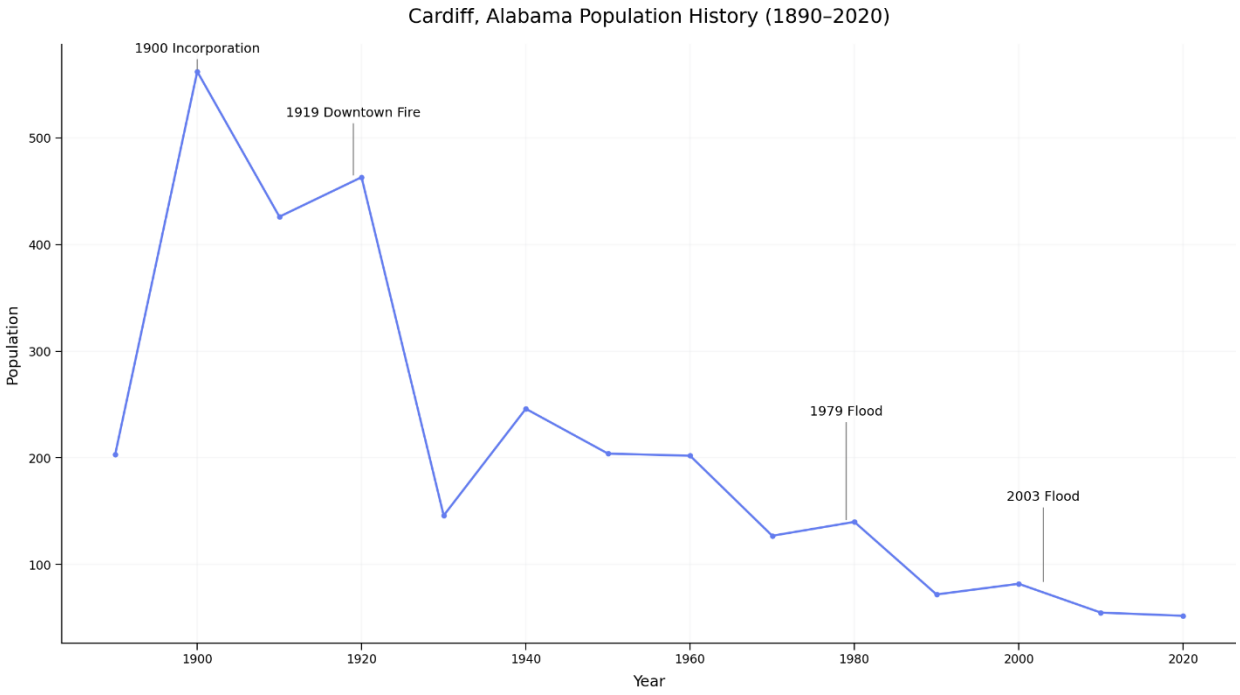
CARDIFF, ALABAMA: CIVIC REVITALIZATION BRIEF

THE BOTTOM LINE ON CARDIFF

Cardiff is a real, incorporated town of roughly 52 people clinging to legal existence in western Jefferson County, Alabama.** The 2020 Census counted 52 residents across approximately 0.2 square miles along Five Mile Creek, west of Brookside and near I-22. The town's government has gone dormant due to loss of quorum — but Alabama law provides a clear, tested pathway back. Cardiff is not the smallest incorporated municipality in the state (that's Oak Hill, population 14), but at 52 residents it sits among the dozen smallest, and its challenges are acute: a negligible tax base, no municipal services, a flood-damaged Town Hall, and a population that has declined for a century. The good news is that towns even smaller and more distressed than Cardiff have pulled off civic revivals elsewhere, and the legal and grant infrastructure to support one exists right now.

POPULATION: A CENTURY OF DECLINE, NOW STABILIZED

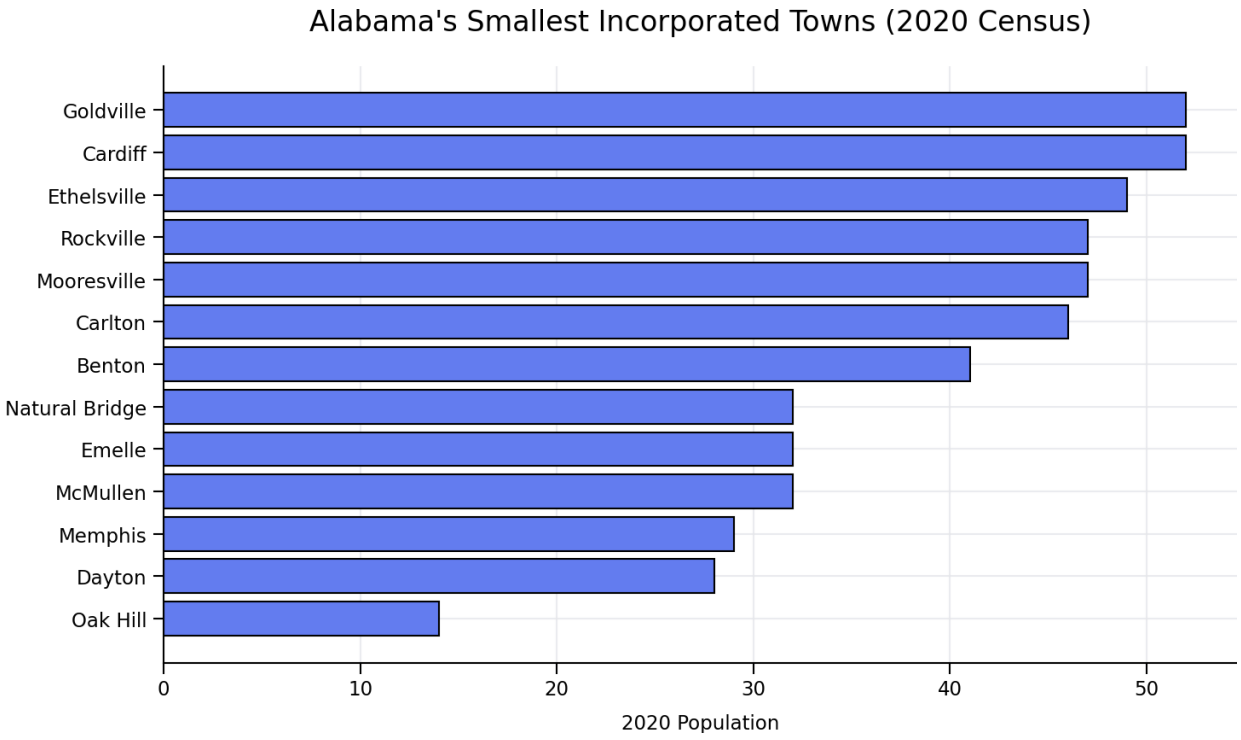
Cardiff was incorporated around 1900 with more than **560 residents** drawn by the coal mines named for Cardiff, Wales. The arc since then has been one of steady contraction:



The pace of decline has slowed dramatically. Between 2010 and 2020 Cardiff lost only 3 people — essentially flat. The ACS 5-year estimates for places this small swing wildly (the 2023 estimate was 42; the 2024 estimate, implausibly, was 125), so **the 2020 Decennial Census figure of 52 remains the most reliable count.** Cardiff's population density is roughly 598 persons per square mile despite its tiny population, because the incorporated area is only about a quarter of a square mile. The town is classified as **100% rural**.

WHERE CARDIFF STANDS AMONG ALABAMA'S SMALLEST TOWNS

Cardiff is **not** the smallest incorporated municipality in Alabama. It ranks roughly **12th–13th smallest** among the state's 465 incorporated municipalities. The actual smallest:



Cardiff's own Wikipedia page notes it was "for years the smallest incorporated town in the State of Alabama" — this was historically accurate during periods of deeper population decline, but Oak Hill, at 14 residents, now holds that distinction. Notably, Alabama law requires a minimum population of **300 to incorporate a new municipality**, but sets no minimum for existing ones. Towns like Oak Hill and McMullen persist legally despite populations far below that threshold.

INCOME AND POVERTY: THE STARKEST NUMBERS IN THE DATA

The Census Reporter ACS 2024 5-year estimates paint an economically distressed picture, though margins of error for a 52-person town are enormous and these figures should be treated as directional, not precise:

- **Median household income: $11,533** (±$780). For comparison, the Birmingham metro median is $71,498; Alabama's is $63,999; the national figure is $80,734. Cardiff's median is **less than one-fifth** of the metro figure.
- **Per capita income: $18,948** (±$10,121) — roughly half the state average.

- **Poverty rate: approximately 64%** (±57.6 percentage points). The margin of error is nearly as large as the estimate itself, so treat this with caution. But even the most generous interpretation suggests poverty well above the state rate of 15.6%.
- **Median property taxes paid: $20/year** (±$42).

The 2000 Census recorded a median household income of $34,107, suggesting real economic deterioration over two decades. Cost of living is low (index of 81.5 vs. national 100), but that reflects the absence of amenities as much as affordability.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS ABOUT CARDIFF'S CHALLENGES

The governance math is brutal. Under Alabama Code § 11-43-48, Cardiff's quorum requires **4 of 6 members** (mayor plus 5 council members) physically present — no remote attendance allowed per Attorney General Opinion 2006-071. In a town of 52 people, finding and retaining 6 willing adults to serve is the single highest-stakes challenge. Council members cannot be removed for non-attendance (only impeachment works), and vacancies can only be filled by majority council vote — which itself requires a quorum. This creates a death spiral: lose quorum, and you cannot appoint replacements to restore it.

The tax base cannot support traditional municipal services. With roughly 30 housing units, median property taxes of $20/year, no commercial establishments, and a median household income under $12,000, Cardiff cannot independently fund police, fire, road maintenance, or infrastructure. The town's fire department was disbanded; fire protection is contracted through Brookside. There is no police force. The Town Hall has been damaged since the 2003 Five Mile Creek flood.

The 2017 dissolution attempt was a warning shot. Eight residents petitioned Jefferson County Probate Court (Judge Alan King) to dissolve Cardiff, citing no election since 2008, inadequate services, and a vacant council seat. A counter-petition of ~15 signatures and a council vote to contest preserved the town. But the underlying grievances — dormant governance, no services, no elections — have not been resolved.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS ABOUT CARDIFF'S OPPORTUNITIES

Alabama law has a specific provision for exactly Cardiff's situation. Code § 11-41-7 states that towns whose organization has become "dormant and inefficient" may be reinstated by petition of a majority of taxpayers to the probate judge, who then appoints a mayor and council to serve until the next regular election. This is Cardiff's most direct legal pathway back to functioning government — it bypasses the quorum trap entirely.

Grant funding for small municipalities is substantial and accessible. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) administers Community Development Block Grants with a dedicated "Small City" category for populations under 3,000. Planning grants start at $40,000; infrastructure grants go up to $500,000. Jefferson County falls

within the Appalachian Regional Commission's eligible region, opening another funding stream. USDA Rural Development and FEMA hazard mitigation grants (relevant given Five Mile Creek flooding) are also available. The critical prerequisite for all of these is a functioning government that can apply.

Cardiff's location is an underappreciated asset. The town sits just off I-22, roughly 13 miles from downtown Birmingham, adjacent to Brookside and near Graysville and Adamsville. This is not a remote crossroads — it's inside the Birmingham metro area, with highway access to the regional economy.

Interlocal cooperation is legally enabled. Alabama Code Chapter 49C allows Class 8 municipalities to jointly operate public transportation, firefighting, law enforcement, and public works. Shared-service agreements with Brookside or other neighbors can provide services Cardiff can't fund alone.

Heritage identity is an untapped resource. Cardiff's Welsh and Scottish mining heritage, founding by immigrants from Cardiff, Wales, its position along Five Mile Creek, and its sheer persistence as a 125-year-old municipality are legitimate hooks for cultural identity and even modest heritage tourism.

HOW CIVIC REVIVAL ACTUALLY WORKS AT THIS SCALE: LESSONS FROM COMPARABLE TOWNS

The Hartly, Delaware model is the closest analog. Hartly (population ~73) in Kent County, Delaware faced an almost identical crisis around 2014–2015. The town council had sat empty for years as terms expired and nobody replaced members. Taxes hadn't been collected in two years. The town was $20,000–$36,000 in debt. A former treasurer had embezzled $89,000. In January 2015, roughly 150 people gathered at the Hartly Volunteer Fire Company to decide the town's fate. Only 16 were actual town residents eligible to serve. They voted down dissolution, reconstituted a 5-member council, restarted tax collection, and began applying for state aid. A state legislator helped navigate the process. By 2026, Hartly has a functioning government with regular meetings, a town budget, a comprehensive plan, and active infrastructure projects. A documentary, *A Hope for Hartly*, was produced in 2016. The key lesson: **even 16 eligible residents were enough, but outside support — from the state legislature, county officials, and neighboring communities — was essential.**

Lamont, Washington (population 71) shows the slow-burn version of Cardiff's crisis. The town operated for nearly a decade with only 3 council members — the bare minimum quorum. The longest-serving member wanted to retire after 16 years but feared the town would face disincorporation if she left. Five council positions drew zero candidates in 2023 elections. The lesson: **volunteer burnout is the universal threat**, and succession planning matters as much as recruitment.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR CARDIFF'S REVIVAL, IN SEQUENCE:

1. **Invoke § 11-41-7.** A majority of Cardiff's taxpayers petition Probate Court to reinstate the dormant government. The judge appoints a mayor and council who serve until the next regular election. This breaks the quorum deadlock.
2. **Contact the Alabama League of Municipalities.** ALM provides legal assistance, training, orientation conferences, and publications specifically for small-town officials. Their Municipal Clerk's Manual and Council Meeting Procedure guides are free to member towns.
3. **Apply for an ADECA planning grant ($40,000).** Fund a basic comprehensive plan. This is both useful and a prerequisite for larger infrastructure grants.
4. **Establish interlocal agreements.** Formalize fire protection and law enforcement arrangements with Brookside and/or Jefferson County. This is cheaper and more sustainable than standalone services.
5. **Hold a town meeting.** Following the Hartly model, convene every resident and interested neighbor to discuss the town's future. Public buy-in is the foundation.
6. **Address Town Hall.** Whether through repair or relocation to a donated or rented space, having a physical meeting place matters for legitimacy and morale.
7. **Pursue flood mitigation funding.** Five Mile Creek flooding is a documented hazard. FEMA pre-disaster mitigation and flood mitigation assistance grants could protect homes and improve property values.

A NOTE ON DATA RELIABILITY

Nearly every ACS statistic for Cardiff carries margins of error that approach or exceed the estimate. A median household income of $11,533 ± $780 is relatively tight, but a housing unit count of 103 ± 108 is meaningless in isolation. The 2020 Decennial Census (population 52) and the basic facts on the ground — roughly 30 housing units, no commercial establishments, a quarter square mile along a creek — are more trustworthy than the ACS microdata. Use the ACS estimates to establish direction and relative standing (Cardiff is poorer, younger, and more renter-heavy than the state average) rather than treating any specific number as precise.