the town commissioners. They approached Mrs. Mollie Brooks, Mrs. Annie Crawley and Mrs. Vonnie Marsh, prominent Bath citizens that had lived there nearly all their lives. The three were reluctant to agree to this arrangement because at this time women did not hold public office. Although women had won the right to vote in 1920 it was still believed that their place was in the home. The men persuaded them that this proposed plan was in the best interest of the town. The women finally agreed and were elected without any opposition. This all-woman administration of the oldest town in North Carolina is said to be the first female governing board in the United States.

The new administration took their assignment very seriously, all the while never neglecting their household responsibilities. These three women spent the time usually set aside for visiting with neighbors in conducting town business. Mrs. Mollie Brooks was elected chairman of the group and Bath was on its way to a whole new look.

Their first priority was improvements to the streets, which, being dirt, were becoming hard to travel because of holes and ruts made by wagon wheels. Bath had very little money available for public works, so the women turned to the farmers in the town who, because of the time of year, had few agricultural responsibilities. The men readily gave the use of their teams and wagons as well as their time for this project and in less than a week the job was finished with very noticeable improvements.

The new commissioners next tackled the collection of taxes. Posting a list of the delinquent taxes in the window of Brooks' store seemed to serve as incentive to tardy taxpayers. Payments began to pour in, and as debts were cleared, the names were marked out. It was not long before three years of back taxes had been collected, bringing in a profit of between \$300 and \$400 for the town.

Involving the children in the sprucing up the town also proved to be an effective strategy. Mrs. Brooks staged a contest for the children of the town. The boy or girl bringing in the most rubbish would be awarded the first prize of \$3.00, with the second and third place winners receiving \$2.00 and \$1.00, respectively. Soon, two double mule wagonloads were hauled from the town, with Roscoe Tankard being the first place winner.

The issue of the building of a school in Bath had made little progress since the first talk of that project began in 1919. The bricks had been acquired but still sat in piles on the grounds of the proposed school site. The women decided to hustle the project along and Mr. T. A. Brooks, husband of Chairman Mollie Brooks, allowed a draft against his personal account to be made for the materials needed to build the school. (He was later repaid by the county and state.) The two-story structure, very modern for its time, served the grammar and high school students and was ready for classes to begin in the fall of 1921.

Another accomplishment of the group was the "City Beautiful" campaign for keeping weeds cut down and the planting of attractive shrubbery. They also encouraged townspeople to keep structures painted, as this would be a noticeable improvement for those visiting the area.

The women commissioners' visions for the future also included a hard surfaced road between Bath and Washington, increasing the population through industry and having a well-stocked public library. They were quick to note that they could not accomplish these goals alone and that in the near future, the men would have to take back the governing of the town. In the Sunday, March 20, 1921 issue of the News and Observer, Mrs. Brooks says, "When it comes to those larger things I am afraid we will have to get men in office again for I know we won't be able to carry those details out by ourselves. We are satisfying ourselves with immediate needs which can be used as a foundation for a later growth of the community."

Through this administration, which only lasted one term, much needed improvements were made to Bath in its revenue, appearance and education. Also, by involving children in various town projects, a sense of pride and responsibility was being instilled in the younger generation.