

CUMMINS STATION

CUMMINS STATION

The History of a Nashville Icon



CUMMINS STATION

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by BILL CAREY

The building that moved business to the tracks

When it was built, Cummins Station linked Nashville's business community to the railroads. In a city that wasn't initially thrilled about railroads, this was a bigger deal than one might think.

In the 1840s, for instance, Vernon K. Stevenson went door-to-door trying to raise money for a rail line connecting Nashville to Chattanooga. Content with the tradition of taking goods downstream to New Orleans, then returning by way of the Natchez Trace, Nashville's citizens didn't invest as much money into Stevenson's venture as he hoped. In the end the people of Charleston, South Carolina, ensured the development of what later became known as the Nashville & Chattanooga Railway by investing \$500,000 in it.

Not long after Stevenson's disappointing sales job, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad extended its line south to Nashville. The business interests who controlled the city tried, successfully for a while, to keep the rail line from crossing the Cumberland River into downtown Nashville — hoping that all the goods would be transferred to riverboats. But in the end, the bridge was built. By the time the Civil War broke out, Nashville had rail lines leading north, rail lines leading south, and rail lines leading southeast. Rail lines were so good, in fact, that the Union Army turned Nashville into its supply depot and staging area for its invasion of Tennessee and Georgia.

Nashvillians with money before the war felt differently about railroads than Nashvillians after the war. Postwar Nashville became affiliated with railroads — most notably the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway. But somehow the world of riverboats coexisted with the world of railroads. By the 1890s Nashville was connected to just about any city in America by rail. But if you look at photographs from that era, you'll see a busy, congested riverfront. From the bustling, muddy bank of the Cumberland River, goods were unloaded, hauled into buildings along the river with a basement level on Front Street (First Avenue), then brought up to the first floor, where they were sold in dry goods stores along Market Street (Second Avenue). Wholesalers and merchants realized they were dependent on the railroads, but they preferred to stay near the river.

Railroads were the main reason Nashville became a thriving capital for the South's wholesale grocer business. Grocery wholesalers — and there were dozens of them in Nashville starting about 1870 — turned Nashville into the traveling salesman capital of the South. An amiable young man with some education could land a job as a traveling salesman for a grocery wholesaler — a profession known as “drummer” because it was their business to “drum up” sales from mom-and-pop grocers. Nashville's business community became so dominated by traveling drummers that by the turn of the century, the *Nashville Tennessean* had a page in its Sunday issue devoted to them.

The downside to being a drummer was that one had to take a train or steamboat out of town Monday morning and did not come back until Friday. The good side was that it was interesting and gave one a chance to learn a business and meet people.



At the turn of the century railroads were becoming better, faster, safer, and more likely to reach just about every spot on the map. The two largest railroads in Nashville, meanwhile, took a step that ingratiated themselves with Nashville’s citizenry and opened the door for the development of Cummins Station.

Nashville, you see, had lousy train stations. Prior to 1886, the Louisville & Nashville’s (L&N) passenger station was north of City Hall, where the train tracks cross what used to be known as College Street (Third Avenue North). The Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway (NC&StL), meanwhile, had its passenger station at the corner of Church and Walnut (Tenth Avenue North).

Then, in 1886, the L&N’s station burned down. Since, by this time, the L&N owned a majority of the stock in the NC&StL, the L&N management decided that instead of building a station just for the L&N, it would build a grand new train station that both railroads could use. It would be called “Union Station” because it would represent the “union” of both railroads. While the Union Station was being planned and

constructed, the L&N and the NC&StL would share the old NC&StL passenger terminal.

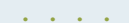
Planning the grand new Union Station took longer than anyone predicted. The relationship between the city of Nashville and its two major railroads was a complex one. Many Nashvillians resented the big L&N, especially after its 1879 takeover of the NC&StL, and felt mistreated by it. The L&N was often referred to as “The Octopus” and was thought of by many to be a heartless corporation that had as much regard for Nashville as a European nation had for a neglected part of its empire. When Nashville resident Jere Baxter tried to organize an east-west railroad called the Tennessee Central, the L&N fought his efforts at every turn and made it clear that the Tennessee Central would not be allowed to use the Union Station.

Since railroads need a lot of help and approval from state and local governments to acquire land, set freight rates, arrange for bridges to be constructed over rail lines and other such things, an agreement had to be worked out with the state of Tennessee and the Nashville City Council before Union Station could be built. Incredibly, this process took more than a decade. And although it was a relatively small part of the overall debate, the people who lived near the proposed Union Station were opposed to it because they knew it would add noise and air pollution to a part of town that had previously been tranquil.

Finally, on June 9, 1898, the city council approved the agreement with the Nashville Terminal Company (the L&N subsidiary that had been formed to develop Union Station and the rail yards surrounding it). Under the deal, the Nashville Terminal Company would build the new Union Station; the large train shed to the south of it; an expanded rail yard west of both properties; and two viaducts that would cross a total of 27 tracks (one for Broad Street and the other for Church Street). All of these projects cost in excess of \$1.5 million – making it the largest single investment in Nashville by a for-profit company to that point.¹

With the deal finally settled, the Terminal Company got to work on the station, the shed and the yards. The L&N didn’t cut corners, building a five-story stone building that was designed in Romanesque architectural style, with a central tower that was 219 feet high. The inside of the station was spacious and ornate. By the time the Union Station opened in 1900, the riverfront must have felt dirty, outdated and inefficient compared to the glorious new station and the maze of train tracks in the vicinity of it.

Nevertheless, for a couple of years after the Union Station opened, wholesale businesses along Nashville’s Market Street couldn’t move closer to the train tracks because there weren’t big warehouses near the train tracks.



Along came William J. Cummins. Cummins was a partner in a Market Street wholesaling business known as Cummins, Bennett & Co. One of Nashville more successful wholesaling businesses, Cummins, Bennett & Co.’s salesmen traveled the countryside representing such businesses as the American Sugar Refining Co. (the largest sugar company in the U.S. at that time); the American Linseed Co. (which was controlled by John D. Rockefeller); the National Starch Co. (which still existed a century later); and the Corn Products Co. (which also still existed a century later). “Big Bill” Cummins – as his friends knew him – appears to have gotten similarly-minded businessmen interested in the idea of a large warehouse complex located along the new rail yards.

But for a man with a big ego, Cummins was ready to share the credit for heading up this effort. In May 1907, a local newspaper article explained the original idea behind the building that would later be named for him:

“One of the present stockholders at that time happened to be passing the corner of the Public Square and North Market Street. It was during a rush season and he saw a line of wagons extending from the College-street yard far back up Market Street. The thought entered his mind that all of this freight had been hauled away from the various freight depots and then hauled back, and he didn’t see why wholesale houses could not be located directly on a railroad track and all of that vast amount of hauling saved. He turned the idea over many times in his mind, and it was not long until the matter was worked

out in definite shape, and not much longer until the present company was organized by a number of merchants and railroad men.”

The article didn’t identify this “present stockholder” as Cummins. But a few years later a *New York Times* profile of Cummins contained the following explanation:

“It soon dawned on him [Cummins] that there was no great reason why the wholesale merchants of Nashville who bought from Cummins, Bennett & Co. should continue doing business in a lot of ‘mill-constructed’ houses — that is, structures of wood, many of them so old and out of date that high rates of insurance were charged by the insurance companies to the occupants. The bulk of these buildings were situated one mile from railroad tracks, thus necessitating the payment by merchants of large sums for the hauling of their merchandise.

“What was needed, Cummins decided, was a big building to serve as a railroad shipping station. He got the idea from the so-called Cupples Station at St. Louis, but decided to build his Nashville station of reinforced concrete throughout, as being the sort of construction best suited to his purposes. Among other advantages likely to appeal to merchants he reckoned the rate of insurance, which on a building of that sort of construction would be very low.”²

The *Times* article said the key step in getting Cummins Station financed was winning over President Smith of

the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. “At first inducements had to be held out to the Nashville merchants in the way of reduced rentals and the like before they would enter enthusiastically into the scheme. But what with these and the continued outpouring of ‘Big Bill’s’ golden words, scruple after scruple was overcome, and soon every foot of space in the place was occupied.”

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Developers of the building later to be dubbed Cummins Station originally organized under the name “Merchants Elevator & Warehouse Company.” Among its officers were:

- Cummins
- William P. Bruce, superintendent of the Terminal Company, which, of course, had just built the Union Station Hotel, train shed, and two viaducts
- Leslie Cheek, who worked with his father C.T. in a wholesale business known as C.T. Cheek and Son, and who had a sizeable investment in his uncle Joel’s coffee business (the Cheek-Neal Coffee Co.)³
- Hunter McDonald, chief engineer for the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway
- William Higgins, a local agent for the NC&StL

Moving, logically, south along the train tracks from the new Union Station and train shed, the partners decided to build their structure along Gowdy Street (sometimes spelled “Gowdey”), which at that time was lined with houses on both sides.⁴ During a six-week period from late September through early November 1905, real estate agent Alfred M. Hagan purchased all 13 lots along the west side of Gowdy Street for amounts ranging from \$2,750 to \$6,000. According to the *Nashville City Directory*, sellers ranged from Rachel Smith (widow of late architect William Smith); to Samuel M.D. Clark (the principal of Montgomery Bell Academy); to Medora Jones (student at Ward Seminary). To keep the transactions under wraps, Hagan kept the deeds in his office and didn’t file them with the Registry of Deeds office until mid-November.⁵

Hagan’s apparent attempt to keep reporters from learning about the warehouse idea was foiled. An article about the development — apparently the first — appeared in the October 21, 1905 *Nashville Banner*. On a day in which the biggest local news story was the arrival in town of several Illinois Central Railroad officials, the headline announced “MILLION-DOLLAR STOREHOUSES” on Gowdy Street. The article said the building would be 750 feet long and be “divided up into stores of a size and with arrangements to suit the prospective occupants.” Its development was said to be “indicative of the confidence of the railroad element in Nashville’s future.”

Old houses were torn down and the large building broke ground in early 1906. Its general contractor was W.J. Oliver & Co., a prominent railroad contractor based in Knoxville. In contrast to the warehouses along Market Street, which were constructed of brick and wood, the new warehouse along the train tracks was made of reinforced concrete. By the time its five-story structure rose beside the train gulch its tenant list included some of the more important dry goods wholesalers of that era, including:

- Cummins, Bennett & Co.
- C.T. Cheek & Son, a wholesale and retail chain
- The Cheek-Neal Coffee Co., whose Maxwell House brand was becoming more widely sold all the time. Only two years earlier, Cheek-Neal had built a large manufacturing and distribution facility in Houston; the Cummins Station facility would replace Cheek-Neal’s Market Street location.
- The Continental Baking Powder Co., a business in which William Cummins owned a large interest.
- Phillips-Trawick-James Co. wholesale grocers
- Matthews, Harrison & Phillips wholesale grocers

At a time when the largest building in town was the Stahlman Building, the new warehouse’s dimensions were staggering. Costing \$375,000 to build, it

contained 12 warehouses with four stories and a basement each, along with 21 freight elevators. The structure was 500 feet long and 132 feet deep, giving it a total cubic footage of 3.9 million.⁶

Advertisements cited it to be, at that time, the largest reinforced concrete terminal station in the world. The building was said to be fireproof – a big deal in an era in which large buildings frequently burned. And, in a reflection of the conditions obviously found on Nashville’s riverfront, the new warehouse’s developers boasted that, in their building, “rats cannot live.”

The new warehouse was christened “Cummins Station” in February 1907. On Saturday night, March 2, 1907, business and political leaders attended a banquet at the Duncan Hotel honoring William Cummins and celebrating the completion of the building that, from that point onward, would carry his name. Among those in attendance were Tennessee Governor Malcolm Patterson, former Tennessee Governor Benton McMillin, state treasurer Reau Folk, Nashville Mayor T.O. Morris, and *Nashville Banner* publisher E.B. Stahlman. At the event, Joel Cheek presented a silver cup to Mr. Cummins on behalf of his fellow tenants that, according to the article, “took Bill off his feet.” Two weeks later, the *Nashville American* carried another promotional article about Cummins Station along with a photograph of Mr. Cummins. He was the hero of the hour; his building represented everything that was progressive about Nashville.

Footnotes

¹ Contrary to what you might think, neither of Nashville’s two daily newspapers reported the passage of this bill on their front pages. That month, both front pages were dominated by news from the Spanish-American War.

² Built in 1894, Cupples Station was a massive freight depot and warehouse complex in St. Louis that at one time consisted of nearly 20 buildings. Some of them were torn down over the years to make way for highways and Busch Stadium, but a couple of them were renovated and still exist as either housing or hotels.

³ Leslie Cheek later built the Cheekwood mansion.

⁴ According to *Stories Behind the Street Names* by Denise Strub, Gowdy Street was named for Thomas Gowdy, an Irish immigrant and former British Army officer who had a jewelry store on the Public Square.

⁵ Hagan’s real estate office was located at 231 Third Avenue North.

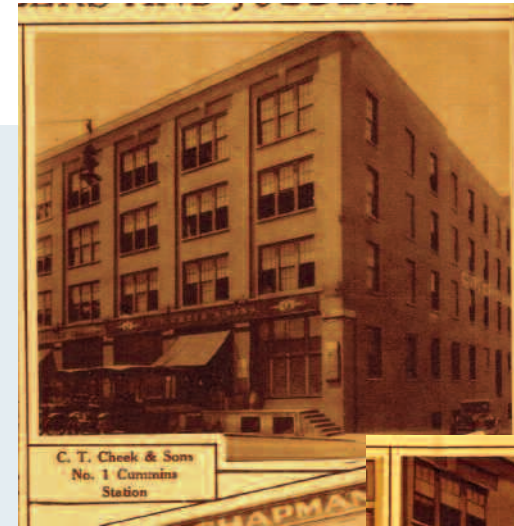
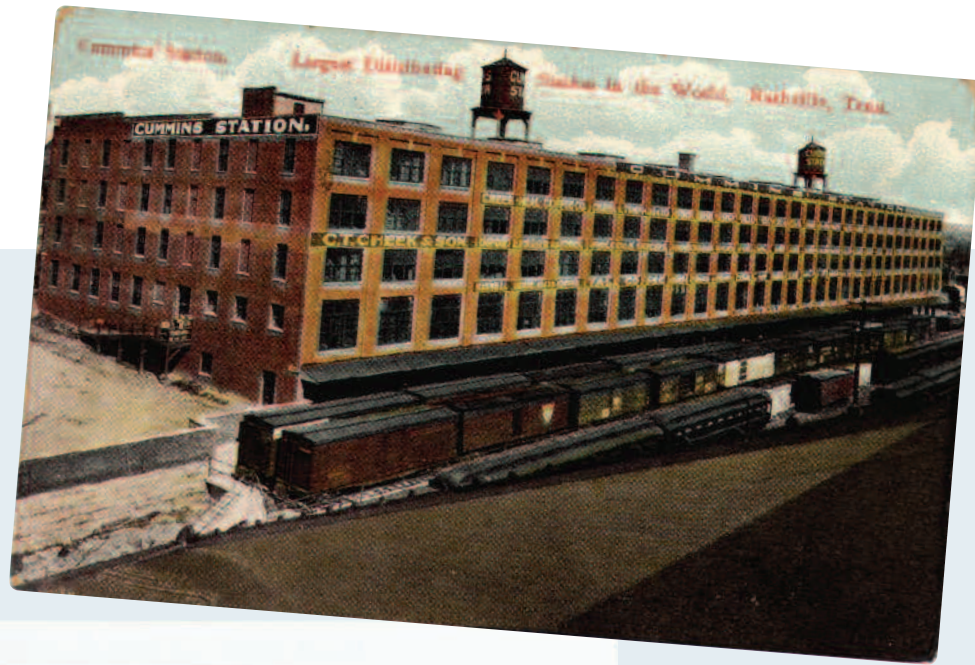
⁶ Cummins Station later expanded on its South side, which is why it is 603 feet long today. No one is certain as to when this expansion was created, but it was certainly prior to the Great Depression.



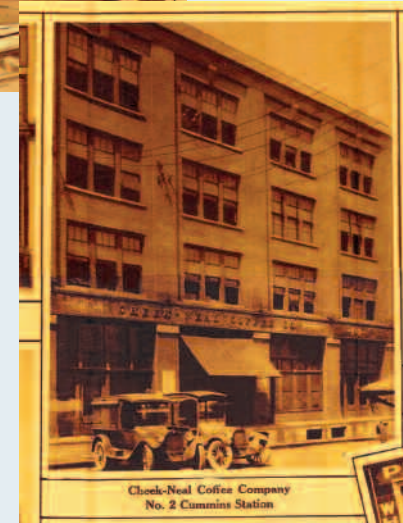
“Big Bill” Cummins, the beloved namesake of Cummins Station, whose feat of developing one of the largest warehouses in the world was one of many notable endeavors. The newspaper article below explains how shipment of goods to and from Nashville would be greatly improved thanks to the construction of Cummins Station.



This early postcard of Cummins Station demonstrates the pride Nashville had in Cummins Station labeling it "The Largest Distributing Station in the World."



C.T. Cheek & Son was one of several wholesale grocers based out of Cummins Station in its early history. C.T. Cheek was the cousin of Cheek-Neal Coffee's founder Joel Cheek.



Cheek-Neal Coffee is the most famous company to have been based out of Cummins Station. However, most people only recognize it by the brand it created, Maxwell House.

This early advertisement of Cummins Station made bold claims about the building designating it "the largest reinforced concrete terminal station in the world." That statement may have been true at the time but claims that the building was "fireproof", and "a place where rats cannot live" were exaggerated but still testify to the strength of the building. At the time Cummins Station truly "symbolized the progressiveness of the South's modern daughter - Nashville." (Tennessee State Library and Archives)

CUMMINS STATION

THE OLIVER COMPANY Merchants Wholesale Warehouse Company

The largest reinforced concrete terminal station in the world. Buildings completed in April 1902, contain two, one mile long, two foot thick, five stories above railroad tracks and sink into six feet deep. The fifth basement opens on the station platform, accessible by all means, where both car and goods are received and shipped without drays. The first floor fronts on a level street, with a double grade in all parts of the city. A fireproof structure with walls, floors and structure of concrete, standard fire doors, automatic sprinklers and smoke elevators. A sign of convenience, sanitation and healthiness - a place where rats cannot live. CUMMINS STATION is ideally located in the city's center, and symbolizes the progressiveness of the South's modern daughter - Nashville.

Established 1885 Incorporated 1902

Cummins-Bennett Company

Wholesale Merchandise
Brokers and
Manufacturers' Agents

Nashville, Tennessee

The above is the modern new home of

HI-LO

A Pure Baking Powder
at a Dime a Pound

GUARANTEED CHEERFUL FOOD AND GLEAMING WHITE JUNE 20th 1909. SERIAL NO. 1001

Some baking powders sell for many times the price of HI-LO, but they are neither purer or better, as will be quickly evidenced by a trial package. If your grocer does not sell HI-LO, write us.

CONTINENTAL BAKING POWDER CO., Nashville, Tenn.

TENTH AV. SOUTH formerly S Walnut, Gowdy, Malvina, Fairmount, Harris, Dixon, Longview, Gardner, Currey, Glendale av, Jowett av, Pomeroy av), from 929 Broadway s to Halcyon av Waverly pl.

106 John B Burch, M 452
106 Hotel Spa, M 452
Union Sta Adams Express Co, M 1746
Southern Express Co, M 1746

McGayock intersects.
Demonbreun intersects.

201 to 241 Cummins Station

- 1 O T Cheek & Sons, whol grocers, M 156
- 2 Cheek-Neal Coffee Co, M 470
- 3 Coleman Tompkins & Co, whol grocers, M 62
- Scoggins & Co, brokers, M 62
- 4 Matthews Harrison Phillips Co, whol grocers, M 138
- 4 Tompkins, Adams & Co, brokers, M 138
- 5 Phillips-Trawick Co, whol grocers, M 4070
- 6 CONTINENTAL BAKING Powder Co, M 375
- 7 Cummins-Bennett Co, brokers, M 98
- 8 Houston Biscuit Co, M 668
- 8 Crown Laundry Supply Co, M 668
- Myers U F & Co, M 668
- Van Camp Packing Co, M 637
- Tritcher-Owen & Co, whol fruits, M 637
- 9 Murray-Dibrell Co, whol shoes, M 730
- 10 Stroud & Fletcher, whol grocers, M 350
- 11 Tennessee Coffee Co, M 350
- Hanks Smith & Co, brokers, M 1558
- 12 EAGLE CANDY Co, M 827
- Matthew B Pilcher Jr Co, brokers, M 827
- 15 M T Stratton & Co, whol grocers, M 39

210 vacant
240 Neal M McCurdy
302 Mrs Anna Bolling
304 Lee Cantrell, M 1729
306 George K Terhune
308 Allen Owen, M 4892
310 Mrs Johannie T Menton, M 4016

This list of early tenants at Cummins Station was extracted from the Nashville City Directory. Most tenants were wholesale grocers such as C.T. Cheek & Son.

Teddy Roosevelt's controversial cup, and other Cummins Station business stories

Cheek-Neal Coffee Co.

The most famous company to have ever done business in Cummins Station, Cheek-Neal was once one of many firms in Nashville that manufactured coffee that was sold coffee in mom and pop grocery stores across the region. But it became the biggest in the city, and then in the region, and then in the United States.

Originally known as the Nashville Coffee & Manufacturing Co., it sold numerous brands in the 1890s, including one called "Porto Rico" (the common spelling then of a much talked about place in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War). At a time when most businesses on Market Street sold groceries of all kinds, founder Joel Cheek's decision to focus on coffee was regarded with some amusement.

"All the ones on Market Street felt sorry for these two misguided persons," wholesale grocer Arch Trawick later wrote. "Everybody that was anybody bought coffee green, selected it carefully, knew about mocha and java. They roasted coffee at home, usually on Fridays so it would be fresh on Sunday."

Around 1900 Cheek-Neal founder Joel Cheek approached Billy Black, the manager of the Maxwell House Hotel, and asked him if he could name one of his coffees for the hotel. Maxwell House soon became Cheek-Neal's most popular brand name.

In 1902 Cheek's partner Jim Neal moved to Houston and started a manufacturing and distribution center there. The business continued to expand, requiring that its Nashville operation migrate from Market Street to Cummins Station in 1907. Eventually Cheek-Neal also built operations in Jacksonville, Florida; Richmond, Virginia; New York City; and Los Angeles.

Cheek-Neal's mark on the business world wasn't in manufacturing and distribution, however. Maxwell House Coffee was one of the first food products that proved the power of national advertising. Only a few months after Cummins Station opened, President Theodore Roosevelt visited Nashville, making stops at the Ryman Auditorium, Peabody College (then located downtown) and The Hermitage. On his visit to The Hermitage, the president reportedly complimented a cup of coffee he was served. Newspaper articles and advertisements immediately following the visit disputed the type of coffee he was drinking and what the president said. But Joel Cheek insisted that the president had been drinking Maxwell House brand, and advertisements that ran in national publications decades later claimed that Roosevelt had said that his cup was "Good to the Last Drop." Thus one of the great myths of American advertising history was born — all revolving around a tablespoon of beans ground and canned in Cummins Station.

By the late 1920s Maxwell House was one of the nation's top brands, and Cheek-Neal was spending in excess of a million dollars per year on



An early photo of an unidentified group posing on the 10th Avenue side of Cummins Station. (Tennessee State Library and Archives)

advertising. Then, in 1928, the company was sold to Postum (later General Foods) for a staggering \$43 million. Four years later the Cummins Station manufacturing operation was shut down and shifted to Mobile, Alabama – one of the many bad days the Nashville business community experienced during the Great Depression.

C.T. Cheek & Son

Joel Cheek had a cousin named “Major” Christopher Tomkins Cheek who was also in the grocery wholesaling business. While Cheek-Neal put all of its eggs in a single product (coffee) and, eventually, a single brand (Maxwell House), C.T. Cheek & Son was one of Nashville’s many grocery wholesalers, sending salesmen across the region to sell and distribute various food products.

C.T. Cheek’s son was Leslie Cheek. And there are interesting things about C.T. Cheek, Leslie Cheek and the business they owned.

First of all, it had a retail division called United Grocers that at one time had about a dozen locations, including one on Lower Broadway that today houses Ernest Tubb Records.

Second of all, a large amount of the money made from the Cheek-Neal Coffee Co. sale made it to the C.T./Leslie Cheek side of the Cheek family. How this happened remained a family secret for many years.

But, according to Newman Cheek, the youngest of Joel Cheek’s sons, it involved “Big Bill” Cummins.

Here is how this transpired, according to a 1972 account of events by Newman Cheek: When Cummins sold his house at 209 Louise Avenue to Joel Cheek in 1902, he accepted Cheek-Neal stock rather than cash in the transaction because Joel Cheek was, at that time, short of cash but wealthy on paper. At the time, Joel Cheek thought he had the option of coming back at a later time and buying back the stock from Cummins. Some time later, however, Cummins sold this stock to Joel’s nephew Leslie Cheek, and this is how Leslie Cheek ended up with so much Cheek-Neal stock.

When Postum purchased Cheek-Neal in 1928, Leslie Cheek pocketed nearly \$6 million, mostly in stock. He used this stock as collateral in borrowing cash to build and furnish the opulent Cheekwood mansion. Unfortunately for Leslie Cheek, the value of the stock of Postum successor General Foods plummeted during the depths of the Great Depression, and his net value declined considerably.

Leslie Cheek died in 1935; the C.T. Cheek & Son wholesaling business went bankrupt a couple of years later.

Washington Manufacturing

By the end of World War II, a privately held firm called Washington Manufacturing was one of the largest apparel companies in the South. It owned more than a

dozen manufacturing plants, most of which were located in small towns across the South. Among its major brands were Dee Cee brand work clothing, Deer Creek sportswear and Happy Jack and Happy Jill children’s clothes.

Washington Manufacturing purchased Cummins Station in the 1940s and kept it until the 1980s. The Nashville-based firm used the building for many things.

“As I remember it, we used it to warehouse fabric for our factories,” said T.W. “Wick” Comer, the son of Washington Manufacturing founder Guy Comer. “But to my memory we didn’t use the rail side of it because by that time rail service wasn’t all that popular. We brought things in and sent them out by truck.”

Washington had many assets that were unassociated with apparel. One of them – the Keith-Simmons Co. – moved into Cummins Station during World War I and remained there through the 1960s. Originally founded by Walter Keith and William Simmons near the Public Square, the Keith-Simmons Co. was for several generations one of Nashville’s best known “hard goods” wholesaler and retailers. According to an ad in the 1940 *Nashville City Directory*, Keith-Simmons sold “mill, mine, factory supplies, paints, sporting goods, house furnishings, auto accessories, electric refrigerators, ranges, washers, appliances, radios, automatic coal stokers, air conditioning and oil furnaces.” The company’s slogan? “Our hardware wears!”

By the 1960s, Keith-Simmons was out of retail; its main business was as the whole distributorship for RCA and Whirlpool.

Keith-Simmons moved out of Cummins Station into a large building on Seventh Avenue in 1969. The business remained in operation until the late 1980s, when the rise of mega-chains such as Home Depot spelled doom for the appliance wholesaling industry.

Today, many older Nashvillians remember Keith-Simmons as the Union Street store that had a train set at Christmas. The managing partner of the law firm Bass Berry & Sims, whose first name is Keith and whose last name is Simmons, has other anecdotes.

“When my wife and I first moved here, we were often mistaken for the store,” he said. “I do remember that one time we got a call at two a.m. from a truck driver who had a load of refrigerators he needed to deliver to our loading dock.”

Rigo Chemical

A man named L.G. (Lefty) Durr started Rigo in 1904 as an “old time” patent medicine company. Its primary business was producing and selling an odd variety of products – from castor oil to cough syrup to turpentine – to mom and pop grocery stores. Among its products were Rigo-Letta face powder and Dr. Peter’s spices. Rigo even had an old fashioned Calliope which Durr would take to county fairs all over the

Cummins Station developer had wild, incredible career

South. The business moved into Cummins Station around 1920.

After World War II, Durr told Nashville attorney Henry Goodpasture about his intention to shut down Rigo. Goodpasture talked the idea up among his friends, one of whom was a pharmacist and surgical supply company owner named Jack Massey. Sometime in the late 1940s Goodpasture, Massey, and William Bainbridge purchased Rigo.

Rigo soon shifted its focus to the production and sale of insecticides – the primary line of which was known as Kill-Ko. In the winter months, when the demand for insecticide waned, the company produced and sold spices and cooking extracts. By the mid 1950s the company had about forty employees in its Cummins Station plant and another two dozen or so traveling salesmen, all of whom operated solely on commission. “We would sell to anyone who would buy it,” said Hunter Woods, who went to work for Rigo in 1952. “We would sell to a drug store, to a filling station, to a country store, to anyone running up and down the side of the road peddling. Anyone with their door open, who would buy the product, and who would pay their bill was a potential customer.”

Jack Massey was more than a passive investor in Rigo. Shortly after he and his two partners bought it, Massey ran it for about a year as president. A series of short-lived managers followed, until in 1960 the three partners appointed Woods to be its president, from which point onward the company turned a steady profit.

In October 1961 Massey sold his ownership in Rigo to his partners for \$250,000. Not long afterward, he teamed up with Kentucky lawyer John Y. Brown Jr. to purchase Kentucky Fried Chicken – the first of three companies Massey would later take to the New York Stock Exchange.

Rigo, meanwhile, remained locally owned until 1969, when it was bought by an Indiana-based farm products company called Central Soya.

“Big Bill” Cummins, as he was known, was a wholesaler, capitalist, developer, banker, and by some accounts the greatest salesman Nashville has ever produced. He was so well-liked, in fact, that his career rebounded from three years in prison.

Cummins was a native of Paris, Tennessee. His father, Hiram F. Cummins, was the railroad commissioner for the state of Tennessee in the late 1850s (which was right about the time Nashville was arguing about whether to build a bridge for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad). Hiram Cummins was later a state legislator, major in the Confederate Army and superintendent of the state prison system.

Bill Cummins originally came to Nashville to attend Montgomery Bell Academy. In 1886 he started a dry goods business with his brother that eventually morphed into Cummins, Bennett & Co. He soon developed a reputation as one of Nashville’s best-liked businessmen, and one of the city’s finest salesmen.

“His gift of persuasion, his broad smile, his geniality, his excellence as a teller of stories are proverbial and potent,” *The New York Times* once said.

Cummins branched out after his core business succeeded. In the 1890s, a time when most Middle Tennessee livestock was shipped to packing yards in Chicago, Cummins put together the financing to start the Tennessee Packing and Stockyards Co., one of the South’s first large slaughterhouses. He later led a

group of capitalists that organized several fertilizer factories into an umbrella corporation known as the Independent Fertilizer Co.

Then, from 1904 to 1907, he focused on the development of the building that he would be best remembered for – the warehouse complex known as Cummins Station.

Had Bill Cummins stayed in Nashville, he might have one day become governor. But his many commercial ventures and vacations frequently took him to New York, and he made friends there, too. In 1910 he accepted a post as chairman of the Carnegie Trust Co.

About a year later the trust company failed, and he was accused of misappropriating \$140,000 from the firm. Even while undergoing his trial Cummins did not waver. “In spite of the turmoil in his affairs, he is keeping a stiff upper lip as he walks resolutely about the lobby and corridors of the Holland House, his New York home, looking as if nothing has happened,” one story pointed out. “His big shoulders are thrown back and his blue eyes are defiant.”

Cummins was convicted in November 1911. Dozens of his friends and colleagues requested that the governor of New York pardon him, including Congressman Jo Byrns of Tennessee, prominent African-American businessman and attorney J.C. Napier, Nashville Judge John Allison and New York financier Andrew Carnegie. “He made a mistake by trying to do banking

in New York without understanding it,” Carnegie said. “He was more sinned against than sinning.”

But Cummins served three years and two months in prison – some of that time in Sing Sing, where his fellow prisoners elected him their “mayor,” and some of that time in Great Meadow prison, where he worked as a clerk and on the prison farm. Finally, he was pardoned by New York governor Charles Whitman – the same man who had prosecuted Cummins as district attorney.

When Cummins returned to Tennessee, he was greeted as a hero; the state legislature had a reception in his honor, and a banquet honoring him was held at the Maxwell House Hotel. According to an account of those events:

“Mr. Cummins was prevailed upon to tell something of his experiences. He said that the Carnegie Trust Company was rotten when he went into it; that he tried to save it, and that more than once he could have got out of it with large profits, but that he could not forsake the friends who had followed him into it. He therefore stayed, he said, in an effort to save it. He thanked his fellow prisoners for their effort on his behalf, and gave them the chief credit for his pardon. They were all his friends, he said, and his future efforts would be directed largely to ameliorating the condition of convicts.”

Many of his friends publicly predicted that he would one day make a comeback. About a year later those

prognostications turned out to be true when, with the help of northern financiers Carnegie, William Wrigley Jr., and Jacob Ruppert, Cummins organized the Bon Air Coal and Iron Corp. Bon Air Coal and Iron was later merged into a larger entity called the Tennessee Products Corp., which controlled several mines and foundries and was important in the industrial development of Chattanooga in the 1920s. According to a national advertisement that sold its industrial revenue bonds, Tennessee Products Corp. had U.S. Steel, DuPont, Sherwin-Williams and Tennessee Eastman as its customers. Caldwell & Co. sold its bonds; Frank Berry of Bass Berry & Sims was its corporate attorney.

The Tennessee Products Corp. was a major player in the industrial development (or one might say, the exploitation) of rural parts of Tennessee. Closely associated with the Tennessee Central Railroad, the Tennessee Products Corp. mined phosphate and coal in points along Tennessee’s Highland Rim and Cumberland Plateau, such as Rockdale, Allens Creek, Collinwood and Lyles. One of the Tennessee Products many “company towns” was Wrigley, in Hickman County – a place with slightly less fame than the Chicago baseball park also named for the chewing gum magnate.

On February 25, 1936, “Big Bill” Cummins died of a heart attack while staying in a Chicago hotel. His body was flown back to Nashville, and was buried at Mt. Olivet Cemetery.

