

Historic Huntsville Quarterly



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Huntsville, Alabama

January - March, 1976

HUNTSVILLE THEATRE

by Mrs. Bessie King Russell

Although John Hunt first came to the Big Spring in 1805 and the government land sales were not until 1809, Huntsville had a theatre before 1820. A newspaper of 1820 carried this announcement:

Theatre - The public is respectfully informed that on Saturday evening, November 4, 1820 will be presented the moral, instructive, and effective Tragedy of the Gamester" after which a comic farce in one act called "Blue Devil." Admission one dollar. Performance to commence at seven o'clock precisely.

This theatre was destroyed by fire in 1821, but Stock certificates were issued in 1823 for a theatre to be built by the Thespian Society in Huntsville. In 1825 LeRoy Pope and his wife, Judith, executed a deed to Benjamin Pope for a lot on the southwest corner of Clinton and Lincoln Streets. This half-acre lot was sold to Benjamin Pope for the

Thespian Society of Huntsville, for a theatre. The theatre was built in 1825 and rented out to traveling players.

Theatrical companies came to Huntsville for a season. They lived in the theatre and presented two different plays each night--a drama, followed by a farce.

Some of the plays presented in 1826 were:

Belle's Stratagem
The Spoiled Child
Sweethearts and Wives
Richard III, and
Frederick the Great.

The actors and actresses were not paid a salary. Instead, they had "benefit nights," when all the money taken in on certain nights was given to some of the performers.

The rules of the theatre were printed on programs: Tickets were \$1.00 for adults and 50¢ for children under 12 years of age. Smoking "segars" was positively prohibited in any part of the theatre.

This theatre remained in operation

until around the time of the Civil War when it was probably destroyed.

The next important theatre in Huntsville was the Huntsville Opera House. It was located on the southwest corner of Jefferson and Clinton Streets where the Hutchens Company now stands. This Opera House changed owners several times. It was constructed by the Huntsville Hotel Company but was deeded to the City of Huntsville shortly before the Civil War in 1860. It was used for meetings and an occasional theatrical presentation. The theatre was deeded by the City of Huntsville to the North Alabama Improvement Company on December 19, 1871, but on condition that it be used as a theatre.

During the Spanish-American War, about 20,000 United States soldiers were stationed in Huntsville. The Opera House reached its peak of performance during this time. People from the surrounding areas came to Huntsville to see firstrate plays and operas. Al G. Field's "Minstrel Show" and "Charlie's Aunt" were among some of the well known shows which were given.

The theatre presented many home talent plays. On October 16, 17, and 18, 1894, the United Charities of Huntsville put on the "Fairy Spectacle of Little Goody Two Shoes" with 150 of Huntsville's "beautiful children." The Spectacle was written by and under the immediate direction of Mrs. Laura Rose.

The theatre was also used for public meetings, graduations, and many amateur plays. The United Charities held their annual "Christmas Tree" in the Opera House. In 1882 the Huntsville Amateur Opera Company presented "Patience." This proved such a success that the company was invited to bring the opera to Chattanooga. (Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis) The N.C & St.L. railway ran an excursion to Chattanooga for the occasion. Tickets were \$3.00 for the round trip. Many people from Huntsville and surrounding areas went. The opera proved to be another great success.

This opera house was a brick building. The entrance room was bare with the ticket window at one side. Flights of steps led to two doors which opened into the theatre. There was a balcony and a main floor. The balcony was divided into the three traditional sections-- one for poor whites, one for Negroes and one for harlots.

On January 29, 1904, the Opera House was deeded to the Huntsville and Monte Sano Improvement Company. It was next bought by Mr. J. E. Penny of Birmingham who bought the Huntsville

Hotel Property. On November 12, 1911, the Hotel and the Theatre were destroyed by fire.

In the Mercury of December 7, 1902, an article stated, "The local lodge of the Elks may build a home." The editor urged that the building include both an Elks home and an opera house. At one of the earlier planning sessions Al G. Fields, the famous promoter of minstrels, encouraged the Elks in this project. After many financial troubles, the building was started and on November 19, 1907, the Elks home and theatre was opened to the public.

This theatre had a standard stage and seated fourteen hundred. It soon became the mecca of Huntsville society. The first play presented on November 21, 1907 was "The Lightning Conductor," starring Oscar Figman, one of the leading actors of the day. Among later plays were: "Squaw Man," "Brewster's Millions," and the "Merry Widow." Al G. Fields minstrels, Susa's Band, many vaudeville companies and amateur plays were presented.

In spite of its popularity, money problems caused the theatre to be sold at auction on July 7, 1913. It was bought by Mrs. Lena Garth. For several years, it was operated by a motion picture company. In 1937 Mrs. Garth sold the building to Madison County

Continued on page 3



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for \$20,000 to be used as an annex to the Courthouse. The building was razed in 1968 to make room for a parking lot.

Although there was no formal theatre here after 1913, several amateur theatrical groups were formed. Among these were: "The Little Theatre," "The Fantasy Theatre," "The Hilltop Players" and others. The old West Clinton school was converted into a "Temporary Civic Art Center." It was restored and used by these groups until it was demolished.

Many people of Huntsville wanted a facility to serve their cultural and recreational needs. Also the city needed a place for large assemblies of its citizens. Although many people worked toward making this dream come true, the ultimate responsibility for designing and operating the Von Braun Civic Center rests with a small group of civic workers who make up the Von Braun Civic Center Board of Control.

The Civic Center took years of planning, but when the plans were finally completed, it took only a little over two years to complete the complex. The formal opening was March 14, 1975. The Little theatre presented the first play, "Barefoot In The Park."

In its 170 years, Huntsville has had five theatres. The first--a small wooden building, the last--in a vast \$12,000,000 Civic Center Complex.



Have any Experiences to share with other readers? Send your ideas and hints to: The Editor, Historic Huntsville Quarterly, 405 Homewood Drive, S.W., Huntsville, Ala. 35801.



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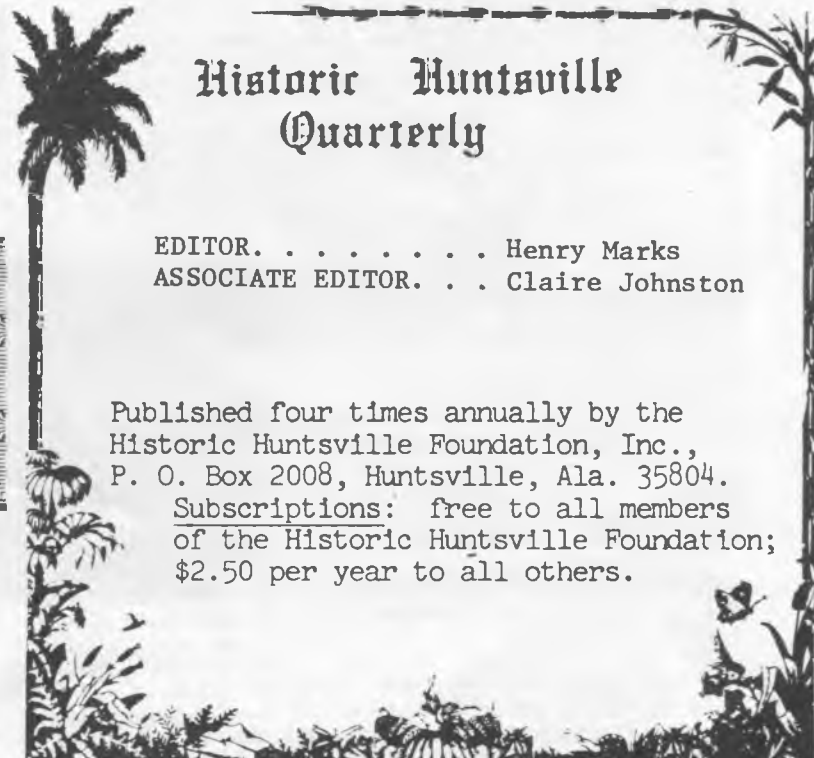
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Making Wood Mouldings The Old Way

THE OLD-HOUSE JOURNAL

Vol. IV No. 4
April 1976

By Burton L. Brown

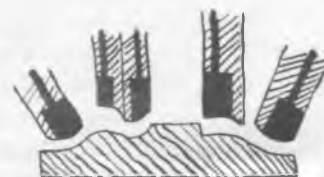
When we ran an article last November showing ways to use stock mouldings to achieve Early American effects, reader Burton Brown wrote to chide us for not showing the truly authentic way to re-create mouldings. Since Mr. Brown is an expert in this area, we asked him to share his know-how. This article is the result.--Ed.

JUST AS THE SLOW MEASURED TICK of a grandfather clock evokes a warm feeling, so also does the classic beauty of an old home. When each was constructed, the builder was not in the habit of being rushed. A sense of beauty, balance and symmetry was worked into each—which still brings forth appreciation today, even though most people can't say why.

AMONG THE THINGS that add to the beauty of an old home are the mouldings in all their variety. In most houses built before 1850, these mouldings were made by hand—many times right there in the house. The method of making these mouldings has been all but lost. If you should suggest that your carpenter of today make mouldings for your house, he'd think only of a custom wood-working shop that produces mouldings by machine. He'd then mumble something about costs being too high, and nothing more would be said.

HANDMADE MOULDINGS come from wooden planes called—appropriately—moulding planes. They were widely used up through the middle of the 19th century. A carpenter

might have anywhere from 40 to 60 of them. The shapes of the cutting blades and the soles (bottoms) of the planes were all different. Each produced a part of the beautiful woodwork that formed the trim in a house. In looking at the sole, it sometimes takes imagination to see what shape comes from it. By and large, these beautiful old tools are now being sold as curios to be hung on a kitchen wall—never to be used again.



Several different planes were needed for complex mouldings.

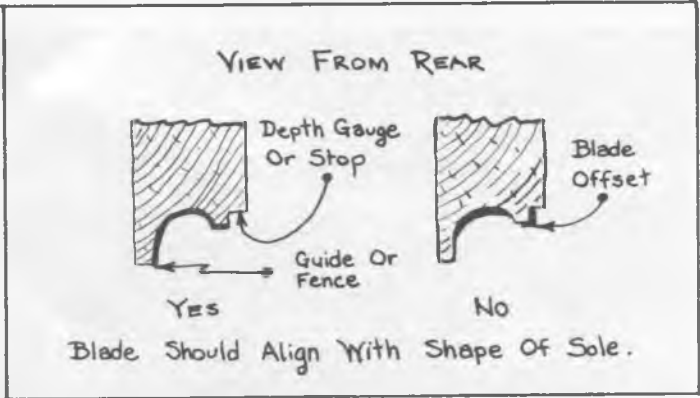
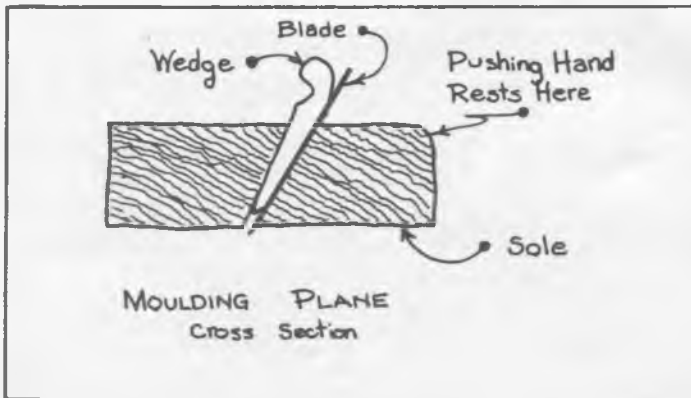
MY FIRST INTEREST in moulding planes came from an unsuccessful attempt to buy an old house that I had always loved. A carpenter friend of mine knew that I was going to look at the house and he told me to take special note of the woodwork—he had always admired the workmanship. This led to an interest in mouldings—and eventually to the method of using the planes.



Moulding planes are stored on end so blades won't get nicked. Note profiles on soles of the planes.

VERY LITTLE SEEMS TO HAVE been written on the subject. Although I still have a great deal to learn, I have been successful in mastering the basics of these old planes and in reproducing many old mouldings.

IF YOU WANT to give it a try, the first thing is to obtain the planes. Antique shops, attics and auctions are the best place to look. About 15 years ago, an antique dealer offered me a wholebox of them for \$3. I didn't know a thing about



them at the time—and couldn't have raised the \$3 besides. The planes I eventually accumulated over the years cost much more.

BEFORE STARTING, you should have some idea of what you are trying to achieve. A trip to your local library might be a good idea. The Fine Arts section usually has books of measured drawings of architectural details. You'll find that mouldings vary with the section of the country. Any mouldings you produce should be in keeping with what was done in your area at the time your house was built. If your house is Victorian, don't try to make it into a Colonial. It will never look right.

BESIDES PLANES, you'll need a tablesaw, a 12-ft. bench, hammer and nails, a strong back and a steady hand. You'll also need some odd-shaped sharpening stones to sharpen the blades of the planes. You'll also need a patient spouse—you'll have shavings everywhere!

NOW TO WORK. Suppose you want to reproduce a baseboard with a simple bead at the top edge. Take a piece of either clear or choice pine and cut it to approximate size. Then fasten it to the bench. This can be done with a stop nailed to the bench for the work to rest against. Or you can nail the work itself to the surface of the bench. Holes made by the small finishing nails can be filled later when the piece is put in place and painted.

THE ROUGH-CUT BOARD is first "dressed" with a flat plane to get rid of saw marks. Now you are ready to start cutting the moulding. Take your plane and adjust the blade so it will cut a thin shaving. The blade should be carefully aligned with the sole of the plane. The wedge should be tight. You can tighten it by tapping with a wooden mallet or by tapping it against the bench. To loosen the wedge (to move the blade) tap the wedge in its notch so it slides upwards. To lower the blade, tap the top end of it against the bench gently until it is low enough. Place your index



Clamp plus stop nailed to bench keeps work steady and vertical.

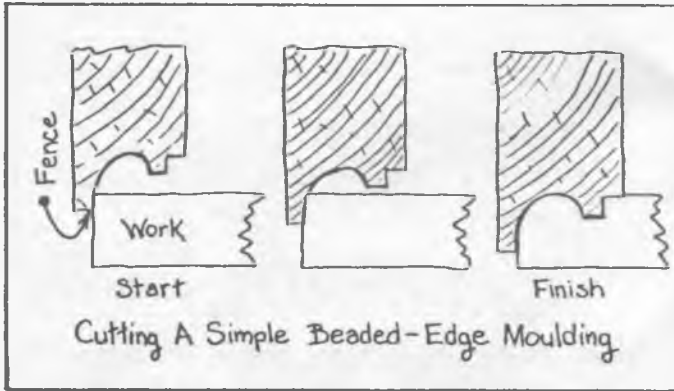
finger on the sole to judge the blade's position. The blade can be raised by striking the front end of the plane against the bench. You can also remove the wedge and start over again.

IN MAKING A CUT, you need a fence to keep the plane from wandering. Many times the fence is part of the plane. You rest the fence against the outside of the work and move the plane along the length of the board—taking off a shaving of wood. As you push the plane, let your finger tips of the left hand slide along the work. (You'll get slivers at times; it's an occupational hazard.) This is done to guard against the plane tipping off to one side or the other. Each time you push the plane down the length of the board you'll take off a shaving, gradually bringing out the shape of the moulding.

IN PUSHING THE PLANE, there are three directions of push: (1) along the length of the board; (2) downward thrust to take off the shaving; (3) a thrust to the right—across the board. This last thrust is important—especially on the first few cuts—to keep the fence of the plane in line so as to produce a full moulding. All this is done, of course, while keeping the plane from tipping from side to side.

WHEN MAKING A PASS, you try to keep the depth of the cut uniform the full length of the board. This is almost impossible because of variations in the grain. Often, the plane cuts less at the beginning of the board and more at the end. Any high spots have to be touched up by short passes in order to make it all uniform.

THERE IS A PECULIAR MOTION used in setting the plane down in the middle of the moulding and in raising it up that keeps you from getting chips and nicks. In setting the plane down, you put the front of it onto the moulding and as you move the plane forward you gradually lower the rest of it onto the work. This gives a gradual start to the pass. In taking the plane off the work at the end of the high spot, you lift the back of the moving plane first—and the



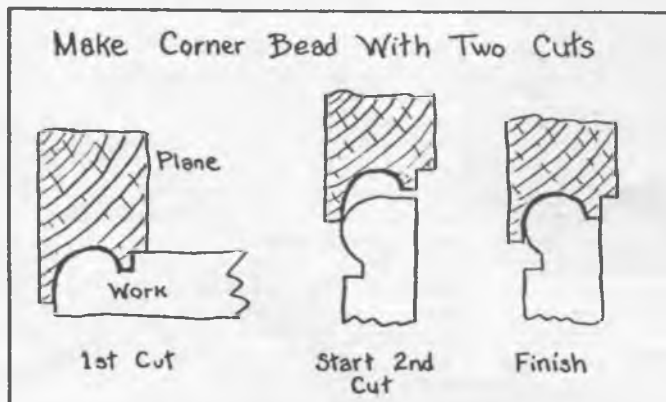
front edge comes up only after the rest has lifted clear. In cutting a moulding, you soon develop a "feel" so that you know when you've hit a soft spot, or when the grain is wrong. This sense of touch is essential to good workmanship—so a protective glove on the guiding hand would detract from your ability to feel the progress of the plane.

ONCE YOU'VE CUT A FEW MOULDINGS, you will find yourself getting fussy about wood. You will want to go to a quality lumber yard where you can go and pick out your own pieces from the pile. You'll want the grain as straight as it comes—and NO KNOTS! A plane can be forced through a knot, but it isn't good for either you or the plane.

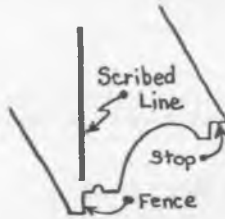
MANY EARLY AMERICAN HOUSES had a bead at the corner of the window trim or door jambs. To reproduce these, starting with a board of the proper thickness, make the first cut as described above. Then stand the board on edge and make a second cut as shown in the diagram below.



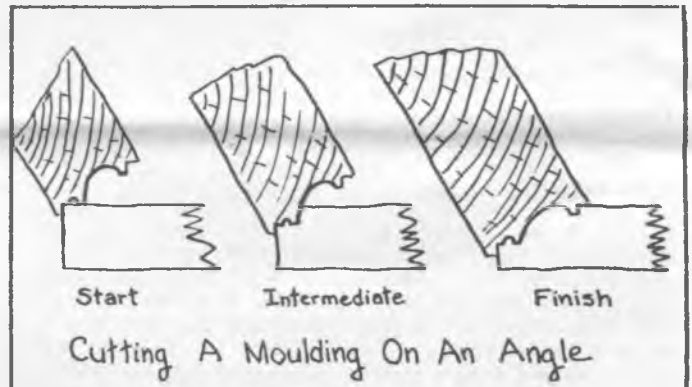
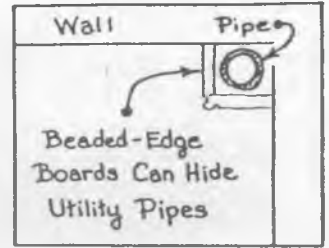
THIS TYPE OF CORNER BEAD can be used in many places. I am planning to use it to help hide some hot air heating pipes. In many Early American houses of post-and-beam construction, beaded-edge boards were used to box in the large framing timbers. By locating the heating pipe in a corner—and boxing it in with some of these beaded-edge boards, the heating run will be disguised to look like an authentic boxed-in beam. Plumbing pipes may be hidden in the same way.



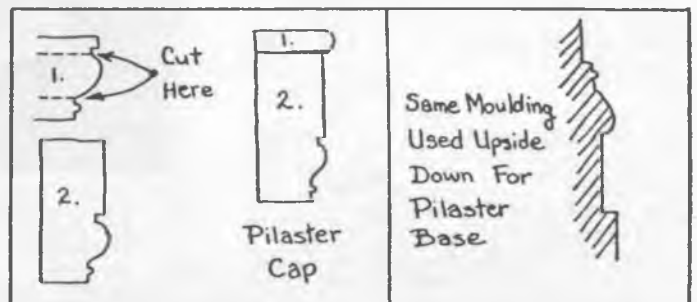
ALL MOULDING planes work on the same principle. Some, however, have to be held at an angle in your hands. You can tell the angle by two methods. The first clue is to note the angle of the stops and fences on the plane. Second, on the front of the plane should be a vertical line scribed into the wood. This line is to be held vertical. In order for the scribed line to be vertical in the plane shown in the sketch at the left, for example, the plane has to be held at an angle of almost 60°. (The plane in the diagram is a post-Colonial plane.)



THIS TYPE OF plane comes together with the work as shown in the diagram below. Most planes of this type have fences that guide you in this angle work. With a fluting plane, however, there is no fence and you'll have to nail one to your work. There are even some planes in my collection that I don't understand yet. But I'll get to them one day!



ONCE YOU CAN CUT MOULDINGS, you can put them together with unlimited effects. For example, a single plane of the type shown above was used to make mouldings for a cap and base for pilasters used in a doorway. A section was sliced out of one moulding and added to the top of a second moulding to make the cap. The large plane was then used in the reverse position to make a base for the pilaster as shown below. Incidentally, the wider the plane, the harder it is to push. A 1-in. plane is hard; and you should try a 2-in. plane!





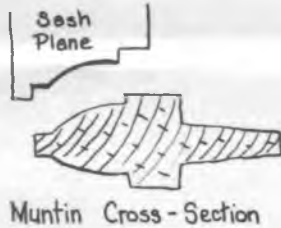
Window at left had been taken out during the late 19th century and a door put in its place. Author Brown restored the win-



dow and created the cap on the window cornice to match the original woodwork (shown on the window at the right).

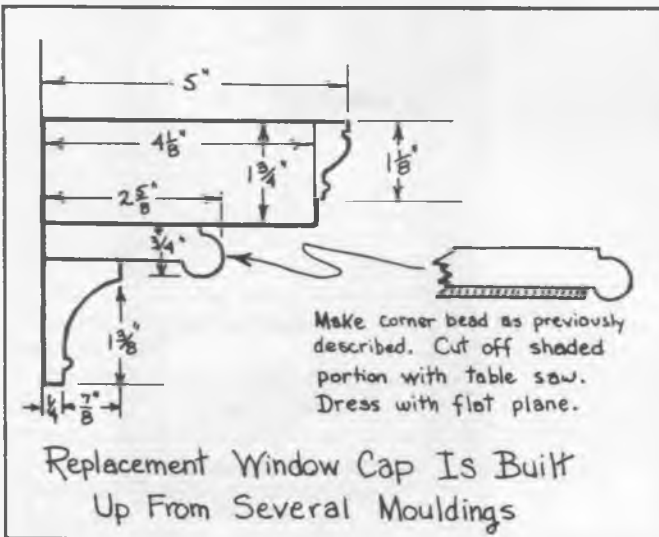
SHOWN BELOW IS A CROSS-SECTION of a cornice cap I made for a replacement window using old moulding planes. As you can see in the photo above, the 1974 work is indistinguishable from the 1823 original.

I ALSO HAVE A "SASH PLANE" that will make muntins for windows. With this plane I rebuilt 6 windows in our old Greek Revival. The old muntins had been removed for some reason and a single pane of glass installed in its place. I merely made up new muntins and took apart the sash by removing the wooden pins at the corners. The new muntins were put in place and the sash reassembled using new wooden pins that I fashioned. The reassembly was done without nails or glue. Small wood wedges were driven between the muntin and sash at the point where the muntin was mortised through.



AS FOR TENDER LOVING CARE of planes, linseed oil is always a good dressing for wood parts; a thin film of sewing machine oil will prevent rust on the knife. Sharpening the blade requires very hard stones (such as "Arkansas white") in various shapes. I have four stones: A flat one for sharpening flat knives; a diamond shaped one; an elliptical one; and a tapered cylindrical stone. With these I can sharpen almost any blade. An edge is worked up to the point where it will take a small shaving from your fingernail. If the blade is sharp, you won't have to sand the finished moulding. If it isn't, there won't be any end to the sanding!

Burton L. Brown has his own insurance agency in Scottsville, N.Y. Most of his spare time is spent restoring his 1823 Greek Revival home in nearby Mumford, N.Y.



Sources For Moulding Planes

If you can't find old moulding planes in shops in your area, there are a couple of mail order sources to try. Iron Horse Antiques, R.D. #2, Poultney, VT 05764, carries antique planes. For catalog, send \$3. Or call Vernon Ward at (802) 287-4050.

Woodcraft Supply Corp. carries a limited selection of new moulding planes. Muntin planes are available on special order. People with grinding equipment can also grind special contours on blades of square rabbeting planes available from Woodcraft. For catalog, send 50¢ to: Woodcraft Supply Corp., 313 Montvale Avenue, Woburn, Mass. 01801.

TREASURER'S REPORT

by R. Thomas Beason

STATEMENT OF INCOME & FUND BALANCE



The following is a statement of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, Inc. for the six months period ending March 31, 1976

<u>ASSETS</u>		
Cash in bank	\$ 1 229 35	
Utility deposit	<u>25 00</u>	
	\$ <u>1 254 35</u>	
 <u>FUND BALANCE</u>		
Fund balance	\$ <u>1 254 35</u>	
Income	\$	498 00
Dues		<u>5 00</u>
Subscriptions		503 00
Expenses	\$	290 04
Printing		80 85
Telephone		39 28
Supplies and postage		<u>22 06</u>
Utilities		<u>432 23</u>
EXCESS OF REVENUE OVER EXPENSES		70 77
Fund balance at April 1, 1975		<u>1 183 58</u>
FUND BALANCE AT MARCH 31, 1976	\$	<u>1 254 35</u>

EDITOR'S REPORT

It is with great pleasure that we feature an article by Mrs. Bessie King Russell, former head of the staff of the Heritage Room of the Huntsville Public Library. Mrs. Russell is the primary developer of this wonderful depository of information about Huntsville and the Tennessee Valley and she indeed is one of the main reasons why people in this area have such an interest in their history. I appreciate that she has always been most helpful to me and always has volunteered to share with me her vast knowledge of this area. Everyone else who knows her says the same thing.

Please let me know, at any time, about articles, features or subjects you like to see placed in the Quarterly. Let me know how we can improve the Quarterly. My address is 405 Homewood Drive, Huntsville, 35801.

Please excuse the lateness of this issue. Hope it will not happen again.

Henry Marks





DISTINGUISHED AREA CITIZENS

THOMAS FEARN

-by-

Henry Marks

Thomas Fearn, according to his contemporaries, was by far the most celebrated of the physicians and surgeons of Madison County and the Tennessee Valley in ante-bellum days. But history remembers him perhaps better as a pioneer builder and developer — of a major canal, water works, and other projects — in the Huntsville area, and as the man who gave Monte Sano its name.



Born near Danville, Va., in 1789, Fearn obtained his early schooling there and then entered Washington College at Lexington, Va. Deciding upon a career in medicine, he enrolled at the Old Medical College in Philadelphia.

Immediately after his graduation in 1810 from medical school, he moved South, selecting Huntsville as a good place to live and practice his profession. He found the town in the midst of an economic boom. Besides developing his medical practice during the next few years, Fearn acquired considerable land in Huntsville and Madison County.

He also became involved in the Creek Wars. When Andrew Jackson moved through Huntsville in 1813 on his way to eventual victory at Horseshoe Bend, Fearn served as a battalion surgeon. The following year Jackson appointed him "surgeon's mate" in charge of hospital facilities in the Huntsville area.

After the Creek Wars, Fearn increasingly became involved in the development of Huntsville. In 1816, still in his 20s, his standing was such that he was named one of nine commissioners of the Planters' and Merchants' Bank of Huntsville.

In medicine, however, Fearn soon decided he needed further education. He temporarily gave up his activities in Huntsville, including his bank commission, and journeyed to Europe. From 1818 to 1820 he remained there, studying in England and on the continent.

Some time after his return Fearn constructed at 517 Franklin Street one of the most beautiful ante-bellum homes in Huntsville, on land he had purchased before 1816. He was back in Huntsville to stay.

Family legend has it that he named Monte Sano. Evidently he had sent a child to the mountaintop overlooking Huntsville for treatment. When the child recovered a few weeks later, Fearn named the place Monte Sano, or Mountain of Health.

Dr. Fearn is also reputed to have been the first physician to use quinine, made from the bark of trees, to treat typhoid fever. His reputation grew, and honorary degrees began to be bestowed upon him from as far away as Rutgers College and Cincinnati University. He turned down several excellent medical teaching opportunities elsewhere to remain in Huntsville.

Fearn also devoted considerable time to business interests. With his brother Robert

Lee, he successfully marketed cotton. This led him to attempt to construct a canal from Big Springs Creek to Ditto's Landing, on the Tennessee River 10 miles south of Huntsville.

For that purpose, the Indian Creek Navigation Co. was chartered by the state legislature in 1820, with Dr. Fearn as one of its five commissioners. The next year stock in the canal company was advertised for sale. It was only through the financial efforts of Dr. Fearn and his brother George, however, that the canal was ever completed. When it was finally opened in 1831, it could accommodate boats carrying 50 passengers and up to 80-100 bales of cotton.

The canal, Alabama's first, continued to operate until roads ended its usefulness by the late 1840s.

Along with his brother George, Dr. Fearn attempted to create a village on Monte Sano. Viduta was incorporated in 1833, intended to be developed as a health resort. It failed, one of the few ventures that did not prove successful for the doctor.

Fearn was also the builder of the county's second city water works. In 1835 he and George Fearn purchased an existing water works for \$2,530. The brothers then made an agreement with the city to construct pumps to lead to the courthouse to extinguish fires. A cistern was erected at the rear of the bank overlooking the Big Spring to supply water. As a result, Huntsvillians had water for drinking and for putting out fires. Later the brothers sold the works to the city.

Like so many other leaders of his time, Dr. Fearn was drawn into politics. Twice he served in the state legislature, in 1822 and 1828-29. He was also once a presidential elector, and later a member of the first Confederate Congress. He served in the latter post for only about a month, resigning because of ill health.

Fearn also devoted much time to civic activities in Huntsville. He was a trustee of Green Academy throughout its existence and was president of the board of trustees of Huntsville Female Seminary and the North Alabama College for men.

He also traveled through the South in an effort to develop rail communications between Huntsville and other points in the region.

With all those activities, it is little wonder that the doctor had long ago given up his regular medical practice. When he died a wealthy man in 1863 at the age of 73, he had not practiced medicine for more than 25 years.



Membership in the Historic Huntsville Foundation

If you want to become a member of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, and to assist in enhancing Huntsville's future by preserving its significant architectural and historic heritage, send your name, address, telephone number (home and office) and check in the appropriate amount (made payable to the Historic Huntsville Foundation Inc.) to: Mr. C. Lynwood Smith, Jr., Chairperson, Membership Committee, Historic Huntsville Foundation, 446 Central Bank Building, Huntsville, 35801.

MEMBERSHIP CLASSES

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Active (Individual).	10.00
Business.	50.00
Patron.	25. - 99.00
Benefactor.	100. or more



ANNOUNCEMENTS

PLEASE DO NOT DESPAIR !!!

You WILL receive notice
of our May meeting
via our postal
system

FROM:

**The Historic Huntsville Foundation, Inc.
P O. Box 2008
Huntsville, Alabama 35804**

