Like many other towns in eastern North Carolina, Fremont began as a crossroads community, in either the late eighteenth century or the early nineteenth century, and slowly evolved into a small town. Its population has fluctuated from 435 in 1900, to 1490 in 1940, 1600 in 1950, 1861 in 1980, 1689 in 1990, 1463 in 2000 and 1255 in 2010.

History reveals to us that unlike its neighbors to the north and south – Virginia and South Carolina – the coastal plain region of North Carolina, where Fremont is located, was slow to develop. There were no major seaports, and with only a few navigable streams, transportation was limited to crude dirt roads that were muddy in wet seasons and dusty during dry times. It was at the intersection of two of these roads that Nahunta – as Fremont was first known – came into existence, probably no more than one or two stores and a few houses. (It is generally accepted that Nahunta is an Indian name, probably coming from the Tuscarora nations that inhabited the area.) Yet, on February 9, 1830, a post office was established in Nahunta by the government. (In those days, the post office would be located in the home or business of the postmaster.)

Most of the early settlers of this time made their living on small farms and/or in the lumber and naval stores trade. In fact, the first known businesses in Nahunta were two turpentine distilleries and two saw mills. But shipping goods was very difficult until the construction of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad – at that time the longest railroad in the world – was completed in 1840. The railroad came through the village of Nahunta.

The railroad would play a vital part in the development of the area. Not only did it radically improve the shipping of goods into and out of the community, but it also provided the quickest and best means of transportation north and south. In addition, local landowners sold timber from their tracts to the railroad company for crossties and bridges during its construction, and later, wood for fuel for the wood-burning locomotives that pulled the trains. During the War between the States, the railroad served as a vital link for movement of supplies and troops for both the Southern and Northern armies.

After the war, the town of Nahunta was incorporated on February 16, 1867, by an act of the North Carolina General Assembly. Two Years later, however, on April 1, 1869, in the next session of the Legislature, representatives of the town petitioned “that the name o f the Town of Nahunta, in Wayne County, shall be changed to Fremont.” No reason for the change was recorded, but perhaps it was due to confusion brought about by the fact that Nahunta is also the name of the township in which it was located, as well as a large swamp that stretches across much of the county three miles south of the town, and a rural community five miles to the southwest. The new name of Fremont honored the highly respected Superintendent of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, Sewell Lawrence Fremont.

The Reconstruction years (1865-1877) were difficult for the people in the community. The economy was bad, and the once prosperous markets for naval stores were drying up; since ships were now bring built using metal instead of wood for the hulls. Farmers relied on cotton and corn as their main crops until flue-cured tobacco was introduced into this area around 1880. By the turn of the century, however, tobacco was rapidly becoming the dominant crop, and it would remain so for at least another century.

Due to the abundance of good timber in the area and the scarcity of clay soil suitable for making bricks, all of the early structures in Fremont were made of wood. It was not until after the Reconstruction, with the development of more east-to-west railroads in the state and an improving economy, that bricks were shipped from the Piedmont, and gradually stores constructed with bricks replaced those made of wood. In 1884, twelve businesses were listed in Fremont; most of them were stores of general merchandise, but four of the twelve were saloons!
The presence of saloons does not indicate that Fremont was necessarily a wild place, for many small towns at that time had saloons since there was no government regulation. Fremont was also the location of churches, with Primitive Baptist and Methodist churches among the earliest to be built.

Education also proved to be a vital part of Fremont. Following the War between the States, the old lodge school was started in the building, which also served as the Masonic Lodge Hall on the site of the present Library on North Goldsboro Street. Among the boys and girls attending the school was a young Charles B. Aycock, who would later become known as the state’s Education Governor in the early 1900’s. He was a student in the Old Lodge School from 1867 to 1872, before being sent to a private school for older students in Wilson. Among the early teachers was J.B. Williams, regarded as an excellent teacher who was also a strict disciplinarian. Students used slates and their first textbook was Webster’s Blue Back Speller.

As enrollment continued to grow, a group of local businessmen and parents raised the money to build a larger wooded school on the site of the present Fremont School. Captain W.H. Hand ran the new school as Fremont Military Institute. Pupils were attracted from neighboring counties and boarded in Fremont homes while enrolled in the school. Unfortunately, girls could not attend the school during these years. Soon, however, Captain Hand moved to South Carolina in the early 1890’s to become the director of that state’s high schools, and the Fremont School returned to a regular school for both boys and girls.
It was during the 1890’s and the first decade of the 1900 that Fremont experienced one of its most progressive periods of growth. Businessmen Z.D. Mumford purchased a farm adjacent to Fremont’s northeastern boundary and developed it into two-dozen residential lots for sale at what is now Vance Street. The Town of Fremont acquired the more hilly portion of the farm to start a municipal cemetery. Soon the residential lots contained new houses and a new Baptist Church.

In 1900, the Bank of Fremont was organized and opened in a new brick building on Main Street, the site of the present-day meeting room in the Town Hall. It merged with Branch Bank and Trust Company in the 1930’s. In 1902, Fremont Oil Mill Company was started on a planned industrial site near the railroad in southeastern Fremont and was a prosperous business producing fertilizer and cottonseed meal and oil until it closed around 1960.
Other business ventures in the late 1800’s, however, were not as fortunate. Plans to build an east-to-west railroad from Snow Hill to Fremont (and eventually to be extended to the coast in the east and to Raleigh to the west) had to be aborted when the railroad company went bankrupt. The only signs today of the planned railroad are the earthworks constructed on the edge of Aycock Swamp east of the town.

In the Industrial site in southwestern Fremont, two tobacco warehouses and a tobacco processing plant were constructed to take advantage of the increased production of flue-cured tobacco in the area around the turn of the century. Unfortunately, one warehouse burned, and the growth of the nearby Wilson Tobacco Market eclipsed the original use of the remaining warehouse and processing plant. The front office of the warehouse was used by various businesses over the years, and during the 1920’s and 1930’s, the warehouse floor was the site of the local high school basketball games when it was not being used for storage. The processing plant was converted to a facility for drying and processing hardwood.

Two major fires destroyed or damaged several of the wooden buildings in the business section. Six were destroyed by a fire on July 18, 1872. On March 1, 1898, four businesses were destroyed and five others damaged by a major fire. The wooden structures were replaced by brick ones, and fortunately, the Fremont business district had not experienced a major fire loss since.

In The North Carolina Yearbook, published by The News and Observer in 1902, Fremont is listed as having one bank, one hotel, three doctors, a dentist, a weekly newspaper, nine general merchandise stores, two drug stores, a cotton gin, a sawmill, a blacksmith, a barbershop, two livery stables, and three saloons.

Fremont continued to grow during the twentieth century, though its growth was curtailed, of course, by the Great Depression of the 1930’s and World War II.

The post-war years, from 1945 to around 1960, brought about another very prosperous period in Fremont’s history. Once again the economy was booming, and farmers were experiencing prosperity with good tobacco production and other profitable crops. Returning service men built houses and opened businesses. Fremont’s business district of less than two blocks had a thriving business in every location, and a new movie theater proved to be an entertainment mecca for the community. Main Street was filled with bustling crowds on Saturday night’s year-around; stores remained open until 10:00 p.m., and the barbershop did not close until midnight. While there were only two paved streets in town in 1945 – Main Street and US 117 – gradually over the next twenty years all streets were eventually paved.

As more and more people were able to purchase automobiles in the post-war period, however, this helped to bring about the decline in Fremont’s business district. The more mobile population started going to the larger nearby cities of Wilson and Goldsboro to shop, and gradually many of the local “mom and pop” stores closed. The change in farming mechanized and the tobacco allotments decreased, the small tenant farmer was forced to move his family elsewhere to earn a living. Fremont leaders worked diligently to bring other opportunities to the area, and they were successful in persuading three small industries to locate here in the 1960’s. Only one, however, is still operating.

During the twentieth century, Fremont’s growth and change have been reflected in its schools. In 1922, a larger brick school building replaced the thirty-year-old wooden structure, which in turn was moved to become part of Friendship School located on Memorial Church Road and attended by African-American students during the years of segregation. In the prosperous years following World War II, a lunchroom, a gymnasium, an Industrial Arts shop, and a classroom wing were added to Fremont School. Today the school is still serving the community as an elementary school, though the middle school and high school students now attend area consolidated schools.
Fremont’s business district remains active today, although it differs from the boom era of a half-century ago. Gone are all of the general merchandise stores that dominated downtown in the post-war years. Also disappeared are the men and women’s clothing stores, the movie theater, and the dime store, as well as the six service stations located beside US 117.

Although sixteen former business sites are now closed or used for storage, there are still viable signs of life in downtown Fremont with professionals and businesses providing services and goods: a doctor, a dentist, an optometrist, two banks, two insurance agencies, a barber shop, two hair salon’s, a florist, a pharmacy, two restaurants and three grills, a realtor, a historical museum, a hardware store and photography studio, dry cleaning service, a grocery store, a furniture and appliance store, a small engines repair shop, a newspaper office, two quick-stop gas stations and two machine shops.

There is also a pool room … but no saloons!