Welcome to Bibb City: A Self-Guided Walking Tour

by

Mindy Gillow

Located on the banks of the Chattahoochee River, Bibb City is a mill village located in Columbus, Georgia. Both the mill and its village opened its doors for business in 1902. Two things make Bibb City unique. First, long after other mill proprietors in the South had abandoned such practices, the management of Bibb Mill kept a paternalistic eye on the village for sixty years. The city remained a separate municipality completely surrounded by the city of Columbus for over ninety years (the town dissolved in 2000). The second unique feature is the design of the community itself. There were two phases of development in Bibb City – what residents used to call the Old Village and the New Village. As the map reveals, the road layout in the northern part of Bibb City differs from the layout in the southern half of the community. The Old Village is located around the mill in the southern section of Bibb City. Old Village roads are laid out on a grid, and the houses sit side-by-side, very close to one another. In contrast, northern Bibb City roads are curved and the homes are laid out along those curves. Streets loop back into each other and do not connect with the major Columbus streets. Little has changed in the community’s housing or its layout in eighty years. As we explore Bibb City, we will see that there are other differences between the Old and New villages.

To begin, start at the Rivermill Event Center located at 3715 1st Avenue in Columbus. The tour should take approximately thirty minutes and is fairly easy to navigate, with only a few small hills and a small flight of stairs.
Let's begin at the corner of Porter and Hansen. From here, you can see a clear view of the water tower towards the West (#2 on the map’s points of interest, or POI), as well as a great example of the newer housing. These four-room houses were used to board workers. Two families lived in each house as evidenced by the two front doors. Workers and families took great pride in their lives in Bibb City and strove to keep the village nice. The mill owners sponsored clean up days to keep the town tidy and kept a critical eye on residents’ gardens.
B. As you continue north on Hansen Avenue, at the corner where you intersect 40th Street, you find your next stop. Looking north, you can see the Bibb City Elementary School (Figure 2 & POI # 6). The school was the center of community life for years, until the construction of the auditorium. To your left, you can see the Porter Baptist Church (Figure 3 & POI # 5). Unlike most mill towns, Bibb did not force religion on its workers. However, it was greatly encouraged.

C. From Hansen Avenue, turn left and proceed down 40th street. Near the point where Park Avenue and 40th Street meet, you will find the site of both the community pool (Figure 4) and the former community center, which also functioned as the town’s clinic (POI # 7). You can also look south down Park Avenue for a view of the ten-room boarding houses, which were part of the Old Village’s housing for both families and single boarders. Originally there were twenty-four of these houses, but today many have been destroyed.
D. Continue down 40th Street (or Poplar Street). The site of the former Boy Scout Hut (POI # 8) is just ahead on the left, across from the Bibb Triangle. The original building was destroyed by a storm in 1953, but was rebuilt by April 1954. The house that you see now was built in 2008. Beyond the house, there is a nice view of the Chattahoochee River.

E. Go right on Poplar Street, making your way past the Bibb Triangle (which will be on your left). As you proceed down Poplar Street, stop to check out Hemlock Drive Park (POI #10) to the North, or on your left. From here, you have a great overview of the park. Unlike the older village, the newer village designs included parks and more rural housing. If you look north up Hemlock Drive, there is much more green space, with wide grass medians between the street and the sidewalk.

Fig. 5. Comer Auditorium
Courtesy of Columbus State University Archives

F. As you approach the corner of 41st Street and Hemlock Drive, you will see the Comer Auditorium (Figure 5 & POI # 9). It was built in July 1941 as a community center. Community basketball tournaments were often held in the Comer. Look up and you will notice a cupola on top of this building, distinguishing it from the surrounding community. Note: Between this point and the final point, you will encounter a small flight of stairs.

G. Continuing on Hemlock Drive, you will notice the housing is closer together. This is considered part of the Old Village. Bibb village residents took pride in keeping their homes clean and properly maintained.
Our final stop on the tour is at the end of Comer Street, which includes a view of the former Bibb Mill (Figure 6 & POI #3). Built in 1902, the mill stretched over 1000-feet long. All the memories that developed in its shadow over the last century resurfaced in a fire in October 2008. Hundreds of people came to watch the mill they had worked in their entire lives burn to the ground. The only part of the long building that remains is the façade – a reminder of the importance of cotton mill life in Bibb City.

(Unless noted, the above images were supplied by the Columbus State University Archives. For the complete story of Collected Lives from a Mill Town, please visit: http://archives.colstate.edu/digital_collections/bibb_city.php)
Points of Interest

1. Bibb Mill Buildings
2. Water Tower
3. Bibb City Hotel
4. Supervisors' Row
5. Baptist Church
6. Elementary School
7. Swimming Pool
8. Boy Scout Hut
9. Comer Auditorium
10. Hemlock Drive Park
11. Riverwalk Bridge
12. Ed Vance Park

Legend
- Tour Points
- Tour Route
- Points of Interest
- North Highlands RR Trolley
- Riverwalk
- Streets
- Bibb City

Fig. 7. Map of Bibb City
Courtesy of Rushtone Cartography