



## How cotton gin scales symbolize Cornelius' balance of future and past

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by Lee Sullivan



Blue-sided buildings and the old cotton gin (the white T-shaped building in the middle with the long front roof) are marked for demolition on the 1.8-acre Catawba Avenue parcel destined to become the Cain Center for the Arts campus. /Courtesy Bella Love

**CORNELIUS** – A significant step toward creating a new town centerpiece is on the horizon, accompanied by a priority to preserve the past.

Building demolition and site preparation for the \$25 million Cain Center for the Arts could begin next month, according to center Executive Director Justine Dionne. And while the reimagining of the downtown area is expected to reshape the town's future, the project will also – with expressed support from all parties involved – celebrate the community's history.

The Cain Center for the Arts is envisioned as a regional hub for arts and cultural activities. A 1.8-acre Catawba Avenue site, just west of N.C. 115 and across Catawba Avenue from town hall, was acquired

by the town last year for \$1.5 million and is destined to become the home of the Cain Center campus. The planned facility will include a 400-seat theater, art gallery, large lobby, multi-purpose classrooms, a 7,500-square-foot public plaza, and an outdoor community space and performance venue.

A \$4 million municipal bond package, and a \$5 million contribution from town residents Bill and Ericka Cain – along with other sizable individual and corporate gifts, a recent \$1 million commitment from Mecklenburg County and community involvement in a years-long fundraising drive – have combined to raise more than \$17 million for the project.

Ceremonies to mark the start of site-clearing work were planned for May – around the time final architectural drawings for the Cain Center campus were released – but were delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis. Renewed discussions about demolition efforts target a late August or early September start, Dionne said.

The site clearing will involve the removal of three buildings, including the century-old Cornelius Cotton Gin that provides a direct link to the town’s development in the late 19th century as a hub for bringing cotton to market.

The pending status of the demolition work, long planned as part of the Cain Center project, triggered renewed discussions about the value of preserving the past while progressing toward the future. Those discussions also revealed a shared interest in protecting and promoting pieces of the past when possible.



Cotton’s vital role in Cornelius’ evolution is included in a town hall wall exhibit honoring the community’s past. / Lee Sullivan

## ‘Once it’s gone ...’

Jessica Boye’s views stem from several perspectives. She is vice chair of the Cornelius Historic Preservation Committee (CHPC) – a citizen group that in 2016 adopted a motion encouraging the town to preserve the Cotton Gin – and the communications coordinator for Bella Love Inc., an event

company that promotes the character of “Old Town Cornelius.” And she emphasized she and the Bella Love team also support the Cain Center vision.

“I want to keep the approach to all this positive,” Boye said in a discussion highlighting the current push for historic awareness. “We have a great relationship with the Cain Center and we want that to continue and grow, but we also want to make sure the town’s history is preserved and protected.”

Boye acknowledged the prospect of saving the well-worn wood-framed Cotton Gin, last used as a furniture warehouse, has faded, but the memory of the building, and potential mementoes from it, should be preserved.

“Anything of historical value would be worth protecting,” she said. “This was the crown jewel of the town, and it will be again. But if we don’t make the effort to preserve what we can now, it might be too late. Once it’s gone, you can’t get it back. That’s really the message.

“We have an historic area, a treasure. And I think to end up with nothing but new development without a reference – a celebration – of the past would be a tragedy.”

The focus on finding and keeping artifacts was sharpened earlier this year when pieces of a large scale system were discovered stored behind a later-era wall addition in the Cotton Gin. Boye, referencing a comprehensive report on the building prepared by Susan Mayer, said the long-standing belief was all original parts and materials from the Cotton Gin had been sold or removed decades before, but she supported the idea of learning more about the scales.

Town Manager Andrew Grant agreed, saying the town asked historic property preservation experts for input on the discovered materials. Stewart Gray, senior preservation planner for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC), conducted the evaluation and determined the pieces were not part of the original Cotton Gin system, but were, without question, worth preserving.

Gray said he determined the remnants of a large-scale mechanism – springs, a control arm, weights and other parts – date back to the 1960s or early 1970s, but the purpose of the pieces, not just their age, carry historic significance.

“It’s an indication of why the building was built in the first place,” Gray said. “It’s an illustration of the important role cotton played in the development of the region and Cornelius.”

Gray said the need to weigh and sell cotton spurred the growth of Cornelius. Despite featuring the convergence of a primary north-south route, railroad line and a direct roadway link to the Cowans Ford crossing of the Catawba River, Cornelius didn’t develop until it became a weighing and selling place for area cotton growers – a process traced to disagreement over establishing an official cotton weigher position for the region based in Davidson.

“The development of Cornelius was because of cotton,” Gray said in summarizing support for preserving the scales, adding that before the first Cornelius cotton gin was built, Caldwell Station (now

the north side of Huntersville) was considered Davidson's closest neighbor to the south.

Dan Morrill, who retired last year after 46 years with the HLC but remains active in county preservation efforts, echoed Gray's assessment about the historic value of the scale parts.

"The fact that something is not original does not negate or diminish its importance," Morrill said. "It's a link to the community's past. It illustrates what was important.

"If you found a toothbrush from generations ago, or centuries ago, does it have to be the original toothbrush to illustrate what life was like when it was used? Cotton was king in Mecklenburg County, and pieces recovered can illustrate that. Something like this is irreplaceable, and once it's gone, well, it's just gone."



Earlier this summer, final architectural drawings of the planned Cain Center for the Arts were released. /Courtesy of Cain Center for the Arts

## Holding on to history

Boye mentioned the idea of incorporating scale pieces into a display or interactive exhibit at the Cain Center, and Morrill said using parts in some type of artistic project would be appropriate.

"The purpose of art is to stimulate imagination," Morrill said. "That's what this could do: give visitors the opportunity to visualize what life was like. That's what art, and the art center, is all about."

Space limitations will ultimately determine the extent of displays possible in the Cain Center, but tributes to the past – either as artwork, exhibits or part of the infrastructure – will be incorporated in the facility, according to Dionne, Grant and Cornelius Mayor Woody Washam.

Dionne and Grant both said a commitment to salvage materials was the reason a more involved and more expensive "selective demolition" approach will be applied at the Cotton Gin.

"The company doing the work understands that whatever can be saved, should be saved," Dionne said.

He added that a plan is in place to use rescuable timbers from the building in the construction of the Cain Center's main reception desk, and if there are other items that can be preserved and used in some way, that's what will happen.

“Our organization is committed to highlighting the culture of the area,” Dionne said, “and we want the Cain Center to honor the history and preserve what’s possible.”

Grant said conversations are continuing with architects about more ways to put salvaged materials to use and create spaces in the Cain Center to honor the town’s history.

“The goal has always been to include ties to the past in the new center,” Grant said.

He and Washam referenced a wall exhibit in town hall that illustrates the town’s timeline – with a notable nod to the cotton industry – and Washam said preserving and displaying more pieces of the past is a shared goal for town officials.

“We want anything that can be saved and preserved,” Washam said. “I completely endorse the idea of preserving components that represent the town’s history and could be displayed as a way to celebrate our roots.”

He added he knows many area residents have artifacts and other items from the town’s past – he specifically referenced a bell from an old school – that should be a part of a Cornelius heritage collection, but the Cain Center may not be the place for the entire exhibit.

“I will say I, along with the entire town board, have endorsed the idea of creating a place, a type of museum, to exhibit and keep things important to the town’s history,” he said. “There will not be room for all of it in the Cain Center; there’s just not enough space. But we’re looking for a location.”

“There is excitement about the new arts center,” Washam added, “but there is also interest in preserving and celebrating the past. I think we’re all on the same page about that.”