

# Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

## *The Russel Erskine Hotel*



*Artist's rendering of  
the Russel Erskine  
Hotel. Courtesy  
Tennessee State  
Library & Archives*

VOLUME 30, NUMBERS 3-4, FALL/WINTER 2004  
SIX DOLLARS



# Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

VOLUME 30, NUMBERS 3-4, FALL/WINTER 2004

## Contents

- 4 From the Preservation Coordinator**  
LESLIE TUCKER
- 7 An Artifact of Time and Place**  
DIANE ELLIS
- 13 The Russel Erskine Hotel**  
DAVID BOWMAN
- 45 Living at the Hotel: Childhood Memories**  
MARGARET ANNE GOLDSMITH
- 55 From Stamp Licker to President:  
My Career with the Russel Erskine Hotel**  
ELEANOR NEWMAN HUTCHENS
- 62 Transition Years**  
PATRICIA H. RYAN
- 65 Historic Renovation of the Russel Erskine**  
DAVID C. GREENBERG
- 71 The New Russel Erskine**  
MIKE HOLBROOK

## Contributors

**David Bowman** has been writing about architecture, historic preservation, and livable places for about thirty years. His most recent book, *Sewanee in Stone* (Proctor's Hall Press, 2003), deals with the University of the South's 125-year-tradition of using sandstone quarried on the Sewanee mountaintop for its amiable Collegiate Gothic buildings.

**Diane Ellis** has been a contributor to the *Quarterly* since 1992. She currently edits the publication with Lynn Jones and Patricia Ryan.

**Margaret Anne Goldsmith**, a native Huntsvillian, was the youngest resident guest of the Russel Erskine Hotel when she, her father, and her grandparents spent their winter months there. It was her grandfather Lawrence B. Goldsmith Sr.'s idea to develop a first-class modern hotel during the 1930s. After college, Margaret Anne lived in New Orleans for a number of years where she raised her family. In the mid-1990s she returned to Huntsville to continue her family's business as president of I. Schiffman & Co. Inc.

**David C. Greenberg** founded the Veristar family of companies in March 2002. He has twenty-five years of hands-on property management and multi-family development experience and is knowledgeable in all facets of multi-family development and operation, particularly in the affordable housing sector. Mr. Greenberg's experience has prepared him to analyze, develop, redevelop, reposition, or asset manage and operate all types of affordable housing portfolios.

**Mike Holbrook** is a former general contractor who holds a master's degree in education and has almost twenty years of experience in construction and renovation. He is a Graduate Master Builder and a Certified Graduate Remodeler. Currently, he is department head for construction administration and director of quality control for Fuqua Osborn Architects in Huntsville. Mr. Holbrook is a board member of the

Remodelors Council of the Huntsville-Madison County Builders Association and chairman of Historic Huntsville Foundation.

**Dr. Eleanor Newman Hutchens** is an eighth-generation Huntsvillian. She graduated from Agnes Scott College with majors in English and Greek and earned a master's degree and a doctor's degree in literature from the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Hutchens taught at Agnes Scott and at the University of Huntsville in Alabama, retiring in 1979.

**Leslie Tucker** is the preservation coordinator of Historic Huntsville Foundation. A native of Grant, Alabama, Leslie received her master's degree in historic preservation from the Savannah College of Art and Design and worked as the preservation coordinator at Historic Savannah Foundation for two years before joining the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C. At the National Trust, she worked as the state and local policy analyst for four years and was responsible for researching and analyzing state and local preservation programs and policies from around the country.

### Acknowledgments

The editors of the *Quarterly* wish to thank **Gladys Oaks** of the *Huntsville Times* and photographer **Bob Gathany** for the retrieval and reproduction of archived photographs used in this issue.

The Historic Huntsville Foundation gratefully acknowledges the following donors who made this expanded issue of the *Quarterly* possible:

**David Greenberg** and **Philip Dotts**, the principals of the New Russel Erskine, L.P.

**Margaret Anne Goldsmith**, in memory of her grandfather, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Sr.

**Fuqua Osborn Architects, P.C.**

## From the Preservation Coordinator

LESLIE TUCKER

Though I didn't know it at the time, I became a preservationist some twenty years ago in a little town called Grant, about thirty miles southeast of Huntsville. My love of historic buildings and the stories they tell began during my years as a student at Kate Duncan Smith Daughters of the American Revolution School. KDS was built by the Alabama DAR in 1924 to serve the children of rural Gunter Mountain. The school brought educational opportunities to an isolated mountain people and provided a curriculum dedicated to achievement and service to community and country.

During my time as a student at KDS, I knew that it was a special place. It was unique in its founding and its history, its architecture and its rich traditions. And I knew it held a special place in my heart because my father, aunts, uncles and cousins had all been students there before me. But it wasn't until I left KDS that I realized none of these things alone make it special. It's the combination of all of them. Together these things create a sense of place and belonging for the students and residents alike. We are all tied to that school. It has been the anchor of the community since its inception over eighty years ago, and it will forever bind the people of that mountain together. It is in our hearts. It's special. And we are all special because of our connection to it.

No doubt most people can name a place or a building that helped to define them—a place that connects them to their past and helped to shape their future. When we lose these places, we don't just lose buildings, we lose a part of who we are as individuals, as communities and as a nation. And when we preserve these places, we aren't just saving buildings, we are protecting that intangible thing we call a sense of place. That feeling we have that lets us know we belong somewhere—that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

As a preservationist, I was excited to see revitalization efforts underway in downtown Huntsville when I recently moved back to Alabama. These efforts include the rehabilitation of some of the city's finest structures, improving the character and appearance of downtown and attracting residents and visitors to the area. But more important, the preservation of these buildings will protect a vital part of Huntsville's history. Their rebirth will ensure that the stories and memories of old Huntsville will be passed down for generations to come.

The Russel Erskine Hotel holds many such stories and memories. And though its story may have been forgotten by many, it is not lost. An impressive plan to rehabilitate this architectural treasure will uncover its rich history and allow a new chapter in the life of Huntsville's "grand hotel" to begin.



*The Russel Erskine's prime location. Archived photo courtesy  
The Huntsville Times. Reprinted with permission*



## An Artifact of Time and Place

DIANE ELLIS

Hotels have always held a special place in the imaginations of local residents and travelers alike. As the setting for historical events or books and films, the world's great hotels are often steeped in folklore and, over time, become so associated with a particular city and its history that they merge to become a single identity. Think of New York's Algonquin Hotel and its literary Round Table, or the Waldorf-Astoria, so closely linked with New York swank and celebrity. Tea at the Ritz in London, Sacher torte at Vienna's Sacher Hotel, and Parker House dinner rolls in Boston at, well, the Parker House, illustrate how closely city, hotel, and tradition can blend to form one historical memory.

Hotels are artifacts of time and place, and a study of hotels has much to tell us, whether about architecture and design, business operations and economics, visionaries and their power to inspire, or prevailing social attitudes. As a social institution, the hotel reflects a community's manners and values, including the legal relationships that affect social contact. Tied to a community's identity, a hotel can reinforce the community's view of itself and reveal how groups see themselves and each other.

Looming large in Huntsville's own identity is the Russel Erskine Hotel, a local landmark that has anchored the downtown corner of Clinton Avenue and Spragins Street since its opening in January 1930. Symbolic of our own modest splendor during the Depression years, the Russel Erskine surely symbolized to local residents the possibilities of a better future for themselves and their nation; thus those who were able to avail themselves of its luxuries and comforts, whether in the form of a Sunday dinner or a meeting of a local civic group, no doubt could forget for a few hours the harsh realities of the larger world. Over time, the Depression would end, and a new promising era of growth and prosperity would appear, in which the hotel, its patrons, and its staff would share. As the essays in this issue show, the Russel

Erskine had a good, long run before its decline and eventual sale.

For many years during the Russel Erskine's heyday, the hotel, like others in the region, operated within a legal system of racial segregation that had been in place since around the turn of the century and affected nearly every institution and almost all social interaction. About the time that the Russel Erskine's cornerstone was laid, for example, nearly thirty percent of Madison County's population was black, which in effect meant that three out of ten local residents could not legally enter the hotel unless it was to go to work. Recognizing these realities in no way diminishes our appreciation for the hotel's place in local history, but rather helps us to better understand the degree to which the Russel Erskine represented a particular time and place in our past.

For many of the hotel's golden years, a man named Jimmie Taylor kept things humming. Taylor's career at the hotel (1936-1960, with four years out as a paratrooper in World War II) is emblematic of the growth opportunities the hotel offered its staff. From teen-aged elevator operator to bellman to clerk to general manager (in 1947), Taylor "served the hotel's guests in every capacity during its golden age," as Bill Easterling wrote in a *Huntsville Times* column in March 1996. Clearly fond of the staff he oversaw during his years at the Russel Erskine, Taylor is a man of relaxed good humor, who possesses an impressive understanding of human dynamics and social relationships and conveys a sense of firmness and managerial acumen. The collection of memories he's amassed from his years at the hotel is remarkable.

It's been Taylor, along with Margaret Anne Goldsmith, who has helped keep the memories alive and the members of the Russel Erskine hotel "family" in touch with one another. In September 2001, some thirty years after the hotel closed, Taylor was the master of ceremonies for a reunion at the hotel of 100 or so Russel Erskine shareholders and former hotel employees and their friends and families ("So many of them had done well," Taylor remarked of the former hotel workers.) He noted that during the first ten (Depression) years of the hotel's operation, sixty percent of the employees hired in this period worked until they died or retired because of

age. “They were a breed of employees who are gone forever,” he said. “They were extremely hard-working, loyal, and seemed to rather be at the hotel than at home.” About sixty of the hotel’s 100 regular employees were black, forty white. “In the early days of the Depression, the average work week was ten to twelve hours a day for six days a week. The pay averaged fifteen cents per hour until about 1940.”

*We served watercress  
salad 365 days a year—  
366 in leap year.*

### JIMMIE TAYLOR

In a videotaped interview with Blake Hudson this year, Taylor noted that he worked the elevator for fifteen cents an hour and wanted all the time he could get, working on one occasion for seventy-two hours. The hotel’s employees came from poor surroundings. At the hotel they could get meals at half-price. At one time, there were twenty handicapped people working at the hotel. Taylor also noted that Mr. Goldsmith (prime mover behind the hotel’s development and operations) gave “nice Christmas bonuses.”

There were appreciation parties in the ballroom for the regular workers, who were served by a few others. “Happy days,” Taylor recalls.

The development of Redstone Arsenal and the start-up of the missile and space programs ushered in a new and vibrant era for Huntsville and the Russel Erskine, and the hotel’s facilities were hard-pressed to accommodate the scores of meetings and guests. “The very things that the Russel Erskine contributed to the growth of Huntsville were the very things that contributed to her demise,” Taylor noted at the reunion. With prosperity and diverse development, the town had outgrown the hotel and the Russel Erskine’s glory years were over.

Thanks are due Jimmie Taylor and Margaret Anne Goldsmith for graciously sharing their memories and memorabilia with the editors as they prepared this issue of the *Quarterly*.

*Quarterly* readers have at hand three absorbing essays to broaden their knowledge of the Russel Erskine hotel as it was. David Bowman has gone to original sources

to give us a detailed account of the genesis of the hotel and how the business and finances fared over time. He also located many of issue's valuable photographs.

Dr. Eleanor Newman Hutchens and Margaret Anne Goldsmith are original sources. Both their families were involved with the hotel from its beginnings. Here they share some remarkable memories from their perspectives as children of founding members. As the daughter of one member of the original group of investors, Dr. Hutchens grew up with talk about the hotel at the dinner table and went on to hold an important position with the hotel company during its last years.

Margaret Anne Goldsmith's grandfather and father are forever linked to the Russel Erskine hotel and the vision-to-reality achievement they brought to the city. For many years, "home" for Margaret Anne was the Russel Erskine (fans of the Eloise at the Plaza stories will find themselves envious), and she gives us a private tour and insider's view of the hotel.

Mike Holbrook's update on the current restoration of the hotel and David Greenberg's account of the financial elements that came together to make the new project work round out the issue.



### Water Cress á la Dennis

*Recipe from the Russel Erskine Hotel.\* The salad dressing was prepared in a five-gallon commercial mixer by Lucille Holden Pickett, the pantry cook at the hotel for more than twenty-five years.*

12 EGGS	VEGETABLE OIL
VINEGAR	SUGAR
SALT	SALAD OIL
PAPRIKA	KETCHUP
WORCESTERSHIRE SAUCE	

*Combine paprika, salt and sugar. Add vinegar and eggs, then beat well. Add oils, then beat well. Add Worcestershire sauce and ketchup. Beat till fluffy.*

*Optional: horseradish, mustard, white pepper, olive oil. Chop a shallot and a slice of crisp bacon for each salad. Toss with a generous portion of Dennis watercress.*

*The Huntsville Times, April 21, 2002*

*\*The hotel's watercress was supplied by the Dennis Water Cress company, which grew watercress in its Martinsburg, West Virginia farms during the summer and in Madison County, Alabama ponds in the winter, guaranteeing the Russel Erskine a year-round supply of the delicacy.*



*Russel Erskine tower late 1940s. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

# The Russel Erskine Hotel

DAVID BOWMAN

What follows is a quick look into an immense topic: the rise and fall of the Russel Erskine Hotel, financed by a group of civic-minded individuals in Huntsville, Alabama during the late 1920s, and going out of business in the early 1970s. This is not intended as a definitive study of the hotel, but perhaps some of the details sketched out here may encourage others to pursue certain aspects further, delving into the wonderful cache of business records and correspondence relating to the hotel now archived in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

## A Hotel at the Crossroads

Location, location, location. The Russel Erskine Hotel sat on a great spot. Huntsville's premier hotel, located on the southeast corner of what is now Clinton Avenue and Spragins Street, was one block south of U.S. 72, which ran west along Holmes Avenue towards Athens and east out towards Scottsboro and Chattanooga. The twelve-story hotel also enjoyed high visibility for north-south travelers driving along U.S. 241 (now U.S. 431) from the direction of Nashville, on down the Meridianville Pike, turning into Meridian Street, and jogging south onto Jefferson, one block east of the hotel. From the courthouse square, this highway route connected up with the Whitesburg Pike, proceeded south across the Tennessee River, and eventually ended up in Birmingham.

On March 15, 1929, the Huntsville Real Estate Board appraised the hotel site—described as a lot fronting 114.5 feet on the south side of West Clinton Street and extending south on Gallatin Street 137.5 feet—as being “valued at this time” at \$137,400. The board's appraisal also noted that the new reinforced concrete building going up on this site would have a construction cost of \$397,532.96—broken out as the general contract (\$253,927.18), mechanical equipment (\$99,568), elevator

equipment (\$21,688), mail chute equipment (\$1,630), and architect's 6 percent fee (\$20,719.78)—plus another \$80,000 for furniture and equipment as estimated by the hotel's lessees, Robert and Roland Meyer—for a grand total of \$614,932.96. This is a lot of money to invest in a town of only about 11,500 people, even if Huntsville's business and civic leadership saw itself as the commercial capital of North Alabama in the late 1920s.

When the hotel was given a grand opening on January 3, 1930, there were ominous signs that the nation's economy was in serious trouble. Some financial institutions, like the Tennessee Valley Bank, located a block east of the hotel at the corner of Clinton Avenue and Jefferson Street, didn't shut down until 1933. Others, like the Commonwealth Life Insurance Company of Louisville, Kentucky, simply battened down their hatches to weather the storm, hoping that their \$175,000 loan to the Huntsville Hotel Company would not go into default.

A number of others shared the risk of this hotel venture, notably about fifty Huntsville investors, who committed themselves to put up \$200,000 for stock in the new hotel company. The biggest contributors, according to the minutes of the "first meeting of the Stockholders of the Huntsville Hotel Company," held on April 19, 1928, included The Hutchens Company (\$20,000); Oscar Goldsmith, Executor (\$20,000); T.T. Terry (\$10,000); H.C. Laughlin (\$10,000); A. R. Erskine (\$10,000); R.E. Smith (\$10,000); L.B. Goldsmith (\$7,500); R.L. Schiffman (\$7,500); J.E. Pierce (\$5,000); W.M. Stanley (\$5,000); W.M. Newman & Company (\$5,000); O.J. Brooks (\$5,000); and R.C. Allen (\$5,000). The minutes were prepared by Lawrence B. Goldsmith, who served as secretary-treasurer of the hotel company, and who worked tirelessly on its behalf for about thirty-eight years.

The Huntsville Hotel Company venture seems to have had its genesis in the late summer of 1927. The earliest surviving reference to it is in a letter (September 19, 1927) from A.C. Huggins, a bond department officer of the Canal Bank & Trust Company of New Orleans, writing to T.T. Terry as HHC's president: "We note that the Huntsville Hotel Company has recently been incorporated with authority to sell



\$400,000 capital stock for the purpose of financing a 11-story building at the corner of Clinton and Gallatin streets. Assuming that you will desire major financing through the medium of a first mortgage bond issue, we would appreciate your letting us have the benefit of such preliminary data as you may have.” (The hotel has a “tower” of eleven floors of guest rooms sitting on a main floor containing the lobby, ballroom, coffee shop and other amenities.)

Rather quickly the word of the new hotel spread, either through business and financial circles or through efforts of principals like Goldsmith and Terry to line up the key participants. One inquiry, from Isaac B. Tigrett of Memphis, references a story about the new hotel project in *Manufacturers Record* (September 22, 1927), which was probably the main source for the other solicitations of business. On September 21, 1927, John Pritchett, officer of the Pritchett-Thomas Company, a Nashville-based company whose letterhead describes itself as “builders and operators” of apartment and office buildings, wrote to Goldsmith with a complete detailed “set-up” for operating the hotel based on the \$400,000 figure: “You will notice the cost of operation is \$41,340. If you want to be conservative, add \$15,000 to this; also, \$10,000 to your vacancies. Then, when you have done this, you will see from the set-up that you will have in the neighborhood of \$25,000 net to retire the 8 percent bonds. No question in our minds but what Huntsville needs a hotel of this kind and we are anxious to see you build it because we want you to cooperate with us. After figuring on this thing, it looks so good we will still be interested in going in with you gentlemen, splitting 50/50 on raising the additional \$50,000.”

The four-page set-up—what would today be called a pro forma balance sheet—provides some wonderful details as to what a 1920s hotel operation would include:

Personnel expenses per month—manager (\$300), two clerks (\$100 each), bookkeeper and stenographer (\$100), telephone operator (\$60), three bellboys (\$25), porter (\$40), housekeeper (\$75), five maids (\$25), engineer (\$100), fireman (\$60), and two elevator girls (\$25). Noticeably absent from this list are any food staff, something Pritchett-Thomas apparently had no experience with

for their apartment and office building properties.

Operating expenses (utilities, laundry, housekeeping supplies, taxes, insurance, repairs, linen replacement, and depreciation and replacement of furniture): \$41,340.

Income would come from 132 hotel rooms (at \$2.50, for \$330 per day), five shops, barber shop, cigar stand, Western Union stand, pressing shop, beauty parlor, and commission on laundry, telephone and miscellaneous concession: \$133,950 gross income, minus \$53,310 expenses, for a \$80,640 net profit.

This, in turn, would service the debt—a 6 percent loan of \$200,000 and the 8 percent stock certificates—worked out respectively as \$12,000, \$16,000, and \$6,000 for amortization, totaling \$34,000, leaving \$44,640 as “funds to retire the eight percent certificates.”

It all looked awfully good, even when a 20 percent vacancy rate was factored in (\$24,090); but then everyone was still basking in the rosy financial glow of the 1920s.

It’s interesting to note that Pritchett-Thomas’s offices (706-8-10 Stahlman Building) were located on the same floor as the architectural firm of Marr & Holman (701-703 Stahlman Building) that would be designing the Russel Erskine Hotel. Joseph Holman wrote Goldsmith on October 29, 1927, to memorandize the essentials of their new relationship: “I thought I would write this letter to confirm our understanding last night with reference to the architectural work on the new hotel. We are to be paid a fee of 6 percent of the total cost of construction of the building, \$10,000 of which fee is to be taken in 7 percent preferred stock with its allotment of common stock. It was agreed that Mr. M.M. Hutchens, Mr. R.E. Smith, and you are to purchase all of this stock from us at the end of eight years for \$10,000 and we are also to give you the allotment of common stock which we receive.”

### **The Russel Erskine’s Architects**

The two principals of Marr & Holman are an interesting pair. Thomas Scott Marr



*The Andrew Jackson Hotel, Nashville. Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

(1866-1936) was born in Nashville. A childhood illness resulted in his deafness, so his parents sent him to the Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville. From there he went to Gallaudet College in Washington. Then he studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for a year. He set up a solo practice in Nashville for fifteen years before joining with Joseph Holman (1890-1952). Holman came to work for Marr as an office boy at the age of thirteen. He studied engineering at Vanderbilt for a year, then worked as a draftsman in Marr's firm from 1904 to 1908 before he and Marr created their architectural and engineering partnership. Holman also served as a set of "ears" for Marr when dealing with their clients.

The major breakthrough for the firm came in the early 1920s, when it came to be allied with the fabled empire builder Rogers Caldwell, whose company built an immense financial pyramid that collapsed in 1932. According to James Draeger's master's thesis on the firm's Art Deco work ("The Art Deco Architecture of Nashville Architects Marr & Holman," Middle Tennessee State University, 1986), Caldwell "underwrote construction costs of 68 projects from 1923 to 1930 with a total valuation of \$25,487,500, including numerous Marr and Holman projects" (p. 41) like the Andrew Jackson Hotel and the Cotton States Life Insurance Building.

The firm did a remarkable variety of work—movie theaters, parking garages, office buildings, schools, hospitals, courthouses, post offices (including the wonderful

Art Deco post office in Nashville, completed in 1934 and recently renovated as the Frist Center for the Visual Arts), and even sports stadiums. For our purposes here, however, it is important to focus on the firm's hotels—notably four Nashville hotels: the Andrew Jackson, the Savoy, the Sam Davis, and the Noel. The first three, unfortunately, were demolished in the 1970s and the 1980s. Only the Noel—at 200 Fourth Street, North—survives, which is good luck for us because it is a virtual twin of the Russel Erskine Hotel.

The Noel Hotel was conceived in 1927 and financed with the efforts of eighty Nashville businessmen when the economy was still roaring. By the time the twelve-story, 250-room hotel was completed, late in 1929, at a cost of about \$1,000,000, the Great Crash was already compromising everyone's financial future. According to a reminiscence offered on the day the hotel building was set to be converted into a bank building, "it was touch and go all through the 1930's to keep the hotel alive." ("US Bank site has seen ups and downs," *Nashville Banner*, April 9, 1983).

Similarly, the Russel Erskine Hotel was conceived in 1927, was built at a cost of about \$640,000, and had 132 rooms. It opened its doors to guests on January 3, 1930, and shut them for good in August 1975. The hotel's name honored Albert Russel Erskine, a native of Huntsville nationally famous as the president of the Studebaker Corporation; unfortunately, the well-known automobile company went into receivership in March, 1933, just a few months before Erskine's suicide early in July.

In addition to their similar conception and delivery dates, the two hotels really look remarkably alike, owing to their Marr & Holman parents. Particularly striking are the two ground floors, with commercial space along Fourth Avenue (Noel) and along Clinton Street (Russel Erskine), and lobby, banquet hall, and ballroom spaces on their respective side streets (Church and Gallatin). These high-ceilinged single-story ceremonial spaces have similar romanesque-arched windows—eight for the Noel and six for the Russel Erskine—that pierce handsome limestone-clad exterior walls. Other ornament shared by the two hotels includes classical urn finials sitting on the parapets of the main floor and on top of their eleven-story tower



*The Noel Hotel, Nashville, as seen on 1930s postcard. Courtesy James Draeger, "The Art Deco Architecture of Nashville Architects Marr & Holman," Master's thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 1986*

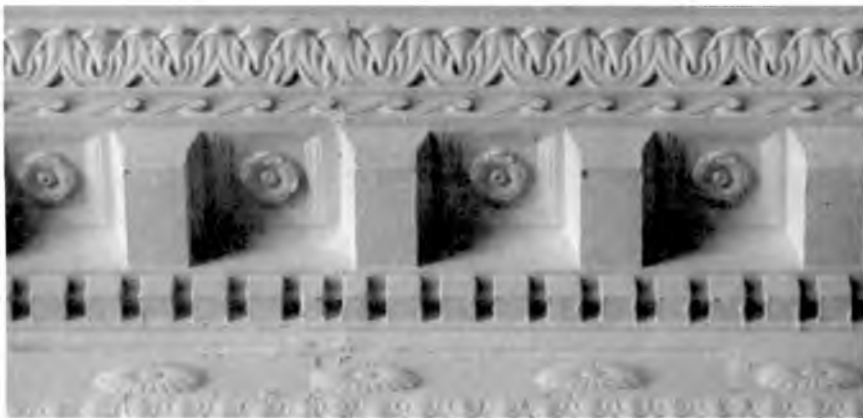
blocks. Underneath these main floors are parking garage spaces for that automobile-crazy 1920s age. Notation on the floor plans of the Russel Erskine—which have survived in the Tennessee State Library & Archives—show that its garage had spaces for fifty-two cars, or more than one for every three hotel rooms.

Like the Russel Erskine, the Noel Hotel claimed a similar strategic location in Nashville's financial and governmental district. No longer a hotel, but a bank and office building now called Noel Place, after the family that owned and operated buildings there since before the Civil War, the building houses First Bank on its main floor. Claire Tucker, city president of First Bank, took me on a tour of the well-cared-for landmark on February 25, 2004. She pointed out with pride how much of the original historic fabric (marble arches and travertine walls, brass stair railings and balconies, ornate chandeliers, etc.) has been preserved.

It's remarkable that the Noel building has survived, since the firm's other Nashville hotels have been lost. The Savoy was demolished in May 1978, the Sam Davis in February 1982—the latter razed so that two big parking garages could be built to serve the Nashville Convention Center on Commerce Street at Seventh Avenue. By far the biggest loss, the 400-room Andrew Jackson Hotel, was demolished

with explosives on June 13, 1971, to make way for the Tennessee Performing Arts Center and the Polk State Office Building. All that survives of this landmark hotel is a collection of photographs in the Tennessee State Library & Archives, a building located on Capitol Hill next to the Tennessee Supreme Court Building (1936-1938), which the Marr & Holman firm also designed. The TSLA holdings of Marr & Holman—copies of letters, photographs, and other archival materials originally donated to Gallaudet College in Washington—date from 1911 to 1929. They include a few items of undeniable importance for the Russel Erskine story, including three original floor plans (basement, main floor, and hotel room floor) that seem not to have survived elsewhere.

Equally important in some ways is the TSLA’s possession of photographs of the interior of the Andrew Jackson Hotel. The Andrew Jackson was one of two landmark hotels (the other was the Greystone Hotel in Montgomery) that a Huntsville Hotel Company representative visited in search of the “look” the company desired for their new building. The TSLA photos show that the Andrew Jackson Hotel, which opened in 1925, set an undeniable standard of elegance that not even the Hotel Peabody in Memphis could match, much less the Russel Erskine. Still, it is signifi-



*Mezzanine plaster crown molding, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



*Mezzanine column capital detail, 2004. Courtesy  
Fuqua Osborn Architects*

cant that the only marble clad pillar in the lobby of the Russel Erskine has precisely the same Corinthian capital as the nine or so marble-clad columns in the lobby of the Andrew Jackson. The bronze railings up the stairs to the mezzanine that extend across the top of the Russel Erskine lobby also seem to be identical in design to the Andrew Jackson’s mezzanine railings. Slim spindles alternate with cast panels consisting of an upright lyre + sunburst + inverted lyre pattern on these railings. Plaster crown moldings—around the lobby ceiling and running below the mezzanine railing—are also

close in their grammar of ornament (egg-and-dart, rod-and-ribbon fascies, etc.) to those used in the Andrew Jackson lobby.

In this sense at least, Lawrence Goldsmith’s reply (November 22, 1928) to a representative of Associated Hotels Inc. (New York and Richmond) as to the kind of hotel that was being built—“The building plans are similar to the Andrew Jackson at Nashville, Tennessee”—is only a slight case of wishful thinking. On the other hand, once Goldsmith entered into an olympiad exchange with the Meyer Brothers, the Russel Erskine’s first lessee, the rhetoric was turned against the Andrew Jackson. Robert Meyer says (March 5, 1929) that the “Hermitage Hotel is 15 years older than the Andrew Jackson yet is in better condition today.” Perhaps not surprisingly, prominent among the hotels the Meyers operated—in Atlanta, Jacksonville, Roanoke, Knoxville, and Nashville—was the Hermitage Hotel. His bottom-line conclusion delivered to Goldsmith was that “a good operator can save the lessor a great deal to offset depreciation.”

## The Meyer Brothers

Enough of the correspondence between the lessor (Huntsville Hotel Company) and the lessee (Meyer Brothers) has survived archivally in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library to argue a delightful dialogue presented on its own merits. At one point, when the two parties were grappling with the myriad details of the hotel under construction, Roland Meyer announced that he would come to confer personally with the HHC. “I feel that the hotel is part mine,” he said, “I spent so many hours on the plans” (February 25, 1929).

Though the hotel management company’s headquarters were in Birmingham, in Rooms 1501-1504 of the Comer Building, both brothers travelled a good deal in their line of work, and always learned more about the hotel business when they did. So when he stayed in the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City, Robert Meyer noted that that landmark hotel had a wood floor for the ballroom. Therefore, in the letter cited above (March 5, 1929), he said pointedly that for the Russel Erskine to have “a terrazzo floor in the ballroom would be a big mistake.” Ten days later, however, he pulled in his horns and said he guessed terrazzo would be okay (March 15, 1929).



*Mezzanine balustrade with lyre + sunburst + inverted lyre pattern, 2004. Hotel mailboxes in background. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects. Missing in this photo is the brass ball that topped the newel. Every time someone discovered that the ball was removable, it would go missing for awhile. See the wedding reception photograph in this issue (page 44) to view both balustrades’ newel toppers in their proper places.*



A draft version of the twenty-five-year lease agreement between HHC and Roland Meyer was drawn up as early as November 1, 1927, but it was not signed because Meyer's original co-signer, R.E. Hyde, dropped out of the deal. Hyde, at the time, was the resident manager of the Hotel Hermitage, when the proposed lease was sent to Robert E. Smith, who was acting as attorney for the Huntsville Hotel Company. Roland Meyer was the resident manager of the Hotel Savoy, one of Marr & Holman's smaller and more modest hotel designs. Robert Meyer at first declined to be drawn in to the deal with his brother—possibly because he sensed a shakiness on the part of the financial underpinnings for the hotel—but eventually he signed on to an eight-page lease agreement dated May 9, 1929. Here are some of the lease's key provisions:

In addition to completing the hotel building on or before October 1, 1929, the Huntsville Hotel Company agrees to add high-tech features such as wiring for radio and telephones, automatic signals in the elevators, an electric sign on the roof, and fine furniture, for a total investment of about \$80,000.

The lease of the hotel shall run for a term of 30 years and be based on the actual cost of the property, on a sliding scale of percentages—6.5 percent/first two years; 7.5 percent/next four years; 8 percent/next four years; 8.5 percent/next five years; 9 percent/next 10 years; and 9.5 percent/next five years. Rent will be paid quarterly.

The lease can be terminated with 30 days' notice—should the lessee become bankrupt or judicially determined insolvent or be in default in the payment of rent for a period of 30 days—or terminated with 60 days' notice for nonpayment of taxes agreed to be paid by the lessee.

The lessor may execute a mortgage or deed of trust on the leased property not to exceed \$300,000.

Lessee agrees to take \$25,000 preferred capital stock in the Huntsville Hotel Company and to pledge \$20,000 of this stock to a trustee of the Company to

secure performance of his undertakings under this agreement.

Lessee can demand, at his option, an addition of 66 rooms to the hotel, up to 10 years before the expiration of the lease. The value of such improvements would increase the rent proportionally.

Voluminous correspondence, mainly between Roland Meyer and Lawrence Goldsmith, has survived. The letters suggest that no detail, large or small, could be overlooked, whether concerning toilet paper holders or invoices for sheets and pillowcases.

### **A Dose of Hotel Economics Realism**

Among the Russel Erskine Hotel files there is an enigmatic news clipping affixed to a sheet of paper on which is scrawled: "Lawrence / This does not sound so good. / HBC."

Regrettably, the clipping is undated, but may be traced back to its source in the *Saturday Evening Post* by some diligent scholar of the once most-respected magazine in American life. Here is the clipping, in its entirety, with no apologies for intruding on what is otherwise an essay on collective civic pride:

#### **HOTEL ROOMS ARE DECLARED LIABILITY**

(James R. Crowell in *Saturday Evening Post*)

Out of three hotels, the average shows, one succeeds, one breaks even, one fails. Rooms produce 55 per cent of the operating revenue, food 45 per cent. A hotel uses six tons of coal per room per year, including bedrooms and the large public rooms. It costs \$60 a year to keep a room in repair. About 2 per cent of room income is required to replace linen used in the room.

Bad accounts, including no-good checks, represent a loss of \$10 per room per year. A hotel can be prosperous with an average of 25 per cent room vacancy and can manage to exist with as much as 40 per cent unoccupied. The tele-

phone service is conducted at a loss and would still be an unprofitable item in most instances even though 15 cents a call were charged, instead of the usual 10 cents. More than 50 per cent of all persons registered at the hotel use one call a day. A 1,000 room hotel employs twenty operators at a salary of \$85 a month each.

It is rather startling to learn that if hotels did nothing except rent rooms the expense would be \$1.10 for every dollar of income. To put this in another way, if all outside income and expenses were eliminated and the total room expense were put against a total room revenue, there would be a net deficit of 10 cents for each \$1 taken in.

Fortunately there are several things which operate against any such deplorable situation. Primarily these are the fact that some of the overhead must be charged off to the restaurant as a revenue producing agency, even though there is no way to allocate rent, light, heat, power and so on to the food department; that store rentals cut further into the general overhead and that a heavy return comes from concessions.

If it were not for concessions and store rentals, the hotel business would have died of anaemia soon after prohibition, or raised room and food prices to such an extent that the public would have been incensed beyond belief.

My guess—and it is merely that—is that the HBC who took the trouble to send this cautionary tale to Lawrence Goldsmith was Henry B. Chase, one of the hotel stockholders, involved to the tune of \$1,000 (ten shares).

### **Following the Financial Paper Trail**

In some ways the most fascinating aspect of the Russel Erskine Hotel is not the building itself— not its reinforced concrete skeleton, or the Bedford limestone cladding on its main floor facade, or the gray Tennessee marble wainscot in its lobby, or a hundred other architectural details—but in the convolutions of its financing

by a small group of people, none of whom were inordinately wealthy. Naturally, after the initial announcement of the Huntsville Hotel Company project in the *Manufacturers Record* (September 27, 1927) and elsewhere, a number of financial institutions lined up to court the hotel principals. Besides the Canal Bank & Trust Company of New Orleans, whose letter is quoted above, there were many other solicitations. One, from the Mortgage & Securities Company of New Orleans, offered “6.5 percent and bonds purchased at 92 percent of par,” which Lawrence Goldsmith turned down in a letter of September 26, 1928.

Whitney-Central Trust & Savings Bank, of New York, had solicited the hotel company’s business back on September 29, 1927, but exactly one year later the bank wrote to say it was no longer interested in the deal.

There was also Emrich Mortgage of Cleveland, Ohio, responding on November 6, 1928, to Goldsmith’s asking about a \$280,000 loan. Goldsmith enclosed a picture (architect’s rendering) of the 132-room hotel and its fifty-two-car garage. The contract for its construction had just been let, with the E.G. Holladay Company of Nashville, and completion was expected within ten months.

In some ways, the most exotic artifact in this financial file is a mysterious personage whose elegant engraved-script letterhead identifies himself as Paul Klein-exel, 10 South LaSalle Street, Chicago. His correspondence with the hotel company begins in late October 1928 and runs on into late January 1929. His final letter to Goldsmith is a terse but gentlemanly declaration that the times may well be changing: “As you probably know, hotel paper is not in good standing at the present time, and that is particularly true of small town hotel paper. The best that you can expect



*Roof finial. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

on a construction loan would be eight points discount, and, in a bad bond market like this, discount might even run up to 10 percent.”

The financial set-up that Goldsmith sent to Paul Klein-exel in January 1929 reflects considerably more optimism—perhaps borne of a growing nervousness—than the set-up that the Pritchett-Thomas Company had sent the Huntsville Hotel Company in the fall of 1927. For example, in its “statement of estimated operating expense and income” is the projection of \$377 a day for rooms, for a yearly income of \$137,605, up from the \$120,450 projected by Pritchett-Thomas. True, this 1929 set-up used an adjustment of “30 per cent for vacancies,” as opposed to the 20 percent figure used in 1927, but that was not as high as the rather authoritative figure of 40 percent used in the *Saturday Evening Post* article. Other key elements emerge in this set-up that show how much financial juggling the Huntsville Hotel Company will have to engage in for a successful launch in 1930:

A projected annual income of \$105,349, minus a total annual expense of \$47,920, will leave a “net available for interest and amortization” of \$57,429.

The capital stock of \$200,000—“75 percent of which has already been paid in”—with the balance being paid monthly.

There is also the cost of the land (\$57,250) plus the valuation of 1,011,000 cubic feet @ 47 cents for the building, totaling \$475,170. To this is added the 6 percent architect & engineer fee (\$28,510); interest—six months—6 percent (\$8,400); discount 8 percent (included 1 percent to K-X-L) of \$22,400; and \$500 for legal expenses, for a grand “total valuation land and building” of \$592,230.

With a total valuation of land and building of \$592,230, the hoped-for “loan—first mortgage —6 percent—10-year sinking fund” of \$280,000 would leave roughly \$312,230 in equity, making this “less than a 48 percent loan.” This bottom-line judgment, appearing as the final line of the set-up, is capitalized and underlined.

Unfortunately, or otherwise, K-X-L was having none of it, not even for a one percent fee.

Goldsmith's financial tree-shaking continued through 1929 with a growing sense of urgency as the construction bills continued to come in with demands for payment: First Securities Company of Chattanooga returned all the financial papers related to the hotel on March 25, 1929, because it would not go forward with the loan application. Chickamauga Trust Company (Chattanooga) reported that Prudential (headquartered in Newark, New Jersey) would not be interested in making the loan (April 15, 1929). Goldsmith wrote to the Louisville Trust Company for a loan on April 13, 1929, but got no reply. The Life Insurance Company of Virginia (Richmond) declined a loan request on April 23, 1929. Fourth National Company, an investment securities firm in Atlanta, told Goldsmith (May 10, 1929) that he could not be encouraging and felt it "unfair to ask you to hold off any longer." W.C. Bowman, president of the First National Bank of Montgomery, wrote (June 28, 1929) that "Just at this time, we hardly think we would be interested in this loan."

Leo Steiner—the Birmingham representative of Steiner Brothers Banking House, with offices at 220 Broad Street in New York—wrote Goldsmith (June 19, 1929) that "At the present time, we would not be interested in a loan of that size on a hotel proposition in your city. We feel from the facts given to us, the loan is attractive, but the Insurance Company that we represent, would not care for a loan of that size in a town of the population of your city." Steiner's mention of their insurance company seems to be the magic words. Insurance companies—as we are coming to know—are where the money will be.

Sure enough, about this time the Huntsville Hotel Company met up with the Commonwealth Life Insurance Company of Louisville, Kentucky. Here is the good-news moment, delivered in a letter (August 8, 1929) to M.M. Hutchens from D.G. Roach, vice president of the mortgage loan department:

The application of the Russell Erskine Hotel of Huntsville, Ala. for a loan

of \$275,000 has been approved by our financial committee to the extent of \$250,000 subject to the following terms and conditions. The loan (is) to be made for a period of 20 years with interest at the rate of 6 percent per annum, payable semi-annually. Fire insurance policies covering the improvements and containing the National Standard Mortgage Clause endorsements are to be deposited with the company, and in addition a number of the stockholders acceptable to our company to apply for \$250,000 life insurance on the 20 year endowment plan, and the Hotel Company agree to keep the insurance in full force and effect to maturity, so that at the end of 20 years the proceeds of the policies will pay off the indebtedness of the Hotel Company. If the death of any one of the insured should occur before the 20 years, then the amount of the policy will be credited on the mortgage indebtedness. In addition the payment of the principal and the interest is to be guaranteed individually by the principal stockholders of the Hotel Company. I am enclosing herewith a copy of the agreement which we will have the principal stockholders sign. If the above terms are satisfactory we will be willing to advance you \$50,000 upon completion of the papers and \$50,000 per month until the building is fully completed when the total balance will be advanced. Please advise me at once if the above terms and conditions are satisfactory so that I may come to your city and prepare the papers so that we can close the loan.

At this very moment, however, Lawrence Goldsmith was writing to Robert Meyer (August 10, 1929), looking at an additional component to the proposition from Commonwealth:

“Roland requested me to send you the enclosed set-up. If we could sell the \$125,000 second mortgage 7 percent bonds, the plan looks about the best we can do. I do not think we would have any trouble placing a \$200,000 first mortgage insurance loan on the property, as we have heretofore always wanted to borrow around \$280,000, which was more than the insurance companies were willing to loan on the property. We have had a proposition from the Commonwealth Life Insurance Company,

of Louisville, Ky. to loan us \$250,000 at 6 percent, but we would be compelled to carry an equal amount of 20-year endowment life insurance, which would cost us approximately \$10,000 a year in premiums, but at the end of the 20 years the policies would mature and pay the loan in full.”

Regardless of the speculation riding on other financial vehicles, which would continue well into the 1930s, the Huntsville Hotel Company closed their loan agreement with Commonwealth on October 15, 1929. The agreement is interesting primarily for the names of the nineteen citizens who agreed to take out life insurance policies “as additional security” for the \$275,000 loan, which is, of course, secured by a mortgage on the hotel property. Their names, for the record, are James M. White, Columbus O. Mullins, Bunyan Harvard Broadway, William Edwards Putman, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Redden H. Canterbury, Robert Joseph Lowe, William Lewis Certain, Jr., John Edgar Mitchell, Frank B. Wilson, Jr., Roland Moore Meyer, Leo Schiffman, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Jr., Joseph B. Van Valkenburg, Jr., Joseph R. Burgess, Oscar Goldsmith Grosser, Thomas J. Taylor, Dorothy Hodges, and Augustine White, Jr. Most of these nineteen took out \$15,000 policies, which entailed the payment of \$707.55 as an annual premium, and held face values totaling up to \$274,000. It’s evident from Commonwealth receipts in the Russel Erskine files that additional citizens—including Milton H. Lanier, Jr., Thomas G. Jones, Stanley D. Myerson, George M. Mahoney, Thomas H. Johnson, and Richard Calloway—were enrolled in the company’s twenty-year endowment plan from 1933 to 1941.

### **The Seven Financial Samurai**

The major burden for assuring that the Huntsville Hotel Company would meet its financial obligations stood on the shoulders of seven men:

**Lawrence B. Goldsmith and Robert Schiffman**—brothers-in-law, partners in I. Schiffman Co., dealing with commercial property, farm property, warehousing, etc.



**Morton M. Hutchens**—partner in the Hutchens Company, plumbing, heating, and electrical supplies, hardware, wholesale and retail.

**Robert E. Smith**—attorney at law.

**T.T. Terry**—dry goods merchant on the Square (“Great is the power of Cash”).

**Wells M. Stanley**—a vice president of the Alabama Power Company.

**J. Emory Pierce**—editor and general manager of the *Huntsville Daily Times*.

These seven signed “as the Officers and Directors of said Hotel Company . . . to underwrite and guarantee the repayment of said sum” (\$275,000) in a deed filed in the Madison County Courthouse on September 20, 1929. Five of the seven—all except Terry and Pierce—signed a subsequent memorandum of agreement on February 10, 1930, working out the details of their future obligations towards guaranteeing the loan repayment, including a pledge “not to sell or dispose of the aforesaid common stock held and owned in the Huntsville Hotel Company and agree that said stock shall be held during said time under a voting trust” for electing and maintaining officers and directors of the corporation, and for dealing with eventualities as “the death of one or more of the undersigned.”

During the hotel’s first seven years of operation—rather lean years in those biblical days of the locust—five of the seven stalwarts—Stanley, Terry, Hutchens, Schiffman, and Goldsmith—continued to put their own money into the pot. In 1930, they each put in \$2,150; then \$5,300 each (1931), \$5,500 each (1932), then differing amounts totaling \$22,550 (1933), then \$800 each (1935) and \$600 each (1936). During these seven lean years came \$83,981.35 “advanced out of earnings from the Russel Erskine Hotel Company” itself. Roughly a like sum (\$84,850) was advanced by the five hotel officers. Together with small sums from other sources, these seven years saw total advancements of \$173,931.85.

It might be wise to close off this financial discourse with two letters exchanged be-

tween Judge Homer Batson, president of Commonwealth Life, and L.B. Goldsmith, secretary and treasurer of the Huntsville Hotel Company late in 1936. The first (November 12, 1936), from Goldsmith, encloses a statement showing HHC's total net loans, together with "three propositions that we made to you in your office some few days ago." One can almost hear echoes of the meeting's heated debate coming through Goldsmith's words:

We believe that possibly you have overlooked the attention, both personal and financial, that the Directors of the hotel have given these loans. They have all told approximately \$160,000 invested in the project, and of this amount about \$85,000 has been put in since the loans were originally made, and since the Depression it is impossible for the hotel itself to carry the burden. The matter has been constantly before us, and we have in every instance consulted with your Company in advance and have by mutual agreement kept the matter current; and never for a moment have the loans been in default.

Homer Batson's reply, dated November 13, 1936, seems equally testy:

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter of Nov. 12, 1936 with enclosures as stated.

I hope you gentlemen will keep in mind down there that this matter of 3 3/4 percent interest is, in my opinion, not going in any way to be pleasing to our Board. The matter cannot be presented to the Board prior to our meeting with you about Dec. 15, 1936.

You will also keep in mind that I kept repeating at our conference on Nov. 2, 1936, that we ought to be able to work out something more concrete in the way of a guarantee.

As years go by, personal endorsements or guarantors often become of little or no value. However, I believe something practical can be worked out that will be adequate security if we can agree on terms.

If your relative, for any reason, cannot be available around the 15th of December, you had better let us know in advance.

(Aside from this exchange: does anyone remember those good old days when the U.S. Postal Service offered next-day service for a first-class stamp?)

### **Constructing the Hotel**

The Huntsville Hotel Company directors met on September 12, 1928, to consider three items—approving E.G. Holladay Company (Nashville) as the general contractor; the Hutchens Company (Huntsville) to do the plumbing, heating, wiring, and ventilation work; and the Otis Elevator contract. All three items were approved by six votes (Terry, Schiffman, Goldsmith, Hutchens, Smith, and Pierce).

Actually, work had already started two months before, on July 30, 1928, when the hotel company approved a \$1,200 contract with S.M. Stewart to do the excavation of the hotel site, according to the plans of the Marr & Holman architectural firm (whose contract had been approved at a directors meeting on April 18, 1928). Before that, as well, four old stores were demolished, and the building materials were salvaged, including a \$6 per 1,000 brick deal with George M. Jones (513 West Clinton).

The Holladay Company came highly recommended. Five referees—including Russell Hart, architect, with the Hart Freeland Roberts firm in Nashville, and architects or engineers from Louisville, Cincinnati, and Birmingham, all speaking favorably of Holladay's work—sent their letters promptly in the space of a few days (August 13-15, 1928) to the hotel company.

From the start of construction, Holladay was supposed to complete the job in 250 working days, beginning September 12, 1928. That did not happen, owing to a number of change orders, plus lots of who-shot-John wrangling going back and forth between the architect (Marr & Holman), contractors (Holladay, Hutchens, and their subs), hotel lessees (Robert and Roland Meyers), and owner (Huntsville Hotel Company). Despite the new letterhead for the hotel saying that it would be





*The Russel Erskine under construction.  
Courtesy Tennessee State Library & Archives*

“opening on or about Nov. 1, 1929,” they only missed that deadline by a couple of months, finishing up late in December 1929.

Remember from the Huntsville Board of Realtors figures in 1929 quoted above that the new reinforced concrete building going up on this site would have a construction cost of \$397,532.96 —broken out as the general contract (\$253,927.18), mechanical equipment (\$99,568), elevator equipment (\$21,688), mail chute equipment (\$1,630), and architect’s 6 percent fee (\$20,719.78)—plus another \$80,000 for furniture and equipment as estimated by the hotel’s lessees, Robert and Roland Meyer—for a grand total of \$614,932.36. Anyone who has worked on a project of that magnitude knows that deadlines are only there to work against. Photos made of the work in progress speak for themselves, though it is too bad there were no dates affixed to each photo to show exactly when those stages were reached.

The opening of the hotel on January 3, 1930 was a grand party, one of the bigger-than-life occasions in Huntsville’s history. A good time, reportedly, was had by all. Less happily, on August 14, 1930, a U.S. District Court Clerk, District of North Alabama, noted the fact that the Huntsville Hotel Company had “paid into the registry of this Court” \$45,965.41, resulting from a decree entered on August 1, 1930, from a settlement reached with the E.G. Holladay Company. Once the attorneys (Lanier, Pride & Brickell) and court costs were added in, the total was \$48,184.56. At issue were liens or other claims filed against the Russel Erskine Hotel Company by forty-five contractors and suppliers, including J.E. Anderson, painter (\$2,941.30), Decatur Iron & Steel (\$1,848.76), Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company (\$2,821.78), and the Hutchens Company (\$3,624.97).

Sifting through the sheaves of correspondence about individual items and looking through the “change orders” that either bumped up costs or saved small amounts of money, we might have wished for some uncompromising architectural despot like Frank Lloyd Wright to demand nothing less than the best in workmanship. For example, about \$570 was saved by letting the bricklayers use “running bond instead of Flemish bond.” That distinctive pattern, achieved by turning every other brick



### *Russel Erskine Hotel letterhead*

sidewise, would have been a nice touch for the eleven-story tower. As it is, when seen by sidewalk superintendents today, the bricklaying is rather unremarkable, and in patches downright terrible. One nice touch, visible only from the backside (south and east facades), shows five horizontal stripes in the brickwork created by bands of glazed yellow brick of the kind used on the facade of the Noel Hotel.

Another opportunity, lost apparently for cost-cutting considerations, involved the building's signage. Neon was ruled out, despite its high-tech allure in the late 1920s, in favor of a rooftop sign spelling out the hotel's name in six-foot letters by means of 390 sockets with twenty-five-watt lamps in them. Considering how neon signs were considered tawdry by the 1970s, perhaps the individual socketed lights—still visible underneath the Russel Erskine's marquee—will add renewed luster once the building is renovated.

Actually, the team that put the Russel Erskine Hotel together did opt for a number of wonderful thoroughly modern touches—summarized in the hotel's new letterhead stationery as offering “running ice water/electric fan/and radio in every room.” This last luxury involved a rather expensive (\$3,103.40) rooftop radio antenna that brought broadcasts to each and every room by means of radio cables, rather like a “community antenna” television (CATV) system for large buildings or apartment complexes a half-century later.

Once the building construction was finished and all the plastering and painting was done, in came carpets and furniture and all those luxurious touches like jardinières, temple jars, and fernery, that made hotel guests believe they were no longer in Kansas (or Alabama) anymore.

Most regrettably, in May 1979, nearly four years after the old hotel closed, all of its contents were sold off. Soon after, as well, the hotel rooms were rehabbed as apartments, resulting in roughly half as many units as there were hotel rooms.

Although today we view the Russel Erskine's accommodations as shown in the Judd photographs from very different notions of luxe and comfort, the photos reveal a level of design and sophistication that hotels in much larger cities and more prosperous times would be proud to claim. Other indications we have of the hotel's sophisticated style are the rather complete lists of the original purchases for the hotel, together with notations of every "commission" (3 to 5 percent) added to the item's price from its having been selected by a tastemaker making his selections from Imperial Furniture (Grand Rapids), Mallen (Chicago), Clifton & Pack (New York), White Furniture (Mebane, North Carolina), Bradford (Nashville), Algoma Wood Products (Algoma, Wisconsin), Simmons (Atlanta), Thonet Brothers (Chicago), and elsewhere. If catalogues of those companies survive, as they probably do, we could further visualize the Russel Erskine's lobby, dining room, and guest rooms. We can also re-visit the wonderful archival photographs of the Andrew Jackson Hotel and other hotels of the period to re-create that sense of grandeur and unutterable luxury, with furniture made of mahogany and walnut and drapes of damask or other fine fabrics.

### **A Possibly Tendentious Conclusion**

Mostly neglected thus far is any focus on Albert Russel Erskine, the Huntsville native who was honored by having his name affixed to the Huntsville Hotel Company's civic creation.



Erskine's name was included as one of the original stockholders at the HHC's very first official meeting, held in the offices of attorney R.E. Smith, on April 19, 1928. The roll call of stockholders noted that Erskine was down for 100 shares of preferred stock and the pledge of a \$10,000 investment. Sadly, it is said, he was not good for his word. Though he visited the hotel, and was quite complimentary about the new addition to his hometown, Erskine reportedly paid in only a small sum. Perhaps he felt his prestige as president of the Studebaker Corporation was being borrowed against and therefore represented payment enough.

Erskine did, with hilarious generosity, loan the Huntsville Hotel Company an oil portrait of himself, under the condition that he reserved the right to withdraw the portrait from the hotel at some future time. In the letter confirming his portrait loan (August 29, 1929), Erskine offered some warm commendatory remarks that cost him absolutely nothing:

"I am deeply appreciative of the fine commercial structure which the representative business men of Huntsville have erected, to adorn and serve my native city, and have named in my honor. I feel certain that the venture will prove successful commercially and congratulate all of you upon your business initiative and courage."

A possibly tendentious conclusion here would be to say that, as often happens, we depend on history's great men to come through for us, and they very often fail us. On the other hand, what the story of the Russel Erskine Hotel may say is that the hotel happened because a number of citizens stepped forward with significant sums of money and created something more remarkable than anything a single benefactor might have offered.

And yet, as thousands of pages of archival documents in the Russel Erskine file attest, there is one man whose prodigious labors should be recognized. And that is precisely what Eleanor Newman Hutchens did, as president of the Huntsville Hotel Company, on July 10, 1973, the day the hotel corporation was dissolved, and its final liquidating distribution—at the rate of \$239.81 per share of preferred stock—





*Early 1930s hotel photos.  
Guest suite, sitting room, and  
bathroom courtesy Lynn Jones.  
Lobby courtesy James W. Lee.  
Photos were taken by Searcy  
Wilson Judd (1880-1960),  
Huntsville's premier pho-  
tographer between 1903 and  
1960. Judd's studio was on the  
southeast corner of the court-  
house square in what is now  
the Harvie P. Jones building,  
owned by Historic Huntsville  
Foundation.*



was approved. Dr. Hutchens read out a beautifully expressed resolution honoring Lawrence B. Goldsmith, who had died in 1972, before seeing the hotel through to its final fade into history:

Now, therefore, be it resolved that the directors of the Huntsville Hotel Company feel deep regret that Mr. Goldsmith has not survived to see his wish realized; that they think of him with gratitude as they dissolve the company he helped to found and to keep in sound condition through many vicissitudes; and that they pray for the peace of his noble spirit and the consolation of his bereaved family.

Be it further resolved that this resolution be spread upon the minutes of the last meeting of the directors of Huntsville Hotel Company, and that a copy thereof be delivered to the bereaved family of Mr. Lawrence B. Goldsmith.



*Old Clinton Street hotel marquee. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



*Margaret Anne Goldsmith celebrates her marriage to John J. Hanaw of New Orleans, October 19, 1963. Following the ceremony at Temple B'nai Sholom, a wedding reception was held in the Hotel Russel Erskine. Courtesy Margaret Anne Goldsmith.*

## Living at the Hotel: Childhood Memories

MARGARET ANNE GOLDSMITH

Employees and resident guests alike knew me as Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, Sr. and Miss Annie Goldsmith's granddaughter, and Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, Jr.'s daughter. I lived in the Russel Erskine Hotel for most of every year from the spring of 1941, when I was a few months old, until I was twelve. In 1952 my father remarried, and my new mother, my father and I moved from the hotel to our family home on Gates Street.

In 1941 Huntsville had a population hovering around 13,000 residents. There was no Parkway, and out Whitesburg Drive the road was lined with cotton fields. Huntsville, a farming and cotton mill town since the late 1800s, was on the verge of transformation. The "talk" in 1941 was about the recent establishment in Huntsville of Redstone Arsenal, an army munitions factory, a facility that after the war would become a major installation for government defense work and space exploration. The seeds had been planted for Huntsville to become "Rocket City USA."

The Terry-Hutchens building at the corner of Clinton and Jefferson Streets had been built in 1925 and was Huntsville's first skyscraper. The *Times* building, a twelve-story office building a few blocks away at the corner of Greene Street and Holmes Avenue, was completed in 1928. The only other buildings over four stories at that time were the Twickenham and Yarborough Hotels. The twelve-story Russel Erskine Hotel, built in 1928 and 1929, opened on January 3, 1930. The Terry-Hutchens and the *Times* buildings and the Russel Erskine dominated Huntsville's skyline for almost thirty years.

The Russel Erskine Hotel had two entryways: through the garage on Spragins Street, a block from the Big Spring, and through the main entrance on Clinton Street. The garage was always packed with old-fashioned cars, the kind with running boards. Luna, the garage attendant, would have to jockey around five cars

in order to pull out the one needed by a guest checking out of the hotel. I always marveled at how Luna managed never to scrape the large beams that supported the hotel tower as he maneuvered around.

After entering through the garage, I would walk past the cars into the hotel proper. As I entered, long winding corridors jutted off to my left and right and led to the engineering rooms, the boiler, and laundry rooms that smelled of heat and freshly ironed linen. I would wait for one of the elevators in the dark basement lobby next to the men's room, then get on the elevator with my nurse, Cora, and go up to the eleventh floor where Cora and I lived. Room 1101 was a corner room next door to my father's and one floor below my grandparents' twelfth-floor apartment.



*Hotel elevator operators and bellmen, 1936. Archived photo courtesy The Huntsville Times. Reprinted with permission.*

The elevator always stopped first at the main lobby, then went up to the mezzanine and on up to the eleven guest floors, two through twelve. I remember the sounds the elevators made at night as I listened to them starting and stopping, lulling me to sleep. The elevator boys, not much older than I, wore uniforms and caps and white gloves to open the heavy green elevator doors with their brass handles. Sometimes the elevator boys let me run the elevators.

Tourists came in through the garage, but most townsfolk entered the hotel through the main entrance on Clinton Street, across from the First Baptist Church (now located on Governors Drive). Once inside, they either turned left to go into the barber shop for a haircut, right to go into the Blue Room, perhaps to a luncheon,



or straight ahead toward the lobby, with its marble floors and elegant chandeliers. Some visitors climbed the stairs on the left to the mezzanine to go to the beauty shop or the office of the Automobile Association of America, which later became the Rocket Club. Others continued on to the hotel's coffee shop, then Huntsville's most elegant restaurant, or they walked through the lobby to the ballroom to a club meeting, a party, or a prom.

On Sundays, folks flocked to the hotel from the town's six or seven downtown churches, wearing hats and gloves and suits and ties. They were headed to the coffee shop to be greeted by Cristo, the head waiter, then seated and served lunch by one of the gentlemen waiters who dressed in dark pants and white coats. Some of the townspeople's favorite menu items were the shrimp appetizer, the hotel's home-made rolls, and chicken croquettes, red snapper, prime rib, steak, and, of course, ice cream or apple pie for dessert.

I remember the kitchen and Horton, the chef, the coffee makers and large commercial stoves. The catering manager's room was in back where the walk-in freezers were. I remember the cooks, the waiters, and the tables on rollers that were used for room service, with their white cotton tablecloths, cloth napkins, and white china with blue trim.

Resident guests sat in the lobby surrounded by red damask curtains and thick area rugs that covered the marble floors. At the end of the lobby was Miss Josephine's newsstand, filled with magazines, candy, tobacco goods, and, best of all, comic books. There was the brass and marble reception desk with the hotel guest registers in their black covers, and behind the desk the old switchboard with its long connector tubes and red board lights. Katherine Taylor stood behind the desk greeting everyone. Her husband was the hotel manager, Mr. Taylor—Jimmie. Jimmie could always be found in his office talking to the employees or out front visiting with guests.

Continuing past the reception desk, through the lobby, I would come to the ballroom to peek in and admire its high ceilings and elegantly carved walls or just to

see what was going on. The ballroom was always booked. At night there might be high-school proms or parties, and during the day, club luncheons or business meetings and sometimes conventions.

During the week, the rooms were filled with businessmen and traveling salesmen. They were joined during the winter months by tourists making their yearly trek from the northern states to Florida. I remember the bellboys carrying their bags and receiving a quarter or sometimes a fifty-cent tip. There were also a number of resident guests. I especially remember the Robinson sisters, Miss Nora and Miss Hazel, from Texas. Miss Nora taught home economics at Huntsville High School and Miss Hazel was one of the two dancing teachers in town.

The guestrooms were furnished with either twin or double beds. Each room had a tile bath with special running ice water faucets, a radio and a Bible. Steam heat radiated from old-fashioned radiators with pipes that made knocking sounds in



*Russel Erskine maids, 1940s. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library*



*Ballroom windows, west side, late 1940s. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

winter. I remember listening to the whirling oscillating fans in summer and looking out through open windows with Venetian blinds, and I remember that the wind rattled those windows as I watched flocks of birds fly south in autumn.

On rainy days I liked to run up the twelve flights of stairs or take the elevator and stop on each floor to visit with and watch the maids (one for each floor) in their gray and white uniforms. Each maid cleaned twelve rooms a day, taking only one break, at noon, to go to the Big Spring Café a block away on Spragins for a hamburger wrapped in waxed paper to bring back for lunch.

I went to West Clinton school through the sixth grade. The school was located just down the street, about where the North Hall of the civic center stands today. After school I would take the hotel elevator to the basement and run down the street to the Big Spring to ride the Little Lion or climb the bluff overlooking the spring. Some days I would spend hours throwing bread crumbs to the goldfish and ducks. At other times, if I could find a large piece of cardboard to use as a sled, I would slide down the big hill behind the tall buildings that used to be on West Side Square, known as Cotton Row.

This was the hotel as I remember it during the 1940s and early 1950s. My father and grandparents shared with me other stories and memories of the hotel during the 1920s and 1930s. It was my ancestors who played a major role in making the Russel Erskine a reality back in the twenties. It all began with an idea of my grandfather, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Sr. His idea was to build a first-class hotel to put Huntsville on the map and provide a much-needed public facility for the town. He gathered together a group of friends and relatives, including Morton Hutchens, Wells Stanley and sister-in-law Elsie Schiffman, widow of my grandmother's brother Robert, to discuss his investment idea. All who listened trusted my grandfather, known to all as Mr. Lawrence or Mr. Goldsmith, or The Big Boss or Captain. They respected his wisdom and business acumen. It was this group of brave farsighted individuals who invested their dollars to build the hotel.

The land on which the Russel Erskine was built was acquired from my family. It was originally the site of a row of buildings bought by my great-great-grandfather Morris Bernstein, who immigrated to Huntsville from Germany before the Civil War. The buildings he had bought long ago were demolished during the late 1920s so the hotel could be built. Although the hotel's grand opening coincided with the early days of the Great Depression, through the guidance of the stockholders, the directors and the sure hand of my grandfather, it remained open and solvent so that when the economy recovered the hotel fulfilled its promise and became Huntsville's social and civic center. It was the gathering place for most club meetings, civic and



*Christmas party for hotel employees. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library*

social, for weddings, proms, business meetings, and birthday parties. The hotel was the social, business and civic heart of Huntsville for many of the city's residents from the 1930s until the 1960s, "providing a facility for everything but funerals," in former manager Jimmie Taylor's words.

By the time my grandfather died in 1972, the hotel had contributed greatly to Huntsville's growth. It had served as caterer for most of Huntsville's major events both in the hotel and at other locations. It operated the restaurant at the old lodge on Monte Sano. It had been a major player in luring the generals who chose Huntsville as the site for Redstone Arsenal, which in turn became the site of the

space and rocket industry that brought prosperity and growth to what might otherwise have remained a farming and mill town. But as the town grew, it outgrew the hotel, and larger, more modern facilities were wanted to meet the needs of a growing community.

The Russel Erskine had seen its day as a grand hotel; in fact, hotel operations had been discontinued in the 1970s. The building was rented for some years after the hotel's closing, until several investors purchased it. Their alteration of the building into a suite hotel was abandoned, and eventually the building was purchased by a group who converted it to HUD apartments. Today the hotel is anticipating a major renovation, having been sold to a new group of investors who plan to renovate the apartments and restore to the public rooms something of their former glory.

In 2001, Jimmie Taylor organized a reunion of the Russel Erskine Hotel family, including more than sixty of its former employees, managers, suppliers, stockholders, and directors and their families. Over a hundred people came from miles around to embrace each other and share memories of the time when their lives had been so closely intertwined with one another and the hotel. It was very special for me to be there for it was indeed an extraordinary event. After more than thirty years, the loyalty everyone continued to have for the hotel and their years there was something unheard of today. I had childhood memories of the hotel, but now as an adult experiencing the reunion, I knew what it was about the hotel that gave it the aura of a *grande dame*. For all the people who lived and worked there for so many years the Russel Erskine had—a deep and lasting sense of place.



*Grand stair, leaning rail, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



*Hotel lobby. Miss Joyce Hollingsworth (front) was crowned "Miss Huntsville" during the 1955 Sesquicentennial celebration. Behind her is Elizabeth Hunter, "Miss Madison County." Note ornate chandelier. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library*



## From Stamp Licker to President: My Career with the Russel Erskine Hotel

ELEANOR NEWMAN HUTCHENS

This is a brief personal memoir. My connections with the hotel were sparse, sporadic, and unpaid. They came about through my father, Morton Hutchens, one of the founding investors who thought up and put up the hotel in the optimism of the late 1920s, when Huntsville was a vigorous town drawing more business travelers than the two existing hotels could accommodate.

There were then two passenger trains each day to and from Huntsville and Washington and New York. Travelers with business in Huntsville—with its mills, its banks, its retailers, its wholesalers, including nurseries among the largest in the world, its small manufacturers, and even its individual citizens who were steady clients for Oriental rugs and linen or custom-made clothing—such travelers arrived by train, took taxis to hotels, and settled in for several days of profitable transaction. Spending most of their working lives in travel, these men knew what they liked in hotels and which hotels best served them. My father and his associates decided to create a hotel in Huntsville that would impress and please them and any other discriminating guests who sought well-kept, up-to-date rooms, good service, and excellent food.

I was about nine years old when my father began mentioning the hotel at the family dinner table. It was to be called the Joe Wheeler, after the famous Confederate general. But as the search for building capital fell short, the founders decided to name it the Russel Erskine, for a Huntsville native who had become head of the Studebaker Corporation. Erskine was a member of one of the oldest Huntsville families and could be expected to enter into the civic spirit of the enterprise to the extent of investing substantial funds in it. The compliment was appreciated but not rewarded, except for a token \$500 investment.

Large sums had to be borrowed. My father occasionally mentioned his concern

Menu, 1960s. Courtesy Jimmie Taylor. The hotel's dining room was called the Coffee Shop. For years its sign was misspelled "Coffe" Shop. It was the first room to be air cooled.



## THANKSGIVING MENU

Apricot Nectar—Tomato Juice—Pinnacle Juice ..... 15  
 Chicken Soup a la Reine ..... 15  
 Fresh Jumbo Shrimp Cocktail ..... 35 & 70

### ENTREE

Served with Two Vegetables, Salad, Rolls, Butter  
 Coffee or Tea

Fresh Speckled Trout Fried in Corn Meal ..... 1.50  
 Baked Sugar Cured Ham, Raisin Sauce ..... 1.50  
 Roast Leg of Lamb, Mint Jelly ..... 1.50  
 Pan Fried Minute Steak ..... 1.50  
 Roast Young Turkey, Celery Dressing,  
 Chutney Relish ..... 2.00  
 Roast Prime Ribs of Beef, au jus ..... 2.00

### VEGETABLES

Fresh Baby Lima Beans — Parsley Buttered Potatoes  
 Fresh Buttered Broccoli — Fresh Creamed Carrots  
 Candied Yams with Marshmallows

### SALADS

Cranberry Rings, Cream Cheese  
 Water Cress a la Dennis

### DESSERTS

Old Fashion Pumpkin Pie ..... 15  
 Hot Mince Pie ..... 15  
 Lemon Fruit Jello ..... 15  
 Bleu Cheese, Jelly ..... 20

### STEAK SPECIALS

Broiled Baby T-Bone Steak ..... 1.75  
 Broiled Sirloin Steak ..... 3.25  
 Fillet Mignon with Bacon ..... 2.85  
 Broiled T-Bone Steak (16 oz.) ..... 3.25

Served with French Fries, Sliced Tomatoes,  
 Head Lettuce with Roquefort Dressing, Rolls, Butter, Coffee  
 or Tea.

## COFFEE SHOP

11:30 A.M. - 2:00 P.M.

5:30 - 8:30 P.M.



over this debt, but the promises of prosperity kept him hopeful. Building went on, then furnishing. My father marveled at the high standards set by his good friend and associate Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, who continued to insist on the best. Parenthetically, I may say the members of business partnerships often go home and tell their wives that they alone are keeping the ship afloat, while their associates are knocking holes in the hull. My father was one of such partners, but not in the hotel enterprise. Never once did he hint that anyone contributed more thought, study, and energy to the nascent Russel Erskine than Mr. Goldsmith.

As opening time approached, a grand reception for about 300 people was planned. I, at age ten, was given the important job of buying the stamps for the invitations and sticking them to the envelopes. First-class postage was two cents for out of town, one-and-one-half for local delivery. I was given several dollars for the purchase.

Having quieted the fears of the postal clerk who suspected that a child my size had no business with folding money, I carried the 300 stamps home, set up a card table in our back hall, and began work. Soon the job palled: licking the stamps was pleasant at first but after a time was cloying to the tongue. I brought a saucer of water to the table.

When they dried, the stamps I had dipped in water fell off the envelopes. The envelopes, stiff with high quality and handsomely addressed in someone's elegant penmanship, were irreplaceable. So were the stamps, for one in my financial bracket. But every schoolchild, if I remember correctly, had a bottle of mucilage. I fetched mine, with its slit rubber cap, and carefully stuck the stamps back on. The effect was not pristine, but I may have gotten by with it; I don't remember scoldings or penalties. I don't suppose I went to the reception, though, being a child.

That was early in 1930. The stock market had crashed in October 1929, and the sense of risk attending the borrowings for the hotel was intensifying from month to month. The strain must have been terrible, but I was only faintly aware of it; I took more interest in my maternal grandfather's anxious watching of the stock market.

Every weekday brought a score, up or down, nearly always down.

In my teens, I knew the hotel for its delicious food and its ballroom. As I later learned, the food, not only in the dining room but in the rooms where civic groups held their weekly lunch meetings, was keeping the hotel from bankruptcy. Business slowed and slowed. The trains brought fewer and fewer travelers. As I heard from my father, Mr. Goldsmith was resolute in keeping up standards nevertheless. He would not cut corners. The few guests who did come found good service, smartly dressed bell-boys and maids, and impeccable rooms. My father was proud though sometimes despairing, as he and others put up thousands more toward the debt.

*Good meals beautifully served by a well-trained hotel staff.*

The approach of World War II brought the first arsenals to Huntsville. Our representatives in Washington and our business leaders at home had worked very hard to win them. The TVA, which I had been reared to believe was a dangerous experiment in socialism that classed President Roosevelt with Hitler and Mussolini, and possibly Stalin, was probably the most important drawing card we had. The hotel, its owners liked to think, may have been another. Redstone, for ordnance, and Huntsville Arsenal, for chemical warfare, saved the Huntsville economy.

It should be noted that we were not a somnolent little village; we were a progressive town that in the 1920s had prepared for progress. We were ready for the construction executives who settled in at the hotel to oversee the building of the two arsenals. We were ready with rental quarters for the union officials who collected dues from the arsenal workers, filling desk drawers with dollar bills. We were ready with four banks on the Square to take their deposits. We were even ready with a railroad track that ran from the west side of town to the river. We were ready with retailers who sold the construction companies the building materials and services that went into the arsenals. We knew how to provide local labor. Men streamed into my father's office to ask for recommendations. By secret agreement with his new friends at the

arsenals, he gave each of them a favorable letter, but used different colors of paper for good and no-good applicants. We were ready for prosperity, and the arsenals brought it to us. The hotel flourished.

In the thirties and forties, I knew the hotel only as a place to go for lunch or for the big dances given by the civic clubs at Christmastime. For a few years, there was the Blue Room, a pleasant cocktail lounge. After the war, I was only vaguely aware that motels and their parking lots were eating into occupancy at the hotel, serving travelers who were coming in not by train but in cars and planes. I was working in Georgia or studying in Philadelphia and took little note of this downward trend. Even when the space program arrived and perked up the economy, I wasn't here to notice its effect on the hotel.

Late in 1965, my father died, and I began to take his place at various board meetings around town. Then one day Mr. Goldsmith came and told me I was to be president of the hotel company and to call him Lawrence. He was really the head, but he wanted to continue as secretary-treasurer and oversee all details. He lived at the hotel.

As retail business completed its migration to the Parkway and hotel business to the Hilton and others, it became apparent that, like older downtown hotels almost everywhere in this country, ours was doomed. It was losing \$20,000 a year and had no prospect of turning around. I began to try to sell it. After Mr. Goldsmith died, I finally managed to find buyers, and we sold it at a price that would enable us to pay the stockholders their original investment plus enough, counting previous dividends, to give them an average 5 percent return for each year of its existence. Our accountant, a prominent Birmingham member of that profession, told me that although he had closed the books of many a downtown hotel in recent years, ours was the only one that had achieved that.

I was nevertheless sad at presiding over the dissolution of the enterprise that had begun so ambitiously in my childhood. The building stands, handsome as ever, and provides valuable housing near the center of town, but the excitement and hope that

charged Huntsville in the 1920s, and that found expression in the Russel Erskine, has moved to other ventures. I watch them with affirmative sympathy and wish them well. They are bringing back the old vital Huntsville.



*Sale of Russel Erskine furnishings, May 1979. Archived photo courtesy The Huntsville Times. Reprinted with permission*



*Ballroom window, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

## Transition Years

PATRICIA H. RYAN

What happened to the Russel Erskine as it was nearing the end of its run as a hotel and in the years following the hotel company's dissolution? To answer this question, Patricia Ryan examined *Huntsville Times* newspaper clippings in the Russel Erskine file at the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library. The following timeline is derived from her research.

### 1971

March — Russel Erskine hotel closes to transient guests, but remains open for tour groups, conventions, jury lock-ups, and permanent guests. Meeting rooms for civic clubs open, but dining room closed except for catered events. 132 rooms.

### 1972

January — Harry and Edith Bullard take over lease and hotel reopens to overnight guests.

### 1973

May — Hotel sells for \$225,000 to James Lane and H.E. Monroe, Sr., principal stockholders in Russel Erskine Hotel of Huntsville, Inc. Goal is to "return the hotel to its original elegance."

June — Ten permanent residents are told to vacate. The then-120 rooms are reduced to 80.

### Undated

Remodeling to be completed September-October. Three chandeliers selected.

### 1974

January — REH reopens for full operation, with 120 rooms reduced to 102 rooms by creating suites and enlarging some smaller rooms.



**1975**

August — Federal tax lien of over \$4,000 filed by IRS. Lane closes hotel, which now numbers 104 rooms. First Alabama Bank forecloses on mortgage of \$312,000 of July 30, 1973 and another of July 22, 1974. Monroe had previously sold his interest.

December — First Alabama Bank buys the hotel and its contents for \$300,000

**1978**

December — State Board of Corrections meets with Huntsville delegation to propose work-release center in the hotel. State board plans to send “letter of intent” to buy REH “assuming it meets fire and safety codes.” Huntsville Central City Association opposes the idea.

**1979**

March — First Alabama Bank sells the hotel to Dr. Tom Lawson, a local orthodontist, and H. Carey Walker, Jr., a Huntsville attorney. It’s not clear what the hotel will be used for.

May — Public sale of the hotel’s furnishings begins and continues for more than a month.

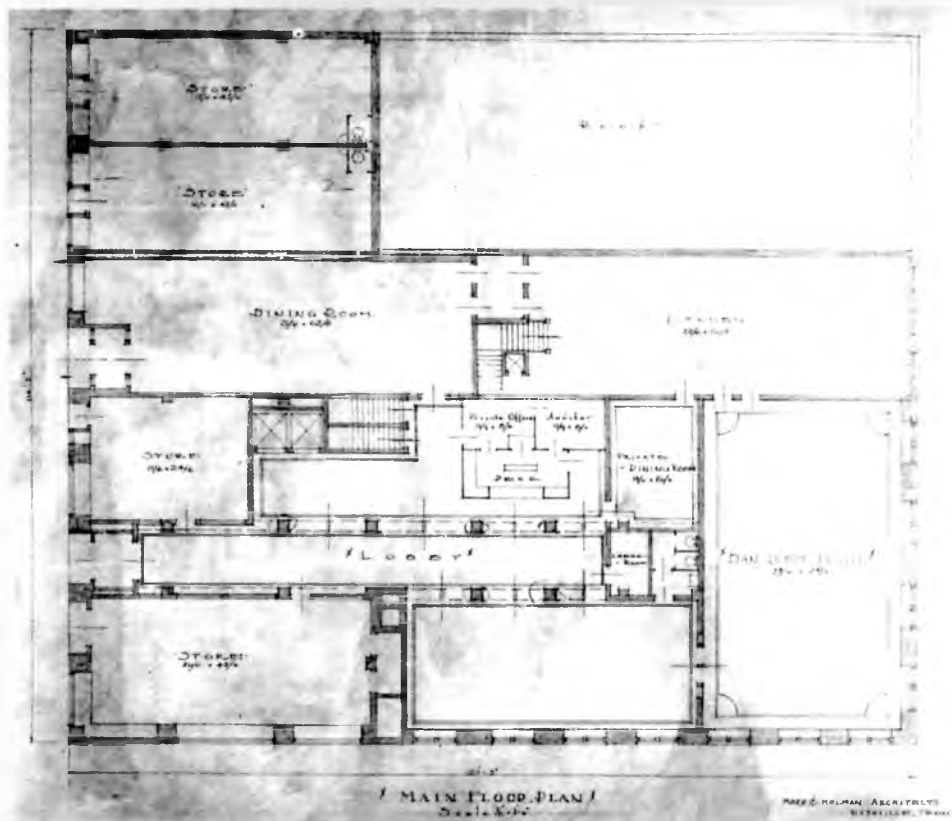
**1982**

July — Owners of Russel Erskine Ltd., Charles R. Smith, Harvey Morris, Thomas Lawson, Carey Walker, Clyde Roberts, and Memphis attorney Elwood Edwards, want to convert REH to apartment complex for elderly. Owners put up \$1.2 million for renovation and hope to get \$2.5 million in tax-exempt bonds through Huntsville Preservation Authority.

December — Building will contain sixty-nine apartments: fifty-seven one-bedroom units; ten two-bedroom units, and two rooms for handicapped residents.

**1983**

July — REH to reopen September 15 after \$3.6 million renovation. The remaining owners worked with the federal government’s Housing and Urban Development (HUD) agency to meet requirements. Rehab was financed by \$1.2 million investments from owners and \$2.45 million tax-free bonds through the Historic Preservation Authority. Residents will have to meet HUD income requirements.



*Working drawings of Marr & Holman floor plans for the main floor. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

# Historic Renovation of the Russel Erskine

DAVID C. GREENBERG

## Financial Challenges and Structure

At the time that New Russel Erskine, L.P., the current owners of the Russel Erskine building, initially started pursuing the property, it was on the verge of foreclosure, occupancy had fallen to historic lows, the rental subsidy provided by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was due to expire, and the future of the building itself appeared to be in jeopardy.

If that wasn't enough, the apartments had become functionally obsolete, the heating and air conditioning system was in dangerously poor condition, roofs leaked and the reserve for replacement, a fund set up to pay for capital improvements, had been depleted. In addition, it was necessary to bring the property into conformance with current fire codes and to mitigate asbestos, lead-based paint, and other environmental hazards.

The total cost to perform the work necessary to renovate the apartments, cure deferred maintenance, bring the property up to code and mitigate the environmental hazards was estimated to be in excess of \$4 million. However, those costs did not include over \$1 million in improvements that New Russel Erskine, L.P. felt were necessary to compete effectively in the marketplace for the long term, provide for the specific needs of its tenancy, and preserve the historical significance of the property.

In order to acquire the property, complete the planned historic renovation, and ensure the long-term viability of the development, New Russel Erskine, L.P. needs to secure over \$11 million in debt and equity financing. Ultimately, the financing plan involves four federal, two state, and one city agency, each with its own set of unique requirements and approvals. It is estimated that, when complete, it will have taken nearly eighteen months to put it all together.

The first and most complicated piece of the financing plan was to restructure the existing Section 8 contract and government-insured debt. Working closely with the Jefferson County Assisted Housing Corporation in its capacity as the agent for HUD's Office of Multifamily Housing Assistance Restructuring (OMHAR), a restructuring proposal was submitted under OMHAR's Mark-to-Market Program in January 2004. The key aspects of that proposal include a new twenty-year, site-based Section 8 contract at post-renovation market rents and a new, cash flow second mortgage, the proceeds of which will be exactly the amount needed to pay off the existing debt encumbering the property. In June 2004, OMHAR's Production Office Loan Committee approved the restructuring proposal. The proposal had its last hurdle in front of the OMHAR Headquarters Loan Committee in early July 2004.

With the cash flow generated by a new Section 8 contract at post-renovation market rents, the development will be able to safely support a new first mortgage. Because a government-insured loan will provide the most proceeds for the property, New Russel Erskine, L.P., in conjunction with Highland Mortgage in Birmingham, Alabama, recently submitted an application for mortgage insurance to the HUD field office in Birmingham.

In early June 2003, New Russel Erskine, L.P. submitted an application for federal low-income housing tax credits under a program administered by the states in which awardees receive federal tax credits based on certain qualified acquisition and rehabilitation costs. Successful applicants are then able to raise equity capital for affordable housing developments by selling those tax credits to corporations.

The Alabama Housing Finance Authority, in October 2003, allocated \$5,934,350 in low-income housing tax credits for the acquisition and historic renovation of the Russel Erskine building. Subsequent to receiving that award, New Russel Erskine, L.P. was able to raise in excess of \$4.5 million in equity capital by selling those tax credits to a nationally known syndicator.

In addition to the low-income housing tax credits, New Russel Erskine pursued an allocation of historic tax credits for the property. Mike Holbrook from the firm of Fuqua Osborn Architects, the project architect, working in close consultation with Chloe Mercer of the Alabama Historical Commission, the state historic preservation office (SHPO), prepared the Part II submission, which was delivered to SHPO in February 2004. SHPO approved the application in March 2004 and the National Park Service provided a contingent approval of the Part II submission in April 2004.

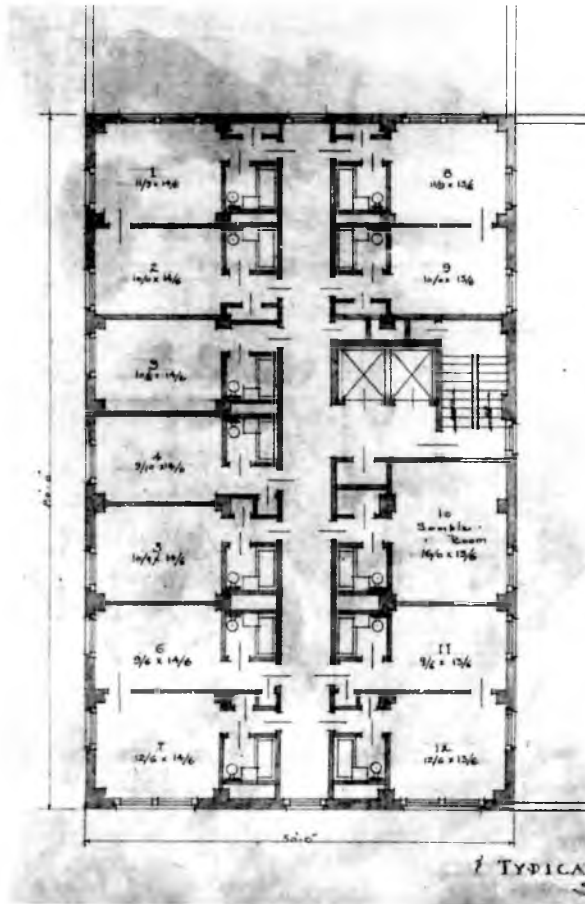
The entire approval process for the Part II application took less than two months, allowing New Russel Erskine, L.P. to secure nearly \$1.5 million in additional equity capital for the renovation. The additional equity raised from the sale of the historic tax credits was the key to the financial viability of the rehabilitation effort.

New Russel Erskine, L.P. estimates that the additional work required to obtain the Part II approvals was less than \$400,000, primarily due to a requirement to keep and repair, rather than replace, the windows. However, the benefits of utilizing the historic credits far outweighed the cost, a testament to the completeness of the owner's overall concept and the architect's design.

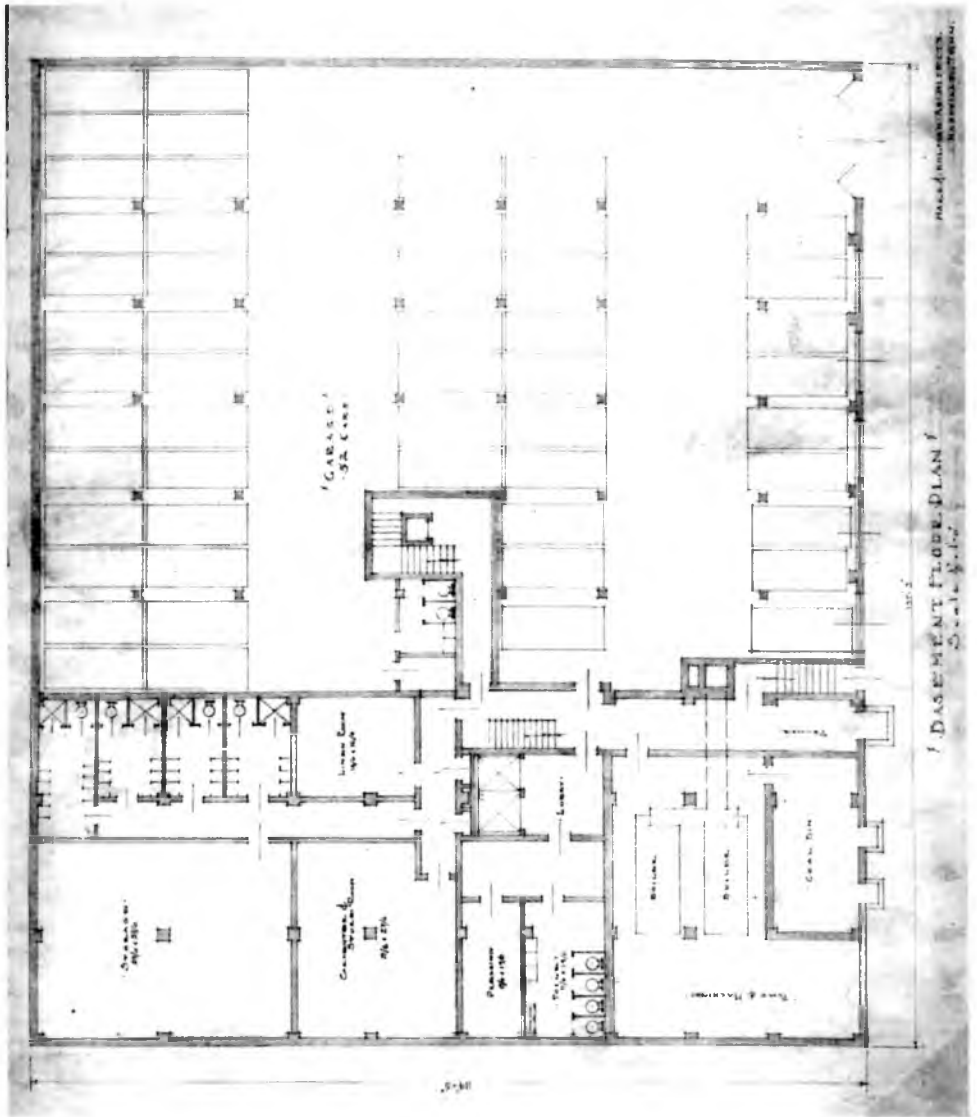
Last, and certainly not least, the City of Huntsville, through Jerry Galloway and the Office of Community Development, has played an instrumental role in helping New Russel Erskine, L.P. save and improve the Russel Erskine building. New Russel Erskine, L.P. believes that the city's strong support of the development and desire to preserve the property as affordable housing for senior citizens played a pivotal role in its ability to secure a significant portion of the financing described above. In addition, the city has agreed to provide a small loan to assist in the renovation. Without the city's support and timely response to code and fire issues that arose during the planning stages, New Russel Erskine would not have been able to get where it is today.

As of this writing, New Russel Erskine, L.P. hopes to close all of its financing and commence construction later this year with the hopes of unveiling a "new" Russel

Erskine building a year later. The owners and development team are excited about their plans for the building and look forward to working together with the city, SHPO, the building's residents and other interested parties in returning the Russel Erskine building to its former glory.



*Detail, working drawings of Marr & Holman floor plans for typical guest rooms. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



*Working drawings of Marr & Holman floor plans for basement.  
Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



*Ballroom entrance, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



## The New Russel Erskine

MIKE HOLBROOK

The proposed plan to rehabilitate the former Russel Erskine Hotel posed several challenges. A renovation to convert the hotel to apartments for the elderly undertaken in the early 1980s basically gutted the ground (basement) level, all but the lobby and ballroom on the main floor, and all of the hotel room configurations on the second through twelfth floors (the tower). The new owners' current plan is not to change the basic apartment use of the building, but to make the living units more functional, comfortable, and attractive while maintaining and restoring the remaining historic elements. Although the original building floor plan was extensively altered in the 1980s renovation, asbestos-containing material and lead-based paint are still present and must be remediated. A several-thousand-gallon fuel tank that supplied fuel to the old boilers also must be removed. Because the building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a significant Huntsville landmark, the owners want to do a certified historic rehabilitation.

The proposed renovation calls for an all-new heating, ventilation and cooling system, as well as new plumbing fixtures, lighting fixtures, and roof and fire protection (automatic sprinkler system). The historic exterior brick and stone will be restored by re-pointing the mortar and cleaning. The original wood and steel windows and the wooden storefronts will be restored and painted to match the original color. Inappropriate aluminum windows that were added in the '80s on the Spragins Street ground level will be replaced with a more fitting clad-wood window. New entry doors will be installed to match the original doors. Street-scaping will provide new sidewalks, trees, and period light poles consistent with the City of Huntsville's plan.

Because of the extensive cost to reconfigure the existing floor plan, the basic apartment floor plans, with the exception of the kitchens, will be retained from the 1980s renovation. The kitchen plans have been redesigned to be more functional, with

new cabinets that will accommodate new full-size appliances including the addition of a dishwasher. All new bath fixtures and mosaic floor tile will provide a hint of the “period look.” New gypsum board ceilings will be installed to replace the existing suspended lay-in ceilings in the apartment units to give the look of the original plaster ceilings that were removed in the ‘80s. Apartment entry doors and other doors in common areas will be replaced with a replica of the hotel’s original two-panel doors. The entire building will be fitted with new light fixtures and floor and wall finishes while maintaining the existing original terrazzo and ceramic tile floors. While all of this may seem simple and straightforward, this renovation is to be accomplished while the building is still occupied by the current residents. And, since the building is occupied, the current HVAC, plumbing, electrical, fire protection and alarm systems must remain functional while the new systems are brought on-line.



*Front desk west elevation, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*



*Mezzanine, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

Before renovation can begin, abatement contractors must remove the asbestos-containing material, located mostly in pipe and water tank insulation in the boiler room. The building contains—as do most all buildings constructed before 1978—varying amounts of lead-based paint, most of which is intact and poses no health risk for residents. The lead-based paint will be encapsulated with new paint, and future workmen can appropriately deal with it according to the Operations and Maintenance Plan created by an environmental engineer. The renovation will begin on the twelfth floor and proceed downward. But in order to renovate any floor, the entire floor and the floor below it must be vacant for worker access. The owners have anticipated the renovation plans by maintaining a vacancy that will allow at least two floors at a time to be vacant as the work progresses on down. Once a tower floor is complete, residents will move in to allow access to the next floor below. All stair and corridor exit routes must be maintained open and accessible during the entire renovation.

Once work is complete in the tower, the main and ground floors will be vacant for the final work, which involves not only rehabilitation of the remaining living units but the restoration of the historic lobby and ballroom. Fortunately, these areas survived the previous renovation with few changes (most of which are easily reversible), such as the inappropriate doors and glass installed at the front desk and the ballroom entrance, and the off-the-shelf replacement light fixtures that are inappropriate for such a grand space. The original decorative finish on the classical plaster moldings was covered with a coat of paint that obscured the detail. The current rehabilitation calls for some of the decorative painting on the ornate plaster moldings to be restored, the front desk glass to be replaced with period appropriate glass, the ballroom doors

*The new owners' current plan is not to change the basic apartment use of the building, but to make the living units more functional, comfortable, and attractive while maintaining and restoring the remaining historic elements.*



*Elevator with Greek key detail, 2004. Courtesy Fuqua Osborn Architects*

replaced with new doors replicated to match the original, and period-appropriate light fixtures installed. On the ground level, the plans call for a new community room that will provide space for crafts and games, a sitting room that will include a TV area and a library, and an exercise room that will offer residents a way to stay fit. One of the most exciting aspects of the rehabilitation is the addition of a caterer's kitchen and restrooms that will make it possible for the restored lobby and ballroom to be used for limited public functions.

Thanks to the vision of the new owners, the "New Russel Erskine" will provide very comfortable accommodations for its residents while remaining a Huntsville landmark for everyone to enjoy.



*Hotel lobby, 1950s, with placards of civic clubs,  
trophy fish, and magazine rack. Courtesy  
Huntsville-Madison County Public Library*





---

### Officers for 2004

---

<i>Chairman</i>	<i>Mike Holbrook</i>
<i>Secretary</i>	<i>Gerald Patterson</i>
<i>Treasurer</i>	<i>Art Tischer</i>
<i>Ex Officio (past chairman)</i>	<i>Richard Van Valkenburgh</i>

---

### Staff

---

<i>Interim Director</i>	<i>Lauren Martinson</i>
<i>Preservation Coordinator</i>	<i>Leslie Tucker</i>

---

### Board of Directors

---

<i>Donna Castellano</i>	<i>Judy Perszyk</i>
<i>Amy Creech</i>	<i>Randy Roper</i>
<i>Sarah Hereford</i>	<i>Jim Rountree</i>
<i>Nancy Horgen</i>	<i>Mary Rutledge</i>
<i>Lynn Jones</i>	<i>Candy Stephenson</i>
<i>Walter Kelley</i>	<i>Richard Van Valkenburgh</i>
<i>Wayne Lumpkin</i>	<i>Kay Wheeler</i>
<i>Linda Maples</i>	

---

### Ex Officio

---

<i>Kyle Davis</i>	<i>David Nuttall</i>
<i>Mary Gray</i>	<i>Jean Steadman</i>
<i>Dr. James Johnson</i>	



## 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:**

Survey and nomination of the Dallas, Lincoln, Lowe, and Merrimack Mill Villages to the National Register of Historic Places, funded by the City of Huntsville and the Alabama Historical Commission.

The rehabilitation of houses in the Lincoln Mill Village funded by an appropriation from Congressman Bud Cramer.

**Historic Huntsville Foundation — 2004 Membership Form**

- INDIVIDUAL OR FAMILY \$35–\$49
- SPONSOR \$100–\$149
- NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION \$25
- SENIOR (65 AND OVER), INDIVIDUAL OR FAMILY \$30
- PATRON \$50–\$99
- BENEFACTOR \$150 AND UP
- BUSINESS \$100

Make check payable to Historic Huntsville Foundation. Membership dues in excess of \$16 (value of subscription to publications) are deductible as a charitable contribution.

NAME .....  
(as it should appear on membership records)

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE.....ZIP .....

E-MAIL ADDRESS..... TELEPHONE .....

Mail to:

Historic Huntsville Foundation  
124 South Side Square  
Huntsville, Alabama 35801

Lauren Martinson, Interim Director  
Historic Huntsville Foundation  
124 South Side Square  
Huntsville, Alabama 35801  
Telephone: 256/539-0097  
E-mail: [preserve@hiwaay.net](mailto:preserve@hiwaay.net)



**Historic Huntsville Foundation**  
124 South Side Square  
Huntsville, Alabama 35801

NONPROFIT  
U. S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit # 34  
Huntsville, AL

**Help save Huntsville's treasures. Call 256/539-0097.**