

Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

Huntsville Daily Times Building



*One of two restored
entries of the
Huntsville Daily
Times Building.
Photograph by Scott
McLain.*

VOLUME 31, NUMBERS 3-4, FALL/WINTER 2005

SIX DOLLARS

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Contents

4 Introduction

LYNN JONES AND DIANE ELLIS

7 The Times of the *Times* Building

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

19 J. Emory Pierce: The Man for the *Times*

PATRICIA H. RYAN

31 Hot *Times* in the Old Downtown

PATRICK McCAULEY

43 The *Times* of My Life

RANDY SCHRIMSHER

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Randy Schrimsher is a Huntsville native and works as a certified financial planner at Evans, Watts & Schrimsher. He and his wife Kelly have three children, ages 19, 17, and 15. The family resides in a 1825 home downtown, also in its final stage of renovation.

Editors for this issue of the *Quarterly* were Linda Allen, Lynn Jones, and Patricia Ryan.

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EDITOR OF THE HUNTSVILLE DAILY AND WEEKLY TIMES

J. Emory Pierce 1910–1931

EDITORS OF THE HUNTSVILLE TIMES

Reese T. Amis 1931–1957

Will Mickle 1957–1961

Leroy Simms 1961–1964, Interim Editor
1964–1985, Editor

Pat McCauley 1966–1985, Executive Editor
1985–1994, Editor

Bob Ward 1974–1994, Managing Editor
1994–1995, Editor

Joe Distelheim 1995–2002

Melinda Gorham 2002–

Introduction

LYNN JONES AND DIANE ELLIS

Huntsville is in the middle of a building boom. Planned communities, housing developments, and shopping centers are on the drawing board or under construction. Downtown, building cranes dot the skyline signaling a hospital's expansion, a new hotel, a condominium complex, and an office building.

Happily for preservationists, a parallel enthusiasm for reviving historic projects is also making a difference in the city's commercial center. Some examples are the condominium conversion of the Terry-Hutchens Building, the Washington Square restaurants, and the continuing restoration of the Russel Erskine Hotel (the latter featured in the *Quarterly's* Fall/Winter 2004 issue). And now it's the Times Building's turn.

Sometimes "old" buildings have to go into hibernation for a while before the spirit of restoration returns to a community and the right person comes along to revive a dormant beauty. Such is the case with the Times Building, whose elegant Art Deco façade continued to fascinate and impress residents even as its commercial vitality waned over the years. In the best case scenario the "right person" is someone with a passion for historic buildings, a vision of what they might become, and the knowledge of how to do it. In 1984 Randy Schrimsher was that right person, who just happened to be at the right place, at the right time, and rather quickly and unexpectedly became the new owner of the Times Building.

Unfortunately the time was not yet ripe to undertake the major restoration the building would need. Work progressed slowly, and unforeseen problems arose. But twenty years later, on November 20, 2005, Randy Schrimsher proudly welcomed HHF members and the community to view the nearly completed restoration of his beloved Times Building. Guests toured the building from the basement level to the magnificent 360-degree views on the eleventh floor and listened to stories related by former newspaper editors, reporters, and production staff. If only all the stories could have been recorded! It was a trip down memory lane for many, and some visitors had their own remembrances to share.

Preservation, after all, includes not just the historic building but also the history that is contained within its walls—the businesses that operated there, the people who worked there, its place in the community throughout the years.

In addition to housing the operations of a newspaper, the Times Building has been home to many other occupants. For several decades the majority of the city's doctors and dentists had offices there. A 1940s city directory lists five doctors, five dentists, and two chiropractors. Long time Huntsville residents recall dreaded visits to dentists—Dr. Coons, Dr. Dillard, and Dr. Gowan—when teeth were drilled and pulled without benefit of Novocain. Physicians included Drs. Carl A. Grote, Sr., Thomas E. Dilworth, John D. Moorman, and Frank Jordan. A sampling of other occupants of the building in the forties includes Paul A. Speake, architect; TVA Forestry Division; masseuse Patsy Canterbury; the Christian Science Reading Room; and the North Alabama Business College. Over the years some businesses moved out, with others taking their place. The *Huntsville Times* moved to its new quarters on Memorial Parkway in 1956, and with its namesake business gone, the downtown building began to lose other tenants as well. City directories in the 1960s recorded an increasing number of vacancies.

There is a certain mystique about newspapers, whose business is colorful stories. Many of us retain romantic images of newspapering from movies: heart-racing headlines on papers rolling off the presses; a newsboy's call of "Extra! Extra! Read all about it!" In this issue of the *Quarterly*, former *Huntsville Times* editor Pat McCauley recounts his days as a *Times* reporter in the forties and fifties; Patricia Ryan narrates the fascinating saga of J. Emory Pierce, the paper's first editor and the man responsible for the Huntsville Daily Times Building; Randy Schrimsher describes how it feels to buy a big building on his way home for lunch; and Linda Allen discusses the construction history that made the Times Building possible.

So enjoy, and "Read all about it!"



From this vantage point, it is easy to see how a sense of verticality was created by placing all the vertical elements in the outer plane and recessing the horizontal panels behind them. The edge piers are wider and their windows more narrow to create a strong feeling of stability at the corners of the building. The absence of a bracketed cornice permits a clean, crisply finished top. Photograph by Scott McLain

The Times of the Times Building

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

The 1920s were years of prosperity for Huntsville. With the construction of cotton mills at the turn of the century and a proliferation of smaller manufacturing businesses, Huntsville finally succeeded in escaping the stranglehold that the Civil War and Reconstruction years had clamped on the town. The official 1920 population of Huntsville was 8,000, but the effective population swelled to more than 20,000 when the residents of the surrounding mill villages were included; and during the 1920s, the population of Huntsville proper increased by forty-four percent.

This economic stability, complemented by a steady population growth, created a full-fledged building boom as confidence in the future of Huntsville soared. During 1926 and 1927 some \$10 million in building permits were issued forcing even the *Birmingham News* to speculate that Huntsville was second only to that city in building activity in the state. The Terry-Hutchens and Huntsville Daily Times buildings, the Russel Erskine Hotel, the Randolph Avenue high school (now the Annie C. Merts Center), and the first building of the Huntsville Hospital were some of the major projects constructed during the second half of the decade. Streets were paved and extended, automobile suburbs were platted, utilities were improved, new houses were erected, and a country club was established.

So certain were local businessmen that Huntsville would continue to prosper and become a major metropolitan center that they deemed it necessary to erect, for the first time, skyscrapers in downtown Huntsville. Both the Times Building and the Russel Erskine Hotel were built to twelve floors, a height that was not exceeded during the city's more extraordinary booms of the 1950s, '60s and '80s.

A set of construction photographs of the Huntsville Daily Times Building documents the stages of construction beginning with the wooden forms for the first floor columns in 1926 and ending with the building's completion at twelve stories

in 1928. It was a very modern building for its date designed in the latest style by one of the most successful architectural firms in the Southeast to house the offices and printing presses of a Huntsville newspaper.

J. Emory Pierce, founder, editor, and president of the *Huntsville Daily Times*, hired the architectural firm of R. H. Hunt Company of Chattanooga to design the newspaper's new home. A crude drawing of a ten-story building, similar in scheme to the present structure but topped by a traditional bracketed cornice and lacking any definition on the elevations, appeared in the *Times* in 1925; however, this drawing displays none of the elegance of the completed structure, which suggests that the Hunt company might have been commissioned after the basic configuration was set.

The architect Benjamin Hunt was frequently in Huntsville during 1925 and 1926 to oversee the construction of the Terry-Hutchens Building and the new Randolph Avenue and Councill schools for the city board of education. Pierce may have engaged Hunt to design the Times Building because he was impressed with these projects that Hunt already had underway.

The Hunt Company was the premier southern architectural firm of the early 20th



This proposal for the Times Building was published in 1925. The basic scheme is similar to the constructed building, but the built design was greatly refined using terra cotta ornament to emphasize continuous piers; the dated, overhanging cornice was eliminated; and two additional floors increased the height. Huntsville Daily Times, 28 June 1925



This photograph, circa 1927, shows the concrete framework of the Times Building going up. The piers and floor slabs were poured one story at a time. A pile of brick is ready for the masons to begin infill of the exterior walls. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, Department of Archives, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville

century with literally hundreds of executed commissions spread from Oklahoma to Florida. In Alabama alone, some thirty-five structures have been identified as works of the Hunt office. Reuben Harrison Hunt, Ben's much older brother, began practicing architecture in 1886 in Chattanooga where he founded the firm bearing his name. He made a specialty of church architecture although he also had an extensive practice in institutional buildings and colleges. The number of buildings designed by the firm for Huntsville—nine are known—is representative of its prolific production for cities both large and small across the South. Of these nine local commissions, seven were actually erected; the Van Valkenburg Block at the northeast corner of Jefferson and Clinton streets, the downtown First Baptist Church (demolished), and Temple B'nai Sholom are earlier Hunt designs that date from the 1890s. R. H. Hunt died in 1937 and Benjamin Hunt died in 1961.

The Huntsville Daily Times Building consists of a twelve-story tower set in one corner of a much larger two-story base, which housed the newspaper pressroom and offices and several stores. Between the publication of the 1925 drawing and the start of construction, the building was restyled with the very current Art Deco ornament. The Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925 is generally considered the impetus for Art Deco design in this country. The aim of Art Deco designers was to create a contemporary, non-historically derived body of ornament that would be stylistically appropriate to the burgeoning machine age. The result was that what we now label Art Deco architecture actually consisted of traditional buildings ornamented with Art Deco motifs, because the Art Deco period produced few structural or spatial innovations.

In the case of Art Deco skyscrapers, the form and technology of the building itself was little different from the form that had evolved in the early years of the century in response to the changing conditions of American life. The urbanization of the United States following the Civil War had brought with it a demand for large blocks of office space, a demand that was accompanied by steadily escalating land costs. The obvious solution was to build upward, layer upon layer of identical floors set on

a relatively small plot of land. The necessary technology for such a scheme required elevators, telephones and electric lights, central heating and high pressure water systems, and of course, the steel framework on which to hang the tiers of offices, and secure foundations to support the superstructure. Chicago was the logical site for these elements to merge because the great fire of 1871 had devastated the commercial core and made rebuilding the business district a top priority. The opportunities inherent in the Chicago situation attracted a multitude of architects, contractors, and entrepreneurs who recognized an enormous market for their services. By 1890 Chicago had produced a multi-story building with an all steel frame and curtain walls, which means that the structural frame rather than masonry walls carried the weight of the building. The exterior walls could be hung on the frame and served primarily to exclude weather and define the building's appearance; because the outer walls no longer supported even their own weight, they could, theoretically, be all glass.

Although the structural problems of the high rise building were resolved relatively quickly, the proper exterior appearance for tall structures proved to be a much thornier issue. Architects grappled with the question of façade design: Should the height be minimized by stacking up horizontal floors and various motifs one upon another? What historical periods were most suitable to ransack for stylistic elements to adorn these tall buildings? It was Louis Sullivan, a Chicago architect, who most thoroughly addressed these concerns and pronounced that skyscrapers should express their height honestly by accentuating the vertical components. He went on to proclaim that the base should be ornamental with a well-defined entrance, that the repetitive floors of offices should appear identical because they shared a similar function, and that the top should form a decorative crown with pronounced overhanging cornice to stop the upward movement and declare the building terminated. And while many architects continued to dress skyscrapers in historical garb (Gothic being considered particularly appropriate because of its prominent verticality), Sullivan created a personal style of ornament, based on sensuous plant forms, that could have led away from the recycling of past styles that dominated late

19th-century architectural design. However, Sullivan's designs, his executed works, and his writings had little impact on his profession, and most skyscrapers during the first decades of the last century continued to masquerade in various historical garb.

Consequently by 1925 when the ideas of the Paris Exposition were being disseminated in this country through professional and popular journals, the form and structure of the skyscraper had been set, and architects had only

to apply the new Art Deco ornamentation to the existing building form in order to be *au courant*. It became fashionable to omit the traditional projecting cornice in favor of a cleanly cut top embellished with panels of low relief or contrasting materials. The emphasis on non-historical forms and ornaments, emphatically vertical compositions, and precise, machined designs were further influenced by the movement towards modernity, an attempt to bring architecture into line with industrial design where streamlining and sleek, aerodynamic forms were gaining ascendancy.

To achieve its effect, Art Deco decoration relied on sumptuous ornament, lush textures incorporating a variety of materials, and color. The ornament itself tended toward rectilinear patterns, such as chevrons, zigzags, frets, fluting and reeding, or geometrical curves, the latter frequently assuming the shape of curvilinear plant forms. In any case, such exterior ornament on skyscrapers appeared predominantly as low relief panels set between windows, along the base and around the entrance, at the tops of the continuous piers, and in fantastically lavish public lobbies.

The Huntsville Daily Times Building displays unbroken vertical piers of brick rising from the base to the attic, and even beyond in the center of each elevation. This



The Times Building concludes with a wide, recessed band of terra cotta, repeating the geometric pattern of the tower spandrels in an expanded design. The brickwork of the piers subtly changes at this level to accentuate a string of three-dimensional terra cotta chevrons. At the extreme top a final row of swags repeats the motif of the base spandrels. Photograph by Scott McLain

verticality is further accented by the placement of the spandrels—those horizontal panels separating the windows of one floor from the windows of the floor above—which are recessed behind the plane of the piers. The tower itself is faced with a buff-colored brick, while the spandrels, two-story base, and attic level are finished with a cream-colored terra cotta. The repeated spandrel panels of the tower are identical, each having an abstract design of geometric shapes. The spandrels of the base also are identical but are more classical in derivation, featuring a swag over the monogram of HDT, for *Huntsville Daily Times*. The recessed, arched entrances facing Greene and Holmes streets are framed by pairs of magnificent eagles, each gracefully emerging from the terra cotta.

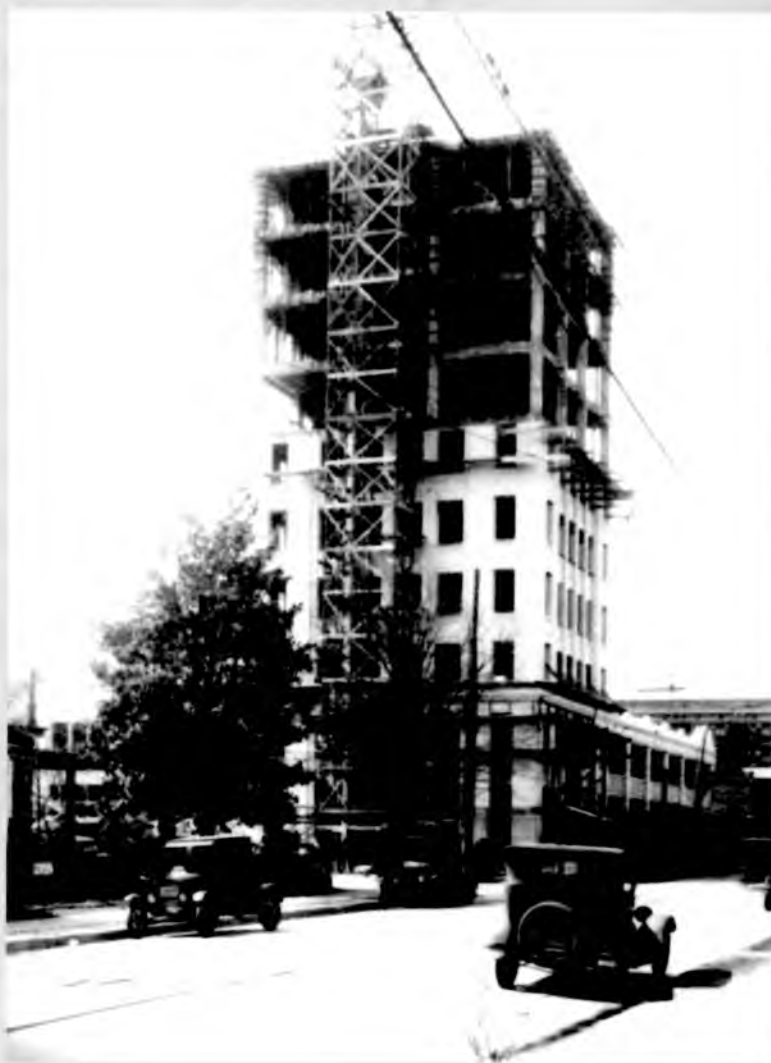
Brick, stone, and glazed architectural terra cotta comprised the most frequent combination of exterior building materials employed for Art Deco skyscrapers. Terra cotta is a versatile material that can be produced to any design, can be colored, and is easier than stonework to install. Basically terra cotta is manufactured from clay much like brick, but is hand-molded, cast into hollow blocks, and fired at temperatures higher than those used for brick (2,000 to 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit). For large designs, it is formed into numerous small components which are assembled on the building itself, much like a jigsaw puzzle. The formed architectural terra cotta pieces were finished with a hard glaze, which created a smooth surface that could easily be cleaned of the grime that accumulated on buildings when coal was the principal heating fuel.

Terra cotta first came into common use in the United States during the 1870s in Chicago. While rebuilding after the 1871 fire, Chicago architects were searching for a material that was cheap, fireproof and non-corrosive. Terra cotta, which had all the requisite properties, first became popular as a substitute for stone ornament because it was much cheaper to produce and install and because a scarcity of qualified stone cutters had made true stonework increasingly impractical. Early terra cotta pieces were produced in a natural red or clay color, which made them ideal replacements for brownstone trim; but after 1890, buff or cream gradually became

the more popular color for terra cotta work. Multicolored terra cotta became fashionable at the turn of the century; an example of this glazed and tinted terra cotta ornament can be seen today in the first story arch of the Law Library on the east side of the Courthouse Square in Huntsville. The lush polychrome effects possible with terra cotta made it a natural for executing Art Deco designs; and the ease of turning out quantities of identical pieces made it perfect for those repeat elements, such as the spandrels on the Times Building. However, terra cotta also functioned as a flat surface material as seen on the two-story base of the Times Building where it appears as simple rectangular cladding tiles. After 1930 the popularity of terra cotta began to wane, and today there are only a few terra cotta companies in operation in the United States.

The construction photographs reveal one other interesting feature of the Times Building; it has a framework of reinforced concrete rather than steel. Serious experiments with concrete construction had begun in the United States in the 1870s, but it was not until engineers discovered how to place steel reinforcing rods within the concrete beams and slabs that it could be safely used for horizontal as well as vertical framing members. The first American skyscraper to be erected of reinforced concrete was in Cincinnati in 1902/03. The photographs of the Times building clearly illustrate the process whereby wooden forms were erected for each of the piers and the floors, one story at a time, then filled with poured cement. To construct the exterior walls, the spaces between the concrete piers and floors were filled with brick, which was finished with thick coats of plaster on the inside. On the exterior, the tower walls were faced with a buff brick while the base received a cladding of flat and molded glazed terra cotta tiles.

In November of 1926 the *Times* reported in a gush of self-promotion that “Hundreds and thousands of people have visited the site of the new ten-story (sic) office building for the *Daily Times*. . .since the actual work of construction began more than a month ago....It is the wonder of many how the workmen can do the job, but when it is considered that the South’s leading firm of architects, R. H.



Ten floors have been poured, and while work on the concrete frame continues at the top, the brick and terra cotta work have been completed on the first five stories. And they did it without a giant crane. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville

Hunt Co., of Chattanooga, are on the job and that Earl Cline, contractor of Birmingham with A. F. Hill of Huntsville as superintendent are manning it, the work is easy and proceeds like clock work.” However, it was a year and a half before the concrete framework was completed. Again the *Times* reported, “Finished pouring the 12th floor of our magnificent 12-story office building home today and next week the columns will start up for the completion of the story and the roof....”¹

The Times Building was opened in December 1928 and served as the newspaper’s headquarters until 1956 when the staff moved to a new building on South Memorial Parkway, where the paper remains today. The building had been sold to a private investor in the 1930s who retained possession of it, even as occupancy dwindled, until 1973 when Madison County purchased it for use as the courthouse annex. In May 1984 the structure again changed hands, being purchased at public auction by local businessman Randy Schrimsher. Plans to convert the tower into luxury condominiums, one per floor, were thwarted by the impracticality of bringing the structure into compliance with residential building codes; as a result, the majority of the space has remained empty for twenty years.



This illustration of the Times Building appears in a “Souvenir Folder of Huntsville, Alabama” that was mailed from Huntsville in September 1928, three months before the Times moved into its new home. Courtesy Huntsville Madison County Public Library

The first necessity of historic preservation is to keep an older building standing until it has an opportunity to become historic. This often requires allowing a building to remain vacant, but secured, during those periods when it is unappreciated and out-of-date, even though taxes and maintenance still must be paid. The usual impulse is to demolish it; but left standing and protected, its day will come again. A new generation will discover charm in those historic buildings that their parents considered dated and worn out. Until then, it takes a special person to recognize the value of a building past its first prime, and it also takes a person willing to tie up money that offers no immediate financial return. Downtown Huntsville has lost many of its significant 19th- and 20th-century structures through short-sightedness on the part of both individuals and government agencies. But some buildings have survived. The Huntsville Daily Times Building was fortunate to have found its angel in Randy Schrimsher. Randy sensed its historic significance, its importance in connecting us with our city's past, and was willing to take on the responsibility of becoming its caretaker (although perhaps unintentionally at first). And because of Randy's appreciation for the Times Building, Huntsville will continue to be enhanced by the diversity and history that the Times Building contributes to the character that distinguishes our downtown and makes it a special place.

Notes

- 1 *Huntsville Weekly Times*, 4 November 1926, p.4; *Huntsville Weekly Times*, 10 May 1928, p.4.



J. Emory Pierce is pictured with his wife Nannie, son William, and younger daughter Nelrose. Daughter Nancy is remembered as a popular piano teacher for many years. Courtesy Patrick McCauley

J. Emory Pierce: The Man for the Times

PATRICIA H. RYAN

Many longtime Huntsville residents remember J. Emory Pierce, the colorful and controversial editor of the *Huntsville Times* and builder of the Times Building. To his admirers he was a man of “vision-faith-action,” the inscription on his tombstone. To others he was simply a con artist, and stories abound of his deceptive, yet creative, financial dealings. Whether all these tales are true or not, it was hard to be ambivalent about the flamboyant Mr. Pierce.

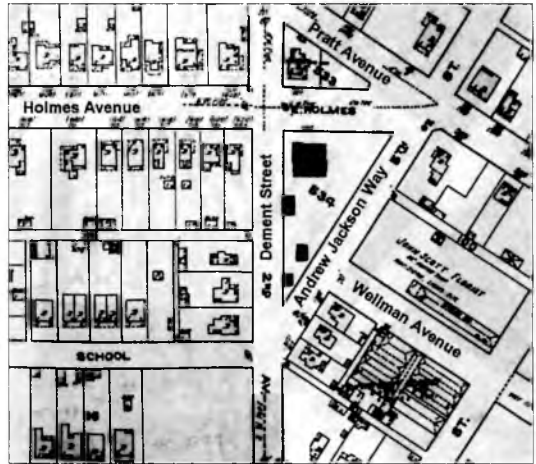
Jacob Emory Pierce was born in Georgia on December 20, 1880, the son of Washington Wyly Pierce (1851-1896) and his wife Mary Ann Orr (1854-1938). The family lived in Texas before moving to Huntsville about 1894. Striking in appearance, he was described as “a fine specimen of physical manhood with a heavy suit of black hair hanging about his shoulders and [swinging a] cane. He would attract attention on the streets or in any crowd, and would compel from strangers the inquiry, who is that man?” Around 1906 he married Nannie Heflin (1876-1953).¹

According to an undated but most likely 1925 *Huntsville Times* article by Colonel Nathan M. Rowe, with information presumably supplied by Pierce, he began his newspaper career in 1894 as a carrier for the *Huntsville Daily Tribune* at the salary of \$2.50 per month. As he advanced, he served as collector, bookkeeper, business manager, city editor, and editor before leaving the *Tribune* to start his own paper. On March 23, 1910, the first issue of the *Huntsville Daily Times* was published, with Nannie H. Pierce the sole owner and J. Emory Pierce the editor and general manager. He later wrote of its humble beginning in “an old ram shackly, leaking wooden structure.” For many years, running the newspaper was certainly a family affair. In 1925 for instance, Pierce’s sister Arvie was society editor and head of the accounting department; his brother Berry (sic) was the manager of circulation, and his son William was sports editor and assistant to the advertising manager.²

Like many entrepreneurs of his time, Pierce engaged in varied business activities and at one time was involved in fifty-two different enterprises. Due to a lack of local source material, a thorough examination of his sundry ventures is not possible. However, a study of available court documents reveals that the Pierces were certainly no strangers to the judicial process having been involved in almost three dozen cases. Some cases sought judgments against Pierce, some involved delinquent ad valorem taxes, and others were dismissed. Unfortunately, haphazard storage over time has left many court records missing or

incomplete, but existing volumes provide some insight. Early in his career, he and his brother N. L. operated the Pierce Coal Company (also called N. L. Pierce & Co.) in Huntsville while Pierce Brothers & Whitaker sold coal, coke and wood in Fayetteville, Tennessee. In 1910 their supplier sued for payment of fifteen carloads of coal, which Pierce claimed were only partially delivered. In 1916 he owed for “one talking machine, known as deluxe 1914 model.” In both cases the outcome is unknown. The most serious charge involved misrepresenting himself as a government officer in the sale of Fourth Liberty Loans during World War I. He was acquitted of this “ridiculous and absurd charge” and noted the jury in this “political persecution case” was out only four and one-quarter minutes.³

Befitting his self-proclaimed stature in the community, Pierce wanted to create a distinctive home for his family. He selected the triangular plot at Five Points that fronted 200 feet on the south side of Holmes Avenue and was bounded on the east



This 1921 Sanborn map shows the Five Points area with Pierce's new house being the dark rectangle in Block 534; today the house site is occupied by Tenders, and the BP station sits in what was Pierce's front yard. Outbuildings, including a garage, are located south of the main house.



The east wall of the house and porch appears to be under construction around an earlier Victorian structure. According to local legend, Pierce did indeed build his rock castle around the clapboard house. When the mortgage holder on the frame building demanded payment, Pierce reportedly denied its existence, proudly pointing to his new residence.

by Fifth Street (now Andrew Jackson Way) and on the west by Second Avenue (now Dement Street), which he assembled from three parcels between 1906 and 1908. The last tract he acquired by declaring, “(I) hereby give notice that I am in adverse possession of (it),” an unconventional way to pass title.* The consideration paid for one of Pierce’s tracts indicates the presence of a house, and the 1913 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows a modest two-story frame dwelling with a bay on each side. What Pierce envisioned was something entirely different—a two-story house with a three-story tower and walls composed of stones of varying kinds and sizes

set in concrete. Known locally as the “wedding cake house,” the “rock castle,” or “Pierce’s folly,” it was certainly a departure from the Colonial Revival and bungalow styles then in fashion. It seems likely that he incorporated at least a portion of the older house in his new one. By superimposing the footprint of the 1913 house over that of the stone house as shown on later Sanborn maps, it is apparent that part of the west wall and window bay is shared by both houses. Written on his 1921 ad valorem assessment sheet dated December 1920 is “one ten-room residence improvements remodel still [ongoing],” so 1920/21 seems a logical date for its construction.⁴

*The adverse possession volume dates from 1893 to 1929 and contains a mere thirty-five claims.



The Pierce home and outbuildings as seen when looking westward from the intersection of Holmes Avenue and Andrew Jackson Way. Courtesy Huntsville Madison County Public Library

Once his home was completed he could focus on an even bigger dream—constructing the tallest building in town to be located at the southwest corner of East Holmes Avenue and Greene Street to house his newspaper. Pierce first bought the property in 1906 but lost it through foreclosure six years later; he purchased it again in 1919. To finance part of the project the Times Building Company was incorporated in late December 1926 with a capital stock of \$100,000 (1,000 shares of \$100 each). Nannie Pierce owned 998 shares; J. E. and William H. Pierce, his son, each owned one share. A special edition of the *Times* published June 25, 1925, announced his plans. While the actual newspaper could not be located, xeroxed portions of it provide insight. A preliminary drawing showed a ten-story building topped with a wide cornice supported by brackets and “J. E. Pierce” and “The Huntsville Daily Times” displayed prominently above the entrances. The design was further refined and the building expanded to eleven floors by the time construction started. Legend relates that the elevators had already been ordered when Pierce learned of plans for the twelve-story Russel Erskine Hotel. Another floor was added to match



The Pierce house, viewed from the corner of Holmes Avenue and Dement Street, showing the light standards on the fence posts and one of the concrete and stone benches. Courtesy Escoe B. Henley

the height of the hotel, and today the top floor of the Times Building is accessible only by staircase.⁵

Two Pierce “stories” are told involving the building’s construction. The first relates to the elevators. Having delayed payment to the Otis Company until the elevators were safely installed and the building almost, if not altogether, completed, Pierce said the company could take back its elevators, but he would sue for any damage to the building incurred during the removal process. Thus he got free elevators.

The second anecdote concerns the marble panels in the entry lobby and the marble wainscoting in the elevator lobbies of each upper floor. Pierce met the delivery train at the depot, unloaded the marble, and somehow got the bill of lading without signing to show he had received it. When the marble company, after many pleas, came for its money, he denied having received any marble from them. There is likely

some truth to this tale as the Gray (Grey) Knox Marble Company of Knox County, Tennessee, filed a mechanics lien on the building for \$4,532.13 plus interest.⁶

The Times Building, located at what Pierce referred to as Holmes Avenue and Metropolitan Avenue (Greene Street), was completed in December 1928. Calling it “Greater Huntsville’s biggest and best asset,” he wrote of its importance and layout:

You can see the Daily Times building for miles and miles. It can be seen from any direction and on the installation of our giant beacon on top, the equipment now being en route to Huntsville, the rays from this 10,000,000-candle power light can be seen on clear nights as far as 100 miles, reach across as they will Birmingham, Chattanooga, Nashville and going halfway to Memphis. This means that on dark and cloudy nights the powerful electrical illumination will focus 40 and 50 miles under all conditions. Just another means of attracting the outside world to this rapidly growing and prosperous community...

Forgetting the struggles of the past for a moment let us usher you thru our plant: first you enter the spacious marble corridors, banking department and business office to the west of the Holmes Street entrance, circulation department to the south of the Metropolitan Avenue entrance, advertising department in the west corridor which leads south to the spacious pressroom, stereotyping and mailing departments. Immediately west of the south corridor you go down the marble stairway into the mammoth auditorium, the largest in any private or public building in the South. Here you find other useful departments of the building itself, all floors served by the finest multi-voltage control Otis elevators.

After the first floor accommodations you have the comforts and conveniences of the second floor which includes the composing room, editorial, news, social, president’s office, director’s room, private office of the editor and general manager, city room and other modern newspaper depart-

ments, including the Associated Press. The first floor will also have the classified, social receiving desks, private telephone exchange connecting all departments, information and other aids to quick public service.⁷

Unfortunately, Pierce's dream was short-lived.

The severity of the Great Depression coupled with Pierce's shaky finances caused him to lose everything. In early June 1931 the *Times* went into receivership and was operated by Shelby Fletcher. In October the newspaper, printing properties, and a Dodge sedan were auctioned for \$44,350. Pierce's son William dropped out of the bidding at \$35,000. Trustee Charles F. Lovell sold the building to I. B. Tigrett, T. H. Temple and Littell J. Rust. The deed, a lengthy and complicated document, concerned the default on First Mortgage Gold Bonds in the aggregate amount of \$200,000.⁸

Pierce's downslide continued and he soon ran afoul of the federal government. By 1935 he was publisher of the *Huntsville Daily Register* which was established December 8, 1931, by his son William. Emory Pierce sold advertising to farmers and others in West Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi for a special TVA edition promoting rural electrification for their counties. The government and the farmers saw things differently. They claimed Pierce fraudulently represented himself as a government official selling TVA stock units to secure electricity for their areas. Only after the transactions were completed and they examined their folded receipts did they discover they had in fact purchased advertising, not stock. In September Pierce was arrested in Winchester, Tennessee, after complaints by about twenty Franklin County farmers, and he immediately labeled the charges "malicious, ridiculous, and libelous." The trial took place in federal court in Memphis in December. Twenty-two witnesses testified for the prosecution, all claiming they were duped; the defense called some thirty persons to dispute this or attest to his good character. E. H. Roach, alternately referred to as Pierce's secretary, chauffeur, and *paper rack*, was also charged. Roach claimed that beginning in August 1934 he and Pierce averaged 800 miles per week in Mississippi and Tennessee selling advertising. He

acted as a paper rack by holding up copies of the *Register* for customers to examine. Pierce took the stand for six hours and maintained he sold ads ranging from \$10 to \$300 to some 3,500 to 5,000 persons in 92 counties. Under cross-examination he admitted he had been detained in at least five Tennessee counties as well as five or six in Mississippi over complaints by subscribers who were dissatisfied “for some reason which I do not know.” Incredulously, Pierce’s attorney moved for acquittal on the grounds that the Tennessee Valley Authority act was unconstitutional and therefore it was not illegal to pose as its agent since it was not a federal agency. District Judge John D. Martin denied the motion, and the jury convicted both men on seventeen counts of the twenty-count indictment. Pierce was sentenced to twelve years in federal prison and fined \$8,500. Roach received a five-year sentence with a \$3,400 fine. It is not known if the case was appealed or how much time either man served.⁹

In 1936 the Pierce house was sold at auction to satisfy indebtedness outstanding on a mortgage. Subsequently the Cumberland Presbyterian Church purchased it for their meetinghouse. The northeast 100 feet was parceled out to Gulf Oil in 1939 while the house was sold to Mutual Savings Life Insurance Company in 1942. According to city directories it served as a funeral home until Pure Oil bought it in 1950. Regrettably this unique architectural treasure was razed for a gas station.¹⁰



The sign atop this remnant of wall in Five Points reads: “This rock wall is the last remaining of a beautiful wall around Mr. J. Emory Pierce’s ‘CASTLE’ on Holmes Street that distinguished this neighborhood in east Huntsville. The wall matched the structure of the home.” (Sign erected by Coca-Cola.) Photograph by Linda Allen.

Pierce later owned and operated the Pierce Newspaper Publishers Service, a national advertising business. The southeastern headquarters were located in Memphis with branch offices in Houston, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Seattle.¹¹

Pierce died in Houston of a heart attack on September 12, 1952. Services were held in Huntsville at the First Baptist Church with burial in Maple Hill Cemetery. As a testament to his long standing in the community, ninety-five of the town's most prominent citizens served as honorary pallbearers.¹²

The legacy of J. Emory Pierce is certainly his beautiful Times Building, a hub of downtown activity for many years until suburbia began to draw businesses away. Now, with a sensitive restoration underway it will once again be a vibrant presence on the Huntsville skyline.

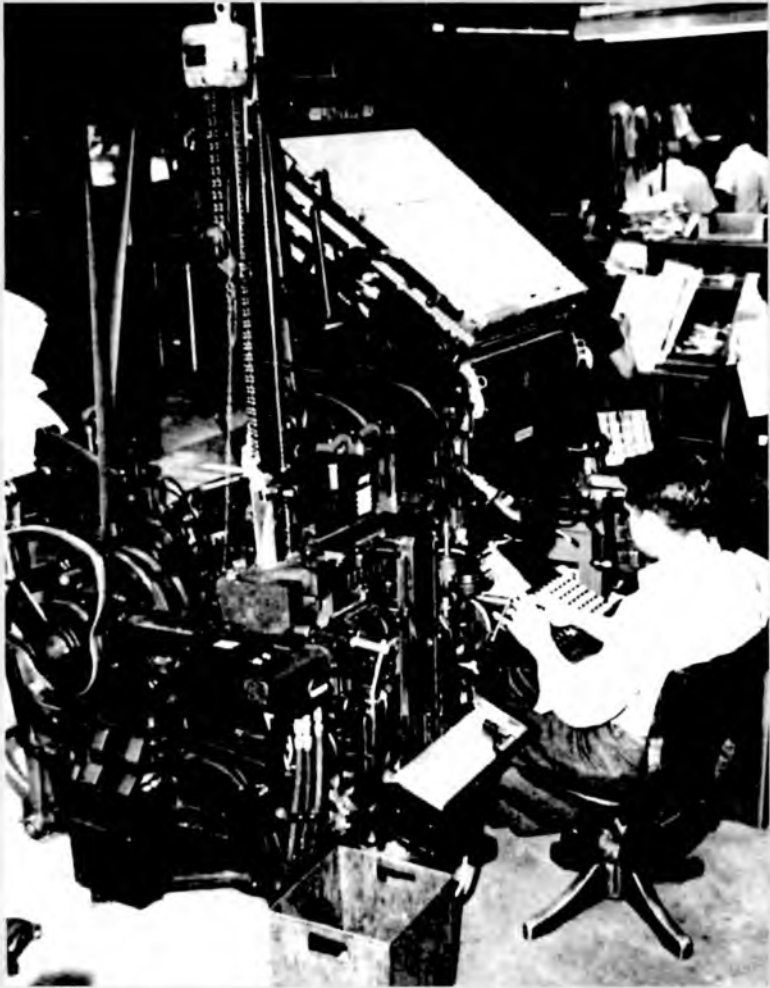
Notes

- 1 Maple Hill Cemetery, Huntsville, Alabama, Block D; "J. Emory Pierce's Rites on Monday," *Huntsville Times*, 14 September 1952, p.1; Nathan M. Rowe, "Col. N.M. Rowe Writes Memoirs of Newspapers in Huntsville," *Huntsville Daily Times*, undated; 1910 Census of Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Rowe; J.E. Pierce, "The Daily Times Is Now In Its 12-Story Home Plus Modern Plant," *Huntsville Daily Times*, 18 December 1928, p.4; *Huntsville Daily Times*, 28 June 1925.
- 3 "J. Emory Pierce's Rites," p.2; Indexes to Criminal, Chancery and Probate Court Cases, Madison County, Alabama; Circuit Court Case #410, Madison County, Alabama; Circuit Court Case #1233, Madison County, Alabama; "Editor Pierce Vindicated," *Huntsville Daily Times*, 3 April 1919, p.1.
- 4 Deed Book 94, p.458; Deed Book 95, p.395; Adverse Possession Book 1, p.18, Madison County, Alabama; Insurance Maps of Huntsville, Alabama, (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1913), sheet 13; Huntsville, Alabama, (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1928), sheet 12; 1921 Madison County Tax Blanks, Beat 1, vol. P, not numbered.

- 5 Deed Book 95, p.170; Deed Book 105, p.243; Deed Book 120, p.47, Madison County, Alabama; Incorporation Book 3, p.117, Madison County, Alabama; *Huntsville Daily Times*, 25 June 1925.
- 6 Mechanics Lien Book 3, p. 41, Madison County, Alabama.
- 7 Pierce, p.4.
- 8 “Henry Johnston Buys The Times On Bid Of \$44,350,” *Huntsville Daily Times*, 11 October 1931, p.1; Deed Book 139, p.672-686.
- 9 “Pierce Makes Bond Of \$2,000,” *Huntsville Times*, 10 September 1935, p.3; “Pierce Trial Nears Close,” *Huntsville Times*, 19 December 1935, p.1; “Pierce Motion Is Overruled,” *Huntsville Times*, 18 December 1935, p.1; “Pierce, Roach Found Guilty,” *Huntsville Times*, 20 December 1935, p.1; “Lawyers Argue Pierce Motion,” *Huntsville Times*, 26 December 1935, p. 1; “Pierce Given 12-Year Term,” *Huntsville Times*, 20 January 1936, p.1.
- 10 Deed Book 148, p.194; Deed Book 148, p. 365; Deed Book 152, p.192; Deed Book 158, p. 244, Madison County Alabama; Huntsville, Alabama, City Directory, (Charleston: Baldwin Directory Co., 1947), p.547; Deed Book 195, p.215, Madison County, Alabama.
- 11 “J. Emory Pierce’s Rites,” p. 1.
- 12 “J. Emory Pierce Funeral Is Held,” *Huntsville Times*, 15 September 1952, p.4.



This rare view of Pierce's garden to the south of his house reveals that he applied his stone-and-concrete theme to even the plant stands and benches. Courtesy Escoe B. Henley



This monster of a machine was one of the six Linotypes employed by the Times to set type when the paper was located downtown. Courtesy Fred Johnston

Hot Times in the Old Downtown

PATRICK McCAULEY

A low-frequency hum rumbled from the south wing of the twelve-story tower, imperceptible perhaps to office workers stirring about on upper levels, but a dramatic signal to staffers on the second floor that another edition of the *Huntsville Times* was on the roll. From 1928—through depression, war, and launch of the Space Age—the newspaper was published in the spectacularly handsome Huntsville Times Building at Greene Street and Holmes Avenue in bustling downtown Huntsville.

Recorded there was America’s economic meltdown, the tragedies and triumphs of local boys locked in democracy’s titanic struggle against totalitarianism, and the technological revolution that was transforming Huntsville and the world around it. “It’s a pretty good little country daily,” a journalist from New Orleans had said when he was recruiting me for a reporter’s job in a place I had to look up on the map. My surprise and delight soared as I approached that buff and white edifice, which ascended into the crisp autumn air, where I would begin my career in newspapers and my love affair with Huntsville.

By 1949, the *Huntsville Times* was a fixture, a well-founded institution in this city. Established in 1910, it had wandered a shaky route to a couple of locations in downtown Huntsville; but by 1928 it had prospered to the point where a monument to its prominence was appropriate. J. Emory Pierce, founder, proprietor, editor, publisher and promoter, undertook the ambitious task.

But one need not have climbed to the twelfth floor on that bright day in 1928 to see the dark clouds on the horizon. No sooner had the *Times* staff settled into their swank new quarters and cranked up the new Goss rotary press, than the stock market crashed. Pierce’s ambitious plans for publishing and real estate crumbled. He was bankrupt, defaulting on \$200,000 of construction bonds. The sparkling new

building was taken over by the Bond Holders Protective Association for \$115,000, later to be sold to the Proctor family of Bridgeport. On October 10, 1931, the newspaper, new presses and all, was sold at auction to Victor Hanson, publisher of the *Birmingham News*, (who was represented at the auction by Henry P. Johnston) for the price of \$44,350 plus assumption of \$15,000 of notes and other obligations. For the next quarter-century, the *Times* would be a tenant in its own namesake.

After the transfer of ownership, Henry P. Johnston of the *Birmingham News* was appointed publisher, and Jack Langhorne, also of the *News*, became advertising manager. Johnston returned to Birmingham in 1934. Langhorne became business manager, later general manager, and eventually publisher after the *Times* moved to Memorial Parkway. Reese T. Amis took over as editor in 1931; he brought many years of metropolitan newspaper experience—in Nashville, Atlanta, Miami, Memphis—and classy educational credentials—Vanderbilt and Yale—to the task at hand. Amis held the position of editor until after the paper's move to the Parkway in 1956.

A new era at the *Huntsville Daily Times* began. Actually, the new era began on November 5, 1931, when the name of the paper was changed to the *Huntsville Times*. The logic for the change was that the name Pierce had given it, the *Huntsville Daily Times*, was a misnomer. From its inception, the newspaper was published Monday through Friday in the afternoons and on Sunday mornings, but not on Saturdays. Thus, it was not a daily publication. There was yet more confusion about the name because there once had been the *Huntsville Weekly Times*, and later generations of readers were to assume that the *Huntsville Times* had evolved, as did many American newspapers, from weekly to daily publication schedules. However, the *Huntsville Weekly Times* was a promotional gimmick designed by Pierce to sell a subscription for home delivery of one paper a week, on Thursdays, to readers who could not afford to subscribe for six days during the farm depression in the 1920s that foreshadowed the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Despite its plush new quarters, the *Huntsville Times* then was a sparse journalistic

enterprise. Circulation in 1931 was 2,600, if its founding proprietor's figures could be trusted. And they could be, for Cliff Wilkerson who was the press room foreman recalled in a conversation on March 10, 2005, that the initial press run in the new



This arched window over one of the entries dominated the second floor office that once housed the tape-punch operators and the AP machines. Photograph by Linda Allen

plant was 3,000. Advertising lineage, the lifeblood of a newspaper, was fewer than 20,000 inches a month in 1931 before the transfer of ownership, and it showed no improvement in 1932 and 1933.

The first week's payroll under the new management listed fewer than twenty-five employees and totaled \$378. From the outset, T.A. Winston was composing room foreman, and Leo Brown was chief compositor. A. L. (Smitty) Smith joined the organization in 1932 to direct a group of twenty-five carriers and distributors

who were not employees but independent contractors. Roy Buchanan was hired in December 1931 as advertising manager, bringing that staff to three. By 1934, Mrs. Ruth Kelly, who had been secretary to Secretary-Treasurer W.P. Nicholson, was appointed to the new position of national advertising manager. And Eleanor Hutchens, who in future years would teach English at UAH, recalls times in those early days when she was the only reporter.

Over the next twenty years, circulation rose steadily. It was 16,000 in 1951, and 20,000 by the time the paper moved to its present location. Advertising, too, grew with the increasing prosperity of the city in wartime and jumped again with the reactivation of Redstone Arsenal for guided missile development. By 1955, the last full year in the downtown building, advertising lineage regularly exceeded 50,000 inches a month.

So the newspaper I joined as one of three reporters in October 1949 was an efficient and prospering little operation in a magnificent monument to hopes and dreams. There were by then forty names on the payroll, and Reese T. Amis was still the editor. His command post was in the spacious second floor corner office overlooking Greene and Holmes (directly above the insurance agency of John Rodenhauer who soon would be elected to the Huntsville City Council). The sports editor (my New Orleans friend and advocate for employment) worked at a desk in a corner diagonally across the room from the corner occupied by the editor. And desks for the four other writers were in the long narrow room, more like a wide corridor really, extending south and overlooking Greene Street. In the space behind the semicircular window above the entrance, were two tape-punch operators, Mary Belle Smith and Carolyn Hummel, and the Associated Press (AP) machines. It was a neat, compact newsroom, characterized by the incessant ringing of telephones, the clatter of manual typewriters, and those electric marvels of the day, teletypes.

The advertising department occupied the second floor wing overlooking Holmes Avenue and the business office was adjacent to advertising. Beyond the *Times* offices were attorney William Page, destined for the Circuit Court bench, and insurance adjuster Ed Mitchell, whose future was to include serving on the Huntsville City Council and managing the Huntsville International Airport/ Intermodal Center and the Huntsville-Madison County Marina and Port Authority. On the ground floor below all this business activity, Mr. and Mrs. Alva W. Burkett operated the best little sandwich shop in town before they opened Huntsville's first modern bookstore on the ground level of the Russel Erskine Hotel.

A thoroughly modern structure in 1928 when it was completed, the Times Building had steam heat throughout and was comfortable in wintertime, but there was no central air conditioning. In the 1950s, the newspaper corporation installed room air-conditioners in the offices on the second floor which brought some relief but not comfort, and the mechanical departments were sweltering hot for six months of the year.

The press was on the ground floor of the wing south of the tower with the reels holding the rolls of newsprint below in the basement. The roar of the press at full speed was deafening but filtered into the tower as a low-pitched hum. Newsprint storage was in the basement west of the reel room, the whole press area being ventilated through skylights in the roof of the paper storage area.

The composing room was located above the press room and also had skylights. It was teased by breezes wafting through the row of windows facing east that were complemented by a large ventilator fan and another row of windows on the west end. Still it was like an oven. The composing room where text was transformed into lead type was a cacophony of groaning machinery, clanging metal, and gurgling melting pots. The pungent odor of molten lead seeped into the hallways and crept into the elevator shaft. Memory varies on the number of Linotype machines in service there because, fifty years later, surviving operators remember them as being rigged for different purposes: some were tape-fed for “straight matter,” while others were operated manually to set the small agate type used in classifieds, the large 14- to 24-point type for headlines, and the display ads. Consequently, the recollections run from three Linotypes, which is too few, to twelve, which is too many. In a 1985 seventy-fifth anniversary section of the *Times* there is a pre-war photo distinctly showing six Linotype machines. “Doomsday” type, the really big stuff reserved for the end of wars and the Titanic sinking, was kept in separate wood-type cases next to the wall.

You may think a newspaper is a cauldron of excitement; and it is, except then as now, the multiple snippets of information gathered had to be reduced to scheduled routines while leaving some slack to accommodate the unexpected or there would never be a timely press start. The only sure constant is the unexpected. Electronic processing has reduced the clatter and the clutter and eliminated the acrid smell inside a newspaper office, but not the surprise of making it through another edition.

In the old Times Building before computers there was a constant procession between the newsroom and the composing room. Whoever was going at half trot

to the composing room, be it lowly cub or editor-in-chief, would grab the finished copy from the spike on the editor's desk and take it "out back." Whoever was going to the newsroom, printer's devil or foreman, would grab the galley proofs from the hook on the wall and take them "up front." In the shop, as the composing room was called, the copy for ads and news was "set" into lead type which then was assembled with headlines and illustrations and locked together in steel page-forms called chases. On moveable work surfaces called turtles, these forms were rolled to the next production process, stereotyping. There, page-size mats (of a composite that felt like heavy, moist cardboard and rubber) would be laid over the type-filled chase, and under great pressure the mats would pick up every jot and tittle of the type faces and zinc photo cuts. Half-cylindrical lead casts would be made from the mats (which in fact were largely asbestos to prevent flaming when hit by the flow of molten lead) and fitted on the press cylinders, inked, and applied directly to the newsprint. The newsprint, on great rolls weighing up to a ton each, was delicately threaded through the press rollers in a marvelous, mysterious maze that placed printed Page Two behind Page One, and Page Three in front of Page Four.

Two new eight-page units of Goss letterpress were installed in the press annex of Mr. Pierce's Taj Mahal, and they served until the Times moved to the Parkway and converted to offset. I still think it strange, after a lifetime in newspapers, that an eight-page unit will give you sixteen printed pages by the expedient of putting a



The original ornate mailbox still adorns the entrance lobby and receives letters dropped from upper floors. Photograph by Scott McLain

different half-cylindrical page-cast on opposite sides of each cylinder; or, it will print twice as many eight-page impressions in the same amount of time by putting duplicate casts on opposite sides of each cylinder. And those of little faith had only to stand on the sidewalk on Greene Street outside the plate glass wall of the press room and watch the sheets come out. On many a Saturday night, it was the most exciting show in town.

As the week progressed Monday through Thursday, each day's paper increased in size from eight to twelve to sixteen to twenty-four pages, slumping to ten or twelve pages on Friday and rising, sometimes, to thirty-two pages on Sunday. That was full press capacity: one full-page half-cylindrical cast on each side of each cylinder of the two eight-page units.

On the second floor, life was not less complicated. In 1949, four writers in the office facing Greene Street divided labor like this: Bob Axelson, later to become editor of the *Orange (Texas) Leader*, covered Madison County and surrounding counties. Martha Witt Smith (who with Harry Rhett cleared the corpses off the voter registration list in 1947) covered schools and organizations. I covered the city and neighboring cities. We all dabbled in politics and soon would be writing about the rising cadence of activities at Redstone Arsenal. Sara Baker was the society editor, and when her husband was called to active duty during the Korean conflict, Sweetie Eslick took her place. Paul Newman in his corner of Mr. Amis's office was the sports editor and helped Amis edit AP copy. In fact, we all helped edit wire copy when the crunch was on, and we wrote headlines and picture cutlines too.

The process started at 7 A.M. Reporters were out walking the beat by 9:00, back at the desk by 11:00, writing furiously to turn out one or two, six or eight stories by noon, because the press would start at 1 P.M. (if the editorials were finished), in order to put the first couple hundred papers on the day train to Scottsboro. There would be a pause to freshen up the front page emphasizing local news, and the press would hum again. Investigative reporting and feature stories were done in the afternoon for publication on a later day.

No paper was published on Saturday, so Saturdays started at 8 A.M.; but the time clock started at 2 P.M. because city hall and the county courthouse were open until noon. The day ended somewhere around 1 A.M. with the night train to Scottsboro being the controlling factor.

Through the 1930s and World War II, little changed except the faces in the newsroom. There was a succession of replacements among reporters with names like Mimi Sims and W. O. Fritts, remembered decades later for their colorful personalities, and Virgil (Pat) Carrington Jones, known for his passion for antebellum houses. He wrote feature stories on dozens of them in Madison and Limestone counties, and after returning to his home in Richmond, Virginia, he wrote volumes of popular southern history inspired by his sojourn in Alabama and his ramblings into Tennessee. He wrote about the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys that extended over generations and three volumes on *The Civil War at Sea*. The best known of his books, perhaps because they were the basis for an early television series, are *Ranger Mosby* and *Gray Ghosts and Rebel Raiders*. Eventually Pat Jones became the administrative aide to a Virginia congressman, but for the rest of his days he maintained connections with friends in Huntsville, especially his old *Times* colleague Ed Duffy in advertising; and he once regaled the Huntsville Press Club with tales of working in the old Times Building.

After World War II, the staff grew gradually. Will Mickle came on board about 1952 and when Amis retired in 1957, became editor. Paul Newman went to the Scripps Howard paper in San Angelo, Texas, and John Thompson succeeded him as sports editor, later to become a copy editor on the expanding staff at the Parkway location. Mignon Bray was added to the reporting staff, which spilled into the office overlooking Holmes Avenue adjacent to the editor.

It was not all deadlines and drudgery. Amis was not a patient man. He was fair, explicit, kind, courtly, demanding, skeptical, tough-minded, witty, salty, but not patient. In the rush toward deadlines, he would frequently flip his cigar butt or dump his pipe bowl into the overflowing waste paper basket beside his desk, then rush to



Reese T. Amis served as editor of the Huntsville Times from mid-1931 until 1957. Courtesy Louis Amis

the composing room, leaving the resulting blaze to be doused by whoever smelled the smoke. He would correct a reporter's spelling once or twice, but soon would call a repeat offender to the front of his desk and direct him to the great *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary* across the room. Once a young reporter frustrated at his failure to find a word he could not spell, retorted in chagrin, "Well, hell, Mr. Amis. You think the dictionary is never wrong!"

About noon on the first primary election of my tenure, the editor barked at me, "Call some polling places and see how many votes they've got." Among others, I called

New Hope, where the election official responded to my query with another question: "How many you need?"

Until 1952, photos had to be sent to Birmingham to have zinc cuts made for printing. The Fairchild Corporation developed a machine that copied a photo onto plastic that could be stuck directly on a press plate. It expedited photo usage for small papers; but the task was distracting and time consuming. One hectic day, a reporter impatient for a picture to go with his story, grabbed the plastic image and trimmed it himself on the cutting board to fit his space—and sliced his new tie in three.

One Saturday, two huge mountain men appeared in the office. We had seen them a few weeks earlier up on Greene Mountain where Axelson and I had gone for stories about the horrible road conditions, and had achieved immediate results from the

county commission. The appreciative residents wanted to give us each a one-acre bluff lot overlooking the Tennessee River. I like to think it was fastidious ethics that compelled us to decline the sincere offer instead of the remote location, for within a few years those lots were prime building sites, convertible to big bucks.

A daily visitor to the *Times*' little piece of the premises was Fred Esslinger, the building manager. He would stand over the teletypes, intently reading the racing results and that other oddsmaker's scratch sheet, the stock market quotations. Staff

members knew our editor loved the ponies and would make a wager with anybody who thought one horse could run faster than another, and we speculated whether the building manager actually made book up there on the top floor. But we never ascended to the aerie to see, lest the truth destroy an intriguing rumor. Life is a gamble, as no one knew better than cotton farmers dependent on the vagaries of weather; but even they didn't know how great a gamble. Before federal legislation stabilized cotton production and prices and before states monopolized the lottery, local numbers vendors in the lively, segregated business district along Church Street made the spot cotton quotation, printed each day in the "ear" of Page One, the winning number.

In the presidential election of 1952, Senator John Sparkman, a resident of Huntsville and friend of the editor, was nominated to run for vice president with Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois. A man of staunch principles, Amis agonized



A young Patrick McCauley when first working as a reporter for the Huntsville Times in the early 1950s. He later returned to the paper and was appointed executive editor from 1966 to 1985 and editor from 1985 to 1994. Courtesy Patrick McCauley

over his editorial endorsement but opted for General Dwight Eisenhower. The local Democratic establishment was outraged. On the morning after the election, Eisenhower victorious, a coffin bearing an effigy appeared at the entrance of the Times Building. “Burn it,” Amis growled.

Through it all, the *Times* did a creditable job covering Huntsville and surrounding areas during a period of growth and transition. Reese T. Amis, though advancing in age, set a vigorous example for hard work and integrity right up to his retirement soon after the paper moved to Memorial Parkway. While local coverage was its first priority, the *Huntsville Times* recognized its readers’ role and interest in a changing world. That “pretty good little country daily” had moved into a different league.

Eventually, the newspaper grew beyond Mr. Pierce’s boldest dream. A building site on Clinton Avenue across Spragins Street from that rival skyscraper, the Russel Erskine, had been acquired for a new *Times* office, but World War II with its claim on materials and manpower delayed construction. By 1949 word drifting from the front office had it that all the top executives were ready to begin construction except Mr. Amis, whose depression era experience had left him with the conviction that you should not start something until the money was in the bank to finish it. When I left Huntsville in 1954 for graduate school, the debate was still on. Memorial Parkway was an idea whose time was coming, but the site where the *Huntsville Times* now stands was then a bog in a cotton field between Huntsville and the mill villages to the west.

Downtown, all that bustle and the hum of the presses would soon fade away.



The two eagles flanking each doorway are the most imposing architectural ornaments in downtown Huntsville. Photograph by Linda Allen

The Times of My Life

RANDY SCHRIMSHER

Looking at the Huntsville Times Building, I am reminded of an article I once read in a preservation magazine. A man was undertaking his first historic renovation. Daunted by the magnitude of the project and its spiraling cost, the owner resolved to find a manageable solution. He worked on one window at a time. One window per month, twelve windows per year. Eventually, with patience and perseverance, he finished the project. It was good advice for those of us bitten by the preservationist bug, though I never considered myself as the one-window-per-month kind of guy.

My experience with the Times Building began on a sunny May day in 1984. I left my downtown office to walk home for lunch, and my route fortuitously took me by an auction on the corner of Greene and Holmes streets. The Madison County Commission was selling the Times Building, and a smattering of lookers and pickers were spread out waiting for the auctioneer to begin. I thought I would hang around to see what happened. The next thing I knew, I held the high bid—for the bargain sum of \$286,000.

I do not typically engage in spontaneous building purchases, but as a Huntsville native, I was familiar with the history and architecture of the Times Building. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980, it was the first high-rise, Art Deco building in downtown Huntsville, built in the late 1920s to a design by the renowned architectural firm of R. H. Hunt Company of Chattanooga.

J. Emory Pierce wanted a grand building to house operations for his *Huntsville Daily Times* newspaper. He was also a pragmatic man, and the Times was structurally over-designed for the period, employing noncombustible, state-of-the-art fireproofing to protect the heavy presses, chemicals, and giant rolls of paper. The building's floors and ceilings are solid concrete, and the exterior rests on a granite base below walls decorated with cream-colored glazed tiles and bricks. Some of the

terra cotta tiles bear the newspaper's HDT emblem and others, above the building's main entrances, form magnificent eagles in the Art Deco style. Inside the Times, the foyer and all elevator lobbies have dusty rose marble wainscoting with terrazzo and tile floors.

In a quirky testament to Pierce's eccentricities, elevators in the twelve-story tower rise only to the eleventh floor. The story goes that the Times Building, designed with eleven floors, was promoted as Huntsville's tallest high-rise. Once construction was under way, the Russel Erskine developers announced they were building the city's tallest structure with twelve stories. Not to be outdone, Pierce immediately added a twelfth floor, but the Times' elevators were already ordered. So, lift access extends only to the eleventh floor and a flight of steps continues to the twelfth.

The Times Building was not my first venture into historic properties. I was working for my father's construction company in 1980 when I purchased a dilapidated Victorian house in the Old Town Historic District on Walker Avenue. The project led me to drive by the Struve-Hay Building on the southwest corner of Jefferson and Holmes streets. The Victorian building, sadly boarded with plywood, looked like many of downtown's turn-of-the-century buildings in various stages of neglect and disrepair. But, as I drove by the Struve-Hay each day, I saw the building's great bones. Like a smitten young man, I eagerly eyed its architectural details. With my father's help, I purchased the property in 1981 and began its renovation. That job led to more preservation work downtown, and we soon acquired and renovated



One of the terra cotta panels used to separate the windows between floors. This design was used on the two-story base; HDT, for Huntsville Daily Times, is encircled and bedecked with rippling ribbons and swags of fruit and flowers. Photograph by Scott McLain

the two-story Terry-Hutchens complex on Jefferson Street and the structures on Washington Street now occupied by the Washington Square restaurants and the Heritage Club.

At the crux of this preservation run-up in the early '80s was the newly-approved federal preservation tax credit, one of the most significant pieces of legislation that enabled countless buildings to be saved and reused. The tax credits were dramatically altered in 1986, but at the time they were first enacted, they leveled the playing field for developers seeking to work on historic properties. I cut my teeth on the myriad historic intricacies and regulations affecting the Struve-Hay Building and learned to navigate and appreciate the complex and often restrictive regulations that surround all preservation projects. None of my work would have been possible without the guidance of Harvie Jones, Huntsville's authority on historic architecture. I learned a great deal from Harvie and when I purchased the Times Building, I sought his advice and that of the Alabama Historical Commission.

I knew the Times Building was structurally sound. What I did not know was that its bargain sale price turned out to be smaller than its annual operating cost. The Madison County Commission had been using the Times as an annex to house its food stamp office and other public agencies. Extra space went to non-profit organizations for little or no rent while the county continued to absorb the utilities. The building had a central boiler, no central air conditioning, and two manual elevators with two full-time operators. A rumor quickly spread through the community that the Times sold for such a "low cost" because it was full of asbestos. So, when I officially took possession of the building, it was essentially a non-income producer with a high operating expense in need of modernization and an asbestos check.

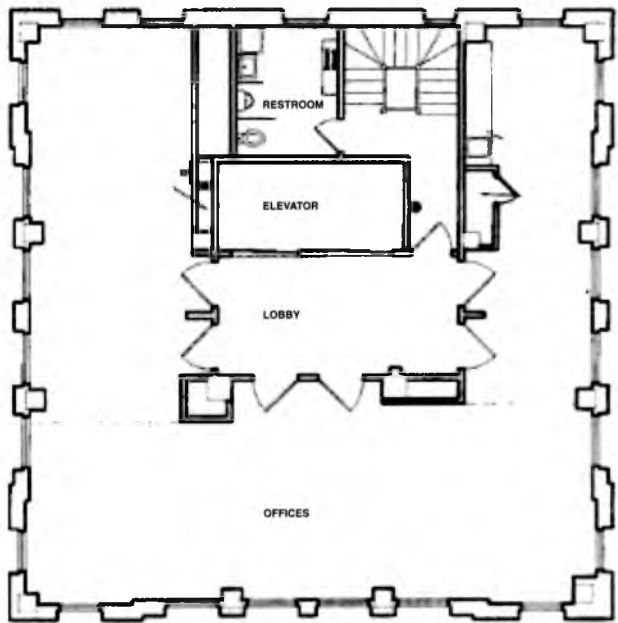
First, I stabilized the building. Inspectors found only minor amounts of asbestos in some of the floor tile and portions of the pipe and boiler insulation, all of which were easily removed. The roofs were in poor shape and, subsequently, there were moisture problems. I replaced the roof and re-grouted and cleaned the exterior tiles on the building's façade. After removing unsightly window air-conditioning units

and disconnecting the boiler, construction crews worked to return the Times to its original shell, preserving all of the building's original details and framework. This involved ripping out extensive modifications, including dozens of cheaply paneled work cubicles in the 12,000-square-foot basement that, interestingly enough, reportedly housed a bowling alley in an earlier day.

Once the building was gutted of its modifications and secure from the elements, the Times, in its original shell, was in

remarkably good condition. The original floor plan allowed for six storefronts on the first floor, naturally lending itself to office or retail use. The tower floors, at 2,000 square feet each, had beautiful 360-degree views of the city and mountains. Here, I envisioned residences in the form of luxury condos.

Starting on the first floor, I began the renovation phase by focusing on the street-level storefronts. I refurbished several of these into office suites with individual restrooms and kitchenettes. New plumbing, heating, and mechanical systems were placed on separate meters. A series of skylights were uncovered and those that had been removed were replaced. The filtered light made a dramatic impact on the interior spaces, and it was validating to see that the original architect clearly had the right idea. Bill Peters Architects leased two of the spaces and retrofitted the interior with an upscale, urbane look befitting his rapidly growing firm.



Typical Tower Floor Plan. Courtesy McLain Real Estate

I worked on residential designs for two- or three-bedroom condos in the tower. Each unit would encompass the entire floor with its own secure elevator access. But the building's single interior stairwell did not meet the city's building code, and the cost of a second stairwell made the residential plan unfeasible. It appeared the most logical use for the tower remained as offices, but there was little outside interest in these upper floors as commercial property. Downtown was still struggling to attract businesses that preferred newer construction and expansive parking lots in the high-tech Cummings Research Park area. Without prospective tenants for the second through the twelfth floors, it was not economically feasible to keep the tower open, and I decided to temporarily close and secure that part of the building.

It was not until 1999 that the Times' tower floors began to attract attention. SIRSI took the bold step and relocated its high-tech company in one of downtown's historic buildings on Washington Street. The owners were British, and they appreciated the charm and craftsmanship of the older structures. That led another high-tech startup to move into the Times' second floor and renovations began anew. I was already working with Huntsville's planning director Dallas Fanning to implement the city's downtown streetscape plan around the Times. This included renovating and widening sidewalks, planting trees, and providing additional lighting. I agreed to pay my share of the cost if the city would move up the timeline, and Jerry Galloway, director of Huntsville's community development division, was instrumental in making that happen.

Up until this point, most of the renovation work on the Times had been fairly straightforward. Now that I was working on the sidewalks and the second floor, new challenges arose to meet city codes and preservation standards.

The Alabama Historical Commission requested that the Times' elevator lobbies be maintained in their original form and finishes. This included the marble wainscoting, plaster moldings and walls, terrazzo floors, and office doors with textured glass lights. Repairing the plaster was easy, as was reproducing the large mahogany doors at the street-level entrances. The problem arose with the glass panels on dozens

of interior office doors and hallway partitions. The city wanted them removed because they could explode in the event of a fire. But the historical commission wanted them preserved. To meet fire code, a sprinkler system had to be installed that would deluge the glass with water in case of fire. The single existing stairwell also needed upgrades to meet the fire code's four-hour rating, and another stairwell needed to be added from the basement as an alternative exit. All of these were costly, if not difficult, tasks in a solid concrete structure.



On the upper floors, the last occupants left their business names neatly painted on the translucent glass door panels. Photograph by Linda Allen

Characteristic of its period, the Times' retained two fully functioning manual elevators with cage-like doors and hand-operated levers. They had charm and personality and worked faithfully. But in a commercial building, people need to move quickly and safely, and codes no longer permit their use. With tenants moving to the second floor, I replaced one of the two elevators with a modern system.

Bill Peters Architects assisted with interiors for the second floor renovation and subsequently for the tower. The firm wisely decided to leave part of the ceiling exposed in the office suite hallways and selected light fixtures that complemented the building's Art Deco period. By the time the second floor renovations were complete in January 2000, the Times offered 10,000 square feet of new executive offices and suites. Also, by extending the sidewalk farther into the street, the basement opened up to accommodate a second exterior stairwell. The lower level, with its ten-foot ceilings, now welcomed natural light through its own set of storefronts. The location is the ideal setting for an upscale restaurant, café or jazz club.

By 2004 work began on the tower's third through seventh floors. The solid floors,



The stairwell winds like an angular snail the height of the building, from basement to twelfth-floor. Photograph by Scott McLain

ceilings and walls made it challenging to update the electrical and mechanical systems, and I credit Hulan Smith in the city's inspection department for working diligently with me on this phase of the project. To keep the integrity of the building intact, we decided to expose the ductwork and allow the ceilings to remain at their existing levels. Electricians were able to reuse the original conduit poured into the ceiling for the lights, but they placed special electrical and telecom-

munications buses at the floor level so wiring would not have to be channeled into the walls. We added kitchenettes, creating upscale office suites on every floor.

The tower's wood framed windows had deteriorated badly, and while I believe in refurbishing the originals in a historic structure, as I did on the first and second floor of the Times, I thought the tower would be better served by installing exact copy reproductions with insulated glass. The state historical commission, however, disagreed, and I complied with their wishes, restoring each window through the seventh floor.

The restrooms were left in their original stairwell locations and renovated with tiles in the Art Deco fashion; however, we made them unisex instead of alternating men's on one floor and women's on the next, as was customary in years past.

Fortunately, the main lobby retained a number of its original appointments. The lighting fixtures have been cleaned and rewired, an office directory in its original brass case hangs on the wall, and an eleven-story mail chute still drops mail into the lobby's brass mail box. Vandals ripped out the elevator floor indicators during the renovation, damaging the marble walls, but I was able to repair the stone with

an exact grain match from the same marble quarry in Knoxville that the original load came from 80 years ago. Otherwise, the lobby appears exactly as it did in 1928.

Now that the Times' renovation is about two-thirds complete, I cannot believe that it has taken twenty-one years to get to this point. My greatest satisfaction comes from seeing other downtown structures revitalized and having more people recognize that the preservation of these properties is worthwhile. There is a feeling of substance in these old buildings, too, nothing like the formulaic interiors that are prevalent in most new office construction.

While I am encouraged to see this renewed interest in downtown, I am amazed there is not more widespread appreciation for these historic buildings. Scott McLain toured the Times during the tower renovation and was so impressed he moved his real estate company to the second floor. The space is very hip with wonderful light and unbelievable views. Scott's real estate display at the Huntsville International Airport reflects his admiration for the Times Building by depicting his brokers in one of its un-renovated upper floors. Like most historic structures, the Times is a building you have to experience to appreciate.

I have invested about \$3 million to date in the Times' renovations, and I am not finished yet. Once the current spaces are leased, I plan to complete the eighth through the twelfth floors. So, like the man renovating one window at a time, I too have learned patience and perseverance through my life with the Times. Perhaps it will take another ten years to complete. It does not really matter. I have deeded the historic façade easement to the Alabama Historical Commission to ensure the building is protected forever. What greater legacy to Huntsville than to preserve the building that played a significant role in the city's history by housing for decades its most visible form of communication—the city's daily newspaper. There is not another space like it anywhere in Huntsville, and I am honored and pleased to play a role in ensuring its heritage.



The two-story base reveals the structure's transitional stylistic status by displaying a more classical bent than do the design and ornament of the tower; this is most apparent at the west end of the base where a cartouche, nestled in garlands of produce, is flanked by upright anthemions. Photograph by Harvie Jones, FAIA, 1995. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville



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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 *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, the 2001 winner of the Alabama Historical Commission's Exceptional Achievement Award, and the *Foundation Forum*, a quarterly newsletter; **sponsors** quarterly covered-dish suppers featuring speakers on historic preservation topics; **hosts** an annual membership tea in architecturally significant homes; **recognizes** people who have made notable contributions to historic preservation; and **provides** complimentary information and consultation on the tax credits available for the restoration of historic income-producing properties.

HHF **functions** have included *A Rooftop Affair*; *The Moveable Feast*; *Happy Days at the Russel Erskine*; *Through the Garden Gate* book publishing party; *Old-Fashioned Trade Day on the Square*; *Time for a View* open house at the historic Huntsville Daily Times Building; and members-only events at private homes and buildings.

On-going projects include rehabilitation of houses in the Lincoln Mill Village, funded by an appropriation from Congressman Bud Cramer; stabilization and plan development for the Memphis & Charleston freight depot, with funding provided by Congressman Bud Cramer; and marketing the Foundation's book *Through the Garden Gate: The Gardens of Historic Huntsville*, proceeds from which will establish an endangered properties fund.

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