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RALEIGH For 150 years, Briggs Hardware has provided the materials that helped build much of Raleigh.

The business survived Reconstruction, two world wars and the Great Depression. But the recent economic downturn delivered a major blow to one of the city's oldest businesses, and Briggs will close in July.

"It was purely economics," said store manager Evelyn Murray, 54, part of the sixth generation of the Briggs family to run the business. "We just couldn't save it."

Briggs Hardware to close after 150 years

Briggs Hardware was a mainstay in downtown Raleigh for 130 years, operating from the historic Briggs building on Fayetteville Street, starting in 1865.

In 1995, the store moved to its current location at the corner of Six Forks Road and Atlantic Avenue.

As Raleigh grew up, Briggs maintained some of its old-fashioned ways. Employees made house calls, offering free guidance to customers.

The company allowed home builders to buy hardware – door knobs, locks, cabinet handles on an account with the store instead of paying up front. When the housing market crashed, Briggs was never paid by some companies that went under, Murray said.

She estimates the business lost tens of thousands of dollars.

As the economy improved, business was slow to pick up again, Murray said. Builders turned to other merchants, and the costs of running a business, including employee benefits, continued to rise.

To avoid closing, the company downsized from 10 employees to four. Three of them are family members.

“I wouldn’t say we didn’t see it coming,” Murray said. “We just hoped it would get better.”

Marcus Scruggs, 80, will retire next month after more than 60 years of working with his family business.

“We’re a mom-and-pop store ... and we just can’t compete with the big stores and the Internet,” Scruggs said.

Built on lore of gold

According to family lore, Thomas H. Briggs exchanged his Confederate money for gold in the 1860s and buried it in Devereux Meadow, near the present-day intersection of North West and Peace streets near downtown Raleigh.

He was hiding it from Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman’s troops.

In 1864, Briggs dug up the loot to finance the city’s first four-story “skyscraper,” which would house Briggs Hardware.

The store was key to Raleigh’s growth. So were members of the Briggs family.

Thomas H. Briggs’ father, John Joyner Briggs, did detailing work at the North Carolina Capitol according to the family. Thomas H. Briggs built several homes in the Oakwood and Mordecai neighborhoods near downtown.

“The Briggs family really capitalized on this post-war boom ... and ruled the growth in Raleigh,” said Ernest Dollar, executive director at the City of Raleigh Museum, which is housed in the Briggs building downtown.

Murray said the original store featured a popcorn machine for customers and an old-fashioned scale for passersby to weigh themselves. Those items survived the move to North Raleigh.

For a long time, Briggs was the city’s only toy store. Murray remembers wrapping toys before families came to pick them up around the holidays.

Central to politics, too

The Briggs family became well-known in retail and in politics.

J.E. Briggs, a “conservative Democrat,” served as mayor of Raleigh from 1951-53.

Marc Scruggs said his grandfather was an admirable leader, playing Santa Claus in the annual Christmas parade. Briggs oversaw the creation of Capital Boulevard – referred to as Downtown Boulevard in those days – and helped extend Glenwood Avenue into downtown.

Marc Scruggs also entered politics, serving on the Raleigh City Council from 1995-97 and again from 1999-2001. He said he tried to focus on supporting public safety in the city, an issue his grandfather was also passionate about.

He jump-started the conversation to reopen Fayetteville Street to vehicle traffic. The city closed the downtown street in the 1970s, turning it into a pedestrian mall.

The Briggs family fought the plan then, knowing it would hurt business, but was unsuccessful. Contractors could no longer pull their trucks up to the front of the store to load supplies.

Marc Scruggs said his father, Marcus, came up with a way for Briggs to remain profitable. He developed a wholesale system, selling supplies to university systems, state organizations and companies in eastern North Carolina. It kept the business profitable enough to stay in its downtown space for about two more decades.

In 1995, a group of nonprofits bought the Briggs building for \$550,000 and worked to preserve the site for the City of Raleigh Museum.

It wasn’t until 2006 that the city opened Fayetteville Street to traffic once again.

The family sold the current Briggs Hardware building to Phydeaux, a local pet store, for \$1.4 million in early June.

Some of the remaining items at Briggs will be sold through auction after the store closes July 10.

“The original Briggs family wanted to keep the store going for 100 years,” Marc Scruggs said. “We made it almost to 150. That’s a pretty good ride. You have to smile.”

Murray, the store’s current manager, isn’t quite ready to get out of the hardware store business. She plans to open a store on Hargett Street downtown that will use the Briggs name, although it won’t be a continuation of the family company.

“If it was the way it is now, we should have stayed downtown,” she said. “My heart remains downtown.”

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150 YEARS OF BRIGGS HARDWARE

1865: Thomas Henry Briggs opened Briggs Hardware on Fayetteville Street in downtown Raleigh. The store quickly became a major construction supplier during Reconstruction and provided supplies for neighborhoods such as Oakwood and Mordecai.

1951: J.E. Briggs became mayor of Raleigh. His work helped create Capital Boulevard and extension of Glenwood Avenue into downtown.

1977: The city closed Fayetteville Street to vehicle traffic and turned it into a pedestrian mall. The Briggs family fought against the change because it was tough for contractors to pull up to the store to load supplies. To remain profitable, the company turned to other wholesale work and contracted with universities.

1995: Downtown Raleigh struggled, and Briggs Hardware moved to its current location at S Forks Road and Atlantic Avenue. That year, Marc Scruggs, grandson of J.E. Briggs, was elected to the Raleigh City Council.

1999: Marc Scruggs was elected to serve another term on the City Council. He decided not to pursue re-election.

July 2015: Briggs Hardware will close its doors for good, just a few weeks shy of its 150th anniversary.