

Shelby North Carolina: the Land of Rhythm and Roots

I relocated to Charlotte, North Carolina just about the time travel restrictions began. While obeying the various rules in place, I poked around as much as I could in my immediate environment. I attended a program about an historic home in Shelby, North Carolina, forty-five minutes and a world away from Charlotte. Expanding my knowledge about that place felt just right. So, I made a test run to tour the Banker's House in Shelby. What a place!

I connected with [Visit Cleveland County](#). I committed to the concept of sharing the tale of the home, as well as other historical and contemporary highlights around Shelby. Of course, there is much more to Shelby than that one house.

Shelby History

Shelby's population hovers around 20,000 souls. During the 1800's and on into the 1900's, Shelby was primarily a "mill town." That is, area residents at the time shifted from the independence of family farming to mill worker life. Working for the mills had its economic advantages along with some disadvantages. Either way, the citizens of Shelby were, and are, a tight community of caring people who share values and pride of place. Yes, indeed! Shelby has a wealth of history to offer.

My Shelby-based contact graciously assisted with a proposed itinerary, came along for the experience, and paved the way for me to access everyday fun, plus some very special behind the scenes access. She also helped me to arrange lodging at a beautiful B&B, adjacent to the Banker's House, the historic home that had initially captured my interest. And she connected me with a local historian whose insights are material to the story of Shelby.

Here's how I spent two exceptional days in Shelby, North Carolina.

The Don Gibson Theatre

The beautiful [Don Gibson Theatre](#) is in Shelby's Historic District. The building has a storied history as an entertainment venue and local movie house. It had ceased operations for several years prior to its rebirth, thanks to community engagement and Discover Cleveland County. The present-day venue hosts an assortment of entertainment genres, including country and contemporary music, as well as classical artists and non-musician entertainers. The theatre is a magnet, not just locally, but far and wide, depending upon the act on stage.

The late, great Don Gibson was a native son of Shelby, who traveled often but always returned home. Mrs. Gibson lives locally and does attend some performances. The evening entertainment during my visit was Billy "Crash" Craddock, who wowed the crowd and called attention to Mrs.

Gibson's presence.

Don Gibson Theatre: Esteemed Performers and Renovations

Of course, given the reality that the venue had rested for some years, renovations were necessary. At the same time, the extent to which historic features were preserved is truly remarkable. I was treated to a daytime tour of the facility, learned of the efforts to maintain the integrity of the stage itself, with its beautifully rustic wood floors. Indoors, seating is updated and staggered for optimal viewing and helps with social distancing. Outdoors, the entrance, which for years had been covered with outdoor carpet, revealed perfectly preserved tile flooring including the original logo. That logo is now the mark of the Don Gibson Theatre.

The long and eclectic list of contemporary artists who have performed at this storied venue includes such luminaries as Travis Tritt, Marty Stewart, and Whitney Houston! Behind the scenes are the dressing rooms. The hallway is covered with hundreds of celebrity signatures and an array of signed guitars. As a nonprofit entity, the theatre holds an annual guitar auction, with the help and cooperation of the performers.

Earl Scruggs Center

[The Earl Scruggs Center](#) pays tribute to music, mill town living, local history and the impact of the duo Flatt and Scruggs on the music industry overall. A master of the banjo, Earl Scruggs invented his own style of playing, now the famous "Scruggs Style" three-finger banjo playing. A favorite example of this is Flatt and Scruggs' famed "Foggy Mountain Breakdown." Visitors begin with an introductory video that provides context for the overall experience. The Center is extensively equipped with technology and accessibility features.

The museum is notable world-wide. Flatt and Scruggs were prolific in their entertaining and could be enjoyed regularly on television and radio, including the Grand Ole Opry. Countless performers have adopted their music and playing style. One favorite exhibit features a table for visitors to experiment with making music. Another display features the art of Bernie Taupin, best known for his collaborations with Sir Elton John. The multimedia Taupin piece depicts integration of musical styles and the societal impact of musical genres.

The Earl Scruggs Center appeals to all ages. Allow at least an hour or more to tour the center. Its spaces are easy to navigate. There is knowledgeable staff on hand to respond to questions and add context to the experience. All ages will find something interesting to either learn or reminisce. Certainly child-friendly, there is even a special room loaded with musical instruments for hands on practice that provides an especially good time for youngsters. The center sits in the heart of the historic district.

Shelby Murals Project

Shelby has engaged with the North Carolina Musician Murals Project, whose purpose is to magnify the cultural and historical impact of the many famed musicians who have called North Carolina home. Don Gibson and Earl Scruggs are stars of the Shelby's murals, created by artist Scott Nurkin. These murals, and the project overall, have received broad recognition associated with the state's promotional effort, "Come Hear NC." Visitor photo-ops are encouraged! Gibson's mural can be viewed at the exterior of [Miss Molly's Boutique](#), where Mr. and Mrs. Gibson once resided.

Earl Scruggs' mural can be viewed at the exterior of [Newgrass Brewing Company](#), along the adjacent pedestrian alley.

The LP Shelby Project

Another cool public art project lauding Shelby's music roots is the LP Shelby project. A stroll around the historic district will quickly alert visitors to the array of artistic versions of LP (long play) records around Uptown. This project has been sponsored by the Don Gibson American Music Foundation. As many as seven installations showcasing album titles dot the historic district. The best place to begin your LP tour is right outside the Don Gibson Theatre. Remember, vinyl records have recordings on both sides. So those seven installations represent fourteen not-to-be-missed titles.

Shops, Breweries and Eateries

[Uptown Shelby](#) is a treasure trove of shops and eateries! You're bound to be hungry after all that touring. Whether your dining preference is haute cuisine, barbeque, pizza, fusion, deli or dessert, Uptown Shelby fills the bill. Enticing cafes can be found all around Uptown, often tucked in small store fronts. My first choice was a wood fired experience. On the second day, I relished brewery fare. Whatever your craving, Uptown Shelby satisfies.

Once your appetite has been sated, you'll have plenty of energy for the shops. All manner of goods are on sale and the boutiques inviting. You may easily while away an hour or more sifting through the treasures of the Antique Market, the eclectic assortment at Dragonfly Wine & Beer Market or the gift shop at the Earl Scruggs Center. Appealing arts, crafts, jewelry, wine, cigars, clothing, Carolina pottery, and souvenirs abound in Uptown Shelby.

Venture Off the Beaten Path: The Banker's House

[The Banker's House](#), my initial inspiration to visit, is a jewel in Shelby's crown. Currently available to the public, both for tours and events, the home is beautifully preserved in the manner of its Second Empire origins. This home was the dream of Jesse and Hattie Jenkins. Listed on the

National Register of Historic Places, the house was Hattie's dream. Designed reminiscent of the grand houses of Raleigh, North Carolina's capital, the home encompasses 5,328 square feet, has a mansard roof with tower, grand staircase, multiple rooms for entertaining, gardens, and outbuildings. A recent renovation of the property's outbuildings and barn has created events space that draws clientele from far beyond Shelby's municipal boundaries.

If historic homes are your interest, schedule your visit to Shelby around the Banker's House tour schedule. Fun fact: While the home changed ownership over the decades, its owners have all been bankers! And there was only one instance of children living in the home. You will be wowed by the home's elegant exterior and scope – it is large, imposing, and beautiful. You will find its tour guides to be knowledgeable and friendly.

Morgan and Wells Bed & Breakfast

Among the many modern lodging options apart from Uptown Shelby, you may wish to linger in the historic Uptown vibe. If so, book a room at [Morgan and Wells Bed and Breakfast](#) just across the street from the Banker's House. Hospitable and lovely, the B&B offers several Queen and King room and access to the entire 1900's era property. Décor is reflective of the era, with contemporary features. The living area is warm and comfortable with relaxing background music. Spa services are available on site. Fun fact: The home was rescued and moved to its current site, thereby preserving a piece of Shelby history.

Breakfast at the B&B varies from day to day and is always delectable. Staff will inquire as to dietary needs, so no worries on that count. Hospitality abounds at Morgan and Wells!

Sunset Cemetery

The rich history of Shelby's founding families can be researched through a self-guided tour of Sunset Cemetery. This is the resting place of Shelby's notable city, county, and state-wide leaders. Shelby was birthplace and home to an array of politicians who heavily influenced the city, Cleveland County and the State of North Carolina. The grounds offer a beautiful, mostly shaded, stroll featuring elaborate gravesite tributes local, regional, and state-wide elected officials and leaders.

The Carrousel

Adjacent to Uptown, Shelby's City Park is a pristine playground and perfect place to stop with children. It offers the usual playground equipment – slides and all manner of climbing equipment – and two very special amenities. The Carrousel opened in 1998 and features a gorgeous and historically authentic collection of over twenty impeccably restored horses amidst an array of

gorgeous panels. Open Thursday through Sunday during the afternoon, the carrousel received the National Carrousel Association's preservation award in 2007. Rides cost 50 cents as of this writing.

The Train

Also on the grounds is the "Rotary Special" mini-train. Seating is child-sized, but still roomy enough for an adult to ride along. The route circles the playground. Driven by an engineer, there's plenty of excitement and sounding of the train whistle. Again, rides cost 50 cents.

A Weekend in Shelby, North Carolina

From its High Piedmont culture, through its mill town origins, to its country music roots, Shelby, North Carolina abounds in community pride and gracious welcome. Give it time. Take it slow. Soak up the ambience. It's easy to fall in love with Shelby and "The Old North State."

For More:

- [Visit Cleveland County](#), Shelby and Cleveland County, North Carolina
- On our site: We have more for you about what to see and do in [North Carolina](#).

-All photos as credited. Cover photo, depicting the Shelby, North Carolina Arts Council building, courtesy Visit Cleveland County.