*One Dollar*


*Winter* *1980*

# THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY

## Of Local Architecture & Preservation

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*Vol. VI, No. 2* *Winter, 1980*

## Contents



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# from the Editor

We are pleased to welcome two new contributors to this issue of the *Quarterly* and feel that a brief introduction is appropriate.

Dorothea Johnston Snow, who contributed the feature article, is an author whose first book was published in the early 1930s by Rand McNally. Since then she has had published thirty-eight books on a variety of topics, many of them written for children. Her current series are romantic suspense novels for teenagers, with the most recent scheduled for release this summer. Mrs. Snow is also an artist whose oil paintings of landscapes, flowers and birds have been widely exhibited.

Ann Boucher, whose review of *Cease Not to Think of Me* begins on page 18, received her Ph.D. in history from the University of Connecticut. Her dissertation was an analysis of southern family life during the first half of the nineteenth-century as it was recorded in documents and family papers; she selected a large number of wealthy Alabama families for her study. A native of South Carolina, Dr. Boucher's special field of interest is social history with a particular emphasis on the role of women and children.

The future success of the *Quarterly* depends on its being able to offer a variety of articles which reflect the interests and knowledge of a wide range of contributors. This journal can only reach its fullest potential if many people are willing to participate in its production by sharing their viewpoints and expertise. Ideally the *Quarterly* should function as a forum for the exchange of ideas concerning local preservation and architectural history issues. Even a letter to the editor, such as appears on page 15, can be a valuable and effective means to introduce new topics or expand on past articles.

Every reader is encouraged to take an active role in the *Quarterly* so that it becomes a vehicle reflecting all of the community rather than the views of just a few individuals.

# As It Was Then:

## Reminiscences of a Huntsville Childhood

*Dorothea Johnston Snow*

History has a way of recording in great detail the lives and deeds of the rich and the powerful of our world. We read of the accomplishments of the most obscure king and queen, ruling lord, military leader, financier, or whatever, and almost nothing of the swarms of 'little' people who made up a much larger portion of the populace of their times.

Likewise, we generally see only the monuments erected in honor of the elite, their palaces and great homes, and the public buildings in which their affairs were carried out and which, in many instances, were named after one or another of them.

One could almost come to the conclusion that the world of the past was composed only of the upper classes, and that they floated up there all by themselves with no trace of the huge middle and lower classes that sustained them.

We might even believe that the impressive monuments and residences and cathedrals sprang full-blown from the bowels of the earth!

Yet we all know that during each period of man's existence on this earth there lived hordes of workers and tradesmen. After all, it was always the lowly pioneer who came before the affluent to tame the wild regions, such as ours was a couple of centuries ago, and to pave the way for those with money, who then bought the land for large estates.

The almost forgotten folks actually played an enormous part in the shaping of the past (what would a general do without an army?). For it was they who furnished the labor to build and maintain and, in great measure, to pay for the architectural treasures with which we now associate only the titled, the rich, and the famous.

Though they left faint, if any, footprints on the sands of time, it was they who erected the edifices we now admire, and in a public building, their steps also echoed through its corridors in pursuit of their own, to them equally important, affairs.

Workmen and tradespeople, artisans and servants also went into the castles, manor houses, and mansions to repair, clean, and keep things in order as well as to feed, clothe, and keep the masters and mistresses comfortable and able to go about their more pleasurable pursuits.

Many of these, however, never got closer to the mansions of the wealthy than the streets and sidewalks in front of them, or perhaps the side and rear doors, and were perforce compelled to admire them from a distance only.

Not all of them were envious either, for many lived in comfortable, though not so solidly built, homes, and because they were made of wood instead of stone, brick or marble, they did not stand up so well to the passing of time, which is why we see so few traces of them today.

If these modest homes had been preserved as have the grander houses, they would most likely be equally interesting to the historian of today. Fortunately for us there are still a few log cabins around!

These reminiscences are those of one who lived in several such humble houses in the Huntsville area of more than a half century ago--one of the many who passed by and admired and went through and did business within the walls of some of the old and beautiful, and some not so beautiful but nevertheless interesting, homes and buildings that graced Huntsville during the early decades of the 20th century.

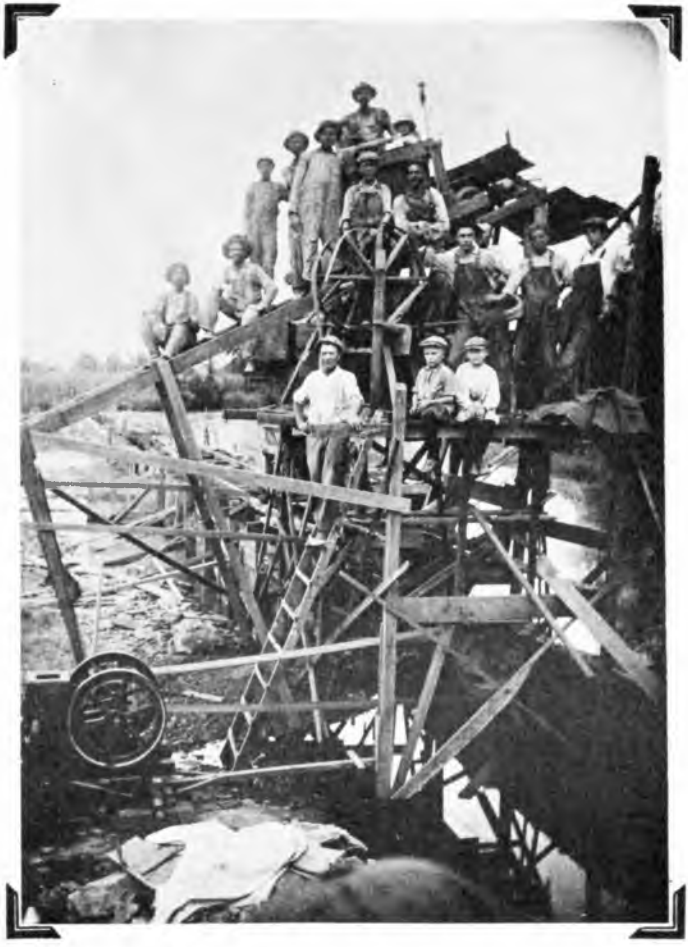
They will include also a partial account of the part played by my father Fred Johnston, a builder, owner and operator of a small sawmill on Monte Sano, who helped erect some of these structures. He came south from Michigan around 1905 with his family to make his fortune in the lumber business, but alas, that did not

materialize, so he settled for a much smaller niche in the community. He settled first in McMinnville, Tennessee, where I was born the last of five children, and from there moved to New Market and, a few years later, to Huntsville.

Incidentally, it was in New Market that he built a dam across a creek there to provide water power for a gristmill. What is left of it still stands today, a lasting reminder of work done long ago.

My earliest Huntsville memories revolve around the old Dallas Mill and Village, where we lived in the first house my father built in the immediate area, although the village was not considered a part of Huntsville at that time.

Our house was located outside the village on Halsey Street, and it was while living there that I attended the old Rison School, built before the present one, and made the acquaintance of Thelma Goodson



*This old photograph shows the dam at New Market during construction. Fred Johnston is the man standing on the ladder in the center, immediately to his left is his son Ted, and Dorothea is the small figure at the top standing in the gravel car.*

who became my constant companion. Her father owned and operated a grocery store, located across the street from the Baptist Church now standing on Andrew Jackson Way.

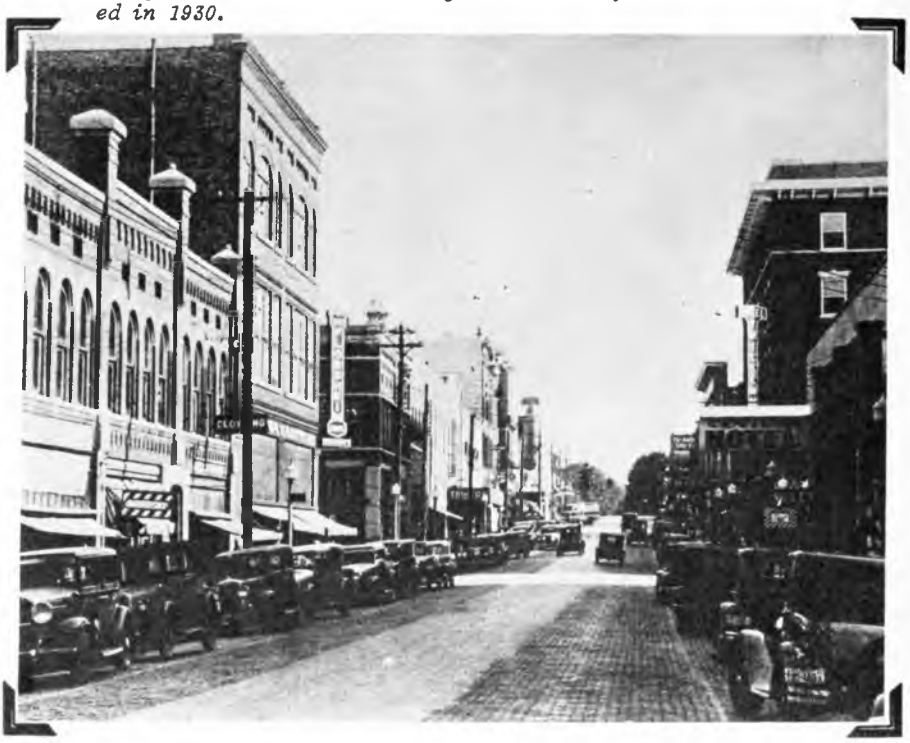
Though neither of us were at that time more than ten years old, we became a couple of free spirits and roamed at will without much parental interference. (Those were the days when parents did not have to worry about children being molested or harmed in any way.)

It was in the Goodson kitchen that I became enamored of Southern cooking, delighting especially in the slowly cooked green beans, which were a staple of southern diet in those days, and cornbread and buttermilk.

They were far superior, I thought, to the fare I got at home. My mother cooked vegetables only to the stage that one could sink his teeth into them, and she stuck to Yankee yeast rising white bread and thought buttermilk an abomination fit only for pigs.

I remember well the rows of neat and, for the most part, well kept mill houses on streets leading to the red brick cotton mill, where most, of not all,

*This view of Washington Street looking south was taken in 1932; however, it gives a good idea of how the downtown looked when Dorothea and Thelma spent their Saturdays going to all the movie theatres. The Lyric can be seen on the left, although it is in a new building since much of this block burned in 1930.*



of the occupants earned their living.

The village was almost like a feudal stronghold in its self sufficiency; few occupants strayed from the village except on Saturdays when they ventured into downtown Huntsville to shop for the few things not available in the village stores.

The downtown merchants welcomed their business, though socially and otherwise kept them at a distance as did the other residents of the city proper.

Saturdays in those days found the streets of downtown Huntsville crowded and busy with people fairly jostling each other to trade in the many prosperous stores and attend the movies shown at the three theatres there.

Thelma and I could be found among them, walking each Saturday down Holmes Avenue past its lovely homes set on manicured lawns to the movie mecca downtown.

There we spent all day going, as I recall, to all three theatres so as not to miss a single episode of our favorite Pearl White, Eddie Polo or William S. Hart serial. Each clutched her weekly quarter allowance, and the nickel admission charge to each show allowed a dime with which to stop at the Twickenham Pharmacy, Humphrey's Drug Store, or any one of several establishments with soda fountains where we savored slowly each bit of a huge banana split or some other concoction consisting of ice cream, fruit, whipped cream and nuts!

We also attended movies shown at the Dallas YMCA in the evenings, often on the same Saturday.

Another of our diversions was walking out into the country, now the corner of Oakwood and Meridian, and gazing in awe through the iron fence that surrounded the fabled and fabulous McCormick mansion and the deer that cavorted on its lush green grounds. To us, it was like gazing upon a real life fairyland castle and we never tired of it. We never, however, laid our eyes on its princess, Miss Virginia McCormick, descendant of the agricultural implement magnate Cyrus McCormick.

Each fall our special delight was a trip to the County Fair, then held at the old fair grounds between what is now Church Street and the Parkway. From early morning until late afternoon, we rode the rides, ate cotton candy and popcorn, and attended as many sideshows on the Midway as our finances would permit...and all by ourselves!

Later, the Goodsons almost broke my heart by sending Thelma away to a private school in Tennessee, thereby ending our childish idyll. But I got even when my father moved us to a small house on Hermitage Street and changed my social status to the much higher one, or so I thought, of 'city' girl.

It was while living on Hermitage that my two brothers returned from army service in World War I--Dick from Camp Oglethorpe in Georgia and Bill from France. In my childish ignorance of such things, I could not understand why my mother cried on such a joyous occasion.

I attended the old East Clinton Street School that was

built prior to the present one. It was a beautiful school, I thought, and I gladly walked, along with most others, from my home on Hermitage.

While living on Hermitage, I discovered the old Carnegie Library on Madison Street. Tiny though it was, it looked as large to me then as the Metropolitan Musuem in New York looks today, and it was filled with all those books, free to be taken home and read. During summer vacations I lived in it.

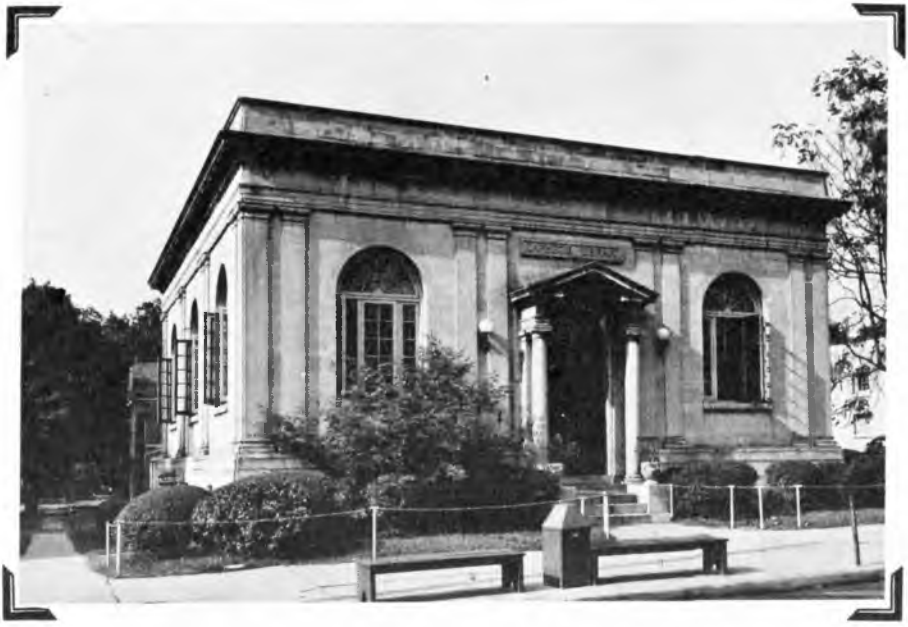
How I pitied one small girl who always came accompanied by one or both of her parents who picked out her books for her! I was so thankful that my parents never interfered in such personal matters, though there was little danger of my picking up objectionable material at that library.

It was there that I met and learned to love the librarian, Mrs. Darwin, who always recognized me and greeted me as a person when I entered the library door and whose home I passed on my way to school and the library.

I fairly glowed when she asked me to stop in at the Darwin home, the lovely old house still standing at the southwest corner of McClung and California Streets, to view the portraits she painted on tiny ovals of real ivory. Miniatures she called them as she introduced me to the exciting world of art. For the first time, I saw a human hand paint a human likeness in living colors, and it thrilled me beyond imagining.

During this time Martha Shreve became a friend of mine. She lived in what was the Chase

*The second East Clinton Street School was erected in 1902 for about $30,000; it was designed by architect Herbert Cowell and constructed by A. M. Booth, both of Huntsville. In 1938 it was replaced by the present building which is the third public school on this site.*



*The Carnegie Library was located at the northwest corner of Madison and Gates Streets, next to the old city hall. It was designed by Edgar Love and built in 1915, using funds provided by the Carnegie Foundation. In 1966 it was demolished for a parking garage.*

home on Adams Street. Like most of the other big houses at the time, it bore little resemblance except structurally to the beautifully kept, proud mansion it is today. I vividly remember Martha and I roller-skating up and down the upper hallway and playing hide-and-seek in the other rooms which were little used and where furnishings were sparse. I doubt if any of its residents, before or since, enjoyed the old house as much as we did.

While living on Hermitage, I remember taking excursions up an old dirt road toward the mountain to what we irreverently called the County Poor House. Remains of its foundation are still there. The whole area that is now Fagan Springs residential district was then covered with cedar trees, and the gushing spring was a popular picnicking spot.

Happy was the day though when I went from the East Clinton Grade School to Huntsville High School on West Clinton Street. It meant a longer walk to school but I did not mind. We walked everywhere in those days because if your family, like mine, did not own a car, and not many families did, you walked and thought nothing of it.

I vividly remember my first day at Huntsville High when the spelling of my name was questioned. Miss Annie Merts, bless her, questioned the fact that I spelled it Dorothea instead of

*The West Clinton Street School was erected in 1916 as the Huntsville High School; in 1927 it became an elementary school when a new high school was completed on Randolph Street. Prior to its demolition in 1973, this school served as the temporary Civic Arts Center.*

Dorothy. But I informed her that my older sister Vera, who was seventeen at the time of my birth, had seen it spelled so in a book she had read and insisted that my parents spell it the same way. Miss Annie still remained skeptical, I think, and felt that I was trying to improve my totally nonexistent image.

In the basement of the old high school I discovered the private art classes of Mrs. Maybelle Metcalfe, then the only art teacher in Huntsville. There were many piano teachers, elocution teachers, and sewing teachers, but she was the only one who dared to teach art.

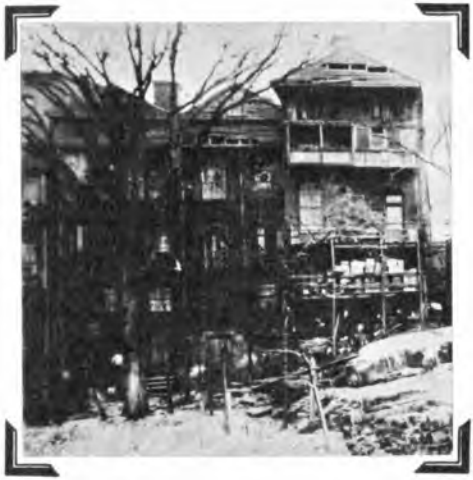
I immediately called on my brother Bill, who was living and working in Indiana, to finance art lessons for me. He did so for four years during which time I won several red and blue ribbons at the County Fair, the only place that our works of art were ever hung.

It was during this time that the Times building was going up, and the sight of it made our hearts swell with pride. It slashed the skyline of Huntsville, alone and awesome, until it was challenged by the Russel Erskine Hotel. My father helped build both of them.

He also built several of the large homes on the eastern end of Eustis Street. I remember that vividly, too, because I

made a habit of stopping by his place of work and conning a nickel out of him for an ice cream cone. I was an ice cream cone fiend at the time, and if he could find a nickel in the pocket of his overalls, I got it.

During those days of suffering in the heat without benefit of air conditioning or even fans at school, many of us students walked home via the Big Spring because the grotto-like area was as cool as the inside of a cave and was made more so by the spray of its fountain which rose high in the air. There we stayed as long as we dared before climbing the rickity wooden stairs to the equally rickity buildings above on West Side Square known as Cotton Row.



*The Big Spring and Cotton Row have played major roles in Huntsville's history. The town was founded in this location instead of on the Tennessee River because the Spring guaranteed the settlers a constant source of pure drinking water. With an average output of 20 million gallons of water daily, the Spring supplied Huntsville with all its water until 1954. Cotton Row, as seen from the Spring at the turn of the century, opposite, received its name from the many cotton buyers whose offices were housed along West Side Square. The Row was razed in 1966.*

All the short while we lived on Hermitage, the sight of Monte Sano in the distance had beckoned to my father. Up there was a lot of timber to be cut on shares, he reasoned, from which his portion would bring in more cash than he could make working for others. So he rented the old Sale cottage, and we moved from Hermitage to the top of the mountain.

It seemed a paradise to us kids. I, my brother Ted, and nephew Billy Mitchell, who lived with us at the time, became blithe spirits and roamed every inch of the mountain and gloried in it, while my father moved his small sawmill from site to site, cutting down trees and sawing them into lumber.

Now, I never pass an old tree stump in the woods on the mountain that I do not wonder if it isn't the remains of some tree that my father cut down.

At that time the top of the mountain was a summer retreat for some of the affluent citizens of Huntsville. Some of the summer cottages were small and rather plain while some would have served as year-round homes anywhere. Without air-conditioning, the summer heat of the valley was pretty oppressive, but the mountaintop was always at least fifteen degrees cooler, so it was a popular spot.

Ted, Billy and I spent many fall days gathering an ample winter supply of hickory nuts and black walnuts. There were many nut-bearing trees on the mountain then, and it was just a matter of picking the nuts up from the ground after a hard frost or tossing a limb into the branches and dodging those that fell. Now one rarely sees a nut of any kind up there, and I cannot help but wonder what happened to the once abundant harvest.

Hunters freely roamed the woods, daytime and night, when the baying of their hounds announced another raccoon or 'possum treed. And forest fires! Never a dry season passed without one spectacular display of flame and smoke which volunteers fought to bring under control, if a hard rain didn't beat them to it. Strange though how the burned over areas soon became lush and green again. No state park existed there in those days and no one seemed to know or care who owned the 'worthless' land, so hunters, picnickers and hikers roamed over it at will with little thought for such mundane matters.

However, the memory of the once nationally known health spa, located there during an earlier era, was still warm and bright. The old hotel still stood where only a chimney remains today to remind residents of its former glory. We kids played inside its spacious interior as the doors were not locked. Inside were many of its furnishings, including billiard tables, balls and cues, and a register containing the names of some of its famous patrons from all over the country. The old building had not been vandalised even though it had been vacant for many years.

*The Monte Sano Hotel was opened in June, 1887, as an elegant summer resort, which successfully attracted many wealthy and famous guests for several summers. However, various problems forced its closing after the 1900 season, and although plans were often made to reopen it during the early part of this century, they came to naught. The hotel was abandoned, fully furnished, with only a caretaker living in the 200 rooms. In 1944 the property was sold for salvage.*

Remains of the old dummy line, over which had run a railroad of sorts carrying visitors from the railroad station downtown to the hotel atop the mountain, were still plainly visible winding and twisting up the mountainside.

Living on the mountain made a freak, of sorts, out of me. For the year or so that we lived there, I walked down the mountain every day to the high school on West Clinton Street and back again. Though I left before it was light on winter mornings and arrived home after dark, I could not understand why my mother worried about me. The only time I remember being scared was during a late afternoon storm, a real humdinger of thunder and lightning.

The old toll gate, for which Toll Gate Road was named, was operative at the time. I remember hearing my folks laugh about a certain Doctor Walker rushing to answer a call, roaring down the mountain, and forgetting about the pole across the road--which he smashed through without stopping!

There was no mail delivery on the mountain in those days so I was appointed the family mail picker-upper as I passed the red brick post office build-

ing that sat atop a rise between Randolph and Eustis, a block east of the Square. Every afternoon I walked up the steep steps and asked the kindly clerk at the window for the Johnston family mail.

Again we moved, this time to a small house my father built at what is now the juncture of Toll Gate Road and Bankhead Parkway. I thought I was practically in town then, and what a short walk to school--a distance that would make any modern high school student blanch!

One of the highlights of my daily walk was a stop at the tiny grocery store of 'Pinky' Gormley located where Wells Avenue became Monte Sano Pike, as the road was known then. It was there I charged my daily ice cream cone to my father's account and munched happily on it the rest of the way home. It was during this time, too, that I began attending Sunday School at the tiny, white framed Cumberland Presbyterian Church which stood in an area on the south side of Wells Avenue, now taken over by Maple Hill Cemetery.

Our last stop in Huntsville was a small house on Wells Avenue where the power transformer now stands. There I became friendly with Annie Davison, and we walked to school together and back as far as the Woolworth store where she worked after school and Saturdays.

A private school stood then where the playground of the old Huntsville Middle School was located. A rather small, red brick building, it was to us a symbol of segregation, though not racial.

Annie and I graduated from high school that year and to me fell the honor of being valedictorian of the Class of '25! A real achievement it was for me, and I was made to feel quite special. Nowadays the only school honors handed out seem to go to football and basketball players.

Soon after, the family packed up and returned for a long sojourn in its native Midwest. Years later, however, my life came full circle when my son Dr. Donald Snow accepted a position at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, and I returned to Huntsville to live.

A walk down Randolph Street today is a real nostalgia trip for me. Almost without exception the same houses still stand there, though they seem to have lost some of their Old South character, probably due to the influx of outsiders in the past few years. The YMCA looks exactly the same as do many of the store buildings around the Square. The only thing missing is the lovely, old, columned Greek Revival style courthouse and with it the cool green lawn and the spreading trees that once shaded the benches where sat folks from city and country, swapping gossip, just resting, or in some cases, snoozing or whittling.

Yet, the more Huntsville changes, the more it remains the same.

And who am I to say that the view from the west side of the Square overlooking Big Spring Park, with the Von Braun Civic Center in the distance, isn't an improvement over what it was in the days of my youth?

*Continued on page 17*

# *A Letter to the Editor*

Since we are the ones who purchased the "House on Banister," we particularly enjoyed your article in the Fall, 1979, issue of *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. There is, however, a sequel to the story, and we thought we should pass it on to you.

Knowing that this was the only known surviving example of the simple frame house of the 1815 era, we too wanted to save it. We obtained a reputable mover to slip steel rails under it in order to lift it so that it could be placed on a foundation. This was necessary since the twelve inch cedar logs that the house was built on rested entirely on the ground. It was at this point that the house totally collapsed. It turned out that termites and rot had made powder of those large beams. We then had a decision to make. Since this was the last house of its kind and since we already had drawings made of it, we decided to reproduce as closely as we could the original three rooms. The late additions were not of interest.

The first step was to save all that could be incorporated into the reproduction. We saved all or part of the unbroken window panes, the old mortised beams, the doors, the bricks, the boards from the floors, the moldings around the roof, the baseboards, and the cherry stairway. When we started to work, we had to find windows of the same size with the same small pane arrangement. We had to find clapboard siding that could be put on unevenly as it was on the old house. The shingles had to give the cedar shake look. Similar brick had to be found. The original front door was a double door so we put in double doors. We had the advantage of Harvie Jones' guidance and the fact that part of Constitution Hall Park was copied from the house on Banister, so we could show the brick mason how to lay the bricks, etc. We had to alter the stairway to conform to the building code. We found that Stone Lumber Company in Decatur could reproduce more molding and more flooring. We found old cut stone for front steps as was used in such houses. We saved some shutter hinges and were able to order some from Ball & Ball so we can hang workable shutters. The eaves and soffits were somewhat difficult to reproduce but have been well done. Since our builders Jerry Gillespie and Joe Eidson were interested in the reproduction, the work has been made easier.

We have a new addition to the three rooms, of course, which we believe was done in keeping with the old house. Harvie drew the plans. We hope that the above described efforts somewhat offset the loss of the original. In fact, we hope that when it is completed, that those who see it will think they are seeing the old house.

Kathleen and Lee James

# News...

A COMPLETE RUN of *The Old House Journal* has been purchased by the Historic Huntsville Foundation and is now available for reference use by members and other interested individuals. An index for each year facilitates research, and the Buyer's Guide Catalogue is available to assist in locating suppliers of products. The *Journal* is published monthly and carries how-to-do-it articles on the myriad problems encountered when restoring an older house. A typical issue may contain articles on restoring marble sinks, patching cracks in plaster, and Victorian tile. There are also occasional features on the domestic styles and regular columns on restoration hints, recent publications, and sources of old products.

*The Old House Journal* is not available in the local libraries, but anyone interested in using this set may do so by calling Ira Jones at 883-5998.

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THE ALABAMA TRUST for Historic Preservation was formed last August as a statewide organization to coordinate and support the activities of individuals and groups interested in Alabama's heritage and to encourage local and state efforts in historic preservation. The Alabama Trust will represent heritage interests before policymakers in state government and provide a distribution point for technical publications, including tax information and sources of funding for preservation projects. Volunteers in Montgomery will serve as consultants when the Alabama Legislature is in session and will keep Trust members abreast of pending legislation that involves heritage matters.

The Trust will publish a quarterly newsletter for its members to keep them informed about federal and state tax laws favorable to preservation and to focus on state landmarks, historic churches, military history, archeological sites, folkcrafts, music and literature. Historical articles and artwork from 19th century publications will be reprinted, and a regular feature will be a calendar of events. The Trust also plans to offer workshops, discounts on medallions for historic houses, and reprints of pertinent publications.

The Trust is a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation with a current membership of over 200; Lee Sentell of Decatur has been elected the first president. Annual dues are $10 for an individual, $20 for a family, and $25 for an organization. For further information or to become a member, write to The Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation, P. O. Box 85, Decatur, Alabama 35602.

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CITY HALLS/ *continued*

quite logical and predictable. Furthermore, each window is placed directly above each ground level arch making the design even more controlled. The ease with which Breeding incorporated the existing engine house into his new design, even though they are of different scales, causes one to speculate that his choice of the wall dormers might have been a practical--rather than an aesthetic--decision. The eaves of the mansard roof exactly hit the top of the engine house wall, while the horizontal line created by the hipped dormers indicates the taller ceiling heights in the city hall.

Little is known at this time of H. D. Breeding. He came to Huntsville, possibly from Tennessee, about 1890 and established a successful architectural practice here. During the late 1890s he maintained an office in Chattanooga, perhaps living there also, but by 1906, he had settled in Birmingham where he resided until his retirement in the late 1920s. Unfortunately many of his known Huntsville structures have been demolished or remodeled beyond recognition. One suspects that his competence in executing the Queen Anne style was at least partially responsible for the early demise of his structures; as architectural tastes embraced the more restrained styles of the 20th century, late Victorian buildings with their flamboyant facades were considered an embarrassing indiscretion. They had to go, or at least be well hidden.

Breeding's city hall had stood for only 21 years before it was razed to make way for the Twickenham Hotel. By 1913 the lack of modern hotel rooms in Huntsville was considered a civic disgrace. The city agreed to sell the city hall property to three local men on the condition that they would promptly erect a modern hotel of not less than 80 rooms and costing at least $100,000. Demolition of the city hall took place in March 1914, and by April construction had begun on the foundations for the Twickenham Hotel.

The city offices were moved to Madison Street where they remained for fifty years until the final move to the present Municipal Building on Fountain Row in 1965. *

AS IT WAS THEN/ *continued*

I have always cherished the memories of my growing up years in Huntsville, and I appreciate this opportunity of setting them down on paper in the hopes they will revive those of others who shared them. Though I made no impression whatever on the small town it was then, Huntsville certainly made a deep impression on me. *

*PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS*

*Dorothea Snow: page 5*
*Huntsville Planning Department: page 3*
*Huntsville Public Library: all others*

# Reviews...

CEASE NOT TO THINK OF ME The Steele Family Letters, edited by Patricia H. Ryan. *Huntsville Planning Department (P. O. Box 308, Huntsville, Alabama, 35804), 1979. 184 pages, illustrated, index, paper, $6.00.*

*Cease Not to Think of Me* is an especially rich collection of letters that were exchanged among members of two prominent mid-nineteenth century Huntsville families, the Steeles and the Fearns. The editor Patricia Ryan compiled the letters from various public and private collections and organized them into a clear and interesting narrative. She and the Huntsville Planning Department which published the letters are to be congratulated.

Certainly for those readers interested in the social history of antebellum Alabama, this collection is most valuable. There are a number of extensive collections of letters by nineteenth-century Alabama families, but few of these have been published. Fletcher Green's *The Lides Go South and West* is one of these exceptions. James Lide and his family were early settlers in Dallas County. While Lide and his sons were absorbed in building up their plantations, his daughters missed the wide circle of kin and friends left behind in South Carolina. Not only was she lonely, but Sarah Lide Fountain worried deeply about her children's education in a place where schools were not yet organized.

Similar difficulties are absent from the pages of the Steele family letters. When the letters were written, Huntsville was a well-developed town with strong educational and religious institutions. While the Lides suffered the social isolation of pioneers, the Fearns and the Steeles enjoyed a rich social connection of both family and friends. Because of these differences, *Cease Not to Think of Me* is an excellent accompanying collection to *The Lides Go South and West* for those readers interested in the diversity of social experiences that characterized Alabama's development in the years before the Civil War.

*by Ann Boucher*

The most well-known members of the Steele and Fearn families--the architect George Steele and the physician and businessman Dr. Thomas Fearn--were rarely the authors of the letters in this collection. Rather, the majority of the letters were exchanged by Steele's son Matt and his wife Kate, the daughter of Dr. Fearn. Matt and Kate Steele were separated frequently during the years 1849 to 1855 because of his business travels. To the good fortune of present-day readers, if not to themselves, the Steeles exchanged letters that are unusual in some of the topics discussed and in the richness of detail recorded.

The letters were written by

Matt and Kate Steele during the first six years of their marriage. This timing was important to the content of the correspondence. Husband and wife were not discussing the marriages of their children or the care an aged parent should receive. Rather, they were planning for their own marriage, discussing the births and rearing of their own children, and measuring ideas of what husbands and wives were like against their own recently acquired experience.

The Steeles were also working out the relationship they as a new family should have with their parents. For Matt Steele, as for the sons of many wealthy and prominent Alabamians, this relationship involved his economic livelihood. Formally trained in the law and probably informally educated by his father in architecture and construction, Matt Steele practiced neither during the early years of his marriage. Instead he worked within his father-in-law's firm of commission merchants and cotton factors. He accepted this as a potentially lucrative and enjoyable way to provide for his family, but nevertheless dreamed of going to Texas where "we would then be alone, to ourselves, and I would be more independent, in any business that I might engage in than I am now in or could engage in." (p. 82) In their discussion of this and other topics, the Steele's candor is exceptional when compared with that of husbands and wives in other collections of nineteenth-century Alabama letters.

The collection's final sections are composed primarily of the letters of Matt Steele's sister Ellen and her husband Edward Tracy, written both before and during Tracy's service in the Confederate Army. While not of the same quality as that between her brother and sister-in-law, Ellen Steele Tracy's correspondence recounted many truly touching episodes. Her description of her daughter's illness certainly captured much of the love and attention children in these families received from parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The girl's eventual death from scarlet fever as well as her mother's untimely death gave basis in fact to the extreme concern expressed throughout the letters for health.

Those who turn to *Cease Not to Think of Me* for a chronicle of architectural developments in antebellum Huntsville from the leading architect's family will be disappointed. Those who read it for local conditions and personalities, for family history, and a sense of the social environment of Huntsville's well-to-do at mid-century will be rewarded. Ms. Ryan's introduction and conclusion are well done, although the early introductions to specific chapters are less satisfying. The "Who's Who" at the end is useful. A map identifying the residences of the more prominent characters is not given, but might have been useful to all readers, especially those unfamiliar with Huntsville. Such criticisms in no way detract from Ms. Ryan's accomplishment. She has brought together a collection of enjoyable letters that are vital as local records and as part of this state's social history. *

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*CEASE NOT TO THINK OF ME may be purchased from the Huntsville Planning Department on the fifth floor of the Municipal Building*

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# And Old Views

Through the years since Huntsville was incorporated in 1811, the city government has built and occupied a succession of structures in the downtown. During much of the 19th century the principal city building was referred to as the market house, reflecting the importance of the city market as an early government function. The mayor's office, where the board of aldermen met, consisted of a single room appended to the market, while the engine house, or fire station, usually was located adjacent. The progression of city sponsored buildings through the 19th century illustrates the expanding roles both of city government and of Huntsville as a town.

The first identified market house, of unknown description, sat on the public square, which it shared with the first courthouse and the early reservoir. When the county decided to build a more substantial courthouse, to a plan designed by George Steele, it was necessary to move the market house to another location. Consequently in 1839, George Steele, who was also a city alderman, offered a resolution that a committee be appointed to locate a lot on which to erect a market and an engine house. Appointed to the committee were Steele, George Cox and Irvin Windham, who recommended purchasing the property at the southwest corner of Clinton and Washington Streets. Steele then resigned as an alderman, perhaps to avoid a conflict of interest since he had been commissioned as the architect. In September the aldermen unanimously adopted the drawings submitted by Steele and elected Windham to superintend construction. The market house was a two-story, masonry structure with columns at the Washington Street entrance. The upstairs room served as a town hall for public meetings. As the market lot had a frontage on Washington of only 35 feet, the market would have been long and narrow, probably with the engine house as a separate structure behind it on Clinton.

## *Huntsville's City Halls*

An ordinance for the regulation of the market was adopted which set daily hours for operation, rental rates for stalls, and fines for illegal practices. It was expressly forbidden for farmers to sell food anywhere within the corporate limits except at the market house. The town constable was appointed clerk of the market and charged with ringing the bell at the start of each market day, enforcing all rules, mediating weight disputes, and preventing the sale of unsound or unwholesome provisions.

The stalls were rented to the highest bidder for a term not to exceed one year, provided that the bid was at least $25 per annum. Products sold at the market house included vegetables, poultry, butter, eggs, lard, wax, cheese, fruits, flour and meal, and butcher's

*This old photograph, looking along Clinton Street, shows the market house as it was rebuilt after the 1850 fire. Barely visible behind the tree is the bell tower over the entrance, while the 1873 engine house can be seen in the background.*

meats. A bench placed along the curb of the Clinton Street sidewalk was provided free for the sale of fish.

The city also rented the hall above the market to the highest bidder, who would be required to furnish it with any number of good, substantial seats, the cost of these to be deducted from the rent. The aldermen obviously expected the market house to pay for itself.

On May 2, 1850, much of downtown Huntsville was leveled when a fire began on North Side Square and moved north, destroying both the market and engine house. The following year the city purchased an additional lot on Washington, which adjoined the market house lot, and rebuilt the market and engine houses to a new design. Although Steele was still practicing as an architect then, there is as yet no evidence that he participated in either the plan or the construction of these structures. The market house was a one-story, T-shaped brick building with a wooden bell tower above the Washington Street entrance. Presumably the market stalls occupied the back wing, which ran parallel to Clinton Street. The engine house was a separate building behind the market on Clinton.

By 1870 the market house had become too small to house both the market and city offices, forcing the aldermen to search for additional space. Rather than erect yet another building, they arranged to have one built by private enterprise. The

city owned a vacant lot at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Clinton Streets which they sold to Mary Hundley. Mary's husband Orville then signed an agreement with the city to erect a strong, elegant and commodious city hall-opera house combination on the lot according to the plans, dimensions, and specifications stipulated by the mayor. Next, Hundley deeded a quarter interest each in the property to Larkin Sullivan, J. C. Steele, and L. W. McCravy for $125 on the condition that they would undertake, with Hundley, to construct, prior to November 1872, the hall as described. The structure, which is variously referred to as the City Hall and the Opera House, was finished on time, and the Opera House grand opening held in December. The city offices remained here for twenty years.

The following summer the aldermen voted to replace the engine house with a new structure. C. A. Gill submitted the lowest bid for the construction; however since Gill was an alderman and a member of the committee that formulated the plans and cost estimate, it is not too surprising. Possibly the competing bidders viewed the transaction in the same light for Gill resigned his position as alderman at the next meeting.

The new engine house, completed in January 1874, was a two-story, brick structure of three bays with a gabled roof--a design reminiscent of many local antebellum residences except for the large doorways for the fire engines. Only the arched openings, the brackets under the eaves, and the corbelled chimney tops suggest its post-bellum origin.

By 1889 the aldermen were again contemplating another building project--a single city hall large enough to accommodate both the market and the city offices. The purchase of another 23 feet along Washington increased the market house lot to 87 feet on Washington by 135 feet on Clinton. The plans, drawn by architect H. D. Breeding, were adopted in June; however, three years passed before the contracts finally were awarded to Hummel and Zschaake for the stonework, H. Brandon & Son for the brickwork, Timberlake and Nance for the tinwork, and McCracken and Golightly for the carpentry, making the projected cost of the hall about $10,000. J. R. Stegall paid $175 for the old market house salvage.

*The COVER photograph illustrates the 1873 engine house and its proud firemen, plus a group of onlookers. At this time the city also operated the scales, which were located in one bay of the engine house.*

Breeding designed an imposing, two-story, brick and stone structure with a tall corner tower and mansard roof. The building fronted 51 feet on Washington and 97 on Clinton, while the tower rose to a height of about 60 feet. The first story of quarry-faced stone contained large arched doorways which provided access to the ground level market. The second story of brick housed the city offices and was lighted by large, individual, round-topped windows. Each window broke through the eaves of the main roof to form a series of hipped wall dormers which created the appearance of a second, or double, roof. Smaller, gabled roof dormers alternated with the wall dormers and reinforced the sensation that the building might erupt through its roof.

The 1873 engine house was retained with modifications. It became the back three bays of the new city hall and was reroofed with an extension of the main mansard. A new hipped wall dormer and gabled roof dormer continued the design of the city hall proper.

With its picturesque tall tower, variety of wall textures and colors, complex roof, and multitude of openings, the hall exhibits all the characteristics of the commercial Queen Anne style. Nevertheless, all of this variety is handled in a very disciplined manner giving a presence and continuity to the design which many buildings from this era lack.

The two types of dormers are alternated and spaced at equal intervals so that the apparently chaotic roof is, in fact,

*Continued on page 17*

*The grandeur of the 1892 city hall reflects the growing prosperity of Huntsville, as textile mills located around the town beginning in 1890, and the increasing services offered by the city government, which finally required as much space as the market. The remodeled engine house can be seen at the far right.*

# from the Chairman

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