

SOUTHERN FIRST BANCSHARES INC
Form 10-K
March 03, 2015

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**UNITED STATES
SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20549**

FORM 10-K

Annual Report Pursuant To Section 13 Or 15(d) of The Securities Exchange Act of 1934
For The Fiscal Year December 31, 2014.

Or

Transition Report Pursuant To Section 13 Or 15(d) of The Securities Exchange Act of 1934
For the Transition Period from _____ to _____
Commission file number 000-27719

Southern First Bancshares, Inc.

(Exact name of registrant as specified in its charter)

South Carolina
(State of Incorporation)

58-2459561
(I.R.S. Employer Identification No.)

100 Verdae Boulevard, Greenville, SC
(Address of principal executive offices)

29607
(Zip Code)

864-679-9000
(Telephone Number)

Securities registered pursuant to Section 12(b) of the Act:

Title of class	Name of each exchange on which registered
Common Stock	The NASDAQ Global Market

Securities registered pursuant to Section 12(g) of the Act: None

Indicate by check mark if the registrant is a well-known seasoned issuer, as defined in Rule 405 of the Securities Act. Yes No

Indicate by check mark if the registrant is not required to file reports pursuant to Section 13 or Section 15(d) of the Exchange Act. Yes No

Indicate by check mark whether the registrant (1) has filed all reports required to be filed by Section 13 or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 during the preceding 12 months (or for such shorter period that the registrant was required to file such reports), and (2) has been subject to such filing requirements for the past 90 days. Yes No

Indicate by check mark whether the registrant has submitted electronically and posted on its corporate Web site, if any, every Interactive Data File required to be submitted and posted pursuant to Rule 405 of Regulation S-T (§ 232.405 of this chapter) during the preceding 12 months (or for such shorter period that the registrant was required to submit and post such files). Yes No

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Indicate by check mark if disclosure of delinquent filers pursuant to Item 405 of Regulation S-K is not contained herein, and will not be contained, to the best of registrant's knowledge, in definitive proxy or information statements incorporated by reference in Part III of this Form 10-K or any amendment to this Form 10-K. X

Indicate by check mark whether the registrant is a large accelerated filer, an accelerated filer, or a non-accelerated filer. See definition of accelerated filer and large accelerated filer in Rule 12b-2 of the Exchange Act.

Large accelerated filer Accelerated filer Non-accelerated filer Smaller Reporting Company X

Indicate by check mark whether the registrant is a shell company (as defined in Rule 12b-2 of the Exchange Act). Yes No X

The aggregate market value of the common equity held by non-affiliates of the registrant as of June 30, 2014 (based on the average bid and ask price of the Common Stock as quoted on the NASDAQ Global Market on June 30, 2014), was \$55,672,243.

6,225,381 shares of the registrant's common stock were outstanding as of February 23, 2015.

DOCUMENTS INCORPORATED BY REFERENCE

Portions of the registrant's Proxy Statement relating to the Annual Meeting of Shareholders to be held on May 19, 2015 are incorporated by reference into Part III of this Annual Report on Form 10-K where indicated.

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**CAUTIONARY NOTE REGARDING
FORWARD-LOOKING STATEMENTS**

This Report, including information included or incorporated by reference in this document, contains statements which constitute forward-looking statements within the meaning of Section 27A of the Securities Act of 1933 and Section 21E of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934. Forward-looking statements may relate to our financial condition, results of operation, plans, objectives, or future performance. These statements are based on many assumptions and estimates and are not guarantees of future performance. Our actual results may differ materially from those anticipated in any forward-looking statements, as they will depend on many factors about which we are unsure, including many factors which are beyond our control. The words may, would, could, should, will, expect, anticipate, predict, project, potential, believe, continue, assume, intend, plan, and es expressions, are meant to identify such forward-looking statements. Potential risks and uncertainties that could cause our actual results to differ from those anticipated in any forward-looking statements include, but are not limited to, those described below under Item 1A-Risk Factors and the following:

Restrictions or conditions imposed by our regulators on our operations;

Increases in competitive pressure in the banking and financial services industries;

Changes in access to funding or increased regulatory requirements with regard to funding;

Changes in deposit flows;

Credit losses as a result of declining real estate values, increasing interest rates, increasing unemployment, changes in payment behavior or other factors;

Credit losses due to loan concentration;

Changes in the amount of our loan portfolio collateralized by real estate and weaknesses in the real estate market;

Our ability to attract and retain key personnel;

Changes in the interest rate environment which could reduce anticipated or actual margins;

Changes in political conditions or the legislative or regulatory environment, including governmental initiatives affecting the financial services industry;

Changes in economic conditions resulting in, among other things, a deterioration in credit quality;

Changes occurring in business conditions and inflation;

Cybersecurity breaches, including potential business disruptions or financial losses;

Changes in technology;

The adequacy of the level of our allowance for loan losses and the amount of loan loss provisions required in future periods;

Examinations by our regulatory authorities, including the possibility that the regulatory authorities may, among other things, require us to increase our allowance for loan losses or write-down assets;

Changes in monetary and tax policies;

The rate of delinquencies and amounts of loans charged-off;

The rate of loan growth in recent years and the lack of seasoning of a portion of our loan portfolio;

Our ability to maintain appropriate levels of capital and to comply with our capital ratio requirements;

Adverse changes in asset quality and resulting credit risk-related losses and expenses;

Changes in accounting policies and practices; and

Other risks and uncertainties detailed in this Annual Report on Form 10-K and, from time to time, in our other filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

If any of these risks or uncertainties materialize, or if any of the assumptions underlying such forward-looking statements proves to be incorrect, our results could differ materially from those expressed in, implied or projected by, such forward-looking statements. For information with respect to factors that could cause actual results to differ from the expectations stated in the forward-looking statements, see Risk Factors under Part I, Item 1A of this Annual Report on Form 10-K. We urge investors to consider all of these factors carefully in evaluating the forward-looking statements contained in this Annual Report on Form 10-K. We make these forward-looking as of the date of this document and we do not intend, and assume no obligation, to update the forward-looking statements or to update the reasons why actual results could differ from those expressed in, or implied or projected by, the forward-looking statements.

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PART I

Item 1. Business

General

Southern First Bancshares, Inc. (the Company), headquartered in Greenville, South Carolina, is a bank holding company incorporated in March 1999 under the laws of South Carolina that owns all of the capital stock of Southern First Bank (the Bank), a South Carolina state bank, and all of the stock of Greenville First Statutory Trust I and II (collectively, the Trusts). The Bank is a commercial bank with nine retail offices located in Greenville, Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina. The Bank is primarily engaged in the business of accepting demand deposits and savings deposits insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (the FDIC) and providing commercial, consumer and mortgage loans to the general public. The Trusts are special purpose subsidiaries organized for the sole purpose of issuing trust preferred securities.

Our Competitive Strengths

We believe that the following business strengths have been instrumental to the success of our core operations. These attributes will enable us to continue profitable growth, while remaining fundamentally sound and driving value to our shareholders.

Simple and Efficient ClientFIRST Model. We operate our Bank using a simple and efficient style of banking that is focused on providing core banking products and services to our clients through a team of talented and experienced bankers. We refer to this model as ClientFIRST and it is structured to deliver superior client service via relationship teams, which provide each client with a specific banker contact and a consistent support team responsible for all of the client's banking needs. We believe this model results in a consistent and superior level of professional service that provides us with a distinct competitive advantage by enabling us to build and maintain long-term relationships with desirable clients, enhancing the quality and stability of our funding and lending operations and positioning us to take advantage of future growth opportunities in our existing markets. We also believe that this client focused culture has led to our successful expansion into new markets in the past, and will enable us to be successful if we seek to expand into new markets in the future.

Our ClientFIRST model focuses on achieving cost efficiencies by diligently managing the growth of our number of employees and banking offices. We have historically insisted that the identification of talented bankers drives our growth strategy, as opposed to a more general desire to enter a specific geography or market. This strategy translates into a smaller number of brick and mortar offices relative to our size and compared to peer banks, but larger overall deposit balances in our offices as compared to peers. As a result, our offices average approximately \$88 million in total deposits. We believe this style of banking allows us to deliver exceptional client service, while achieving lower efficiency ratios relative to our local competitors.

We have also made significant investments in our IT systems and technology offerings to our clients that we believe will continue to drive low-cost deposit growth. For example, we launched our new mobile banking platform in early 2014. Since then, we have successfully registered over 4,000 mobile devices and expect that our active users will increase significantly in the coming years. We believe that our current mobile banking, on-line banking and cash management offerings are industry-leading solutions amongst community banks, and we will continue to invest in the latest technology solutions to ensure we meet the evolving needs of our clients and maintain this competitive advantage over other community banks.

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Attractive South Carolina Markets. We have nine banking offices located in Greenville, Columbia, and Charleston, South Carolina, which are the three largest markets in South Carolina. The following table illustrates our market share, by insured deposits as of the dates indicated, in these primary markets:

Market ⁽¹⁾	Total Offices	Our Market Deposits		Rank ⁽²⁾	Market Share ⁽²⁾
		June 30, 2014	Total Market Deposits ⁽²⁾		
Greenville	4	537,386	9,441,739	5 of 31	5.69%
Columbia	3	146,673	15,190,022	9 of 23	0.97%
Charleston	2	65,449	8,299,988	16 of 29	0.79%

(1) Represents Greenville County, Richland and Lexington counties in Columbia, and Charleston County.

(2) The total market deposits, rank and market share data displayed are as of June 30, 2014 as reported by the FDIC.

Greenville. The city of Greenville is located in Greenville County, South Carolina approximately midway between Atlanta and Charlotte on the heavily traveled I-85 business corridor. Greenville County is South Carolina's most populous county with an estimated 474,000 residents as of July 1, 2013 and is also one of the state's wealthiest counties with an estimated median household income of \$48,000 for 2012. A large and diverse metropolitan area, Greenville County is one of the southeast region's premier areas for business, serving as headquarters for Michelin and Hubbell Lighting as well as hosting significant operations for BMW and Lockheed Martin.

Columbia. The city of Columbia is located in Richland County, South Carolina and its surrounding suburban areas expand into adjoining Lexington County. Columbia is the state capital, the largest city in the state and the home of the University of South Carolina and Fort Jackson, the Army's largest Initial Entry Training Center. Richland County is the second largest county in the state with an estimated population of 399,000 residents as of July 1, 2013. Lexington County is the sixth largest county in South Carolina with an estimated population of 274,000 as of July 1, 2013. The median household income for Richland County and Lexington County was \$48,000 and \$54,000, respectively, for 2012.

Charleston. The city of Charleston is the second largest city in the state and is located in Charleston County, South Carolina, which is the third largest county in the state with an estimated population of 373,000 as of July 1, 2013. Charleston is home to the deepest port in the Southeast and boasts top companies in the aerospace, biomedical and technology fields such as Boeing, the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) and Blackbaud. The median household income for Charleston County was approximately \$50,000 for 2012. We opened our first retail office in the Charleston market in the downtown area of Charleston in December 2012 and our second retail office in the Charleston market in the city of Mount Pleasant in August 2014. Mount Pleasant is located just north of Charleston in Charleston County and ranks as the fourth largest city in South Carolina.

Experienced Management Team, Dedicated Board of Directors and Talented Employees. Our senior management team is led by Art Seaver, Justin Strickland, and Mike Dowling who lead a team of 23 additional senior team members which we believe compares favorably to any community bank management team assembled in South Carolina.

The management team is complemented by a dedicated board of directors with extensive local knowledge and a wide range of experience including accounting, business, banking, manufacturing, insurance, management and finance. We believe that our management's and board's incentives are closely aligned with our shareholders through the ownership of a substantial amount of our stock. As of December 31, 2014, our executive officers and board of directors owned an aggregate of 1,096,945 shares of our common stock, including options to purchase shares of our common stock, or approximately 21.09% of the fully-diluted amount of our common stock outstanding. We believe that our officers' and directors' experience and local market knowledge are valuable assets and will enable them to guide us successfully in the future.

In addition, we believe that we have assembled a group of highly talented employees by being an employer of choice in the markets we serve. We employed a total of 155 full-time equivalent employees as of December 31, 2014. Our employees are skilled in the areas of banking, information technology, management, sales, advertising and marketing, among others. We pride ourselves on maintaining excellent relations with all of our employees, which is evidenced by our less than 10% employee turnover ratio

during 2013 and 2014. We strive to provide an umbrella for great talent, characterized by a culture of transparency and collaboration which permeates all levels of the organization. To drive our culture of transparency and collaboration, our employees engage in a series of weekly meetings to understand the goals and plan for each week. These meetings are intended to remind our employees of our vision, strategy and ClientFIRST service, and provide our employees with information regarding monthly and quarterly goals and client or prospect needs. In addition, each week is started with a meeting of all Senior and Executive Vice Presidents to ensure that all team members are informed on the latest developments of our Company. Our employees and their ClientFIRST approach to service have been instrumental to our success.

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Our Business Strategy

We are focused on growing business relationships and building core deposits, profitable loans and non-interest income. We believe that we have built a dynamic franchise that meets the financial needs of our clients by providing an array of personalized products and services delivered by seasoned banking professionals with knowledge of our local markets. Our overall strategic goal is to provide the highest level of service to our clients while achieving high-performance metrics within the community banking space that drive franchise and shareholder value. Our specific business strategies include:

Focus on Profitable and Efficient Growth. Our executive management team and board of directors are dedicated to producing profits and returns for our shareholders. We actively manage the mix of assets and liabilities on our balance sheet to optimize our net interest margin while also maintaining expense controls and developing non-interest income streams. By constantly striving to build a well-structured balance sheet, we seek to increase profitability and improve our return on average assets, return on average equity and efficiency ratio. We believe that, as the economy continues to improve, our focus on maximizing our net interest margin and minimizing our efficiency ratio while maintaining credit quality controls will translate into continued and improving profitability and shareholder returns. We are committed to enhancing these levels of profitability by focusing on our core competencies of commercial lending and core deposit gathering. We believe that we have the infrastructure currently in place, such as technology, support staff and administration, to support expansion with limited associated noninterest expense increases.

Provide a Distinctive Client Experience. Our markets have been subject to consolidation of local community banks primarily by larger, out-of-state financial institutions. We believe there is a large client base in our markets that prefers doing business with a local institution and may be dissatisfied with the service offered by national and larger regional banks. We believe that the exceptional level of professional service provided to our clients as a result of our ClientFIRST model provides us with a distinct competitive advantage over our local competitors. We also believe that technology innovation will continue to play a critical role in retaining clients and winning new business. We believe that our current mobile banking, on-line banking and cash management offerings are industry-leading solutions amongst community banks. During the year ended December 31, 2014, 77% of deposits were acquired through our office network, 22% came through the commercial remote deposit capture channel and the remaining 1% came through consumer mobile deposits. In comparison, during 2013, 83% of deposits were acquired through our office network and the remaining 17% came through the commercial remote deposit capture channel. We believe that the volume in remote deposit capture and mobile deposit channels will continue to increase over time as more clients become acquainted with the convenience these services provide. By delivering superior professional service through our ClientFIRST model, coupled with our deep understanding of our markets and our commitment to providing the latest technology solutions to meet our clients' banking needs, we believe that we can attract new clients and expand our total loans and deposits.

Maintain a Rigorous Risk Management Infrastructure. As we grow, one of our top priorities is to continue to build a robust enterprise risk management infrastructure. We believe effective risk management requires a culture of risk management and governance throughout the Company. The legislative and regulatory landscape continues to quickly evolve, so we are continually performing risk assessments throughout the organization and re-allocating resources where appropriate. We will continue to add new resources and technology investments to help enhance all of our risk management processes throughout the Bank. Our risk management success is exemplified by our historic credit risk management and disciplined underwriting practices, which have enabled us to successfully grow our balance sheet while maintaining strong credit quality metrics. We do not reduce our credit standards or pricing discipline to generate new loans. In addition, we are heavily focused on compliance risk and cybersecurity risk, as both of these risks have increased since our inception. Our management team continually analyzes emerging fraud and security risks and utilizes tools, strategies and policies to manage risk while delivering an optimal and appropriate client experience. We believe our risk management structure allows our board and senior management to maintain effective oversight of our risks to ensure that our personnel are following prudent and appropriate risk management practices resulting in strong loan quality and minimal loan losses.

Attract Talented Banking Professionals With A ClientFIRST Focus. We believe that our ability to attract and retain banking professionals with strong community relationships and significant knowledge of our markets will continue to drive our success and grow our business in an efficient manner. By focusing on experienced, established bankers who deliver exceptional client service through our ClientFIRST model, we believe we can enhance our market position and add profitable growth opportunities. We believe that the strength of our exceptional client service and relationship banking approach will continue to help us attract these new bankers. In recent years, we have invested in our internal infrastructure, including support and back office personnel, and we believe that we can continue to add experienced frontline bankers to our existing markets, which will drive our efficient growth.

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We will continue to expand our franchise, but only in a controlled manner. We may choose to open new locations, but only after rigorous due diligence and substantial quantitative analysis regarding the financial and capital impacts of such investments. We may also choose to enter new, metropolitan markets contiguous to, or nearby, our current South Carolina footprint, but only after careful study and the identification and vetting of a local, senior level banking team with significant experience and reputational strength in that market. We have not yet supplemented our historic strategy of organic deposit and loan growth with traditional mergers or acquisitions. We evaluate potential acquisition opportunities that we believe would be complementary to our business as part of our growth strategy. However, we have not yet identified any specific acquisition opportunity that meets our strict requirements and do not have any immediate plans, arrangements or understandings relating to any acquisition. Furthermore, we do not believe an acquisition is necessary to successfully drive our growth and execute our ClientFIRST model.

Lending Activities

General. We emphasize a range of lending services, including real estate, commercial, and equity-line consumer loans to individuals and small- to medium-sized businesses and professional firms that are located in or conduct a substantial portion of their business in our market area. Our underwriting standards vary for each type of loan, as described below. Because loans typically provide higher interest yields than other types of interest-earning assets, we invest a substantial percentage of our earning assets in our loan portfolio. At December 31, 2014, we had net loans of \$859.7 million, representing 83.5% of our total assets.

We have focused our lending activities primarily on the professional markets in Greenville, Columbia, and Charleston including doctors, dentists, and small business owners. By focusing on this client base and by serving each client with a consistent relationship team of bankers, we have generated a loan portfolio with larger average loan amounts than we believe is typical for a community bank. As of December 31, 2014, our average loan size was approximately \$229,000. Excluding home equity lines of credit, the average loan size was approximately \$301,000. At the same time, we have strived to maintain a diversified loan portfolio and limit the amount of our loans to any single client. As of December 31, 2014, our 10 largest client loan relationships represented approximately \$78.1 million, or 9.0% of our loan portfolio.

Loan Approval. Certain credit risks are inherent in making loans. These include prepayment risks, risks resulting from uncertainties in the future value of collateral, risks resulting from changes in economic and industry conditions, and risks inherent in dealing with individual borrowers. We attempt to mitigate repayment risks by adhering to internal credit policies and procedures. These policies and procedures include officer and client lending limits, a multi-layered approval process for larger loans, documentation examination, and follow-up procedures for any exceptions to credit policies. Our loan approval policies provide for various levels of officer lending authority. When the amount of aggregate loans to a single borrower exceeds an individual officer's lending authority, the loan request will be considered for approval by a team of officers led by a senior lender, or by the voting members of the officers' loan committee, based on the loan amount. The officers' loan committee, which is comprised of a group of our senior commercial lenders, bank president, and chief executive officer, has pre-determined lending limits, and any loans in excess of this lending limit will be submitted for approval by the finance committee of our board or by the full board. We do not make any loans to any director or executive officer of the Bank unless the loan is approved by the board of directors of the Bank and all loans to directors, officers and employees are on terms not more favorable to such person than would be available to a person not affiliated with the Bank, consistent with federal banking regulations.

Management monitors exposure to credit risk from potential concentrations of loans to particular borrowers or groups of borrowers, industries and geographic regions, as well as concentrations of lending products and practices such as loans that subject borrowers to substantial payment increases (e.g. principal deferral periods, loans with initial interest-only periods, etc.), and loans with high loan-to-value ratios. As of December 31, 2014, approximately \$93.4 million, or 10.7% of our loans had loan-to-value ratios which exceeded regulatory supervisory limits, of which 100 loans totaling approximately \$40.5 million had loan-to-value ratios of 100% or more. These types of loans are subject to strict underwriting standards and are more closely monitored than a loan with a low loan-to-value ratio. Furthermore, there are industry practices that could subject the Company to increased credit risk should economic conditions change over the course of a loan's life. For example the Company makes variable rate loans and fixed rate principal-amortizing loans with maturities prior to the loan being fully paid (i.e. balloon payment loans). The various types of loans are individually underwritten and monitored to manage the associated risks.

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Credit Administration and Loan Review. We maintain a continuous loan review system. We also apply a credit grading system to each loan, and we use an independent process to review the loan files on a test basis to assess the grading of each loan. The Bank has a chief risk officer that reviews performance benchmarks established by management in the areas of nonperforming assets, charge-offs, past dues, and loan documentation. Each loan officer is responsible for each loan he or she makes, regardless of whether other individuals or committees joined in the approval. This responsibility continues until the loan is repaid or until the loan is officially assigned to another officer.

Lending Limits. Our lending activities are subject to a variety of lending limits imposed by federal and state laws and regulations. In general, the Bank is subject to a legal limit on loans to a single borrower equal to 15% of the Bank's capital and unimpaired surplus. Based upon the capitalization of the Bank at December 31, 2014, the maximum amount we could lend to one borrower is \$15.4 million. However, to mitigate concentration risk, our internal lending limit at December 31, 2014 is \$10.8 million and may vary based on our assessment of the lending relationship. The board of directors will adjust the internal lending limit as deemed necessary to continue to mitigate risk and serve the Bank's clients. The Bank's legal lending limit will increase or decrease in response to increases or decreases in the Bank's level of capital. We are able to sell participations in our larger loans to other financial institutions, which allow us to manage the risk involved in these loans and to meet the lending needs of our clients requiring extensions of credit in excess of these limits.

Loan Portfolio Segments. Our loan portfolio is comprised of commercial and consumer loans made to small businesses and individuals for various business and personal purposes. While our loan portfolio is not concentrated in loans to any single borrower or a relatively small number of borrowers, the principal component of our loan portfolio is loans secured by real estate mortgages on either commercial or residential property. These loans will generally fall into one of the following six categories: commercial owner occupied real estate, commercial non-owner occupied real estate, commercial construction, consumer real estate, consumer construction, and home equity loans. We obtain a security interest in real estate whenever possible, in addition to any other available collateral, in order to increase the likelihood of the ultimate repayment of the loan. At December 31, 2014, loans secured by first or second mortgages on commercial and consumer real estate made up approximately 81.2% of our loan portfolio. In addition to loans secured by real estate, our loan portfolio includes commercial business loans and other consumer loans which comprised 17.2% and 1.6%, respectively, of our total loan portfolio at December 31, 2014.

Interest rates for all real estate loan categories may be fixed or adjustable, and will more likely be fixed for shorter-term loans. We generally charge an origination fee for each loan which is taken into income over the life of the loan as an adjustment to the loan yield. Other loan fees consist primarily of late charge fees. Real estate loans are subject to the same general risks as other loans and are particularly sensitive to fluctuations in the value of real estate. Fluctuations in the value of real estate, as well as other factors arising after a loan has been made, could negatively affect a borrower's cash flow, creditworthiness, and ability to repay the loan. Although, the loans are collateralized by real estate, the primary source of repayment may not be the sale of real estate.

The following describes the types of loans in our loan portfolio.

Commercial Real Estate Loans (Commercial Owner Occupied and Commercial Non-owner Occupied Real Estate Loans). At December 31, 2014, commercial owner occupied and non-owner occupied real estate loans (other than construction loans) amounted to \$374.5 million, or approximately 43.0% of our loan portfolio. Of our commercial real estate loan portfolio, \$183.4 million in loans were non-owner occupied properties, representing 49.0% of our commercial real estate portfolio and 21.1% of our total loan portfolio. The remainder of our commercial real estate loan portfolio, \$191.1 million in loans or 51.0% of the commercial loan portfolio, were owner occupied. Owner occupied loans represented 21.9% of our total loan portfolio. At December 31, 2014, our individual commercial real estate loans ranged in size from approximately \$2,000 to \$7.1 million, with an average loan size of approximately \$513,000. These loans generally have terms of five years or less, although payments may be structured on a longer amortization basis. We evaluate each borrower on an individual basis and attempt to determine the business risks and credit profile of each borrower. We attempt to reduce credit risk in the commercial real estate portfolio by emphasizing loans on owner-occupied office and retail buildings where the loan-to-value ratio, established by independent appraisals, does not exceed 85%. We also generally require that a borrower's cash flow exceeds 115% of monthly debt service obligations. In order to ensure secondary sources of payment and liquidity to support a loan request, we typically review all of the personal financial statements of the principal owners and require their personal guarantees.

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Construction Real Estate Loans. We offer adjustable and fixed rate construction real estate loans for commercial and consumer projects, typically to builders and developers and to consumers who wish to build their own homes. At December 31, 2014, total commercial and consumer construction loans amounted to \$90.2 million, or 10.3% of our loan portfolio. Commercial construction loans represented \$51.0 million, or 5.8%, of our total loan portfolio, while consumer construction loans represented \$39.2 million, or 4.5% of our total loan portfolio. At December 31, 2014, our commercial construction real estate loans ranged in size from approximately \$9,000 to \$7.9 million, with an average loan size of approximately \$738,000. At December 31, 2014, our consumer or residential construction loans ranged in size from approximately \$1,000 to \$1.5 million, with an average loan size of approximately \$382,000. The duration of our construction loans generally is limited to 18 months, although payments may be structured on a longer amortization basis. Commercial construction loans generally carry a higher degree of risk than long-term financing of existing properties because repayment depends on the ultimate completion of the project and sometimes on the sale of the property. Specific risks include:

- cost overruns;
- mismanaged construction;
- inferior or improper construction techniques;
- economic changes or downturns during construction;
- a downturn in the real estate market;
- rising interest rates which may prevent sale of the property; and
- failure to sell completed projects in a timely manner.

We attempt to reduce the risk associated with construction loans by obtaining personal guarantees where possible and by keeping the loan-to-value ratio of the completed project at or below 80%.

Commercial Business Loans. We make loans for commercial purposes in various lines of businesses, including the manufacturing, service industry, and professional service areas. At December 31, 2014, commercial business loans amounted to \$150.0 million, or 17.2% of our loan portfolio, and ranged in size from approximately \$1,000 to \$4.1 million, with an average loan size of approximately \$178,000. Commercial loans are generally considered to have greater risk than first or second mortgages on real estate because commercial loans may be unsecured, or if they are secured, the value of the collateral may be difficult to assess and more likely to decrease than real estate.

We are eligible to offer small business loans utilizing government enhancements such as the Small Business Administration's (SBA) 7(a) program and SBA 504 programs. These loans typically are partially guaranteed by the government, which helps to reduce their risk. Government guarantees of SBA loans do not exceed, and are generally less than, 80% of the loan. As of December 31, 2014, we had originated one loan utilizing government enhancements.

Consumer Real Estate Loans and Home Equity Loans. At December 31, 2014, consumer real estate loans (other than construction loans) amounted to \$242.5 million, or 27.9% of our loan portfolio. Included in the consumer real estate loans was \$146.9 million, or 16.9% of our loan portfolio, in first and second mortgages on individuals' homes, while home equity loans represented \$95.6 million, or 11.0% of our total loan portfolio. At December 31, 2014, our individual residential real estate loans ranged in size from \$100 to \$2.3 million, with an average loan size of approximately \$302,000. Generally, we limit the loan-to-value ratio on our consumer real estate loans to 85%. We offer fixed and adjustable rate consumer real estate loans with terms of up to 30 years. We typically offer these long-term fixed rate loans through a third party rather than originating and retaining these loans ourselves. Consumer real estate and home equity loans that we retain on our balance sheet typically have terms of 10 years or less. We also offer home equity lines of credit. At December 31, 2014, our individual home equity lines of credit ranged in size from \$100 to \$1.9 million, with an average of approximately \$110,000. Our underwriting criteria and the risks associated with home equity loans and lines of credit are generally the same as those for first mortgage loans. Home equity lines of credit typically have terms of ten years or less. We generally limit the extension of credit to 90% of the market value of each property, although we may extend up to 100% of the market value.

Other Consumer Loans. We make a variety of loans to individuals for personal and household purposes, including secured and unsecured installment loans and revolving lines of credit. These consumer loans are underwritten based on the borrower's income, current debt level, past credit history, and the availability and value of collateral. Consumer rates are both fixed and variable, with negotiable terms. At December 31, 2014, consumer loans other than real estate amounted to \$14.3 million, or

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1.6% of our loan portfolio, and ranged in size from \$100 to \$875,000, with an average loan size of approximately \$19,000. Our installment loans typically amortize over periods up to 60 months. We will offer consumer loans with a single maturity date when a specific source of repayment is available. We typically require monthly payments of interest and a portion of the principal on our revolving loan products. Consumer loans are generally considered to have greater risk than first or second mortgages on real estate because they may be unsecured, or, if they are secured, the value of the collateral may be difficult to assess and more likely to decrease in value than real estate.

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Deposit Services

Our principal source of funds is core deposits. We offer a full range of deposit services, including checking accounts, commercial checking accounts, savings accounts, and other time deposits of various types, ranging from daily money market accounts to long-term certificates of deposit. Our out-of-market, or wholesale, certificates of deposits represented 7.6% of total deposits at December 31, 2014. In an effort to obtain lower costing deposits, we have focused on expanding our retail deposit program. We currently have nine retail offices which assist us in obtaining low cost transaction accounts that are less affected by rising rates. Deposit rates are reviewed regularly by senior management of the Bank. We believe that the rates we offer are competitive with those offered by other financial institutions in our area. We focus on client service and our ClientFIRST culture to attract and retain deposits.

Other Banking Services

In addition to deposit and loan services, we offer other bank services such as internet banking, cash management services, safe deposit boxes, direct deposit, and automatic drafts for various accounts. We earn fees for most of these services, including debit and credit card transactions, sales of checks, and wire transfers. We also receive ATM transaction fees from transactions performed by our clients. We are associated with the NYCE, Pulse, STAR, and Cirrus networks, which are available to our clients throughout the country. Since we outsource our ATM services, we are charged related transaction fees from our ATM service provider. We have contracted with Fidelity National Information Systems, an outside computer service company, to provide our core data processing services and our ATM processing. By outsourcing these services, we believe we are able to reduce our overhead by matching the expense in each period to the transaction volume that occurs during the period, as a significant portion of the fee charged is directly related to the number of loan and deposit accounts and the related number of transactions we have during the period. We believe that by being associated with a shared network of ATMs, we are better able to serve our clients and are able to attract clients who are accustomed to the convenience of using ATMs, although we do not believe that maintaining this association is critical to our success. We also offer Internet banking services, bill payment services, and cash management and mobile banking services.

Competition

The banking business is highly competitive, and we experience competition in our market from many other financial institutions. Competition among financial institutions is based upon interest rates offered on deposit accounts, interest rates charged on loans, other credit and service charges relating to loans, the quality and scope of the services rendered, the convenience of banking facilities, and, in the case of loans to commercial borrowers, relative lending limits. We compete with commercial banks, credit unions, savings and loan associations, mortgage banking firms, consumer finance companies, securities brokerage firms, insurance companies, money market funds, and other mutual funds, as well as other super-regional, national, and international financial institutions that operate offices in Greenville, Richland, Lexington, and Charleston Counties, South Carolina and elsewhere.

As of June 30, 2014, the most recent date for which market data is available, there were 31 financial institutions in our primary market of Greenville County, 23 financial institutions in the Columbia market, and 29 financial institutions in the Charleston market. We compete with other financial institutions in our market areas both in attracting deposits and in making loans. In addition, we have to attract our client base from other existing financial institutions and from new residents. Many of our competitors are well-established, larger financial institutions with substantially greater resources and lending limits, such as BB&T, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and SunTrust. These institutions offer some services, such as extensive and established branch networks and trust services that we do not provide. In addition, many of our non-bank competitors are not subject to the same extensive federal regulations that govern bank holding companies and federally insured banks. Because larger competitors have advantages in attracting business from larger corporations, we do not generally compete for that business. Instead, we concentrate our efforts on attracting the business of individuals and small and medium-size businesses. With regard to such accounts, we generally compete on the basis of client service and responsiveness to client needs, the convenience of our offices and hours, and the availability and pricing of our products and services.

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We believe our commitment to quality and personalized banking services through our ClientFIRST culture is a factor that contributes to our competitiveness and success.

Employees

At December 31, 2014, we employed a total of 155 full-time equivalent employees, respectively. We provide our full-term employees and certain part-time employees with a comprehensive program of benefits, including medical benefits, life insurance, long-term disability coverage and a 401(k) plan. Our employees are not represented by a collective bargaining agreement. Management considers its employee relations to be excellent.

SUPERVISION AND REGULATION

Both the Company and the Bank are subject to extensive state and federal banking laws and regulations that impose specific requirements or restrictions on and provide for general regulatory oversight of virtually all aspects of our operations. These laws and regulations are generally intended to protect depositors, not shareholders. Changes in applicable laws or regulations may have a material effect on our business and prospects.

The following discussion is not intended to be a complete list of all the activities regulated by the banking laws or of the impact of such laws and regulations on our operations. It is intended only to briefly summarize some material provisions. The following summary is qualified by reference to the statutory and regulatory provisions discussed.

Recent Legislative and Regulatory Developments

Markets in the U.S. and elsewhere experienced extreme volatility and disruption beginning in the latter half of 2007 that has continued since then. These circumstances have exerted significant downward pressure on prices of equity securities and virtually all other asset classes, and have resulted in substantially increased market volatility, severely constrained credit and capital markets, particularly for financial institutions, and has caused an overall loss of investor confidence. Loan portfolio performances have deteriorated at many institutions resulting from, among other factors, a weak economy and a decline in the value of the collateral supporting their loans. Dramatic slowdowns in the housing industry, due in part to falling home prices and increasing foreclosures and unemployment, have created strains on financial institutions. Many borrowers are now unable to repay their loans, and the collateral securing these loans has, in some cases, declined below the loan balance. In response to the challenges facing the financial services sector, the following regulatory and governmental actions have recently been enacted.

The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act

The Dodd-Frank Act impacts financial institutions in numerous ways, including:

- The creation of a Financial Stability Oversight Council responsible for monitoring and managing systemic risk,
- Granting additional authority to the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve (the Federal Reserve) to regulate certain types of nonbank financial companies,
- Granting new authority to the FDIC as liquidator and receiver,
- Changing the manner in which deposit insurance assessments are made,
- Requiring regulators to modify capital standards,
- Establishing the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection (the CFPB),
- Capping interchange fees that banks charge merchants for debit card transactions,
- Imposing more stringent requirements on mortgage lenders, and
- Limiting banks' proprietary trading activities.

There are many provisions in the Dodd-Frank Act mandating regulators to adopt new regulations and conduct studies upon which future regulation may be based. While some have been issued, many remain to be issued. Governmental intervention and new regulations could materially and adversely affect our business, financial condition and results of operations.

Basel Capital Standards

The Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (the BCBS), an international forum for cooperation on banking supervisory matters, promulgates capital standards for banking organizations. On July 9, 2013, the federal bank regulatory agencies issued a final rule that will revise their risk-based capital requirements and the method for calculating risk-weighted assets to make them consistent with agreements that were reached by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (Basel III) and certain provisions of the Dodd-Frank Act. The final rule applies to all depository institutions, top-tier bank holding companies with total consolidated assets of \$500 million or more (such as the Company) and top-tier savings and loan holding companies.

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The rule imposes higher risk-based capital and leverage requirements than those currently in place. Specifically, the rule imposes the following minimum capital requirements:

- A new common equity Tier 1 risk-based capital ratio of 4.5%,
- A Tier 1 risk-based capital ratio of 6% (increased from the current 4% requirement),
- A total risk-based capital ratio of 8% (unchanged from current requirements),
- A leverage ratio of 4% and
- A new supplementary leverage ratio of 3% applicable to advanced approaches banking organizations resulting in a leverage ratio requirement of 7% for such institutions.

The rule also includes changes in what constitutes regulatory capital, some of which are subject to a transition period. These changes include the phasing-out of certain instruments as qualifying capital. In addition, Tier 2 capital is no longer limited to the amount of Tier 1 capital included in total capital. Mortgage servicing rights, certain deferred tax assets and investments in unconsolidated subsidiaries over designated percentages of common stock will be required to be deducted from capital, subject to a transition period. Finally, common equity Tier 1 capital will include accumulated other comprehensive income (which includes all unrealized gains and losses on available for sale debt and equity securities), subject to a transition period and a one-time opt-out election.

The new capital requirements also include changes in the risk-weights of assets to better reflect credit risk and other risk exposures. These include a 150% risk weight (up from 100%) for certain high volatility commercial real estate acquisition, development and construction loans and non-residential mortgage loans that are 90 days past due or otherwise on nonaccrual status; a 20% (up from 0%) credit conversion factor for the unused portion of a commitment with an original maturity of one year or less that is not unconditionally cancellable; a 250% risk weight (up from 100%) for mortgage servicing rights and deferred tax assets that are not deducted from capital; and increased risk-weights (from 0% to up to 600%) for equity exposures.

Finally, the rule limits capital distributions and certain discretionary bonus payments if the banking organization does not hold a capital conservation buffer consisting of 2.5% of common equity Tier 1 capital to risk-weighted assets in addition to the amount necessary to meet its minimum risk-based capital requirements.

The final rule became effective on January 1, 2015. The capital conservation buffer requirement will be phased in beginning January 1, 2016, at 0.625% of risk-weighted assets, increasing each year until fully implemented at 2.5% on January 1, 2019. It is management's belief that, as of December 31, 2014, the Company and the Bank would have met all capital adequacy requirements under Basel III on a fully phased-in basis if such requirements were currently effective.

The federal banking agencies have not proposed rules implementing the final liquidity framework of Basel III, and have not determined to what extent they will apply to U.S. banks that are not large, internationally active banks.

The ultimate impact of the rule on the Company and the Bank is currently being reviewed and is dependent upon when certain requirements of the rule will be fully phased in. We believe that the final rule will not have a material impact on our business, financial condition, results of operations and cash flows. At this point we cannot determine the ultimate impact that the fully phased-in rule will have upon our business, financial condition, results of operations and cash flows.

Volcker Rule

Section 619 of the Dodd-Frank Act, known as the Volcker Rule, prohibits any bank, bank holding company or affiliate (referred to collectively as banking entities) from engaging in two types of activities: proprietary trading and ownership or sponsorship of private equity or hedge funds that are referred to as covered funds. On December 10, 2013, our primary federal regulators, the Federal Reserve and the FDIC, together with other federal banking agencies, the SEC and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, finalized a regulation to implement the Volcker Rule. The deadline for compliance with the Volcker Rule is July 21, 2015.

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Proposed Legislation and Regulatory Action

From time to time, various legislative and regulatory initiatives are introduced in Congress and state legislatures, as well as by regulatory agencies. Such initiatives may include proposals to expand or contract the powers of bank holding companies and depository institutions or proposals to substantially change the financial institution regulatory system. Such legislation could change banking statutes and the operating environment of the Company in substantial and unpredictable ways. If enacted, such legislation could increase or decrease the cost of doing business, limit or expand permissible activities or affect the competitive balance among banks, savings associations, credit unions, and other financial institutions. We cannot predict whether any such legislation will be enacted, and, if enacted, the effect that it, or any implementing regulations, would have on the financial condition or results of operations of the Company. A change in statutes, regulations or regulatory policies applicable to the Company or the Bank could have a material effect on the business of the Company.

Southern First Bancshares, Inc.

We own 100% of the outstanding capital stock of the Bank, and therefore we are considered to be a bank holding company under the federal Bank Holding Company Act of 1956 (the Bank Holding Company Act). As a result, we are primarily subject to the supervision, examination and reporting requirements of the Federal Reserve under the Bank Holding Company Act and its regulations promulgated thereunder. Moreover, as a bank holding company of a bank located in South Carolina, we also are subject to the South Carolina Banking and Branching Efficiency Act.

Permitted Activities. Under the Bank Holding Company Act, a bank holding company is generally permitted to engage in, or acquire direct or indirect control of more than 5% of the voting shares of any company engaged in, the following activities:

- banking or managing or controlling banks;
- furnishing services to or performing services for our subsidiaries; and
- any activity that the Federal Reserve determines to be so closely related to banking as to be a proper incident to the business of banking.

Activities that the Federal Reserve has found to be so closely related to banking as to be a proper incident to the business of banking include:

- factoring accounts receivable;
- making, acquiring, brokering or servicing loans and usual related activities;
- leasing personal or real property;
- operating a non-bank depository institution, such as a savings association;
- trust company functions;
- financial and investment advisory activities;
- conducting discount securities brokerage activities;
- underwriting and dealing in government obligations and money market instruments;
- providing specified management consulting and counseling activities;
- performing selected data processing services and support services;
- acting as agent or broker in selling credit life insurance and other types of insurance in connection with credit transactions; and
- performing selected insurance underwriting activities.

As a bank holding company we also can elect to be treated as a financial holding company, which would allow us to engage in a broader array of activities. In summary, a financial holding company can engage in activities that are financial in nature or incidental or complimentary to financial activities, including insurance underwriting, sales and brokerage activities, providing financial and investment advisory services, underwriting services and limited merchant banking activities. We have not sought financial holding company status, but may elect such status in the future as our business matures. If we were to elect financial holding company

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status, each insured depository institution we control would have to be well capitalized, well managed and have at least a satisfactory rating under the Community Reinvestment Act as discussed below.

The Federal Reserve has the authority to order a bank holding company or its subsidiaries to terminate any of these activities or to terminate its ownership or control of any subsidiary when it has reasonable cause to believe that the Bank holding company's continued ownership, activity or control constitutes a serious risk to the financial safety, soundness or stability of it or any of its bank subsidiaries.

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Change in Control. In addition, and subject to certain exceptions, the Bank Holding Company Act and the Change in Bank Control Act, together with regulations promulgated thereunder, require Federal Reserve approval prior to any person or company acquiring control of a bank holding company. Control is conclusively presumed to exist if an individual or company acquires 25% or more of any class of voting securities of a bank holding company. Control will be rebuttably presumed to exist if a person acquires more than 33% of the total equity of a bank or bank holding company, of which it may own, control or have the power to vote not more than 15% of any class of voting securities.

Source of Strength. There are a number of obligations and restrictions imposed by law and regulatory policy on bank holding companies with regard to their depository institution subsidiaries that are designed to minimize potential loss to depositors and to the FDIC insurance funds in the event that the depository institution becomes in danger of defaulting under its obligations to repay deposits. Under a policy of the Federal Reserve, a bank holding company is required to serve as a source of financial strength to its subsidiary depository institutions and to commit resources to support such institutions in circumstances where it might not do so absent such policy. Under the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation Improvement Act of 1991 (FDICIA), to avoid receivership of its insured depository institution subsidiary, a bank holding company is required to guarantee the compliance of any insured depository institution subsidiary that may become undercapitalized within the terms of any capital restoration plan filed by such subsidiary with its appropriate federal banking agency up to the lesser of (i) an amount equal to 5% of the institution's total assets at the time the institution became undercapitalized, or (ii) the amount which is necessary (or would have been necessary) to bring the institution into compliance with all applicable capital standards as of the time the institution fails to comply with such capital restoration plan.

The Federal Reserve also has the authority under the Bank Holding Company Act to require a bank holding company to terminate any activity or relinquish control of a nonbank subsidiary (other than a nonbank subsidiary of a bank) upon the Federal Reserve's determination that such activity or control constitutes a serious risk to the financial soundness or stability of any subsidiary depository institution of the bank holding company. Further, federal law grants federal bank regulatory authorities additional discretion to require a bank holding company to divest itself of any bank or nonbank subsidiary if the agency determines that divestiture may aid the depository institution's financial condition.

In addition, the cross guarantee provisions of the Federal Deposit Insurance Act require insured depository institutions under common control to reimburse the FDIC for any loss suffered or reasonably anticipated by the FDIC as a result of the default of a commonly controlled insured depository institution or for any assistance provided by the FDIC to a commonly controlled insured depository institution in danger of default. The FDIC's claim for damages is superior to claims of shareholders of the insured depository institution or its holding company, but is subordinate to claims of depositors, secured creditors and holders of subordinated debt (other than affiliates) of the commonly controlled insured depository institutions.

The FDIA also provides that amounts received from the liquidation or other resolution of any insured depository institution by any receiver must be distributed (after payment of secured claims) to pay the deposit liabilities of the institution prior to payment of any other general or unsecured senior liability, subordinated liability, general creditor or shareholder. This provision would give depositors a preference over general and subordinated creditors and shareholders in the event a receiver is appointed to distribute the assets of our Bank.

Any capital loans by a bank holding company to any of its subsidiary banks are subordinate in right of payment to deposits and to certain other indebtedness of such subsidiary bank. In the event of a bank holding company's bankruptcy, any commitment by the bank holding company to a federal bank regulatory agency to maintain the capital of a subsidiary bank will be assumed by the bankruptcy trustee and entitled to a priority of payment.

Capital Requirements. The Federal Reserve imposes certain capital requirements on the bank holding company under the Bank Holding Company Act, including a minimum leverage ratio and a minimum ratio of qualifying capital to risk-