### One Dollar



Fall/Winter

1983-4

## THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY of Local Architecture and Preservation

# THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY

### of Local Architecture and Preservation

Vol. X, Nos. 1 & 2

Fall/Winter 1983-4

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### from the Editor

Historic Huntsville Foundation will be ten years old on April 30! Many people have worked countless hours over these past ten years to make HHF the solid community organization that it is. Pursuing its purpose with much success, HHF continues to promote the preservation of architectural structures and historic sites throughout Huntsville and Madison County, and to increase public awareness of their value to the community.

The sale of the HHF cookbook, "Huntsville Entertains", is an on-going project with the proceeds benefitting local preservation. An order blank for this excellent cookbook is located on the last page of the Quarterly, along with a membership application form. Although these books are available through bookstores alnd other outlets, the entire purchase price can abe applied to the Foundation's preservation funds when pruchased directly from HHF.

#### Cover

A page from the 1908 Sears Modern Homes Catalog, the first year it was issued.

#### Photographs:

Micky Maroney: pp. 11-17 and 26-29 Dr. William S. Reynolds: pp. 31-37

# History of East Huntsville Addition

by Joberta Wasson

In 1888, a magnificent subdivision was planned for an east Huntsville suburb by a local corporation, the North Alabama Improvement Company. It was to be the easternmost part of a larger projected plan called "The East Huntsville Addition", which would encompass a portion of what is now the Old Town Historic District, and on its western side, would include what became the Dallas Textile Mill site, and much of the adjacent mill village.

The choice lots were to be situated in an area which extended west only to the present Andrew Jackson Way, north to the street now called McCullough Avenue, south to Maple Hill Cemetery, and east to a projected but never dedicated 15th Street, one block east of the present Maysville Road extension. This is the area which is being proposed as a third Historic District for Huntsville.

The 1888 plat shows streets laid out in a semicircular fashion, with fiftyfoot lots facing east and west. A broad avenue bisecting the center of the semicircle leads to a large city park on the western edge of the district. Streets are generally named for trees, such as cypress, magnolia and elm. An exception is the broad (one hundred feet wide) central avenue named "Cleveland Avenue" in honor of Grover Cleveland, then president of the United States. This avenue leads to Randolph Circle, which curves around the park.

The toll road, which at



1888 Plat of the first planned subdivision - which was never developed - for East Huntsville. Plat information reads:

East Huntsville First Subdivision of a Portion of the Lands Belonging to the North Alabama Improvement Co.

N. F. Barrett, Landscape Architect R. Jones, Civil Engineer On Feb. 22, 1888 same was duly entered on records of said county.

Thomas J. Taylor, J.P.C.

that time led to the summit of Monte Sano, crossed the area on its south side, and tracks were being laid for a little luxury railroad spur, the "Dummy Line" which was to lead to the Monte Sano resort hotel, then in its heyday.

A few years before this. Huntsville had been a small town of less than 5,000 people, suffering from reconstruction doldrums. Outsiders considered it a dead town, pretty, but of no consequence. ("Mercury", July 13, 1892). However, some enterprising citizens realized that Huntsville had a potential for growth and a flourishing economy: low building costs, cheap and plentiful labor, a nice climate, and a water supply which was inexpensive and practically inexhaustible. If all this were brought to the attention of northern capitalists, success would be assured, reasoned citizens such as Charles Halsey, Milton Humes and others. They initiated a campaign of advertising Huntsville's assets in newspapers around the country. The results could hardly have been better. Businessmen from other cities and states came, liked what they saw and often stayed.

Two of the most outstanding were the O'Shaughnessy brothers, Michael and James, from Cincinnati, via Nashville. ("Mercury", April 10, 1889). Michael organized the North Alabama Improvement Company, a corporation, in 1886, and became its president. Other stockholders included many local businessmen. Its purpose was simply to make money through real estate and other ventures, (Corporation Book, page 19), but since more new business for Huntsville meant more money and more need for new houses, it also expended considerable effort in wooing northern capitalists into the area.

One of its most ambitious projects was a real estate venture, the East Huntsville Addition. The company acquired land from individual owners, 2,000 acres in all, according to the 1889 "Mercury". The plat for the property was approved on February 22, 1888. The following May, lot sales were launched in the elegant eastern district, with a day-long extravaganza.

Quoting the "Mercury" for Wednesday, May 15, 1889:

"In the morning the Chattanooga Cornet Band played several fine selections in front of the Huntsville Hotel, and at ten o'clock the first train on the dummy line left McDonald's Station with two cars loaded down with men and women, and continued making trips during the day, carrying a full load each trip.

"At twelve o'clock the sale was started with the privilege of purchasing the adjoining lot at the price paid for the lot bid on, which plan was continued through the day. There was considerable excitement on the part of the bidders. The first lot was purchased by C. H. and W. Halsey for \$300.00. (Lots 15 and 16, Block 46).

"At one p.m. sale discontinued for an hour to allow the crowd to take advantage of a grand barbeque.

"A large crowd, many of whom were ladies, followed the carriage containing the auctioneer. Sales ended at five p.m."

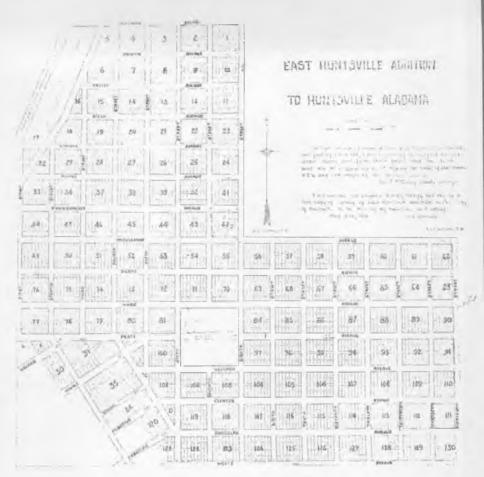
With such an auspicious beginning, sales might have been expected to continue briskly. But they apparently did not. We may speculate that the Addition opened too soon. Even though the Improvement Company stockholders had worked hard promoting Huntsville, the economy did not begin to soar until the early 1890's when many new industries became fully established, among them the textile mills which were to be the cornerstone of prosperity for many decades.

The ensuing events give rise to many puzzling questions: The North Alabama Improvement Company's founder, Mr. Michael O'Shaughnessy, left town, even though he and his wife had recently taken up residence in his large and imposing new house (now called the McCormick House). This is not to imply that there was scandal involved. There may have been. On the other hand, his departure may have been a mere coincidence, or he may have gone seeking help for the ailing company, more likely the latter. Soon after, three astute businessmen from Pierre, South Dakota moved to Huntsville. These men, William S. Wells, Tracy W. Pratt and Willard I. Wellman drew up a corporation under the laws of South Dakota. Though it was named the Northwestern Land Association and had probably been formed before they left South Dakota, its sights were now set on Huntsville rather than the northwest, and its aims were more or less the same as those of the North Alabama Improvement Company. Many local leaders became stockholders, too.

This company proved to be the salvation of the North Alabama Improvement Company. It bought the entire East Huntsville Addition, except for a portion of the western section which had already been deeded to the new Dallas Textile Mill then in construction, and to the proposed mill village housing area adjacent. The entire elegant eastern portion, the 285 acre tract which comprises the proposed historic district, was replatted as of May 9, 1892. (Plat Book 1, pp.34-35).

On the new plat, the streets run straight north and south, east and west. Lots are forty feet wide. The streets running east and west are named for company directors and other prominent citizens, except for extensions of Randolph and Clinton Avenues. The side streets are merely numbered. (These were not named until 1958, when there was a general overhaul of Huntsville street names, at which time they, too, were named for local prominent citizens). The fine park on the west is gone and has been replaced by another park, in the shape of a square two blocks wide, between Wellman and Ward, to the south and north; and Sixth and Eighth, to the west and east.

This time, the project



1892 Plat of East Huntsville Addition, developed by the Northwestern Land Association. Plat information reads:

East Huntsville Addition to Huntsville, Alabama On Sept. 3rd, 1896 - I made a survey of Blocks 122, 123, 118, 119, and part of Block 124, I found some of the original lot and street stakes and from these found that the streets were now at a variation of 3, making the angle of the streets N 3 W and the angle of the avenues S 87 W.

Jno. T. McCalley, County Surveyor

I, H. J. Simmons, Civil Engineer, hereby certify that this is a true Copy of Survey of East Huntsville Addition to the City of Huntsville, to the best of myu knowledge and belief.

May 9th, 1892

H. J. Simmons

H. J. Simmons, C.E.

F. C. Flickinger, C.E.

prospered. Lots sold rapidly and construction began at once on new houses. Among those who purchased lots were William S. Wells, president of the company, and Willard I. Wellman, its secretary. Both speculated by building rental houses in the district. Mr. Wellman is purported to have bought \$63,000 worth of lots. ("Mercury", September 18, 1892). His own home was constructed across from Five Points, where a First Alabama branch bank now stands.

The 1892 newspapers often referred with pride to the new development. The "Mercury" for September 18, 1892, exclaimed:

"This company is transforming East Huntsville into the most beautiful part of the city. Many of our best citizens are taking advantage of the low prices at which this beautiful property is placed on the market. Care will be taken so the surroundings will not be objectionable. There will be no 'Georgia' adjacent."

Another comment was:

"East Huntsville is capturing all the new houses. The truth of the business is that East Huntsville is working to sell lots and build up that end of the city while other portions of the city are simply waiting for something to turn up." ("Mercury", August 10, 1892).

The company advertised aggressively, emphasizing its low prices and easy terms. As a result of this, it tended to attract more speculators in rental property than prospective home owners. As the "Mercury" for September 28, 1892, affirmed:

"The low price at which the property is offered makes this the surest and safest investment property in the city."

The change in the plat layout of the area presented some problems. For instance, those original "eager buyers" who had bought lots on North Alabama Improvement Company's opening sales day must have been left with property which cut across new streets and adjacent lot lines. Newspaper records and deed books show that a number of those buyers either sold their lots to the Northwestern Land Association or gave them to it, doubtless for other considerations. The chancery court records of this time indicate that the North Alabama Improvement Company was involved in various lawsuits, though none was directly connected with land sales. The "Argus" for January 5, 1893 contains a reference to the two companies which clearly indicates that the Northwestern Land Association was trying to assist the North Alabama Improvement Company in paying off its debts. There was an obvious connection between the two.

It was necessary to take up some tracks of the "Dummy Line" and re-lay them to prevent cutting up blocks. ("Mercury", May 25, 1892).

By the end of this decade, the district was well established. About this time, the Northwest Land Association ceased selling property, and the district developed more slowly. As late as 1921, only one block had been completely filled with dwellings. (Sanborn Map Company). Ironically, this is the block between Pratt and Ward, immediately across from the present Five Points business distric. Now, all dwellings facing Pratt and the side streets have been torn down to make way for stores and a filling station.

In 1921, the John Scott Florist and Greenhouse occupied both north and south sides of Wellman Avenue at Five Points. The only other business in the district was Mrs. McKissack's Grocery Store on East Clinton Avenue. Now, of course, the Five Points section is primarily made up of business establishments. Outside of Five Points, there are very few others.

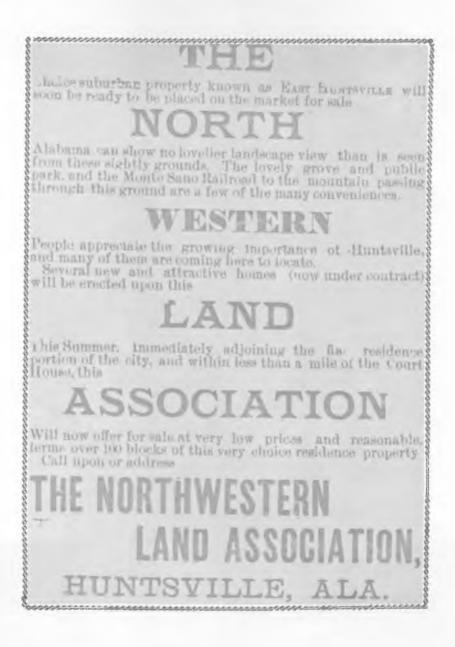
The Wellman Avenue area had not been opened beyond Five Points and much of it was still vacant land. The projected park was never developed, though a large part of it remained vacant at least as late as 1920. The section of Pratt and Ward, between 7th and 8th streets, was platted September 26, 1914, as A. A. Love property and divided into forty-foot lots. This was the first section of the park to be cut off and sold. Others followed until nothing remained.

During the 1920's, there was an upsurge of building and by the time of the Great Depression, the area was rather densely populated. The dwellings in the district are an interesting conglomerate of architectural styles and periods, and of quality of workmanship. If someone decided to take a stroll around one block--any block-in the heart of the district, it would be possible to predict, with reasonable accuracy, what sort of buildings would be seen. There would be a few cottages, several late Victorian and, or, eclectic twenties style houses - some very fine and a few extremely simple rectangles. (The exceptions to this pattern are the apartments and condominiums which are now engulfing vacant spaces.)

This district is a perfect example of what can happen to a development when there are no zoning laws governing it. The promises of "no Georgia" were broken flagrantly as speculators put up rental property. However, the district's lack of uniformity actually enhances its historical importance. As a whole, it is a piece of Americana. If only the best houses were preserved, it would deteriorate into a lifeless showcase.

#### Sources:

Corporative Record of Madison County - Huntsville Law Library Huntsville, Alabama - Sanborn Map Co., 11 Broadway, N.Y., 1921 Madison County Chancery Court Records - Huntsville Law Library Property Deed Books - Madison County Courthouse Plat Book 1 - Madison County Courthouse Newspapers: "The Weekly Argus", "The Weekly Democrat" and "The Weekly Mercury" Changing Huntsville, by Elizabeth Humes Chapman, Privately published, Huntsville, Alabama, 1972



Newspaper ad in the "Weekly Argus", June 23, 1892

# The Organization of a Third Historic District in Huntsville

by Marilyn Kavanaugh

East Huntsville, the area being proposed as a third historic preservation district for Huntsville, includes most of the East Huntsville Addition of the City. The plat of this Addition was recorded in 1892. The area being considered lies between McCullough Avenue (both sides) on the north, Maple Hill Cemetery on the south (including the Ess-

linger Addition), Andrew Jackson Way/California Street on the west, and Maysville Road on the east.

At several points, the western border of the proposed district adjoins the eastern boundaries of Huntsville's present preservation districts, Twickenham and Old Town. Situated near the eastern boundary is Oak



Corner of Ward Ave. and Andrew Jackson Way.



McCullough Avenue. The sole remaining structure from Williams College, believed to have been faculty quarters.

Place, the beautifully restored home of Huntsville's antebellum architect, George Steele. Oak Place now serves as the educational building for the East Huntsville Baptist Church and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Maple Hill Cemetery serves as a logical historic and geographic southern boundary, while both sides of McCullough Avenue were chosen as the northern boundary to include the site of the former Williams College, a women's college in existence for only a few years before it burned down prior to 1920.

Initially, Oakwood Avenue was considered as the northern boundary, but a smaller area is now being proposed for two reasons. First, for administrative convenience, since several of the blocks north of McCullough Avenue have 36 lots, as opposed to 16 lots in the blocks to the south. And second and more importantly, it was felt that the area north of McCullough has a character of its own, more suitable for inclusion in a future Dallas Mill Historic

Preservation District.

East Huntsville is a wonderful melange of architectural styles, including Victorian, Colonial Revival, bungalow, English cottage, and a few more recent ranch styles. Most of these homes were built before World War II, but at least one structure is believed to have an antebellum portion. One Victorian home in the area, already on the National Register, is being used as a commercial establishment, The Old Town Gallery. Located at the corner of Andrew Jackson Way and Ward Avenue, it was meticulously restored by its owner, Evelyn Wright.

Organizers of the newly proposed district have been greatly assisted by the organizer of the Old Town District, Frances Rice, by Harvie Jones of the architectural firm of Jones and Herrin, and by Linda Bayer of the City Planning Department. The organizing committee consists of Bob Cantrell, Gary and Sue Cooper, Randall and Cathy Hayes, Ben and Marilyn Kavanaugh (chairman), Virginia Lavender, Doug and Judy McKee, Jim Sanders, and Bill Wilson.

As a first step, Judy McKee and Marilyn Kavanaugh conducted a structures survey of the area, noting which structures had been built or destroyed since the last city survey. House numbers were also noted for future correlation with the petitions.

A preliminary meeting was held at the Kavanaugh's home to discuss the project. It was decided to invite all those within the proposed district (which at that time included Oakwood Avenue) to attend an educational program. Permission was obtained from Dr. James Johnston of the Huntsville City School System to use the Annie C. Merts Center for the meeting on Sunday, June 20, 1982. Leaflets were distributed within the area to advertise the meeting, and publicity was sought from the various news media.

Approximately 100 interested persons attended the meeting and voiced their concerns and support to a panel consisting of Frances Rice, Harvie Jones, and Linda Bayer. It was decided that sufficient support had been expressed to continue to the next phase, which was preparation of the petitions. A number of persons volunteered to distribute the petitions for signatures once they were ready.

According to Act No. 1037, H. 2095 of the 1971 Regular Session of the Alabama Legislature, each petition must include the legal description of each parcel of property and must be signed



Bierne Ave. A Victorian "Carpenter Gothic" being restored.



Ward Ave. Turn-of-the-Century cottage with new rear wing.

by the person or persons to whom the property was last assessed for tax purposes. The Act presumes they are the legal owners. At least 60 per cent of the property owners in the proposed district must sign these petitions for the district to become a reality.

Obtaining and gathering this information for some 600 parcels of property was very time-consuming. About 20 percent of the property owners live outside the proposed district, adding a further challenge to the task. The Historic Huntsville Foundation voted to lend its support to the project, and voted an appropriation toward the petition expenses.

When a sufficient number of signatures has been obtained, the organizers will consult with Linda Bayer, of the City Planning Department, concerning the final boundary lines, as well as the supporting rationale and documentation for the district. The petitions will then be presented to the Huntsville City Council, asking that the area be accepted into the City as an Historic Preservation District.

If approved by the City Council, the District would then come under the guidance and protection of the city's Historic Preservation Commission. Future plans include the organization of an East Huntsville Historic Preservation Association, and the application for registration with the National Register of Historic Places.



Clinton Ave. 1898 house undergoing restoration with new rear addition built in original style of house.



McCullough Ave. Twin bungalows.



A pair of English cottages. Randolph Ave. (top) 1925, shows Craftsman influence. Ward Ave. (bottom) A later version of the English cottage style.





Corner of Randolph Ave. and Andrew Jackson Way. A trio of bungalows.

Some homeowners in the East Huntsville area may be eligible for low interest loans for repair and rehabilitation purposes. Totally unrelated to the proposed third historic distric, these funds are presently available for several areas of the city.

The program is administered by the department of Community Development of the City of Huntsville. At the attractive interest rate of six per cent, any funds borrowed become a second mortgage on the property where a first mortgage exists. The terms of the loan depend upon family size and income, but the program itself is not limited to low-income families.

Included in the program is a portion of East Huntsville, known as the Five Points Target Area; it is bounded on the North by the southern side of Oakwood Avenue, on the South by the northern side of Clinton Avenue, on the West by the eastern side of Dallas Avenue, and on the East by those lots facing both sides of Mayesville Road.

Further information may be obtained from Steve Baird with the Department of Community Development.



"The Langston" was featured in the 1919 Sears, Roebuck Fall Catalog.

## Sears

## Mail-Order Houses

by Micky Maroney

"One Order Brings It All." The headline of the advertisement for "The Langston", on the opposite page, surely caused even the casual browser to pause for a second look. Featured in the Fall Catalog of Sears, Roebuck and Company in 1919, the adver-tisement for the "Honor Bilt" Modern Home offered every item for a complete, well planned house containing the finest materials - from lumber and lighting to plumbing and paint - for a reasonable price. Included were detailed instructions for construction.

Between 1909 and 1937 the Sears Modern Homes Department offered about 450 different models and sold more than 100,000 homes. Ranging in size from modest three-room cottages priced well under \$1,000 to nearmansions of ten or more rooms selling for over \$5,000, the "Honor Bilt" homes were available in a variety of architectural styles.

The Modern Homes Department was introduced in the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog in the spring of 1908 when four pages of modern homes were featured and a special Homes Catalog was issued. The first bill of materials for a complete home was sold in 1909, and by 1911 Sears had made its first mortgage loan. Business was booming.

The primary purpose of the Modern Homes Department, according to Sears information, was "to afford an outlet for the sale of general merchandise." At the time, sales were lagging in certain home furnishing items, such as sofas, pianos, graphophones, etc. These items, sometimes verbally suggested in the home ads, were often drawn into the floor plans of the Modern Homes, giving prospective buyers ideas for future purchases. In addition, separate building and roofing materials were sold by the Department. And of course, Sears made available to the small homeowner a selection of complete homes to be built at moderate cost of high quality materials.

Persuading people to buy an entire house by mail-order was no small accomplishment. Richard Sears, an astute, selftaught merchant and copywriter himself, trained his copywriters to continue his own early advertising tactics of enticing the buyer with colorful phrases, alluring illustrations, testamonials, and even gilt-edged guarantees. All else failing, Sears added a free set of plans and the advice of architects, builders and contractors.

Offering undeniably good reasons for purchasing a Sears home, "The Langston" ad continues convincingly: "You dispose of the entire transaction in a few minutes. You select your house from our Book of "Honor Bilt" Modern Homes, merely by writing down the name or number, and on receipt of your order we ship at the price quoted: the Lumber, Lath and Shingles; Mill Work such as Doors, Windows, Molding, Building Paper, Flooring, Porch Material, etc.; Hardware, Nails, Eaves Troughs, Down Spouts, Paint and Varnish.

"At your option: Steam Heating, Furnace Heating, Plumbing Outfit, Electric Wiring, Gas and Electric Fixtures, Wall Paper and Electric Lighting Plants Furnished Extra.

"See how much more convenient this is than to be compelled to go to a dozen places for as many different items, each transaction requiring time, expense and worry. . .

"You can go even further and benefit yourself still more . . . by adding to your order to be shipped when convenient to you, your rugs, furniture, perhaps a piano, a Silvertone phonograph, chinaware, silverware, suits, dresses, linen, etc., all of which you will find illustrated, described and priced in this catalog.

In even more detail, "The Fullerton" ad of 1926 advised that the price included framing lumber of No. l quality Douglas Fir or Pacific Coast Hemlock, siding of Clear Cypress or Clear Red Cedar, a 17-year guarantee on the Oriental Slate Surfaced Shingles, etc. Also, paint for three coats on outside trim and siding. Interior features included a medicine case, wardrobes, kitchen cupboards, a Colonial mantel, and shellac and varnish for interior trim and doors. Among the options offered at extra cost were storm doors and windows for \$76 extra, and sheet plaster and white plaster finish to take the place of wood lath for \$196 extra.

And persuaded they were, every type of buyer on every level. By 1919 Sears had opened its first Modern Homes Sales Office in Akron, Ohio; other offices were opened in other cities east of the Mississippi, including a large branch office in Philadelphia. But the real advantage to the Sears, Roebuck mailorder house was that the components could be shipped by boxcar to anyone in any remote part of the country served by a rail line.

Upon receiving an order and a small downpayment, the Modern Homes Department would ship the load of precut and fitted pieces to the homeowner. Enough materials were guaranteed to build the house, although cement, brick

### SIX ROOMS AND BIG PORCH



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For Our Easy Payment Plan See Page 144

See Interior Views of The Fulterton Home on opposite Page

1926 Sears Modern Homes Catalog. Note furniture placement in floor plan.





Wantindam

Manual Dover Special

OPTIONS.

and plaster were not included in the price. The builder had to dig his own basement, probably with a horse-drawn scoop, and lay his own foundation.

Each item was numbered to correspond to the precise instructions which made construction sound simple, even for the amateur. Homeowners were cautioned: "Remember, these instructions and plans are the result of several years of practical experience. Follow them carefully and no trouble will result. If you do not follow them, errors will occur."

Roofing instructions for "The Crescent", a 1926 bungalow, advised: "The roof boards of your Modern Home are to be laid tight. The Oriental Slate Surfaced Shingles are to be laid 1/2 inch apart and 4 inches to the weather. Enough wood shingles are furnished to be laid for first course projecting over eaves. Over the wood shingles lay your first course of slate-surface shingles. This will prevent the first course of slate shingles from drooping at the eaves."

With such detailed instructions and persuasive advertising, plus the obvious quality of the completed homes, the solidly built Modern Homes by 1919 were mushrooming across the entire country. 1919 also was the year that Standard Oil Company of Indiana sent Sears, Roebuck and Company a check for \$1 million and an order for 200 houses!

Standard Oil had purchased two coal mines near Carlinville, Illinois, had hired enough men to work them, and needed instant housing for the men and their families. Sears' precut and fitted homes were the perfect solution. Thus, two new towns were born in short order - Standard City and Standard Addition, Illinois with Sears planning the towns.

The Sears planners, well-versed in the pecking order of company towns, planned everything right down to the width of the sidewalks and the sizes of the houses for the miners and their supervisors. Standard hired construction workers to do the actual building, then sold the finished homes to the miners for \$100 down and \$40 a month.

Flourishing for a few short years, the mining towns were abandoned when the coal mines were depleted in 1923. Over the ensuing years, some of the houses have been renovated and are still being lived in today.

Between 1926 and 1929, mail-order home sales peaked, as did sales in home furnishings. The sly ploy to boost sales in "general merchandise" had worked.

To help keep their costs low, Sears had built a sash and door factory in Norwood, Ohio and millwork plants in Cairo, Illinois and Port Newark, New Jersey. However, after 1929, the effects of the Great Depression were felt by the Sears Modern Homes Department as much as by anyone.

Ironically, it was the



1918 sears Modern Homes Catalog. "The Magnolia" was one of the largest, most expensive homes offered by Sears.

extensive mortgage financing program that led to the collapse of the Modern Homes Department. By the summer of 1931, there was a large increase in the number of properties reacquired by Sears, and from September 1931 through November 1932, the number of mortgage foreclosures exceeded the total number of foreclosures of all the preceeding years. The accounts of the Modern Homes Department were liquidated in 1934, and the Spring Catalog of 1937 contained the last appearance of the Modern Homes Department. In subsequent years, only special Homes Catalogs were issued.

At present, Sears corporate headquarters has very few records of who purchased mail-order homes or the shipping locations. Lenore Soiskin, Sears archivist in the Department of Public Affairs at the Sears Tower in Chicago, is actively trying to identify Sears houses and to collect the rare old catalogs. She is especially interested in learning about any newly discovered Sears homes anywhere in the U.S.

From articles in company publications, many Sears employees have learned of the efforts to locate the mailorder homes and have sent in building plans, catalogs, deeds and settlement papers from their own Sears homes. These documents, plus a lengthening list of existing homes, are now on file in the Sears archives in Chicago.

It is hoped that more Sears houses will be identified in the future as more preservationists and oldhouse enthusiasts become interested in them. A guide to Sears houses, to be published in 1984 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, should eliminate the need to look through numerous Homes Catalogs to spot pictures of the houses for identification.

Unfortunately for the Sears-house sleuth, there is no designer label emblazened on the front door or chimneytop to indicate that a house is a Sears original. Indeed, some owners tried to hide the fact that they lived in a Sears house. Also, several other companies provided mail-order homes during the late 1800's and early 1900's, confusing and confounding present-day homeowners who hope they have a Sears "Honor Bilt" home.

For the diligent searcher, however, it is possible to find clues indicating that a house was ordered from Sears. Mail-order evidence has been found in out-of-theway places, such as the shipment serial number and the buyer's name stenciled on a baseboard in the attic or on a panel in a closet under a stairway. Often, evidence is buried under layers of old paint or covered over by structural alterations.

Fortunate, indeed, is the clue-hunter who finds the bill of materials, blueprints or specifications for his home, proving it to be from Sears.



From the 1897 Sears Catalogue No. 104, when the company was just four years old.



1506 McCullough Avenue.

# **Bragg-Kavanaugh House**

### A Sears House in East Huntsville

by Micky Maroney

There are undoubtedly a number of Sears "Honor Bilt" homes in Huntsville and Madison County, although only three such houses have come to the attention of the Historic Huntsville Foundation. None of the three is documented as positively being a Sears house, but rumor and hearsay indicate that these homes were ordered from Sears.

One such house is located in the proposed East Huntsville Historic District, at 1506 McCullough Avenue. Now owned by the Ben Kavanaughs, the Colonial Revival style home was built in 1912 by Huntsville merchant J. D. Bragg on land he owned at the northeastern edge of town.

No documents have ever been found to verify that the house came from Sears, but all the previous owners have said they heard that it was a Sears house.

The Kavanuaghs have talked to the original owner's grandsons, Henry Bragg and James Bragg, Jr., about the origin of the house. The Braggs remember their grand-



father saying he chose and ordered the house from the Sears catalog, and when several boxcar loads of materials arrived at the depot, the components were hauled by wagon to the construction site.

Kavanaugh even wrote to Sears for information, but they had no early records of Huntsville area sales. However, he was able to determine that the house was built in 1912 by searching through old tax assessment records at the county courthouse. So far, the Kavanuaghs have found nothing to indicate the model or purchase price; they had hoped that the house was "The Magnolia," a Colonial Revival model of 1918. After finding that their home was a much earlier model, the Kavanaughs also saw many differences in the two houses when they saw floorplans for "The Magnolia."

During the process of restoration of their nine room house, they found evidence of changes made during years past - a couple of



Detail of newel post

doorways had been moved, a couple others had been sealed up, and some closets had been added.

They also found evidence of the mail-order origin of their home. Located in the attic is a baseboard stenciled with the name "J. D. Bragg," a shipment serial number, and "CVT Co.," which Kavanaugh believes stands for Charles Van Torn Company, posssibly a local builder who constructed the house for Mr. Bragg, or perhaps "CVT Co." produced the precut millwork for Sears. Identical stenciling appears on the backside of all interior trim and door facings. Also in the attic, they found some beams with unused precut notches, perhaps for an optional wall or partition, indicating the beams were cut before they were purchased, rather than being cut as needed.



"Colonial style" overmantel in living room. Several structural components of the house typify options in the Sears mailorder packages, most notably, the redwood siding. Redwood was not easily available in Huntsville in 1912. Other materials, offered by Sears and used in the Kavanaugh's house, include cedar shingles, oak beams, joists and studs, and very dense heart pine flooring from a pine variety not grown locally.

Interior features denoting a possible Sears design include the "colonial style" oak mantel, a built-in china closet in the dining room, and an original brass light fixture with a globe having a raised design of "akanthos" leaves.

Even though documentary proof eludes them, the Kavanaughs choose to believe that Mr. J. D. Bragg did, indeed, order his spacious, charming house from the Sears catalog.



Built-in china cabinet in dining room.

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Historic Huntsville Foundation is interested in learning of other Sears houses in the area. They need not be documented; rumor, recollection, structural evidence, etc. would be sufficient justification for further research to be done for verification.

Information and questions concerning other possible Sears houses in the area may be directed to the Quarterly Editor, Historic Huntsville Foundation, P.O. Box 786, Huntsville, AL 35804, or by calling 883-8474.

# UPDATE

### **D**OWNTOWN:

## **A** Revolution

by Toni Reynolds

It is a revolution in every sense of the word because it is motion and activity around a point, because it is change from a past situation, because it is part of an historical cycle, and because it is of the utmost importance and significance in the economic development of the downtown section of the city of Huntsville. Even though there is change/revolution in the usage of the buildings, restoration and preservation are the order of the day, tool

In the short space of a year, the downtown has a new face, a new direction, and a new future because the citizens here have continued to believe in the development of Huntsville, Madison County, and North Alabama. As long as the government and business interests will take risks and have vision, then Huntsville will have a future and prosper. The commercial interests are capitalizing on the new trends in our society, and downtown is reflecting these changes.

What a marvelous opportunity for merchants in the 80's to take advantage of the rejuvenation of buildings and the influx of people necessary to staff offices! The world turns, and the historical cycle repeats itself as the downtown area once again will be full of people who will be working and shopping there, much as townspeople did in earlier years.

The importance of downtown derives from its age, scale, architecture, and layout, all of which are typical of small town development in the early 1800's. In the downtown area that is located north of the Courthouse Square, most of the present buildings are the two or three story Commercial Brick style (characterized by usually symmetrical brick facades with regularly spaced or grouped windows; reliance on fenestration and structural materials to create interest; lack of applied ornamentation) which reflects the mercantile architecture of the early twentieth century. There are four multi-storied structures dating from the 1920's in this area: the Yarbrough Hotel (1922-24), the Terry-Hutchens Building (1925), the Times Building (1926-28), and the Russel Erskine Hotel (1928-30).\*

Currently, work progresses on the rehabilitation of a number of buildings located to the north of Courthouse Square:

### **DUNNAVANT'S (1905)** 100 North Washington

Dunnavants's was designed by Huntsville architect Edgar Love. The exterior, of brick and milled construction, is the original design except for the entrance and display windows. The new owners have committed themselves to preserving the outside of the building. The windows on the upper floors will be restored and protected in the renovation. The exterior renovation is in progress and the completion date is approximately May 1984. The inside will have 30,000 square feet of new, modern offices. The 18-foot metal ceilings will be kept, and the old elevator will remain operational, as well



Dunnavant's Building

as a newly installed elevator to serve the upstairs offices. The interior will have a skylight, incorporating a multi-story atrium design from roof to basement. The atrium will have plants and a bridge, providing a light and open effect, especially in the basement with its natural brick walls. This eclectic style is common in renovated office buildings, blending the old exterior with a new interior. There will be solar heating. if possible, on the roof. Occupancy date is planned for June 1984.

### BELK-HUDSON BUILDING (1930) 116 North Washington

The Belk-Hudson building, which was sold recently, is also being renovated now. The store building will be leased to Science Applica-

\*The original architectural style of each of these buildings was expertly described in the 1981 Winter Issue of the "Quarterly".

tions, Inc., a computer company, and will also have at least 30,000 square feet of office space in the two sections of the building. The two-story front part of the building will have about 56 offices, while around 20 offices and a workshop area will be in the one-story back portion. Complete modernization is planned with a target completion date of February-March 1984. The exterior will be remodeled and some of the windows will be bricked up to give a new 1980's appearance. This building is not as architecturally and historically significant as many other remaining structures downtown, so this form

of preservation can be considered preferable to demolition.



The gap between Belk-Hudson's and Dunnavant's, soon to be a parking lot, was once occupied by the Gudenrath Building which was demolished in 1979. Built in 1900 by Otto and Joseph Gudenrath, the two-story structure was one of the most interesting commercial buildings in downtown Huntsville.\* The city can ill afford to lose any more fine buildings such as the Gudenrath, if we hope to maintain the area of historic identity that is still intact.



St. Charles Anglican Church A replica of a 17th C. Hopewell, Va. church

\*See the 1979 Winter Issue of the "Quarterly for description and history of the Gudenrath Building.

Moving north on Washington Street across Holmes, one sees the new office for the Huntsville Housing Authority, located in a lately remodeled building of mid-twentieth century origin. Between this and Lewter Hardware Co. is a building that is new but has historical interest, being an authentic reproduction of the oldest extant Anglican Church in America. A copy of the seventeenth century Merchant's Hope Church in Hopewell, Virginia, the replica will house Huntsville's first Anglican congregation, the St. Charles, King and Martyr Anglican Church.



The Washington Street Complex

### THE WASHINGTON STREET COMPLEX (1932) 101-111 North Washington

Backtracking to the corner of Washington and Clinton, we find the Washington Street Complex which was recently developed by Schrimsher and Co. This building has seen many changes before its recent renovation. Built before 1861, the building was enlarged in 1881 to house the Speegal Hotel. In 1932, the building was reconstructed after a fire left only the walls standing. Lately, the building, bought from the Huntsville Housing Authority, was renovated according to a

plan the Housing Authority had purchased from Steve Kling, designer of Overton Square in Memphis, Tennessee. The plan was bought as an impetus to downtown development. The idea of creating an appealing appearance to attract people to the downtown area is a good one! The building now reflects an atmosphere of casualness and openness, with its wroughtiron decoration and bright, colorful awnings. Cafe 101, a restaurant with outdoor patio seating, typifies this casual and open atmosphere. Upstairs there are spaces for several offices. One is al-



Washington Street Complex - cafe patio

ready occupied by a law firm. Continuing north on Washington Street from Cafe 101, the

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building houses several renovated shops to be rented as specialty shops or boutiques.

MICHAEL NE NE NE

### THE EVERETT BUILDING (1899) 115-123 North Washington

Next door to the Washington Street Complex is the Everett Building, soon to be the home of the Heritage Club. Currently undergoing renovation, this private club and restaurant, with its several thousand square feet of space, will be a valuable component of the downtown resurrection. It will serve the many business and social interests of the community well. The Heritage Club is expected to be open in May-June 1984.

Although there is much renewal planned for the coming year, this is not true for all the buildings in the area. Next to the Everett Building is the old Yarbrough Hotel on the southwest corner of Washington and Holmes. There are no anticipated changes or development for the Yarbrough at this time. Across Washington on the northwest corner of Holmes, is real estate that retains its traditional usage as a retail business operated by a tenant of long standing, with a long-term lease. So, there are no plans to change this arrangement, either, in the forseeable future.

### STRUVE-HAY BUILDING (1900) 117-123 North Jefferson

Moving west along Holmes to Jefferson Street, the next renovated building is the Struve-Hay Building at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Holmes. Built in 1900 by architect Herbert Cowell, it combines Commercial Brick and Victorian features, including a Victorian corner tower. Other nineteenth century features include the applied metal cornices and the Romanesque-derived side entrance with an oriel window above. The exterior features of the building have been preserved, and the renovation of the interior has been completed. This, too, is currently being used for offices. It has been occupied since May 1983.



### Struve-Hay Building

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### Becker's Block



### BECKER'S BLOCK (1925) 105-111 North Jefferson

Continuing south on Jefferson Street is Becker's Block, a fully developed example of Commercial Brick styling. This building will be renovated and restored in the near future and will be offices, too.



The Terry-Hutchens Building, facing West Clinton on the corner of Jefferson and Clinton, is one of the three original skyscrapers in the central business district. It was the first highrise office building downtown. There are no definite plans as to when this building will be remodeled, but it will continue to be leased for office space as the demand becomes apparent.



Terry-Hutchens Building Clinton Ave. entrance

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Again, in the space of a year, there has been significant change. As more and more of the population age and need housing, this is another example of downtown reflecting our society today.

While it may seem a shame that there is not a well-publicized overall plan for this downtown revolution, that is often true of revolution, and it has been true of Huntsville in the past. But there does seem to be a need for recognizing the problems associated with development of office space and the influx of people in the area.

How many people will it take to staff so many offices? Where are they going to eat? Where are they going to spend their lunch hour, and where will they shop? Park? In addition to the present parking areas (which will be inadequate when all this new office space is staffed), there will be a new 75-foot parking lot on Washington Street between the Dunnavant's and Belk's Buildings. Since business interests are returning to the downtown area, the City Transportation Department plans to update its 1972-3 study on downtown parking

### RUSSEL ERSKINE HOTEL (1928-30) 123 West Clinton

The Russel Erskine Hotel, west of the Terry-Hutchens Building on Clinton, has also changed ownership and usage in the last couple of years. It is currently owned by a syndicated group in Memphis, and a management company is presently leasing apartment units to the elderly and handicapped who qualify as tenants. There are 69 apartment units, including several (located in the areas where the parking garage and the retail shops formerly were) for the handicapped. In spite of interior changes, the old hotel's marble stairs have been preserved. The apartments are now being rented and occupied.



Russel Erskine Building

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requirements, and present the results to the City Council as soon as possible so that future parking problems can be avoided.

So, part of downtown Huntsville has dramatically changed in one year. While the skyline north of the Square looks the same, the exteriors of the buildings are similar, and the streets are basically the same, it is coming alive with a fresh look, attitude, vitality, and purpose. The new proprietors are no longer merchants in the historical sense of mercantile businesses selling goods, but are merchants selling office space. As we progress into 1984, Huntsville's downtown is alive and well! The update is that the old structures are being preserved, while at the same time, the new era of technological and service employment is providing the area, once again, with a population.





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