

J. Fred Johnson Desk

by Jeff Fleming

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The Kingsport Improvement Company, led by J. Fred Johnson, was the driving force behind the development of modern Kingsport, operating from offices in The Improvement Building at 201 West Market Street. Johnson, affectionately known as "the father of Kingsport" and a "one-man Chamber of Commerce," coined the term "Kingsport Spirit," which continues to define the city today. His expansive office, located on the second floor overlooking the corner of Market & Shelby Streets, was his workplace from 1916 until his death in 1944.

In 1996, the City of Kingsport purchased the building, and inside Johnson's former office remained this large oak desk, identified by the previous owner as Johnson's. It was then relocated to the Archives of Kingsport at the J. Fred Johnson Memorial Library for preservation.

In the early 20th century, the relationship between an executive and a secretary was defined by a clear hierarchical structure and mutual dependence—thus the double-sided desk. The executive held authority, focusing on high-level decision-making, while the secretary handled vital administrative tasks such as managing correspondence, scheduling, and document preparation. Secretaries were key to ensuring the executive's efficiency, acting as gatekeepers, and handling confidential matters with trust, loyalty, and discretion. This close working relationship, shaped by the social norms and expectations of the time, laid the groundwork for the evolving role of administrative professionals and contributed to the modern understanding of these roles in the workforce.

Imagine the many impactful decisions made at this desk, decisions that helped shape the Kingsport we know today.