

# Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

## *Preservation: Progress and Setbacks*



VOLUME 29, NUMBERS 3-4, FALL/WINTER 2003  
SIX DOLLARS



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OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

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## From the Executive Director

LYNNE BERRY

As happens with many issues of the Quarterly, portions of this one will break your heart. Historic Huntsville Foundation works to preserve historic structures, and as you read through these pages, you'll see the kinds of challenges we and other preservationists face in carrying out our mission.

Demolition by neglect, for example—described so poignantly by Lou Gathany in “Farewell to a Homeplace”—raises this question: At what point is a structure irretrievable? So often the quick and easy decision is to bulldoze or burn a structure so that something bright, shiny and new can be built in its place. Yet, knowledgeable preservationists can determine whether the “bones” of a structure are still good. When they are, these “bones” are most likely of far better quality than anything offered at local retail building supply stores. Moreover, in cases of a building’s missing or damaged parts, materials salvaged from other old structures or appropriate new material can often replace or supplement what’s needed in the restoration.

Some structures fall victim to what Foundation member and architect Marc Goldmon calls “taxidermy preservation”—the interior of a structure is completely gutted, leaving only the shell. While preferable to total demolition, this alternative gives the building an incongruous split personality that does no honor to the unifying and coherent principles of architecture. In our historic districts, this is a situation that is becoming more and more common, with the added complication of additions that are out-of-scale and inappropriate. The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission regulates only what is visible from the street. But a house that has lost all or most of its original materials—floors, mantels, doors, hardware, light fixtures, trim—and has somehow “morphed” from a 2,800 square foot cottage to a 6,000 square foot complex has, in the view of preservation, lost its soul.

Many historic properties are lost to prevailing notions of progress. Huntsville is far more fortunate than most United States cities in this department. Well-reasoned

community members in our city recognized the beauty and the value of the historic Twickenham and Old Town neighborhoods in the early 1970s and ensured their protection. Unfortunately, this occurred after the loss of what Patricia Ryan characterizes in her article about the Rison House as “Huntsville’s finest concentration of Victorian dwellings.” And over time, impressive public buildings, such as the previous courthouse and the Elks building, have been deemed expendable.

One alternative to demolition is relocation. Frances Robb’s article, “Recycling Redstone,” details some of Jeff Kennedy’s many moving (pardon the pun) experiences. Well-planned architecture is usually very site-specific and structures generally lose their context when moved. For some buildings, though—the Clemens House, for example—relocating is the only choice. (Stay tuned: we expect an exciting announcement about the Clemens House very soon.) In the case of the Redstone houses, relocating the units means families who would be priced out of many housing markets have good places to live, Mother Earth is spared further scarring from a new landfill, and houses that are approaching the 50-year “historic” mark will be around for future generations.

Also on the plus side are efforts like those of Dennis Boccippio and Alex Godwin, who bought a house with a tangled history and 100 years of wear and tear and renovated and restored it, keeping in mind the property’s character and setting.

We all have different ideas about what is important, what should be saved and how, and what can be sacrificed in the interest of progress and modernization. Historic Huntsville Foundation seeks to promote all alternatives to destruction whenever possible. If the Foundation had been around during urban renewal, it would have been, I believe, due a seat at the table when decisions affecting historic structures were made. When destruction is inevitable, the Foundation endeavors to save anything that is salvageable and offer it, through our warehouse, to folks who are working to preserve historic structures. Our historic structures are the visual identity of our community. They give it its unique character. Please help us preserve them.

## Contributors

**Lynne Berry** is executive director of Historic Huntsville Foundation. A graduate of Vanderbilt University, she has served as a staff member for Congressman Bud Cramer and Senator Jeff Sessions and been active in local, statewide and national preservation projects.

**Dennis Boccippio** earned a Ph.D. in Atmospheric Science from Princeton University. He works at NASA on weather and climate research. He has participated in many international weather and climate field research campaigns and has been interviewed on local, national and international television and radio, including the Discovery Channel. Dennis bought the Coombs House in 2002.

**Donna Castellano** has a master's degree in history and teaches at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She serves on the board of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association and on the Preservation Committee of Historic Huntsville Foundation.

**Lou Pettus Gathany** is the Testing Services Coordinator at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. For twenty years she was in partnership with her husband, doing business as Bob Gathany-Photographer. The Gathany's lived in the Pettus house for a short time when they were newlyweds.

**Frances Robb** is an art and cultural historian who is interested in the cultural landscape. She watched Don Kennedy and Sons House Moving Company offload one of the Redstone houses onto a lot near her neighborhood, and after talking with the site chief, she met Jeff Kennedy and arranged for the interview that resulted in her article.

**Nancy Rohr** is a former primary school teacher and tutor who researches and writes about local history for various publications and gives presentations for the Alabama Humanities Foundation program Speaker in the House. She edited and annotated the book *An Alabama School Girl in Paris*.

**Patricia H. Ryan** is the author of *Northern Dollars for Huntsville Spindles* and the editor of *Cease Not to Think of Me, the Steele Family Letters*. She was the pictorial researcher for *Huntsville, A City of New Beginnings*.

The editorial committee for this issue of the Quarterly was Diane Ellis, Lynn Jones and Patricia Ryan.



*The Rison House: The front staircase typified the exuberance of the interior woodwork. A second staircase can be seen at the right rear.*

*Cover and article photographs courtesy of Richard Smallwood*

## What Were They Thinking? The Lost Rison House

PATRICIA H. RYAN

The Gilded Age often refers to the last quarter of the 19th century, when the United States rapidly industrialized and many men of commerce and industry amassed great wealth. Such wealth was often spent building luxurious residences, and one of Huntsville's most refined homes reflected this pattern of affluent spending. The Rison House, situated on West Holmes west of its intersection with Monroe Street, was a striking example of the era's illustrious architectural achievements.

Built in 1889 the two-story dwelling displayed all the requisite characteristics identified with the Queen Anne style, but in a subdued, restrained manner. The building's asymmetrical form; complex rooflines; mixture of wall materials and textures; expansive veranda trimmed with spindle-turned and jigsaw-cut balustrades, brackets, and friezes; and most obviously, its circular corner tower topped by an S-shaped dome and finial, placed this house squarely within the American Queen Anne tradition.

Decorative brick and limestone string-courses delineated and decorated the exterior wall, while patterns of recessed panels were employed to enliven wall planes and add texture, and tall paneled chimneys soared skyward. But the architect, who is unknown, used restraint in the massing, which was a composition of sturdy geometric blocks grouped around a central cube, and in the choice of substantial



*Front view of house showing elaborate wrought-iron fence.*

brick walls accented with rusticated limestone, two choices that seem to suggest a lingering Italian villa influence on the design. Another Italianate motif is seen in the windows, which, while set in rectangular frames, had double arched panes in the upper sashes. Completing the overall sense of stability and decorum were the moderately pitched hipped roofs with generous eaves resting on solid brackets.

The interior of the Rison House was another matter altogether. The relatively sedate exterior handling was abandoned for an exuberant Victorian treatment within the house. The spacious entry hall, containing two full-sized staircases, erupted in a riot of spindles, spools, woven wooden screens, paneled walls and stair stringers, stained-glass transoms, and massive incised and carved Eastlake newel posts, with the grander newel post surmounted by a free-standing maiden in flowing gown holding aloft her glove of light. The first floor fireplaces, designed for burning coal, were surrounded with raised-pattern ceramic tiles set within ornate wooden mantel surrounds and tall overmantels awash with more spindles, spools, tiny shelves, turned columns, and mirrors. The main doorways featured transoms above, while the public rooms could be separated by closing massive pocket doors. Ornate Victorian ceiling light fixtures hung in many rooms. A wainscot of Lincrusta wall covering was featured in at least one hallway, along with an embossed panel of a classical maiden that was framed between two spoolwork screens. Recessed wooden panels recurred as a frequent decorative motif inside the house, appearing as wall finishes and on stair stringers, doorframes, support posts, and elaborately paneled doors. This impressive home was for many years the architectural legacy of William Richard Rison and his family.



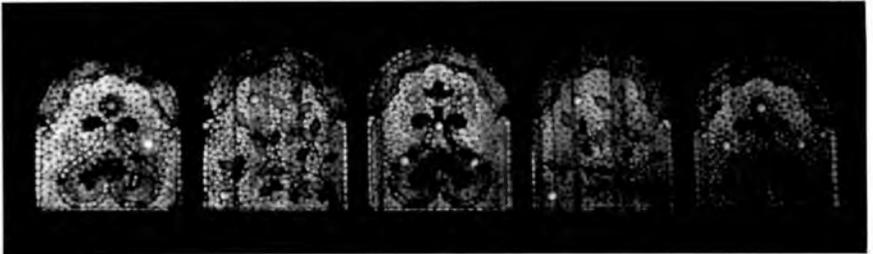
*Detail of porch woodwork.*

W.R. Rison was born in Huntsville in 1837, the eldest son of Archibald Rison

(1803-1862) and Martha Bibb (1816-1903), who was a distant cousin of Governors William Wyatt Bibb and Thomas Bibb. It is not known when the elder Rison came to Huntsville from his native Tennessee, but he began buying property here in 1826. In the 1840s and 1850s he acquired various tracts on the north side of West Holmes. The 1859-60 City Directory lists both his residence and business (Rison & Hobbs were cotton gin manufacturers) on the north side of Holmes Avenue between Mill Street (roughly the intersection of Holmes and Monroe Streets today) and the railroad tracks. These buildings, shown on the 1861 city map, were replaced by the Rison's Queen Anne residence.<sup>1</sup>

William Richard Rison married Maria Louise Jones (1842-1902) in 1858. After serving in the Confederate Army, he began his distinguished banking career in 1866 with Samuel Fordyce in the firm of Fordyce & Rison. When Fordyce retired eleven years later, the name was changed to W.R. Rison & Company. In 1902, W.R. Rison Banking Company was incorporated with a capital stock of \$75,000.<sup>2</sup> His only child, Archie L. Rison (1859-1925), was cashier.<sup>3</sup>

With W.R. Rison's death in 1904, the house passed to Archie and his wife Rena Lanier (1862-1935). Archie succeeded his father as both president of the bank and as secretary and treasurer of the Dallas Manufacturing Company. Archie later became general manager of the mill, and under his direction Rison School was



*This stained glass was located above one of the windows. A Rison descendant recently purchased the "Rison" transom, also in stained glass, that was located above the front door.*

established for the children of mill workers. At his death in 1925, the mill stood idle for a day to honor his memory.<sup>4</sup>

Later that year, Rena Rison sold her home to Robert and Helen Harrison. Robert was associated with Harrison Brothers Hardware Store, along with his brothers James and Daniel. His sister Cora was also involved with the firm.<sup>5</sup> Robert and Helen lived in the house until his death in 1952. The following year the City Directory listed Mrs. Harrison living on White Street and Mrs. Ruby A. Moore operating the Moore Rest Home at the Rison address. By 1957 the property had been converted into six apartments, most likely because of the housing shortage caused by the growth of Redstone Arsenal.<sup>6</sup>



*Pediment above the front door.*

Photographs taken in the 1960s show the interior of the house modified but still beautiful. Regrettably, the era's urban renewal plans targeted the 19th-century homes and businesses along Clinton and Holmes Avenues west of downtown, between the business district and Pinhook Creek, for clearance and redevelopment, thereby destroying Huntsville's finest concentration of Victorian dwellings. In 1968 the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville purchased the Rison House and demolished this magnificent home to make way for low-income housing.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

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- 1 1850 Census of Madison County, v.2, p. 260; Madison County, Ala., Deed Book K, p.443; *Huntsville Directory, City Guide, and Business Mirror* 1859-60 (Huntsville: Reprinted by Strode Publishers, 1972), p.79.
- 2 Thomas McAdory Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Co., 1978), v.4, p.1443; *Huntsville Weekly Democrat*, 3 August 1904, p.3; John Rison Jones, personal communication, June 2003; Madison County, Ala., Corporation Record 2, p. 31; *Huntsville Daily Times*, 28 June 1925.
- 3 In 1948 the Rison Banking Company on North Side Square and its assets were sold to the First National Bank, which is today Regions Bank. Madison County, Ala., Deed Book 184, p. 175.
- 4 *Weekly Community Builder*, 28 January 1925, p. 1.
- 5 Robert and Helen Harrison had three children: Daniel, John and Margaret (Smallwood). In 1984 Historic Huntsville Foundation purchased Harrison Brothers Hardware from their estates. Madison County, Ala., Deed Book 637, p. 860.
- 6 Madison County, Ala. Deed Book 132, p. 124; Richard Smallwood, personal communication, August 2003; *1953 Huntsville, Alabama City Directory* (Charleston: Nelson Baldwin Directory Co., 1953), p. 535; *1957 Huntsville, Alabama City Directory* (Chillicothe, Ohio: Mullin-Kille and The Huntsville Times, 1957), p.499.
- 7 Madison County, Ala., Deed Book 416, p. 134.



*Scholle-Dickson house, 224 West Holmes Avenue. The two most exuberant frame Victorians on West Holmes (this one and 415) appear to have had similar floor plans, but slight variations in detailing make each distinctive. Their most spectacular feature is the upper porch with its oval and circular openings framed with spindlework that repeats on the curved porch. A round bay covered with fish-scale shingles and a delicate iron fence terminating in a row of lotus motifs complete this high style house.*

*Photographs courtesy of Huntsville-Madison County Public Library*

## Memories of West Holmes Avenue: An Interview with Eugenia Millen Pitsinger

DONNA CASTELLANO

There are no indications today that the portion of West Holmes Avenue that runs from North Jefferson Street to Woodson Street was once a tree-lined residential area graced by some of the prettiest antebellum and Victorian homes in Huntsville. Instead, most Huntsville residents associate this stretch of Holmes Avenue with parking garages, banks and businesses and professional offices in modern buildings.

But folks who lived here before urban development led to the demise of the street's historic houses in the 1960s hold memories of a very different place. During a recent interview for the Quarterly, a former West Holmes Avenue resident, Eugenia Millen Pitsinger, shared her recollections of what life was like on West Holmes in an earlier time.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Pitsinger lived on West Holmes as a young woman, from 1928-1932. She moved to the neighborhood at the age of 14 with her widowed mother and her brother Bill. Her father, William W. Millen, had died in 1918. The Millens rented the upstairs of the old "Spragins" house, located in the 300 block of West Holmes Avenue between Mill and Monroe Streets.<sup>2</sup> In Mrs. Pitsinger's day, the 100 block of West Holmes Avenue was a business district and the residential area began in the 200 block of the street. One of her most vivid memories is of old oak trees lining West Holmes with canopies so thick that they blocked the light cast by the street lamps. Mrs. Pitsinger's mother, Carrie Millen, provided admirably for the family, working in the office of Huntsville Steam Laundry at 303 West Clinton Avenue—a quick walk through the alley that connected West Holmes and West Clinton. The Millen family shared the house with Mrs. Leona Grider, also a widow, who rented the first floor.

According to Mrs. Pitsinger, the north side of the block was filled with old homes—some larger and more elaborate than others. In addition to the Spragins home, there was the Rison house next door, occupied by R. S. Harrison and his family, and

residences owned by James S. Wall, Emmett Woodall, and Mrs. Fanning.

Mrs. Pitsinger described the Rison house “as one of the most beautiful houses in Huntsville.” She has clear memories of the home’s impressive exterior. The large brick two-story residence dominated the lot and sat a good distance back from the road. She remembers the house’s wraparound porch and the distinctive turret on its east side, as well as an ornamental iron fence that ran along the sidewalk in front of the property. There was also a horse hitching post in the front yard next to the sidewalk. Mr. and Mrs. R. S. Harrison and their children lived in the Rison house for the four years that Mrs. Pitsinger lived on West Holmes. Although they frequently conversed with the Harrison family, Mrs. Pitsinger regrets that she never saw the interior of the Rison house. She recalls Mrs. Harrison as being ill at this time and not receiving many visitors. She remembers hearing about the house’s beautiful interior and its elaborate staircase.

Mrs. Pitsinger’s block appears to have included houses of varying sizes and degrees of elaborateness. The Rison house’s architectural distinctiveness contrasted with the house rented by the Millen and Grider families. Mrs. Pitsinger remembers her house as being a two-story brick structure with a very simple wrap-around porch that ran along the front and east side of the house. The house sat very close to the street. She doesn’t remember that the house had any distinguished architectural details or trim.



*Adcock house, 409 West Holmes Avenue. The simple massing combined with awkward tower suggests that this house initially was constructed before the Queen Anne period and was later remodeled by the addition of the small non-functional tower, bracketed entry hoods, and bay window to bring it into line with more ornate Queen Anne tastes. It sat on the south side of West Holmes opposite the Rison house.*

In fact, the front porch didn't have a banister. The front-porch steps were simple blocks of stone, so worn they had indentations.

The simplicity of the interior rooms echoed the simplicity of the house's exterior. Mrs. Pitsinger recalls that the house had very large rooms with fireplaces in every room. She describes the woodwork and trim in the house as "crude" and believes that the house had been built before the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> She speculated that it must have been built by slave labor. In 1928, the house had indoor bathrooms and running cold—but not hot—water. Mrs. Pitsinger remembers heating water on a "modern" kerosene stove to take a bath in what she called the coldest bathroom in the world.

Differences between the footprint of the house recorded in the 1894 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps and Mrs. Pitsinger's memories suggest that the house was altered between 1894 and 1928 from a single-family residence into a residence divided into two separate apartments. During this alteration, the small front porch depicted on the 1894 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map was extended into the wraparound porch, and changes were made to increase the size of the second story. A second entrance door was added to provide a private entry to the apartment. One entered from this door directly into the living room of Mrs. Grider, who had a large dining room, two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a long back porch. The original entry was used by the Millen family and provided access to a small foyer that led to the upstairs rooms they shared. Their apartment consisted of a living room, a dining room, a bedroom, and a glassed-in sleeping porch. Mrs. Pitsinger recalls that her mother paid \$15 per month to rent the upstairs apartment, while utilities ran around \$2.50 per month.

As the contrast between the grandness of the Rison house and simplicity of the Spragins house suggests, West Holmes Avenue contained a diverse collection of residences. Immediately adjacent to the Spragins/Millen home sat the residence of James S. Wall. Mrs. Pitsinger remembers this house as a lovely two-story Victorian. The house had a small porch with beautiful gingerbread trim and a distinctive front door. Farther down the street was a residence owned by the Fanning sisters,

which Mrs. Pitsinger describes as a “cottage” with double-entry doors. One block up, the 200 block of Holmes Avenue also presented beautiful examples of antebellum and Victorian architecture. Mrs. Pitsinger recalls the home of Dr. Marion R. Moorman. She remembers that it was brick. The house is described in *Medicine Bags and Bumpy Roads* as a “lovely antebellum home.”<sup>24</sup> These blocks of West Holmes attracted families from various income levels, but the residents mixed with egalitarian ease. Mrs. Pitsinger repeated a phrase expressed in a note she had recently received from John Rison Jones: “everyone was respectable who lived in our area.”



*Blanton house, 415 West Holmes Avenue. The majority of the Victorian houses on West Holmes were of frame construction, a material made affordable by the mechanical milling of lumber that was more suitable than brick for the creation of the complex floor plans, rooflines, and fantastic ornamentation favored by those who could afford a stylish Queen Anne home.*

Respectable was also a characteristic Mrs. Pitsinger used to describe the black families who lived near them on adjacent streets. She remarked that visitors to the area were often surprised by the closeness with which white and black families lived on Huntsville’s downtown streets. She said most black families lived in old, but well-maintained cottages. She recalled Charlie, the black postman, who lived around the corner from her. Blacks moved easily throughout these neighborhoods as they made their way to their jobs. Aside from polite greetings, Mrs. Pitsinger recalls very limited social interaction between black and white residents. The dictates of a segregated society were observed even in those close quarters.

Through her memories, Mrs. Pitsinger fashions a lovely backdrop for the activities that animated life on West Holmes. In these recollections, porches were not areas decorated to look appealing from the street but were used by residents as a necessary retreat from the stifling heat of southern summers. She remembers sitting out on the front porch at night with her mother, both in their nightgowns, their privacy preserved by the thick limbs and full leaves of trees. To cool down, they lightly sprinkled water over their necks and arms. A great deal of activity centered on the arrival of the iceman, who delivered the ice for the iceboxes in his truck. Young children followed him along his journey and scooped up ice chips left in the bed of the truck where he scored and cut blocks of ice for his customers. Children fished in Pinhook Creek that cut across West Holmes at the end of their block. Mrs. Pitsinger recalled that the creek got its name because the children who fished there did not

have fishing hooks, so they bent straight pins to make their own.

Like tree-lined West Holmes Avenue and the houses that sat along it, these activities are part of Huntsville's heritage. Mrs. Pitsinger mourns the changes that a desire for progress brought to this neighborhood in the middle 1960s. She states that it is difficult to go down those streets today, because she knows what the area looked like before. She still has strong feelings regarding the loss of the Rison house, the Moorman house, the Wall house, and the neat, well-maintained cottages of Huntsville's black



*Fanning house, 400 West Holmes Avenue. This Victorian cottage, which stood on the north side of Holmes near Pinhook Creek, displays numerous characteristics of the period, including a wraparound porch, a multi-gabled roof with fanciful bargeboards, and a rounded corner tower with uncommon vertical siding and a slender finial extending its conical roof.*

residents, all pushed aside in the desire for urban renewal. Fortunately, the demolition of these structures did not occur entirely without good effect. Their destruction awakened the activism of other Huntsville residents whose blueprint for the future included a place for Huntsville's past.

### Notes

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- 1 Interview with Mrs. Eugenia Pitsinger, July 18, 2003.
- 2 Mrs. Pitsinger stated that her home would have been in the approximate area of where the public housing units [Searcy Homes] are located.
- 3 This seems a reasonable assumption. The 1861 City of Huntsville map shows a house fitting Mrs. Pitsinger's description in this location.
- 4 Jewell S. Goldsmith and Helen D. Fulton, *Medicine Bags and Bumpy Roads: A Heritage of Healing in Madison County, Town and Country* (Huntsville: Valley Publishing Company, 1985), 223-224.



*North side West Holmes Avenue, 2003*



*Blake house, 1890s. From left to right: Eva Copeland  
Blake, Hall Blake, Jean Hall, Jim W. Blake, Grandma  
Sarah Hall Blake, and B.W. Blake*

*Photographs courtesy of the Bryant family*

## The Old Neighborhood: A Family Remembers West Holmes Avenue

NANCY ROHR

Just one block west of the focus of Eugenia Pitsinger's memories, the Blake and the Bryant families were acquiring their own memories of the West Holmes Avenue neighborhood. In an interview for the Quarterly, three members of the Bryant family—Martha Moore Bryant, Sarah Bryant Batson, her daughter, and Hall Blake Bryant, Jr., her son—recalled with fondness their life on West Holmes Avenue.<sup>1</sup> The houses and the people formed a wonderful environment for raising three generations of Blakes and Bryants. For a time the Bryants and Pitsingers lived next door to each other. They shared lively days then and fond memories now.

Martha Moore Bryant's roots go way back in Madison County history, as did those of her husband, Hall (Buddy) Blake Bryant, Sr. The Blake family had arrived in Huntsville perhaps as early as the 1840s. Mrs. Bryant was born in 1916 in her grandfather's house on East Clinton Street. Her parents were Olivia B. Humphrey and Andrew Jackson Moore. Her grandfather Humphrey, the first principal of an early school on Clinton Street, lived with them to the age of 89, and Mrs. Bryant was raised on his stories of Yankee raids at the plantation north of town. In 1937, Martha Moore married Hall Blake Bryant.<sup>2</sup> They and their six children—five girls and one boy—lived on West Holmes Avenue in the third house from Pinhook Creek, next door to Grandmother Sarah Bryant.

The Fannings, Blantons, Burwells, Joneses, Johnsons and Harrisese come to mind when Mrs. Bryant remembers her family's West Holmes area neighbors. The Fannings were an elderly couple who also owned acreage where the present University Drive and Memorial Parkway meet. Mr. Fanning, a gentleman with a fine head of coal-black hair, used to walk or ride on a white horse out to the farm. His wife churned butter on the front porch, perhaps to enjoy the breezes of summer.

According to Mrs. Bryant, the Blanton house was originally on West Clinton Street. A man from Athens relocated the house, using a team of mules and rollers to move

it through a field and onto West Holmes Avenue. He set the house in the middle of perhaps five acres, leaving room for the horse and a shed in the back. Mrs. Blanton then restored the interior of the house beautifully. The mantels were particularly fine. While her husband, Judge William Blanton, spent his day at the courthouse, Mrs. Blanton, who was quite progressive for her time, was also busy. Having arranged to move a house from one street to another, she then contracted to build a concrete block apartment house behind her home and managed the rental units herself.

In the neighborhood all the children, black and white, played together, and everybody knew everybody else. Mrs. Bryant recalled PeeWee, the five Woody children, Mickey Payne, and Tommy and Buddy. No child EVER sat around bored with nothing to do.

The five acres behind the Bryant house allowed plenty of room to keep the horse they all rode.

Mr. Bryant set up iron poles in the back with chains for swings, action bars, and a jungle gym. He built a fishpond, and they had one of the earliest swimming pools. Many neighbors went to watch the semi-professional black baseball team play in a nearby field. At the end of the professional baseball season, the children got out of school early to come home and watch the World Series on television.

Neighborhood children walked to Mr. Thomas Womack's store, across the railroad tracks at the corner, to turn in Coke bottles for the refund and buy penny candy to eat on the way home. Along the way, the children played at the bridge, around the tempting waters of Pinhook Creek. The railroad bed produced an endless supply of rocks just the right size, and occasionally there were rock battles. But no one went



*Sarah Blake house, 421 West Holmes Avenue, ca. 1950*

home and tattled or told tales to their parents. Mama never knew.

Sometimes Big Spring Park lured some of the children to play and swim in the water at the lagoon or to haul out buckets of crawfish. Here also were the pick-up football games for the older boys. When the train whistle announced the arrival of the Joe Wheeler, the children stopped what they were doing to meet it at the depot just a block or so away. After that, they might go to the Greyhound bus station where the older kids played the pin ball machine.

Some neighborhood children attended Saturday morning's Kiddie Club, sponsored by radio station WFIX at the Lyric Theatre downtown. This local talent show encouraged everyone to enter and compete for the prizes. The main movie feature followed. Afterwards, the boys and girls lingered downtown and then walked the quarter mile home along the street lined by small markets.

Some vendors came right to the doorstep. The iceman, for example, was a regular feature. Salesmen from the Jewel Tea Company or the Tetley Tea Company came around with premiums. The milkman delivered glass bottles of milk (with cream on the top) to the family's front porch. In the summer some children sold blackberries by the bucket.

As the children grew older, shopping downtown at Kress and Woolworth for Christmas gifts became more serious. And Mama always sincerely thanked the thoughtful child who gave her Evening in Paris perfume every year. No one ever missed the rummage sale in the basement of Belk's or the sale at Mangle's, even though a shopper knew there would be dresses just like hers all over town.

Mrs. Exie Blanton and her daughter Mary Ann helped the children produce skits and plays on a makeshift stage in Grandmother Bryant's back yard. They had "real" shows with the neighborhood children. Costumes made of crepe paper added an elegant touch to their theatricals.

The neighborhood's lovely trees, so admired for their shade by adults, were perfect

for climbing and building tree houses from scraps of lumber. In the back fields, youngsters helped the poorer boys trap ‘possum and rabbits for the stewpot. They seined for fish and crawfish in Pinhook Creek. Using large sheets of cardboard, they often slid down to the creek from the top of the slope near the road. Just about everyone had roller skates and could use the sidewalk along the street, even though the road was a main thoroughfare. As they grew up they skated up to the Coca-Cola plant to use the concrete surface there. On rainy days the children already had an indoor skating rink: the Bryant’s basement floor was concrete, and they could skate inside around the metal support posts. At the back end of the room, Mr. Bryant had a space for a coal heater that also doubled as a smoke room for hams and bacon from the farm.



After World War II, Americans had time to consider the many things they had been fighting for. The need to spend time, energy and money on the war effort was over, and it looked as if the quality of life for everybody, white and black, rich or poor, could now be improved. There was a sense of urgency about raising living standards in Huntsville, or at least the appearance of the poorer neighborhoods surrounding the city. Many residents, black and white, were living in unsanitary shanties that lacked running water and were crowded with children and infested with vermin. And they were living like this around the very heart of a town that wanted to be seen as a city.

There was even a shabby look about some of the dwellings on Franklin and Adams Streets. Many houses then had boarders, and there were often unsightly fire escape stairs extending into front yards from the second and third floors. Meanwhile, the city was expanding out to newer residential neighborhoods. Mayfair, for example, with its neat and orderly brick homes, looked very appealing.

The Space Age had landed in Huntsville and progress would come whether everyone was ready for it or not. It was time to project a modern image, and under the leadership of men like Senator John Sparkman and others, it happened.

Like others, the Bryants thought urban renewal was “a needed thing” at the time, and they still do. They remembered that the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville bought the houses slated for demolition and reimbursed the homeowners, but not for what houses and their contents were really worth. In the eagerness for a crisp new look, local historic landmarks fell to the bulldozer. If progress has a price tag, perhaps taxpayers bought more than they realized.

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### A SWEET NEIGHBORHOOD

Martha Moore Bryant counts sixty-three descendants, at least fifty of whom still live in Huntsville and are proud of the heritage that earlier served them well on West Holmes Avenue. Mrs. Bryant remembers a sweet neighborhood of family and friends who cared for one another and took care of each other. She sums up her memories this way: “What else would you want?”

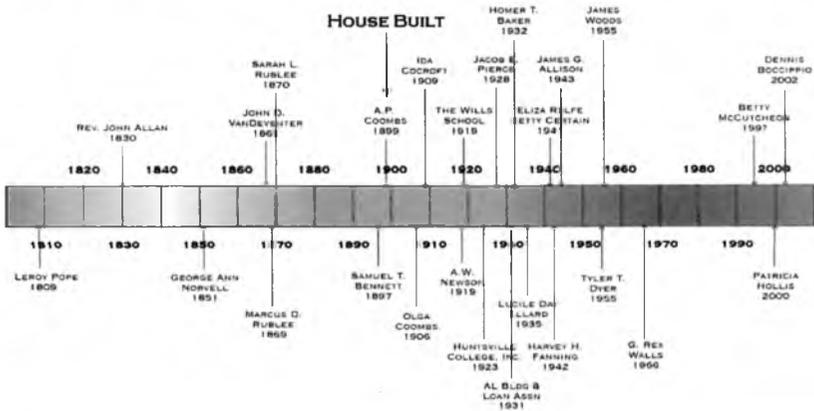
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When the houses of West Holmes Avenue were vacated, the housing authority stripped the interiors of architectural features such as mantels, windows, staircases and newel posts. Finishing touches so lovingly treasured were removed before the houses were torn down. According to the Bryants, the homeowners were not allowed to take with them any of these things, nor were they allowed to

purchase them from the housing authority. The materials were removed and taken to be stored, but somehow they later appeared in other settings throughout town. For the displaced residents, the unfairness of this action was the most distressing part of leaving and looking back.

### Notes

- 1 Interview, August 25, 2003.
- 2 Hall Clarence Blake started the family’s hardware business. H.C.’s sister Sarah married William Bryant, who eventually took over the business. Sarah and William’s son Hall Blake Bryant married Martha Moore. Sarah Bryant Batson and Hall Blake Bryant, Jr., are two of their children.



Above: Woodcut of the current façade of the Coombs house.  
 Below: History of owners of the land containing the house parcel,  
 going back to the original Leroy Pope land purchase.

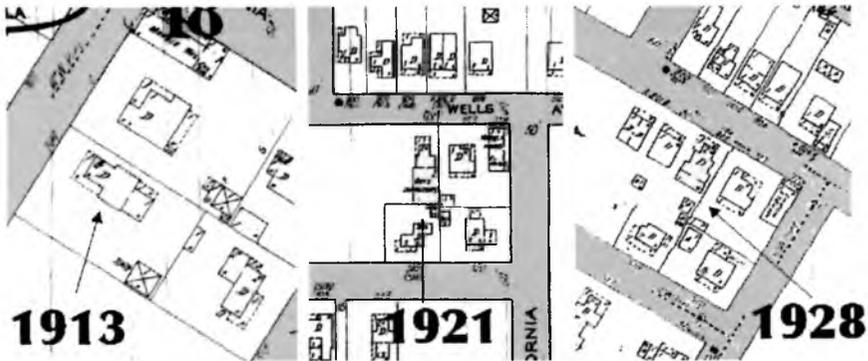
## Wells Avenue Restoration Preserves a History-Rich House in Five Points

DENNIS BOCCIPIO

Nestled between California Street and Maple Hill Cemetery is the 1899 Coombs House at 804 Wells Avenue, one of the oldest surviving dwellings in the Five Points Historic Preservation District. Fondly known to long-time Five Points residents as the “Pig House” (for reasons elaborated below), the house is a local example of the Folk Victorian style common from 1870-1910.\* Since 2000, the residence has undergone interior and exterior renovation and restoration. During its lifetime, the house has been used for both public and private purposes, and along with neighboring homes, its history evokes former eras of this corner of the Five Points neighborhood.

In researching the history of the Coombs House and the property’s many owners—beginning with Leroy Pope, who purchased the land parcel in the August 1809 public land sales<sup>1</sup>—the writer relied on a variety of public and private records. Publicly documented surveyors’ notes, census records and title abstracts (the latter available in the Madison County Records Room of the Huntsville Madison County Public Library) helped confirm the earliest title history. The Sanborn Fire Insurance Map series was used to establish the history of significant structural changes in the 1910s and 1920s, and to confirm that the earliest recorded dwelling is indeed the currently standing house. Photographic evidence from a “Huntsville Schools History” collection of informal documents at the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library was also helpful.

By 1898, after many changes in ownership and development in the surrounding neighborhood, the parcel had been sold to a Samuel Bennett, for \$350<sup>2</sup> and in 1899 to A.P. (Arthur) Coombs, for \$1,150.<sup>3</sup> By 1899, tax records show two houses assessed to Coombs on one lot bounded on the north by Randolph Avenue (now Wells Avenue) and on the south by Eustis Avenue. Subsequent records and subdivisions confirm that these two houses were on opposite sides of the property, and



*Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1913, 1921 and 1928 showing the structural layout of the original Coombs House, the Wills School dormitory/science laboratory addition, and the post-1925-fire layout. Also visible are the next-door marble works. Wills-Taylor/Huntsville College includes all land to the west in the maps.*

that the present house is the one on the north side. Interestingly, a Folk Victorian home with a nearly identical exterior can be found at 711 Wells Avenue, just across California. A thorough search of its history might uncover additional information.

Evidence of Arthur Coombs's actual presence in Huntsville is elusive. No Coombs is listed in either the 1896-1897 or the 1911-1912 City Directory. Arthur Coombs does not appear in the 1900 census. No Coombs is listed in probate records or as resting in Maple Hill Cemetery.

In any event, Coombs's heirs seemed to have fallen on difficult times and struggled to keep the property after his death. A six-year legal battle ensued in which a lumber company in Tacoma, Washington sought to seize the house. The title history during this period is a somewhat amusing series of foreclosures, court orders, vacancies, and title transfers aimed at protecting the property. (All these are included in a title abstract package prepared by the firm of G.W. Jones and Sons and recorded at the Madison County Records Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.) In the end, the Coombs heirs prevailed.

In 1909 the Butler School (later Goodrich School) was built on the western edge of the original parcel. The year 1913 marks the first year that the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps show structural details for the area, and reveal the original footprint and construction of the house (frame, composite roof, two-story), including its distinctive front porch. From the plan, it can be confirmed that the front half of the house—including its wraparound porch—is indeed the current structure. The original rear portion of the house was later destroyed by fire (see below), but it was two stories, with the exception of the current kitchen, which was originally a rear porch. The 1913 maps also show the neighboring property on the corner of Wells Avenue and California Street (now Maple Hill Drive), which then housed the marble works for Maple Hill Cemetery.

The most interesting period in the history of the house began in 1919 when it and the Goodrich School were bought by Professor R.P. Wills<sup>4</sup> and became the Wills School (incorporated that year, later renamed Wills-Taylor, and eventually Huntsville College). The Wills School property encompassed the entire area west of the house to White Street, between Eustis and Wells, and its main building was the

older Butler-Goodrich School.

The most pleasant surprise in researching the Coombs House history came when a collection of old Wills School annuals (“The Wist”) was found at the Huntsville Madison County Public Library. The annuals note that in creation of the Wills School, a number of patrons organized a stock company, and “the facilities of the school were so increased that a number of boarding students came.” The



DORMITORY

*Photograph of the Coombs House (with rear dormitory addition) from the 1919 Wills School annual, The Wist. The front half of the house is identical to the current structure.*

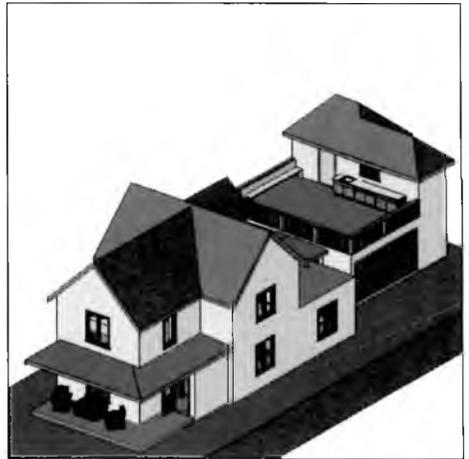
annuals included actual photographs of the house from 1919 to 1925, complete with a rear dormitory addition. In these photographs, the house is listed variously as “Taylor Hall,” “Dormitory” and “Dormitories.” The front façade is clearly identical to the current structure, down to the molding on the front porch. In the 1921 photograph, a portion of the house immediately behind the Coombs House on Eustis Avenue is also visible and clearly resembles its current structure. The 1920 Wist notes that “Taylor Hall is a two-story, well arranged modern dormitory with every convenience, situated on the Northeast corner of campus.” By 1921, the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps reflected the boys’ dormitory.

In 1923, a corporation organized for the purpose of putting on a Junior College course purchased the Wills-Taylor School, and the Huntsville College, Inc., was founded. The 1925 (Third Year) Huntsville College Annual Catalogue again shows a photograph of the Coombs House, then named “Science Hall.” The annual notes that, “... the laboratory [houses] the Physics, Chemistry and Mechanical Drawing Laboratories.... Apparatus sufficient for the carrying on of advanced experimentation is available in the physics and chemistry laboratories, thereby insuring the means for further laboratory work by students far advanced in work.” As the present owner is a scientist by profession, this discovery was a warmly welcomed surprise.

As with many structures during this time period, fire struck the Coombs House, in 1925, specifically the rear (now laboratory) addition. This event was documented by G. W. Jones in a May 1932 affidavit (J. D. Vandiventer et al. to Alabama Home Bldg & Loan Assc) given as part of a minor metes and bounds dispute. (Jones had surveyed the property in 1926 during paving of what is today Maple Hill Drive, and he noted that four of his children themselves graduated from Wills School and Huntsville College). The original front half of the house survived the fire, and the original rear half was partially reconstructed (one story only). During the recent renovation, isolated boards of scorched wood were found under the rear siding, indicating that some had been re-used after the fire. The 1928 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the original building marked as “fire ruins.”

By this time, however, the Huntsville College had hit hard times, and in November 1928 the property was bought at public auction by Jacob E. Pierce, editor and general manager of the *Huntsville Weekly Times* and at one time a trustee of the Wills School and Huntsville College.<sup>5</sup> Pierce owned many properties in the area, but was apparently not immune to the financial difficulties of the times. The school property was foreclosed by Alabama Home Building and Loan Association in 1931.

Over the next thirty-five years, the house passed through a succession of short-term owners, and family names familiar to many Five Points residents can be recognized in the list: Baker, Ellard, Rolfe, Certain, Fanning, Allison, Dyer and Woods. A garage was added on to the reconstructed rear in the early 1940s. In 1966, the house was purchased by pharmacist G. Rex Walls, who lived there until his death in the mid-1990s. Rex was originally a pig farmer, and he adorned the yard and exterior with a variety of porcine placards and objects that included a large pig sculpture in the front courtyard. The Coombs House thus became known to local residents as the “Pig House.” In honor of this tradition, the current owners have left several pig decorations (discreetly) in place. During his ownership, Rex also attached a rear two-story efficiency apartment behind the garage, and had a front courtyard designed by local Master Gardener Bill Nance. Rex’s surviving friends recount the tradition of the house supporting a ghost, who purportedly appeared at the bottom of the interior stairwell from time to time. The current owners have yet to encounter her.



*Architectural layout of the current structure, including post-1925 rear first floor reconstruction and later garage and apartment additions.*

In 2000, the house was acquired by the artist Nall Hollis (originally from Arab, Alabama) and his wife Tuscia for use by his mother Mary. Nall oversaw renovation and remodeling of the first floor, which was in disrepair. His treatment of the first floor hardwood in a European style (an ebony stain still allowing the wood grain to show through) coincidentally evokes the house's former (and forgotten) "schoolhouse" usage. The galley kitchen was updated with Indiana slate flooring and marble countertops, and the front two rooms were opened and joined to create a spacious formal area.

In 2002, the house's current residents, Dr. Dennis Boccippio and Alex Godwin, began restoring the exterior, which was in significant disrepair. Much of the siding remaining from the original front half of the house was rotting, while the rear post-fire reconstruction had been sided with a different wood lap, and the garage and apartment additions had been sided with Masonite, which was almost completely decayed. Local carpenter Ray Gambrell handled the exterior siding restoration with artful attention to detail. The entire rear half of the house has now been re-sided with siding specially cut to match the original 1899 siding on the front. Western cedar was chosen for longevity and durability. As much of the original front siding as possible was retained and sanded, and the house was repainted, with assistance in color selection from local decorator Randy Roper. The restoration earned a 2003 Historic Preservation Award from the Historic Huntsville Foundation. Between the interior renovation and exterior restoration, the house was essentially given a new lease on life as its centennial birthday present, complete with a Five Points Historic Preservation District marker.

The author plans to continue restoring and renovating the house over the next few years. An exterior stairwell on the east side of the house leading to the rear deck and apartment is architecturally inconsistent with the Folk Victorian style and will be replaced with a more appropriate solution. Reconstruction of the second story of the rear of the house (rebuilt only as single story after the 1925 fire) is also planned. It will serve to join the main house with the deck area over the rear garage.

This corner of Five Points thus includes the former home of the cemetery's granite works (next door), the former home of the Huntsville College president (on Eustis Avenue), and the former Wells Avenue Grocery (across the street). Together with these houses, the Coombs House is a small but important surviving part of the history of Five Points' "southern" tip.

*\*The Folk Victorian style was a humbler version of the more elaborate Victorian house styles, including Italianate and the Romanesque. Just plain folks could afford these no-fuss homes thanks to mass production of decorative trimwork and the ability of expanding railroads to transport ready-made wood features to local lumberyards. Houses in the Folk Victorian style were likely to be owner- or carpenter-designed or planned from pattern books rather than done by a professional architect. Folk Victorian features include porches with spindlework detailing, an L-shaped or gable-front plan, and brackets with details often inspired by Queen Anne or Gothic design. Editors.*

## Notes

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- 1 Tract Book 36, certificate 802.
- 2 Madison County, Ala., Deed book 84,259 (2-27-97).
- 3 Madison County, Ala., Deed book 82,249 (1-10-1890).
- 4 Madison County, Ala., Deed book 121, p. 485.
- 5 Joberta Wasson, *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, vol. XIV, nos. 2 & 3, Winter-Spring 1988: 13.



*Redstone recycling from original duplex to single family dwelling.*

## Recycling Redstone: Preservation on a Massive Scale

FRANCES ROBB

You might call it one of Huntsville's biggest recycling projects. When it's finished, in a year or so, approximately ninety duplexes will have been relocated from Redstone Arsenal to new sites in Huntsville and many surrounding communities. For more than two years, Jeff Kennedy and employees of his company, Don Kennedy and Sons House Moving Company, have been finding new homes for old homes, houses built in 1959, when the United States military was much larger than it is now, and base housing provided three-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath, 1,200 square foot houses for hundreds of service families. These were not hasty, cheap constructions. Solid brick, with their original three-quarter-inch oak parquet floors intact, yellow poplar baseboards, and kitchens completely renovated in the late 1990s, they were built to detailed government specifications and at a level of quality that would be extremely expensive to duplicate today.<sup>1</sup>

With the downsizing of the military in the 1990s, these houses—several dozen single houses, plus the duplexes—were no longer needed. Bulldozing them seemed the only option. Yet moving the debris to a Redstone Arsenal landfill would be an expensive proposition, actually requiring a new landfill.

Enter Jeff Kennedy, who called the base one morning three years ago to inquire about the possibility of moving some of the single-family houses to new sites in the Huntsville area. Too late, he was told. The demolition orders had already been processed and work was about to begin. But across the street were nearly 100 duplexes. Would he like to take a look at those? Sure.

When Kennedy saw the duplexes he was impressed by their solid quality workmanship. Their relatively small size, twenty-nine feet by ninety feet, made them desirable for individuals and families who seemed to Kennedy to have been, as he puts it, “left out of the loop,” forgotten in the recent construction trend in which new houses costing \$150,000 and up were the norm. Modest-sized high-quality houses

like those at Redstone would be prohibitively expensive to build in the 21st century. Relocating them would make the houses available at half the cost.

Kennedy's firm had the expertise to move these houses from their concrete pads, shift them onto trucks, haul them on city streets and highways, and deposit them onto new foundations. Kennedy was sure that they could be used in many ways as reasonably priced high-quality residences and offices. He thought it wouldn't be hard to add some modern amenities—garages or carports, additional baths, dining areas. He could see that it would be possible to individualize them with updated rooflines, porches and new foundation treatments so that the casual observer would have to look hard to see the original plain facades behind the revisions.

A year of paperwork later, Kennedy began the largest recycling job of his career: ninety houses, each weighing about 200 tons. That's 36,000,000 pounds of stuff that otherwise would have ended up in a landfill. By any reckoning, that's preservation on an enormous scale.

"I have nothing but good to say about the people at Redstone," commented Kennedy. "They were super-nice to work with from the beginning. This project was a first, the first time a private company had come onto a United States military base to move houses off the

base. But they realized right away that this was a win-win situation. It's exciting to think that this project might be the model for others across the country, as we've shown that a project on this scale can succeed."

The scale of the Redstone house-moving project is truly massive. It has required work on an assembly-line scale, with specialists to dig out the houses and shore them up with jacks, shift them onto steel supports, load them onto trucks, and move and relocate them onto new foundations.

Kennedy believes that it takes a special set of conditions for such a large project to be carried out. The city and its surrounding area must be large enough to absorb

*It's exciting to think that this project might be the model for others across the country.*



*Redstone duplex rounds a corner*

so many recycled houses—one or two each week for three years. The county and city officials must be supportive; moving houses along streets and highways is a complicated business. Officials at Redstone have to be alerted when a house is moving off the base. Then, at the entrance to the military facility, city and county authorities

must supervise the move and the restoration of traffic lights, power wires and other obstacles in the house's path.

In Huntsville and in surrounding communities, Kennedy found officials willing to help. Every house that's relocated, he points out, starts to pay its share of taxes. If you were a city official, you'd rather have a house instead of an empty lot. In addition, people must have trust in the moving company. It's not everyone, Kennedy notes, who is completely confident that a relocated house will function just as well as one built on the spot. Jeff is very proud of his family's fifty-plus years in the house moving business. That's long enough, he feels, for trust to develop in the company's experience and know-how.



Don Kennedy, Jeff's grandfather, started the business almost by chance back in the 1940s, when he moved a shed for a neighbor. At the time, he was working as a construction contractor. He used his bulldozers to terrace fields and for other earth-work projects. Earlier, he had worked as a rigger on some of the TVA dams, using cables to hoist materials high into the air.

"It's the rigger's mentality that sums up what you need in this business, planning balance and weights, being always ready to adjust and improvise safely and

efficiently. It's an attitude, a way of thinking. If you look at these houses, you may think they're all alike—cookie-cutter houses. But in fact, there are all sorts of minute differences. You can't know exactly what problems you will face, even when you have the original blueprints and specifications, and a good idea of the underlying terrain. As my father used to say, there is an answer to every problem."

Kennedy's grandfather worked in the days when hefty wooden timbers were placed under buildings, and screw jacks—often with their operators making adjustments beneath buildings on the move. These were potentially hazardous activities, where something could go wrong at any moment, where the rigger's quick intelligence and problem-solving attitude were often put to the test.

Kennedy's father, Joe, took the reins of the family business in the early 1970s and became a familiar figure around Huntsville, moving houses and doing a lot of foundation work and construction. About 1990, Joe sold the business to his sons Terry and Jeff. Five years ago, Jeff bought Terry's portion of the business and he is now sole owner. His talk is peppered with references to the family, the family firm, the jobs they worked on, the accumulated lore of more than fifty years in the business.

Joe Kennedy is now retired. He and his wife, Jan, live in a big Victorian house that they moved sixty miles from Lynnville, Tennessee onto their Limestone County farm. "They set it on one end of the farm," Jeff recalled, "and it was twenty years before they had finished work on it. But now it's a showplace." Joe has a passion for fine woodcraft. When a walnut or cherry tree had to be cut down on the property, he saved the trunk. He scrounged other woods, including yellow poplar, from wherever he could find them. These woods, some from ancient trees, were used to complete the Victorian house.

An appreciation of quality construction is something that comes naturally to Jeff Kennedy. Partly, he thinks, it's in his genes, partly it's the result of a lifetime of experience watching his father shape fine woods into something special.

But it's more than that. "I love to see our heritage saved," he says. He has moved his

share of historic buildings, including the Steamboat Gothic house in Huntsville; the antebellum Figh-Pickett House in Montgomery, the second largest structure ever moved in Alabama; and the 1920s Phi Kappa Phi fraternity house on the campus of the University of Alabama. “Moving historic houses is very exciting. It gets the headlines. But it doesn’t pay the bills.”

One of the moving company’s local attention-getters is the project involving an historic house at the intersection of Whitesburg Drive and Drake Avenue. When the city announced plans for road improvements in the area that would require



*Whitesburg Drive house before current highway improvement project*

removal of structures in the path of road widening, Don Kennedy and Sons acquired five houses that, like the Redstone duplexes, would otherwise have been consigned to a landfill. Three houses have been relocated, and two remain on their sites, repositioned. The largest house, at 2904 Whitesburg Drive, was built circa 1905 and was one of the first houses to sit right on the roadway. Jeff restored 2904,

adding modern amenities, and placed it on the market. The house is now under sales contract. At its annual awards ceremony in May 2003, Historic Huntsville Foundation honored Jeff Kennedy with a Special Recognition award for repositioning and restoring this historic house, and thus saving it from demolition.

Jeff finds recycling houses from our recent past—the Redstone duplexes—just as enticing. Even so, the idea of selling ninety houses on the open market took some thought. People find out about the houses from television and newspaper advertisements, billboards and word of mouth, all effective marketing tools, Kennedy feels.

All sorts of people have turned up to buy his buildings: people wanting a reasonably priced high-quality house or office, and investors who plan to lease or rent the houses. Kennedy has created small communities of these houses, particularly in the Harvest area, and he plans to lease them himself.



Jeff says the house moving business is largely made up of family firms like his. Its professional association, the International Association of Structure Movers (IASM), strives to keep these firms in the forefront of innovations that make house moving safer, more economical and more efficient. Kennedy has advanced up the ranks in this organization and will soon serve as its president. “I want to make a contribution not just to my region but to my industry,” he commented. To that end, he has invented several devices that make moving a house safer and more predictable. One is a computerized device that shuts down the movement of the hydraulic oil on which a house is supported during the move. If a line should break, it could be real trouble, with the house, the movers and spectators placed in real danger. With his device, the system can be immediately shut down so that nothing can happen.

Another Kennedy device is a hydraulic remote control, which steers the dollies on which the house rests when it makes turns. Kennedy has no intention of making money from the device, which he patented in 1997. “I’ve sent some that I’ve built to friends in the business, and sent the plans to others.” It’s a way,” he notes, “of making our industry safer. You still need someone at the side of the house while it’s



*Whitesburg Drive house after modernization and repositioning on new foundation*

moving along, checking everything is okay, but you no longer need a person under the house. It makes the work quicker, more efficient and less confusing. It keeps people from having to yell to each other. For emergencies, to get people's attention, we use whistles. This kind of innovation helps us keep our safety record at its best. We're proud that we have never had a major accident."

Hiring the right people is also critical in the house moving business. When Kennedy looks to hire new employees, he looks first at character. "You can't buy it," he notes, "but every employee of this company has to have it. I need people who want to do their best every day, on every job." His foreman, Phillip Griffin, is an exemplary and trusted employee. Thirty years on the job, Griffin "pulled his first house" when he was thirteen. When he gets to a new job site, he has no idea what the job costs. He does his best, whether the job is quick and relatively easy or tedious and difficult. He's not in it, Kennedy explains, to save the company's money but to do the job right.

Kennedy has the same commitment. When he describes the plans for some of his redesigned Redstone houses, he delights in every new amenity he has added, improvements that bring these houses into the 21st century. He is especially proud of the enlarged dining areas, their floors a sweep of the same solid oak parquet as the original living room. When asked where he got the new flooring to match the old, he chuckles. "It's not new," he admits. "Before Redstone bulldozed the single-family houses, I was allowed to take the oak flooring out. It too will be recycled, and the larger dining room will look as if it's always been there."

Architects and architectural photographers are sometimes described as people with a talent for detail. That description obviously extends to some house movers, Jeff Kennedy among them.

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#### Note

1 Author's interview for this article conducted July 4, 2003.



*CLAUDE PETTUS*  
*Born in 1871, he graduated from the*  
*University of Alabama and*  
*received his medical training*  
*at Vanderbilt, graduating in 1896.*

*Photographs courtesy of Bob and Lou Gathany*  
*and Linda Allen (Dr. Pettus's office)*

## Farewell to a Homeplace

LOU PETTUS GATHANY

*A country doctor's house is lost but a granddaughter preserves the family's story.*

I did not know my grandfather Dr. Claude Pettus. He died in 1933, long before I was born. Sadly, my grandmother, Hattie Seay Pettus, was unreachable to me, suffering from what in the 1950s was called “hardening of the arteries.” The beautiful Victorian house that Claude and Hattie built on Jeff Road was my only connection to another time and another way of life.

Constructed in 1903 on a dirt road in rural Madison County, this was a house built for service. It provided shelter for the doctor

and Hattie and the five children they produced. Their massive barn was home to the mules used to pull the buggy that was their transportation. The wellhouse with its huge pump was just beyond the screened porch off the kitchen. The house property also included a small structure called “the office,” where Dr. Pettus sometimes saw patients. There were gardens, for both flowers and vegetables, and all of these were bordered by the wonderfully cold waters of the Nichols Spring Branch and Indian Creek.



*Pettus house, 1903*

Much of the Pettus acreage was plowed and planted each spring with the crops

that sustained the family's diet year round. Hogs and cows would be slaughtered as required, and there were always chickens available for Sunday dinner. This was long before the luxury of air conditioning so potatoes were kept in the cellar under the back porch.

For its time, my grandparents' house was a grand homeplace. Construction of the house was underway over the New Year's holiday, and I was always told that the reason the first floor had a ceiling height of eleven feet was due in part to the "spirits" imbibed by the workers to keep from freezing. Since they had extended the first floor too far, the second floor height was reduced to compensate. As it was the children's floor, its height of eight feet worked out just as well. There were two huge bedrooms up there, a playroom under the front gable, and a "dark room" used for storage under the back gable.



*Pettus house, 2003*

The first floor had a parlor, a "front room," a bedroom and a grand dining room separated from the large kitchen by two swinging doors that, when propped open, as they almost always were, concealed an impressive pantry. There were four fire-places—two placed back-to-back on two stately chimneys. A screened front porch was alive with Jackson vine and provided relief from the summer heat.

Dr. Pettus delivered all five of his children in that house. During his years of medical practice he traveled all over rural Madison County delivering babies and tending the sick, often taking along one of his own children. My father remembers being with him once when the doctor reached a family that had been poisoned by im-



*Dr. Pettus' office*

properly canned turnip greens. Unfortunately, they all perished. It was a time when medicine was often inadequate. There were no antibiotics, such as penicillin, and of course few vaccines. Still, Dr. Pettus was called upon often to do what he could and was sometimes “paid” in promises and produce.

My grandmother Hattie played the piano for Ford’s Chapel Methodist Church and was an artist and a poet. I treasure the handwritten pages of sheet music she composed and the poems she crafted. Hattie hosted and participated in many a quilting session. She was a trained teacher who worked as a private tutor before she married. Photographs of her are characterized by the kindest of smiles, the softest and most gentle of spirits.

Though I did not know my grandparents as others did, I knew and loved the house they built. But as so often happens in families, indecision became the decision.

The house was allowed to fall into disrepair and suffered greatly from neglect. The estate was unsettled until the property was sold at auction in 1998. The purchaser was not able to carry out plans for restoration, and so the property was sold again. The present owners concluded that the beautiful old house was beyond saving. In April 2003, Monrovia volunteer firefighters used the property for a controlled burn exercise. Before the burn, members of the Historic Huntsville Foundation removed door and window casings, moldings, baseboard, and the old claw-foot bathtub. Some of the flooring and beams were also salvaged for preservationists to buy from the Harrison Brothers Hardware Store warehouse.

With the remnants of my grandmother’s flowers in



*Bill Munson salvages baseboard for the Harrison Brothers warehouse*

bloom, and the dogwoods and redbuds bursting with new life, I watched as the old house put up a terrific show of resistance to its fiery end. As the slates from the roof exploded and flames engulfed the house, I held a thick folder of my grandmother's poetry and read, and read again, a poem she titled "April." The last stanza proclaims —



*Monrovia firefighters conduct controlled burn of Pettus house*

*The bird's songs then are gladest  
With love notes sprinkled through,  
The grasses are the tenderest green  
The skies are the bluest blue.  
Oh, who could be sad and gloomy  
When April skies are fair?  
For then the world is born anew  
And hope is in the air.*



*HARRIET SEAY PETTUS*

*Born in 1879, she graduated from the  
Huntsville Female College  
and taught school in Monrovia.  
Harriet died in 1962.*



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<i>Kay Wheeler</i>	

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**Ex Officio**

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<i>Alex Godwin</i>	<i>David Nuttall</i>
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# Historic Huntsville Foundation

Since 1974, the Foundation has worked to preserve architecturally and historically significant sites and structures in Huntsville and Madison County.

The Foundation **owns and operates** Harrison Brothers Hardware. **Owns and leases** the Harvie Jones Building. **Operates** a warehouse of architectural artifacts and materials for reuse in historic preservation. **Publishes** *The Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, 2001 winner of the Alabama Historical Commission's Exceptional Achievement Award, and *The Foundation Forum*, a quarterly newsletter. **Provides** complimentary information and consultation on the tax credits available for the restoration of historic income-producing property.

## **Functions include:**

Quarterly covered-dish suppers featuring speakers on historic preservation topics. An annual awards dinner honoring those who have made notable contributions to historic preservation.

*A Rooftop Affair* and *The Moveable Feast*.

*Old-Fashioned Trade Day on the Square*.

Members-only events at private homes and buildings.

## **On-going grant-funded projects include:**

Repair and restoration of Harrison Brothers Hardware, funded by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Save America's Treasures fund.

Survey and nomination of the Dallas, Lincoln, Huntsville Park, and West Huntsville mill villages to the National Register of Historic Places, funded by the City of Huntsville and the Alabama Historical Commission.

Survey and nomination of the Gurley and New Market historic districts to the National Register of Historic Places, funded by citizens of Gurley and New Market and the Alabama Historical Commission.

**Historic Huntsville Foundation**  
Post Office Box 786  
Huntsville, Alabama 35804

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