

## **In a City of Turnover, Auburn's Legacy Businesses Stand the Test of Time**

**AUBURN, Ala.** — In a college town defined by constant change, storefronts come and go with the seasons. Restaurants close, boutiques rebrand and new concepts take their place, often within months. For many business owners in Auburn, longevity is the exception, not the rule.

But along the same streets where turnover has become routine, a handful of businesses have remained fixtures for generations, outlasting trends, economic shifts and the ebb and flow of student life.

City officials say that contrast is what makes these businesses stand out.

“Turnover is a natural part of a growing community like Auburn,” said Phillip Dunlap, the city’s economic development director. “But the businesses that stay for decades tend to have something deeper, a strong identity, community ties and the ability to adapt.”

From a corner drugstore turned campus landmark to a fifth generation jewelry business, these establishments have become part of Auburn’s identity, not just surviving but shaping the culture around them.

Few places in Auburn carry as much symbolic weight as Toomer’s Corner. While most visitors recognize it for its role in celebrations, the business at its base has quietly endured for more than a century.

Manager Michael Overstreet said the store’s longevity comes from its connection to Auburn traditions.

“People don’t just come here for a drink,” Overstreet said. “They come here because it’s part of their Auburn experience. It’s something they remember and come back to.”

That sense of nostalgia has helped sustain the business even as surrounding storefronts have changed hands multiple times. While other locations rely on trends, Toomer’s has remained rooted in consistency.

“We’ve evolved where we need to,” Overstreet said, “but we’ve never lost what makes us Toomer’s.”

Just a few blocks away, J&M Bookstore has been serving the Auburn community since 1953. Unlike national chains that have entered and exited the college retail market, the independent bookstore has remained family owned for three generations.

Hannah Johnston, granddaughter of the store's founder, the "J" in J&M, said that history is central to its identity.

"This isn't just a store," Johnston said. "It's part of my family's story, and it's part of Auburn's story too."

As an Auburn graduate herself, Johnston said she has seen firsthand how the store connects generations of students and alumni.

"People come in and say their parents or even grandparents shopped here," she said. "That kind of continuity is rare, especially in a college town where everything changes so quickly."

Johnston said the store has adapted over time, expanding merchandise and embracing new retail strategies, but its core mission has remained the same.

"We've had to evolve, but we'll always keep the identity my grandfather established so many years ago" she said.

Longevity is also a defining trait at Ware Jewelers, a fifth generation family business that has served Auburn since 1946.

Sierra Cumens, a senior business student at Auburn who has worked at the store for two years, said the store's reputation has been built on trust and consistency.

"Ware has been around for so long because people know they can rely on it," Cumens said. "It's not just about selling jewelry. It is about relationships."

In a college town, those relationships often take on a familiar form. Each spring, as graduation approaches, engagement season follows close behind.

"Ring by spring is definitely real," Cumens said with a laugh. "You could say it's keeping us in business."

The phrase, commonly associated with Southern college culture, reflects a broader dynamic that has helped sustain the store, its ability to serve both students and long term residents.

"Students come here for major life moments, and then they come back years later," Cumens said. "That kind of loyalty is what keeps a business going."

For Donna Young, founder of Behind the Glass, longevity has meant curating a store that serves the ever-evolving interests of college girls and local women alike. The gift shop has become a staple in Auburn's retail scene.

Now managed by her daughter, Chloe Young Floyd, the business has remained in the family while continuing to evolve.

“We’ve always focused on offering something for every woman,” Floyd said. “You can’t survive in a place like Auburn by only serving one demographic.”

Floyd said the store’s success comes from its ability to adapt and meet multiple needs at once without losing its identity, a challenge many businesses struggle to meet.

“There’s definitely turnover in Auburn,” she said. “You see places come and go all the time. I think what’s helped us stay is that we’ve built relationships with our customers and with the brands we work with.”

That sense of connection, she said, creates a loyalty that extends beyond a single transaction.

“People come in because they know they’ll find something meaningful,” Floyd said.

While each business has its own story, Dunlap said there are common factors that contribute to long term success in Auburn.

“The businesses that last are the ones that understand their audience but also build something deeper than just a product,” he said. “They become part of the community.”

That can be especially challenging in a city where a large portion of the population is constantly changing. With students arriving and leaving every few years, businesses must find ways to appeal to both new and returning customers.

Still, the businesses that endure show that it is possible.

In a city where turnover is expected, staying power has become something rare.

And in Auburn, that rarity is what makes these businesses not just successful, but essential.