

20th Century

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Prosperous and resourceful, Washington entered the 20th century relying on its transportation advantages as a river port and railroad town to fuel a trade centered economy. Connected with farmers and villages over a wide territory, the town shipped and processed agricultural products and sold the wares of its merchants and craftsmen. Flour mills, pork-packers, the corncob pipe factories and a world renown zither maker shared space on the riverbank with blacksmiths, furniture stores, tailors and jewelers, taverns and hotels, church spires and schoolhouses.

But the golden age of steam boating was over and competition from newly built railroads nearby eroded Washington's preeminence in the region. Local business houses felt this loss of territory keenly. Large scaled industrialization was putting small local businesses in jeopardy here as elsewhere nationwide.

Washington needed a new economic base and soon found it in the Roberts, Johnson & Rand Shoe Company which built a branch factory in **1907** on a site provided by a local committee headed by G. H. Otto. Lots surrounding the factory were sold for housing and Washington entered a new economic era as a shoe factory town. A second shoemaker located here in **1925** and for the next several generations the town's fortunes were tied to the shoe industry.

After having declined by 15% between **1910** and **1920**, Washington's population almost doubled to 5,900 in the 20s and by **1934** over **1900** Washingtonians were making their living at the shoe factories. Shoe making continued to dominate economic life throughout the 40s and 50s. When the shoe industry relocated in the 60s and the 70s other manufacturing plants were drawn to town by the presence of an able work force and efforts of civic leaders who provided the real estate and other enticements for relocation. It is an effort, which, with much success, has continued into the 21st century.

Expansion of housing has been a constant theme of the 20th century. Numerous subdivisions and annexations accommodated the growth. Population increased from 3,000 over the hundred years to the present 13,500 in the city proper. Single family

homes have remained the preferred domicile with numerous apartments, duplexes and condos available as well. Considerable residential development has also occurred outside the city in the nearby vicinity.

The sturdy brick cityscape of business buildings downtown remained largely intact until mid-century when retail expansions and parking needs began to thin its ranks by demolition. New shopping areas, especially at the state highway intersection, have now shifted most business activity away from the old town, although significant retailers, schools, churches and civic buildings remain there. Washington has several historic districts and a total of 445 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, a record number for Missouri. The waterfront has been redeveloped for leisure activities with inns, restaurants, parks, trails and boating facilities, and a Visitors Center in the renovated railroad depot.

Nowadays Washington serves its residents and visitors in many ways. It is a regional shopping place, a bedroom community for urban commuters, high tech manufacturing town, a major medical provider as well as a sports, cultural and

educational center. It is the largest city in Franklin County where double digit growth rates in recent decades has pushed population to well over 90,000 inhabitants.

Despite the recent rapid development, which has brought Washington into the modern worldwide business economy, it is still possible to detect its unique flavors of Southern gentility and German earnestness. The city, however, has become a midwestern melting pot, always aspiring to improve and uplift. A vibrant community spirit prevails which is expected in a town, which thrives on strong roots and solving its own problems.