Winston-Salem Rotary Club
Northeast corner of N. Main & E. Second Streets

The Winston-Salem Chapter of Rotary International was founded in 1915 by Owen Norvell and twenty-three other men who had become excited about improving the manner in which businessmen could become acquainted with one another, exchange ideas, and promote community projects. Over time, the Winston-Salem Rotary Club would exemplify its motto of “service above self,” helping to shape Winston-Salem into a place that thousands of people enjoy calling home.

The original Rotary Club (1905) started in Chicago, with the intent to create opportunities for businessmen to enlarge their circle of business, as well as those of their professional acquaintances. It was decided that members would meet once a week, with one person representing each business or profession. The same foundational structure remains, although membership has ballooned with the expansion of business.

The Winston-Salem club’s first meeting was held at the Zinzendorf Hotel, which was one of the city’s most prominent hotels at the time. Later meetings took place at various locations throughout the city and county, but Downtown has always been a focal point.

In nearly one hundred years, the Winston-Salem Rotary’s membership has included numerous public and elected officials, university administrators, community organizers, teachers, ministers, and prominent businesspeople. Their list of accomplishments includes leading the way for the formation of the City-County Planning Board (the first of its kind in North Carolina); organizing a group of people to administer and donate funds to preserve Old Salem; facilitating the relocation of Wake Forest College to Winston-Salem in 1956; encouraging the construction of the North Carolina Baptist Medical Center (including Bowman Gray Medical School and Brenner Children’s Hospital); pioneering the shopping center enterprise with Thruway Shopping Center; spearheading the creation of the J.G. Hanes Community Center; expanding SciWorks; and encouraging the UNC Board of Governors to locate the North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem.

The Winston-Salem Rotary was also among the first in the state to extend invitations of membership to women who met their standards for admission. Following a 1987 decision by the United States Supreme Court that forbid Rotary International from discriminating against women, four accomplished and well-respected women were invited to join the local chapter.

Today, Rotary International has over 1.2 million members in more than 27,000 clubs, including three here in Winston-Salem. The Stratford and Reynolda Rotary clubs are both offshoots of the Winston-Salem Rotary Club.