

Historic Huntsville Quarterly

OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION

Our Vanishing Heritage



*The awesome entry
to the David Wade
house—demolished
1952. HABS
photograph by Alex
Bush, 1935*

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THE QUARTERLY EDITORS

Contributors and Editors

Linda Bayer Allen has been researching and writing about Huntsville's architectural past intermittently for thirty years. She served as editor of the *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* for five years.

Diane Ellis previously served as director of the Historic Huntsville Foundation and has been a contributor to and editor of the *Quarterly* since 1992.

Lynn Jones is a long-time Foundation member, board member, and a former Foundation Chairman.

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

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank **Bruce Hiles** of Designwise for his patience, assistance, understanding, and professional expertise in making the *Quarterly* a publication of which we can all be proud.

A Tradition of Research and Preservation

The Elusive Past

Researchers investigating the past are no strangers to speculation and guesswork and are used to revising interpretations or changing conclusions when new information comes to light. An archaeologist's understanding of the past, for example, may be altered by the discovery of inscriptions on an ancient tablet. Or new clues can emerge to challenge assumptions made in the course of historic preservation research.

Sometimes information turns up that simply confounds rather than clarifies. It is just such a case that leads us to take another look at a property



The Chapman-Johnson house on Dairy Lane. Photograph by Harvie Jones, 1970

featured in the previous *Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2006), which examined the outbuildings of several notable antebellum city and county houses, among them the Chapman-Johnson house on Dairy Lane.

A letter written in 1955 by Elizabeth Humes Chapman (1884-1967), a former resident of the Dairy Lane house and the author of *Changing Huntsville, 1890-1899*, has surfaced, which describes the home place as she remembers it and heard about it from relatives. ¹ Based on physical evidence, the Chapman-Johnson residence has been assumed to be of late 1830s-1840s construction and built by Allen Christian, an early settler and farmer who “acquired joint ownership of a 159-acre tract in

1820 with Lemuel Mead.”² In 1835 the two divided the land equally between themselves. The Christian property changed hands at least twice before Philip Woodson purchased it in 1849. Chapman writes that her cousin Ellen White Newman told her that Woodson bought the “place” as a wedding present for his daughter Mary (and son-in-law Augustine Withers). “He built the house,” writes Chapman. If so, Allen Christian wasn’t the house builder and the presumed construction dates are off a bit, or there wasn’t yet a dwelling on the property. Mary Woodson and Augustine Withers were married in 1834; if Woodson’s purchase was intended as a wedding gift, it was a belated one.³

So, Christian or Woodson? Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson, the property’s current owners, believe that Allen Christian did indeed build the house and live in it with his family, but they speculate that Woodson might have built over the early dwelling. They note the discovery of a hidden transom over the house’s back door that was covered up by a staircase in addition to other minor construction quirks that suggest the possibility of changes made to an earlier structure. That Christian built and lived in the house after acquiring the property is also supported by the will he made shortly before his death in September 1836 affirming his Madison County citizenship, bequeathing “the plantation on which I now live,” to his wife, and referring to a Jackson County farm he also owned that was managed by his son, whom he entreats to come live on the referenced plantation. The Johnsons also note that they have always heard about the Christian family’s burial ground, although they haven’t found it. Chapman writes that, “There was an old graveyard a little above a wet weather brook nearby on the Underwood [neighboring property] line.” And Allen’s widow Margaret Christian dictated in her 1842 will that her executor “have the family burial ground enclosed with a brick wall in a neat & substantial manner.”⁴ It seems likely that the Christian family would choose a site near their house for the family cemetery.

The *Quarterly* also focused on a two-room outbuilding referred to as a servants’ quarters, noting that the National Register nomination described it as a “c. 1870



Above: The 1870s office/boys' quarters/servant quarters?

Below: Smokehouse. Photographs by Diane Ellis, 2006

saddlebag” structure, and that the Johnsons understood preservation architect Harvie Jones to date the building’s two fireplace mantels to the early 19th century. Josephine Gaboury Chapman (1896-1980), who moved into the house in the late 1910s with her husband Reuben Chapman IV, told the Johnsons that the family’s cook had lived in the building for years. But Elizabeth Chapman writes that the William B. Matthews family moved to the Dairy Lane property about 1891 and “The house back of the main building was built for Mr. Matthews’ office, and for a room for his sons.” Perhaps the cook lived there for some time after 1894, when the Matthews family left the property. Where the early mantels came from is still a mystery.

Finally, there’s the smokehouse, dated late 1800s by Harvie Jones. Elizabeth Chapman writes that, “The old smokehouse was there originally.” We don’t know whether by “originally” she meant before Woodson’s 1849 purchase—which again would suggest the presence of a dwelling on the property before the one thought to be built by Woodson—or at the time the Matthews family moved to the property—which would correspond to Harvie Jones’s dates.

Elizabeth Chapman's letter, with its delightful, charming and informative reminiscences and anecdotes about black and white Huntsvillians in earlier times, will be of keen interest to researchers when it becomes available at UAH. Like many such documents, the letter raises some questions and answers others, leaving room for further investigation into the history of a fascinating community.

DIANE ELLIS

Notes

- 1 Chapman wrote the letter to Dr. Frances Cabaniss Roberts, who was preparing material about the Chapman place for *Glimpses Into Antebellum Homes, Huntsville, Alabama*, a publication of the Huntsville Branch of the American Association of University Women. Dr. Roberts died in 2000, and her papers are being sorted and arranged for eventual deposit in the Department of Archives/Special Collections of the M. Louis Salmon Library at the University of Alabama in Huntsville by Nancy Rohr, a Huntsville historian and researcher. Rohr made a copy of the letter for Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson, present owners of the property and long-time researchers into its history. And thus it came to us.
- 2 National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Withers-Chapman Home, prepared by W. Warner Floyd, executive director, and Ellen Mertins, Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, Alabama, August 17, 1978.
- 3 Copies of deeds in Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson's possession; Madison County Marriage Book 4, 213.
- 4 Copies of deeds in Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson's possession.

From the Beginning

Less than a year after the Historic Huntsville Foundation was created in April 1974 the first *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* was published in early 1975. The ten-page publication was edited by Claire Johnston and printed free of charge by Kent Lee Holloway and the Credit Bureau of Huntsville. Lynwood Smith was the Foundation's first chairman.

From the beginning, the *Quarterly* was speaking up for the preservation of Huntsville's remaining historic architecture. Front page headlines of that first issue were "HHF Resolution Ignored by Chamber," and "Weeden Home Restoration Shaping Up." According to the first article the board of directors of the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce had approved "a controversial Plan for the Improvement of Downtown Huntsville, Alabama." The plan, drawn up by architect Edward Arnold for the chamber's Downtown Improvement Committee, was critical of the historic restoration movement downtown. It stated that downtown Huntsville

should communicate solidarity as a vigorous financial center, government seat, and major shopping district. The quaint, remodeled village square does not answer this set of criteria. We need high quality contemporary buildings.

It claimed that the majority of redevelopment to date had "consisted of the historic restoration of facades of existing buildings," and stated "as works of architecture, the old facades along downtown streets are neither historically significant nor of high architectural quality."

According to the article, Harvie Jones had presented his critique of the plan to HHF board members with a "point-by-point evaluation of erroneous data and conclusions." The Foundation board passed a resolution asking the chamber to not forward Arnold's document to the Huntsville City Council but send it back for further consideration, pointing out that the "so-called plan was not really a plan but rather an expression of sentiment." Jones' critique was appended to the Foundation's

resolution, which was “hand-carried to the chamber’s executive vice-president.” However, when the plan was brought before the full chamber at its November 1974 meeting, the Foundation’s resolution was not included. According to the *Quarterly* article, “the chamber’s board subsequently approved the plan and sent it on to the city council. Nothing has been heard of it since.”

From 1976-78 Henry Marks served as editor of the *Quarterly*, followed by Linda Bayer [Allen]. It was during her tenure that the name was changed to *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation* and the journal assumed a more scholarly character and sophisticated format. By the summer of 1980 Lynn Jones was appointed associate editor. Mickey Maroney assumed editorship with the Fall/Winter 1983/1984 issue, serving admirably through the Summer 1989 issue. All these editors volunteered their time and produced many wonderful issues, doing research, writing, editing, and what was once laborious layout all by themselves. Also, as the *Quarterly* moved from its original ten stapled pages to a book format with many more pages and photographs, printing services were no longer donated, adding to the cost of publication.

After Maroney, when no volunteer could be found to carry on such an enormous task, the Foundation was, for the first time, forced to pay for editing. Elise Stephens was the first paid editor, followed by Margaret Vann, Heather Cross, and others. During this time several of us served on an editorial oversight committee, helping to find writers, choose topics, and taking on more and more actual writing tasks. In 2002, after having several guest editors, the Foundation was not able to find a suitable editor who would take the job for the amount it was able to pay. The editorial oversight committee was also becoming more and more dissatisfied with the printing quality, particularly the photographic reproductions.

It was then that Diane Ellis, Pat Ryan, and I volunteered to be the editors without pay on the condition that the board of directors investigate the possibility of paying for a professional layout and redesign of the *Quarterly*. Bruce Hiles of Designwise made a presentation to the board and was subsequently hired. We have been more

than pleased with the new design and the care Bruce has taken to do a good job of layout. White Tiger has been doing the printing, and we have been happy with them as well. Linda Allen joined us in the writing/editing process several years ago, and has been a tremendous help.

The editorship is a big job, requiring knowledge of architecture, local history, photography, and of course the ability to write well and search out other good writers. The editors have thoroughly enjoyed the work, which has taken us in many interesting and often unexpected directions. We have learned a lot. But, we feel it is time for us to rest and time for someone else (or several someones) to bring new blood and new ideas to the *Quarterly*. It is our hope that the tradition of a scholarly publication will be continued as one of the main benefits of membership in the Foundation.

LYNN JONES

Our Vanishing Heritage

The Teardown

A frightening trend is sweeping across our country, threatening many older and historic neighborhoods—it is the “teardown.” Also referred to as “bash-and-build” or “scrape-off,” teardown is shorthand for the practice of buying a small, older house in an attractive, settled neighborhood, demolishing or moving it, and building a new, oversized house on the site. The problems are that the new house has



This house has been occupied by only one family, but it is being moved out to make way for more expensive housing. A frustrated Baltimore preservationist, Douglas Gordon, postulated the Gordon Curve to explain why we lose so many houses: According to his equation, if a newly built house is worth 100 percent, it must deteriorate at a rate of 1.5 percent a year, so that when it is seventy years old, its real estate value is low enough to warrant demolition [or removal]; if it survives this low point, its value rises rapidly and in thirty years when the house is 100 years old, it is worth 100 percent again. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006



A late 20th-century teardown was this extraordinary house on the west side of Meridian Street. Known as Abingdon Place, it was constructed in the Italian villa style and was renown for its formal gardens, vineyard, hedge-lined winding drive, conservatory, and European paintings and sculpture. It had been the home of Milton Humes and later served as the home of the general superintendent for Lincoln Mills of Alabama. More recently it was occupied by the Boys' Club prior to its demolition. Collection of Linda and Ralph Allen

at least three times the square footage of the original, is usually one or two stories taller, covers the lot to the extent allowed by zoning or variance, features multiple garages and driveways on the street façade, and does not relate to the existing streetscape by style, scale, or massing. In short, it destroys the rhythm and continuity of the block into which it has been shoehorned—much like the proverbial 500-pound gorilla.

But these are just the most obvious objections to the teardown vogue. When one such example appears in a neighborhood, others will soon follow, which quickly destroys the character of the whole development, not just one block. The mature trees must be removed to allow the new mini-mansion to fill the lot, thereby eliminating

one of the prime features that made the area attractive. The out-of-scale new house frequently looms over its smaller neighbors in an unfriendly manner and blocks their sunlight. Frequent targets of the teardown purchaser are smaller houses constructed on generous lots, including ranch houses of the 1950s and '60s; these are the starter houses that young people can afford to enter the housing market or that empty-nesters might find attractive. As the teardown trend gains momentum, the supply of such houses diminishes, and developers have no interest in constructing new market-entry housing. As the existing houses are replaced by faux mansions, a city's ability to provide an economic diversity of housing choices becomes seriously impaired.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has recognized the seriousness of this trend, and as early as 2002, it listed "Teardowns in Historic Neighborhoods" as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Richard Moe, president of the National Trust, has bluntly stated that "teardowns wreck neighborhoods," and further elaborated that "teardowns represent the biggest threat to America's older neighborhoods since the heyday of urban renewal and interstate highway construction." He is not referring just to designated historic districts, where some restraints are usually in place to blunt the practice; he is concerned about all our older, particularly, in-town neighborhoods that are populated by Victorians, bungalows, and, yes, even ranch houses. As he pointed out, these are irreplaceable legacies from the past that define a city's character and aspirations.¹

Sadly, Huntsville is not immune from this attack on its more desirable *older neighborhoods*. Already houses are being moved off attractive lots in subdivisions located near downtown. Especially sought after are those houses with lots sufficiently large to accommodate the monstrous suburban style houses popular today in new, outlying subdivisions. While it's easy to think of these mid-20th-century houses as insignificant because of their modest scale and relatively recent date of construction—they are, after all, the ones that many of us grew up in—many have already reached the magic age of 50 years, which makes them, theoretically, eligible for the

“...the survey shall cover structures of all types from the smallest utilitarian structures to the largest and most monumental. Buildings of every description are to be included so that a complete picture of the culture of the times as reflected in the buildings of the period may be put on record.”

— *excerpt from original HABS mission statement*

National Register of Historic Places, and many more will soon qualify. While it is difficult (perhaps even insulting) to consider as historic a structure that one grew up in, it should be recognized that Huntsville’s most significant historic period, the one that distinguishes Huntsville from all the other small, southern county seats, began with the arrival of the German rocket scientists in 1950 and the subsequent transformation of Huntsville into the Rocket City. The population boom of the 1950s and ‘60s spurred the development of thousands of new houses—predominantly some variation of the popular ranch house. No one is suggesting that all of these should be preserved; but, it would be extremely shortsighted of our generation to relegate the most significant collections of these houses to the garbage heap of history when only fifty years old. Not everyone can afford a new mansion, indeed, not everyone wants a new mansion.

HABS: The Historical Record

Unfortunately, the teardown is not a new problem. Huntsville has already lost many of its neoclassical and Victorian buildings, which fell to the wrecking ball for new residential and commercial development as Huntsville prospered and grew. The only mitigating factor is the federal program that documented a few of our antebellum structures before they were demolished. The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) was established in 1933 with the short-term goal of employing out-of-work architects, draftsmen, and photographers during the Depression and with the long-term goal of creating an archive of early American architecture so that these buildings “should not pass into unrecorded oblivion.”



The Gus Mastin house was constructed on Meridian Street, probably in the 1840s or '50s, when the road was known as the Meridianville Pike. The Pike once was lined with impressive plantation houses, most of which have now been demolished. HABS photographed this house in 1934 and '35 but made no drawings nor included any information on its history. Demolished. HABS photograph by W. N. Manning, 1934

The working procedure was to prepare measured drawings, photographs, and written data pages documenting sites, buildings, and objects of exceptional value in the country's history, primarily those constructed prior to 1860. Begun as a temporary measure, HABS operated for approximately four years before World War II brought it to a temporary halt. In Alabama, the program operated until 1937 under the leadership of E. Walter Burkhardt, who appointed an advisory committee consisting of three state architects, one of whom was Edgar Love of Huntsville. Emphasis was placed on recording those major structures that were considered to be most endangered, but (in the words of Burkhardt), "also types of typical buildings from the beginning of settlement in Alabama. . . ." In 1935-36 the state program employed 44 people including the three photographers, Alex Bush, W. N. Manning, and E. W. Russell, who traveled the state with their photographic equipment. In a little over

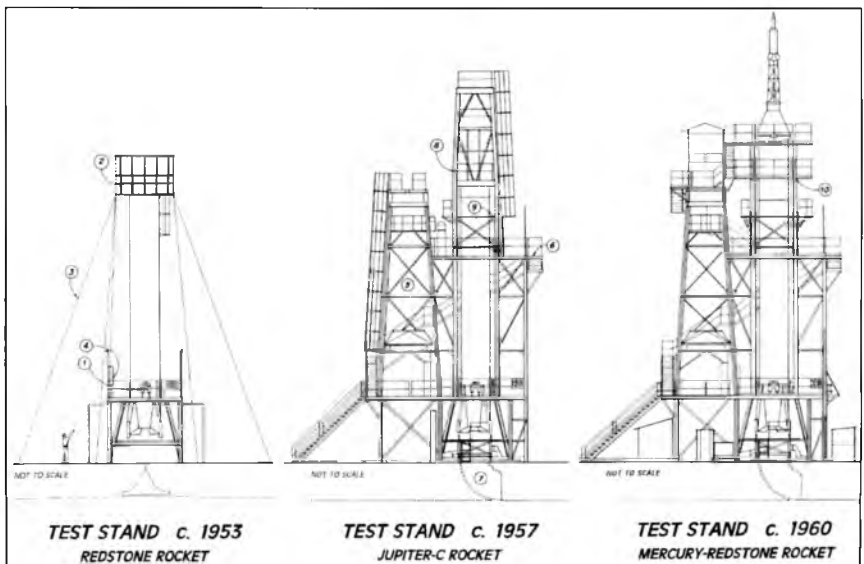


Huntsville's Carnegie Library was built on Madison Street in 1916 to a design by local architect Edgar Love. It was part of the small municipal complex located at the corner of Madison Street and Gates Avenue, which was razed in 1966 to clear land for the city hall parking garage. Collection of Linda and Ralph Allen

three years, the Alabama crews produced over 5,000 photographs and 750 sheets of measured drawings. Alabama is particularly fortunate in having so many of its structures recorded and has one of the largest collections of any state, numbering over 700 documented sites.²

In Huntsville, 22 structures were documented during the first three years of the program, of which four have been demolished. One, the second Madison County Courthouse, was added to the collection from drawings and photographs made in 1913 by local architect Edgar Love prior to its demolition. Twenty of the structures chosen were substantial city or plantation houses, with the only utilitarian structures documented being some of the dependencies belonging to these houses. The George Steele designed bank on West Side Square (Regions Bank) was the one commercial structure included.

HABS was reactivated in 1957, but under a new operating procedure: recording of structures is now conducted by summer field crews of college students working under the direction of a professional from the National Park Service, which administers the program. Additional listings from Alabama have been deterred by the necessity to pay the expenses of this work with local funds. But, the success of HABS spurred the 1969 creation of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) to document significant engineering and industrial sites. These two programs, HABS and HAER, which are archived at the Library of Congress, are compiling an impressive collection of America's architectural and engineering



In 1995 a HAER survey team documented the Redstone Interim Test Stand at Marshall Space Flight Center, producing 52 photographs, 7 drawings with extensive explanatory text, and 80 data pages. The importance of recording changes in structure and use over time is illustrated in this drawing which shows how the test stand was adapted to function with redesigned missile and rocket systems. It was erected to static test fire Redstone propulsion systems and has been used for this purpose 362 times. Drawing by Amy E. Vona for HAER, 1995

“From 19th-century Victorians to 1920s bungalows and 1950s Eichlers, the older houses that grace our communities are valuable historical documents in brick and wood, steel and glass. They trace the changes in taste, technology and lifestyle that have shaped the community over the centuries—and with their varied styles and details, they are a visual banquet for residents and visitors alike. America’s older neighborhoods are important chapters in the story of who we are as a nation and a people.”

—Richard Moe, 2006

history. As of 2001, the HABS collection contained material on over 30,000 structures documented in 51,000 measured drawings and 150,000 photographs. The HAER collection consisted of 3,500 drawings and 68,500 photographs of 7,600 sites.

The advent of HAER has been especially beneficial for Huntsville. Forty-three engineering-related sites have been listed, including 14 sites located at Marshall Space Flight Center and Redstone Arsenal. And this work is continuing. The summer of 2006 brought a team of three historic preservation interns to Marshall to measure and draw the Neutral Buoyancy Simulator tank and research its history. Next summer another team of interns will be back to document the Saturn V Dynamic Test Stand. The documentation being carried out by HAER includes not just the current condition of these structures but recreates their histories and previous physical configurations, an important consideration because of the necessity to adapt these facilities to serve slightly differing purposes for each new space initiative undertaken at Marshall. Both the tank and the test stand were designated National Historic Landmarks in 1985 as were the Redstone Interim Test Stand, and the Propulsion and Structural Test Facility.

The focus of these federal programs has been expanded again; in October 2000 the National Park Service permanently established the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) for the system-

atic documentation of historic spaces to include designed and vernacular, rural and urban, agricultural and industrial landscapes. Vegetable patches, estate gardens, cemeteries, farms, quarries, nuclear test sites, suburbs, and abandoned settlements all may be considered historic landscapes under this program.

The fourth partner of the above three programs is the Cultural Resources Geographic Information Systems (CRGIS) facility. Its mission is to institutionalize the use of geographic information systems (GIS), global positioning systems (GPS), and remote sensing technologies in historic preservation within the national park system as well as with state historic preservation offices and tribal historic preservation offices.

All four of these programs now are administered under the Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP) division of the National Park Service. HDP conducts nationwide documentation programs in partnership with state and local governments, private industry, professional societies, universities, preservation groups, and other federal agencies. The program assigns highest priority to sites of national significance that are in danger of demolition or loss by neglect, and to National Park Service properties.³

The vast time span, change of focus, and advances in technology separating Huntsville's HABS-documented antebellum houses and its HAER-documented NASA facilities illustrate the tremendous changes that have occurred in Huntsville's character between 1860 and 1960. One viewing these two extremes may well wish for similar examples of the built environment from the intervening years—but that material does not exist. Even more distressing is that funding has not been available to undertake HABS surveys of representative specimens of the city's surviving Victorian, bungalow, and ranch houses, as well as of its evolving commercial and religious buildings.

When HABS buildings are restored, the archives provide valuable information concerning original layouts, materials, and appearances to guide the work of a

serious restoration. And when a HABS building has been lost, the photographs and drawings help fill the gaps in our architectural history and demonstrate the variety that once defined the community.

Three of Huntsville's lost HABS houses and the second county courthouse are remembered here through photographs taken in the 1930s. These early teardowns must stand for all the other teardowns for which visual information has not been collected—for those pieces of our history only dimly remembered, if at all.

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 Richard Moe in a speech at the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA, June 28, 2006.
- 2 Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalog, Historic American Buildings Survey, A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 177-187.
- 3 www.cr.nps.gov/hdp

The Second Madison County Courthouse



A local newspaper called the second Madison County Courthouse “the prettiest courthouse in the state from an architectural point.” Photograph by E.L. Love, copied by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

The inclusion of the second Madison County Courthouse in the Historic American Building Survey is unusual in that the building was demolished some 20 years before the 1935 survey was begun. Huntsville architect Edgar Lee Love (1867-1936) documented the building with detailed drawings and photographs prior to its razing in 1913. This impressive Greek Revival structure served for many years not only as the seat of county government but also as an outward embodiment of a prosperous city.

The county’s first courthouse was built about 1811 while Alabama was part of the Mississippi Territory. Although no contract has been found for its construction,

a superior court case indicates John Lowry in that year undertook the work with carpentry by William Ingram. Apparently the upper story was not finished, and on June 10, 1817, the justices of the quorum contracted with William Watkins and John H. Hickman for casing and panes for the second story windows, repairing the crown molding on the cornice, and roofing the building. The top of the cupola was to be adorned in striking fashion with a “new and neat turned block, dressed off with gold lines and a new speare and Twin blocks dressed off with gilt and crown the whole with a neat gilt Eagle not less than three feet across.” At the county commissioners’ discretion, the eagle was to be made of wood or sheet copper. On January 1, 1818, journalist Anne Royall noted that while Huntsville contained about 260 houses, there were no churches, and the people worshipped in the courthouse. Period newspaper accounts relate the importance of the building as the center of the community for such varied activities as promoting a musical school, establishing a Bible society, and organizing a library. ¹

After Alabama attained statehood in 1819 and throughout the 1820s Huntsville flourished. Perhaps the original building proved too small or the citizenry hoped to make an architectural statement of their prosperity, but a new courthouse was called for. In 1835 the state legislature granted the county commissioners authority to erect a new courthouse and to levy a special tax to the amount of \$12,000 to finance its construction. While the initial rates of taxation are unknown, it is likely they were similar to those for 1839-41:

Ordered that the following be the rates of taxation in said County for the year 1839, being the authority of Acts of the Legislature to raise a revenue for the building of a new Court House and other purposes, to-wit:

On every \$100 worth of land - 10 cents

On every \$100 worth of town property - 10 cents

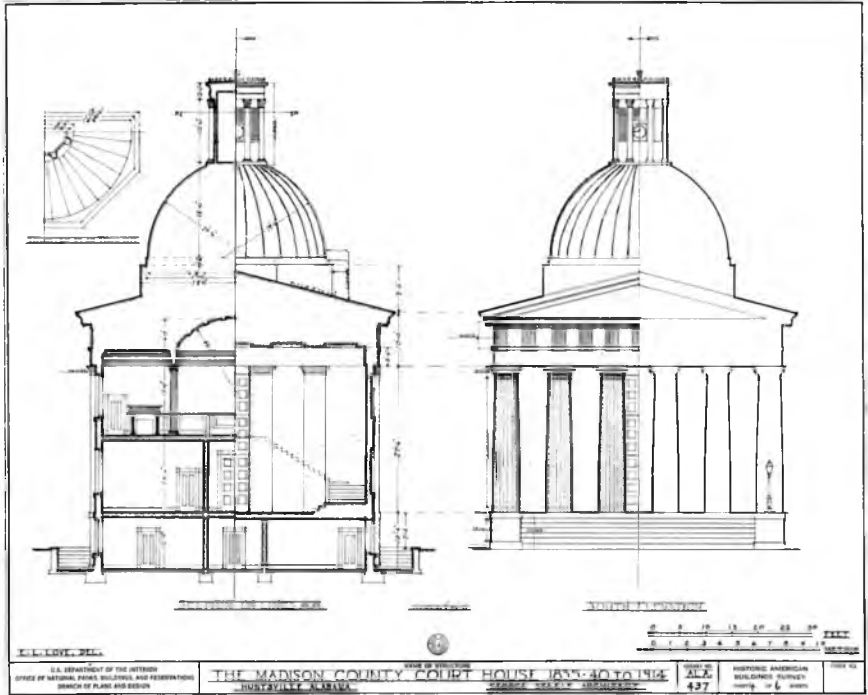
On every \$100 worth of merchandise sold from the first day of May 1838 to the first day of May 1839 - 20 cents

On each slave not exceeding 10 years old - 16 cents

- On each slave over 10 and under 60 years of age - 56 cents
- On each free male negro or mulatto, over the age of 21 years - \$1.00
- On each \$100 worth of pleasure carriages and harness - 50 cents
- On each race saddle or carriage horse - 50 cents
- On each public Race Tract [sic] - \$10.00...
- On each gold watch - \$1.00
- On each silver or other watch - 40 cents
- On each metal clock - \$1.00
- On each clock not metal - 25 cents...
- On each pack of playing cards sold, given away, loaned, or otherwise disposed of - 25 cents...
- On each Billiard Table kept for playing - \$150.00
- On all free white males over the age of 21 and not exceeding 45 years - 25 cents

And on such things as are not herein enumerated and were heretofore objected to state taxation, the amount of the state and said county tax for the year 1835. And it is further ordered that 35% be added to the foregoing taxation for the purpose of defraying in part the building of a Bridge across the Flynt River at the three forks thereof. ²

Later in 1835 the commissioners approved the plans of Huntsville architect George Steele (1798-1855) for a building in the Greek temple form. The following year advertisements for proposals seeking builders were published in the Huntsville *Southern Advocate*, *Florence Gazette*, *Nashville Republican*, and the *Knoxville Register*. According to Steele's plans, "The building will be 112' in length, by 56' in width, 2 stories above the foundation or basement story, to have a Doric Portico of 6 columns at each end and Pilasters at the sides. The basement or foundation to be of hewn stone, and the remainder of brick stuccoed." Dr. Thomas Fearn and James Donegan were appointed commissioners to receive proposals from prospective builders and enter into a contract for its execution. The firm of Wilson and Mitchell was selected, but Steele was responsible for the "superintendence of the building in every respect." ³



Edgar Love's drawing of a cross section and south elevation of the second courthouse was included in the HABS survey of 1935.

The commissioners soon discovered that the \$12,000, borrowed from the Branch of the Bank of the State of Alabama at Huntsville, was insufficient, as cost overruns became the order of the day. Contributing to the funding problem was the 1838 decision to cover the dome, a feature frequently used on public buildings, with copper instead of the cheaper tin originally specified. Steele was paid \$2,000 for his supervision and plans while Wilson and Mitchell received over \$15,500. In 1839 the commissioners contracted with Thomas Rayon for a stone wall with circular corners to enclose the new building within 14 feet of the streets, and for this he was paid about \$4,700. An iron railing to top the wall was installed by C.T.V.R. Parker at a cost of \$4,000.⁴

Completed in 1840, the courthouse served the county well for many years. But with the growth of county government, more space was needed. In 1912 a controversy arose over whether to enlarge the existing building or raze it and erect a modern structure. The *Weekly Mercury* lamented: "It looks as though those who have charge of the old building propose to let it decay and fall to pieces...The prettiest courthouse in the state from an architectural point [is] simply falling to pieces from neglect. No one cares." ⁵The grand jury, impaneled to study county problems and survey its buildings, took a more direct approach:

The building further is in a very bad state of [disintegration] and will soon become, if not now, dangerous to human life. It is dirty, dingy, and its sanitary conditions and arrangements is [sic] in strict [accord] with every law against health, it is vile. The basement is piled up with every conceivable species of trash and junk together with old records, an urgent invitation to a conflagration. We are sincere when we say that we admit its architectural beauty and that we revere and respect the courage of our fore fathers for erecting what was in their time such a magnificent structure. They were keeping in pace with the time. We should follow their foot steps and keep pace with our time. We are therefore not disrespectful when we say that the present court house has served its purpose well, but is worn out and the time has long since passed that the present structure is wholly unfit for the present day needs and should speedily give way to a modern building up-to-date in every particular. Sentiment and repairs is [sic] a waste of time and money...

If immediate steps are not taken looking to a betterment in the conditions of the court house, we recommend that the solicitor institute impeachment proceedings against the County Commissioners, and to [do so] without unnecessary delay; the time has arrived for action and indifference to the present condition and dilatory tactics should be no longer tolerated. ⁶



The third Madison County Courthouse. Photograph by Ernest Smartt, courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

Even so, public outcry to save the old building convinced the commissioners to remodel, and T.E. Brown of Atlanta, Mr. Edward of Atlanta, R.H. Hunt of Chattanooga, C.K. Colley of Nashville, and Edgar Love of Huntsville submitted plans. The design of Clarence Colley was chosen and Little-Checker Construction Company of Anniston was awarded a \$59,000 contract to tear down the building except the walls and to add two wings. The *Weekly Mercury* reported that timbers removed from the building were yellow poplar beams 50 feet long and hewn out of a solid log. As work progressed the structure proved to be in such weak condition that the commissioners decided to raze the second courthouse and rebuild. Fortunately, Edgar Love's seven drawings and three photographs were included in the HABS survey in 1935. His foresight contributes much to our architectural heritage.⁷

Although Love's design for the third courthouse was not selected, he received numerous commercial and residential commissions to shape the appearance of Huntsville. His more notable extant designs include the Masonic Temple at 409 Lincoln Street (1917); the Milligan building, currently the Madison County Law Library at 205 East Side Square (1913); the Central YMCA, now the law offices of Watson Jimmerson Martin McKinney Graffeo & Helms at 203 Greene Street (1910); and the old Dunnnavants store, now called 100 Washington (1905). He also drew plans for numerous residences including the King bungalow at 531 Franklin Street and the Lee house at 516 Randolph Avenue.

The third courthouse was dedicated with the laying of the cornerstone and its contents by members of the Masonic Lodge in September 1914.⁸ A two-story building with pedimented entrances on all four sides, it was topped with a cupola featuring a four-sided clock. Today this charming building no longer stands. Again space constraints in the 1960s fueled the outcry for a new building. While many preservationists sought to save the old building and relocate county offices, others demanded that public buildings symbolize the "Rocket City" and Huntsville's prominence in the space program. Unfortunately, these modernists held sway, and the current courthouse was dedicated in 1967. Today portions of the massive Doric columns of the third courthouse mark the entrance to the Huntsville Botanical Garden on Bob Wallace Avenue. These stand as a poignant testament to the architectural legacy of the courthouse square.

PATRICIA H. RYAN

Notes

- 1 Sarah Huff Fisk, *Civilization Comes to the Big Spring: Huntsville, Alabama 1823* (Huntsville: Pinhook Publishing Co., 1997), 138-141; Deed Book D, 22-24, Madison County, Alabama; Anne Newport Royall, *Letters From Alabama 1817-1822*, ed. Lucille Griffith (University: University of Alabama Press, 1969), 119.
- 2 *Southern Advocate*, 13 January 1835; Commissioners Court Minutes, 1831-1844, 291, Madison County, Alabama.
- 3 Commissioners Court Minutes, 152; *Southern Advocate*, 15 November 1836; Commissioners Court Minutes, 196, 249, 250, Madison County, Alabama.
- 4 Commissioners Court Minutes, 297, 320, 330, 385, Madison County, Alabama.
- 5 “Many Counties Making Repairs on Court House,” *Weekly Mercury*, 10 July 1912, 8.
- 6 “Full Text of the Recent Grand Jury’s Report,” *Weekly Mercury*, 13 November 1912, 5.
- 7 “Look Over Plans of Architects,” *Weekly Mercury*, 23 April 1913, 7; “Contract Is Awarded,” *Weekly Mercury*, 18 June 1913, 4; “Rapid Work On Old Court House,” *Weekly Mercury*, 30 July 1913, 1; “New Plans of Building,” *Weekly Mercury*, 22 October 1913, 5.
- 8 “Madison County’s Handsome Court House Opened Thursday,” *Weekly Mercury*, 16 September 1914, 6.

The Horton-McCracken House



The massive Doric columns of the Horton-McCracken house were constructed of brick and finished with a hard stucco coating. Local lore holds that the portico was a later addition; the sheer mass and scale of it against the more fragile frame house would seem to support this conjecture as does the crude manner in which the entablature meets the house wall without being carried across the facade. On the other hand, the timing of Rodah Horton's death leads one to wonder whether such a major alteration would have been undertaken by his widow. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

The antebellum Horton-McCracken house on Meridian Street survived long enough to be documented by HABS; but shortly thereafter, in the late 1940s, it became a teardown, to be replaced by a residential subdivision when Huntsville entered its most phenomenal period of expansion.

The house is believed to have been built for Rodah Horton, a wealthy Virginian, born in Staunton in 1794. He had immigrated to Huntsville by 1818, and began purchasing land in and around Huntsville in 1820. In 1824 Horton married

Lucy Ann Otey. The Oteys were from southwestern Virginia, arriving here about 1817; whether Rodah Horton and the Oteys were acquaintances in Virginia is not known, but their lives became entangled once in Madison County. In 1821 Horton purchased the section of land (640 acres) across the Meridianville Pike from the plantation of Walter Otey. It had been advertised in the *Republican* by its owner William B. Harris as “An Elegant Estate for Sale,” and was described as “formerly owned by Dr. Manning.” The ad raved about “The conveniences of the [house], the fertility of the soil, the great abundance of water and never failing springs, sites for water works, bordering immediately on the meridian road and within 7 miles of Huntsville.” Horton paid only \$10,800, a sum that was 40 percent of the price Harris had paid just two years earlier for the estate. The deed described the house as a mansion, leading one to assume that this became Rodah and Lucy Ann’s first home, later referred to as the “old residence.”¹

During the 1820s and ‘30s, Horton continued to purchase tracts, primarily north of Huntsville and occasionally in partnership with John Robinson with whose family he also shared a close connection through marriage. Lucy Ann, Rodah’s wife, had five siblings; her sister Caroline married John Robinson, another sister Mary Frances married his brother James B. Robinson, and yet a third sister Mariah married John W. Pruitt, who was a merchant in Meridianville. William Madison Otey, Lucy Ann’s brother, inherited the plantation lands on the east side of the Meridianville Pike that his father Walter Otey had settled.²

It was not till 1839 that Horton acquired the 160 acres on which he constructed his new homeplace, the Horton house. This land was on the west side of the Meridianville Pike (now Meridian Street), north of the Sparkman Drive overpass. The new mansion is believed to have been constructed circa 1843-44. The HABS photographs reveal that it was an eight-room, two-story, clapboarded frame house with a symmetrical five-bay façade, side-gabled roof, and exterior end chimneys. A massive, full-height, pedimented portico of four Doric columns may, or may not, have been added at a later date.³

The Meridianville Pike at that time was the principal road connecting Huntsville and Nashville making it an important route for importing goods from the north. Work on macadamizing the road had begun when the Madison Turnpike Company was incorporated in the mid-1830s to upgrade the section between Huntsville and the Green Bottom Inn (located on the campus of Alabama A&M University). The improved road was to be 30 feet wide with a road bed width of 21 feet. The city took bids in the spring of 1835 to surface this stretch and in the summer was still trying to hire sufficient men to complete the job. Then, in 1839, the Alabama legislature authorized the incorporation of the Meridianville and Hazel Green Turnpike Company to extend the macadamized road from Green Bottom Inn to the Tennessee line. Seven residents, including Rodah Horton and John Robinson, were appointed to sell shares of \$25 each to raise \$100,000 for the project. The riding surface was to be finished with nine inches of gravel, rising in the middle, with ditches on either side and stone culverts, and was to follow the route of the existing road but could deviate where the directors thought necessary. When five miles had been constructed, and the work approved by a group of independent observers, the company could begin collecting tolls at no more than three gates. The following year Rodah Horton and two other property owners deeded two acres to the Madison Turnpike Company for a toll gate and house, which presumably would have been about half-way between Huntsville and the Green Bottom Inn. Horton's only other identified brush with public service consisted of two terms as a state representative from 1836-38. ⁴

The intermarried Horton, Otey, and Robinson families built magnificent mansions during the 1840s and 1850s along the portion of Pike stretching from Huntsville to Meridianville. John Robinson and his wife Caroline (Otey) constructed Oaklawn in the mid-1840s; Rodah's house dated from the same period; and James Robinson and Mary Frances (Otey) built Forrestfield on the Pike (which was reputed to be identical to Oaklawn—however, since it was burned on the order of the Union Provost Marshall during the Civil War, the resemblance remains unconfirmed). Lucy Ann's brother William Otey constructed his house Greenlawn about a mile



The backsides of houses are seldom photographed; but as is the case here, the rear is very interesting, revealing three parallel gables running perpendicular to the front gable but obscured by it from view. Even more unusual are the chimneys which begin as exceedingly shallow exterior stacks, disappear behind the gables, and then pop out through the roof ridges. This treatment also appears at Greenlawn, hinting that the same architect/builder may have worked on both. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

south of Meridianville circa 1850, and Mariah (Otey) Pruitt and her husband resided in Meridianville. William, a third Robinson relation (either brother or cousin to John and James, depending on who is telling the tale) began construction of his house Quietdale on the east side of the Pike just south of Oaklawn; but William died in 1852, leaving his widow to oversee construction of the house, which was completed in the late 1850s.

Sadly, Rodah Horton did not live long to enjoy his new mansion. He died in 1846 at age 52 and was interred in Maple Hill Cemetery. He had made no will, thereby throwing his estate into years of probate court proceedings and leaving his widow



The only interior shots of the Horton house are of two fireplaces, neither of which had been altered to burn coal as were so many in the late 19th century when it became commercially available. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

and six children in a state of uncertainty, which lingered into the war years. Rodah had amassed not only extensive land holdings in Madison County but also a major plantation in Marengo County containing 1,361 acres that was managed by an overseer. The Marengo County estate inventory listed 115 slaves, 9,000 bushels of corn, 8,000 pounds of cotton, 2 cotton gins, and assorted mules, horses, oxen, cattle, and 230 hogs. The real estate inventory for Madison County included the homestead of 96 acres, 320 acres at the “old residence,” 280 acres north of the old residence, an additional 1,625 acres in several tracts in various locations, and two houses and lots in Huntsville proper. He also left 63 more slaves (many of whom were children), an additional 14,000 pounds of baled cotton, and 450 barrels of corn.⁵



This fireplace protruded into the room and was more ornate, having an engaged column on either side. Faintly visible on the back wall of the firebox are bits of the design left by a cast iron fireback that was installed to help reflect heat into the room and protect the masonry of the chimney base. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

Lucy Ann received as her dower right one-third of the real estate including the new homeplace on the Meridianville Pike, and one-fifth of the balance of the estate. She died in 1863 and is not listed in any Madison or Limestone county cemetery; the assumption is that she went south with her sisters (who had married the Robinson brothers) to her Marengo plantation as Union troops approached North Alabama and that she was buried there. Two of her sons, James E. and Rodah, had moved to land in Limestone County prior to the outbreak of war. It was James' son James E. Horton, Jr., who became famous as the Alabama judge who overturned the verdict and death sentence of Scottsboro Boy Haywood Patterson in 1933. Judge Horton



This view of the Horton-McCracken house was taken just two weeks after the house had been sold at public auction to pay mortgages on which the McCrackens had defaulted. The house looks as desolate as the March landscape. All the blinds are closed, boards are missing, and tall weeds surround the house. Although Laura McCracken died only the previous year, she may not have continued to live there by herself following the death of her sister in 1928. Photograph by W. N. Manning for HABS, 1934

was living in an antebellum house in Athens at the time of the trial, but his ruling in the Patterson case effectively killed any chance he might have had of being reelected to the circuit court. He bought 2,000 acres near Greenbrier the following year and moved his Athens house to the new plantation. The house still stands there today, still in the Horton family, the only surviving landmark to the events that Rodah Horton set in motion when he moved to Madison County more than a century earlier. ⁶

In 1871 the Horton place on Meridianville Pike was finally sold out of the family at a court-ordered auction. Frank Mastin was the high bidder at \$6,500; he owned

other land in the vicinity, never lived in the house, and died two years later. Eight more years passed before Mastin's heirs sold the property to Mary M. McCracken and her two daughters, Mary C. and Laura, who paid \$3,000 cash and financed the remaining \$1,400. The McCracken ladies became the only long-term occupants of the house. Unfortunately they seem to have been perennially short of cash—a situation common to many southerners during that period—on the evidence of their long list of mortgages. Probably in an effort to pay off debts, they sold 40 acres in 1887, and in 1892, they conveyed approximately one acre “being all of that tract of land known as the Horton tract lying east of the Meridianville Pike,” which left the McCrackens with a little less than 45 acres. Three years later the mother deeded her interest in the property to her two daughters and probably died shortly thereafter. Mary C. died in 1928 leaving her share of the house and furnishings to her cousin Sarah Leech. Mary's probate file reveals with startling clarity just how cash-strapped these people were: the final settlement listed \$18 in the bank, some chickens, a cow, and a little corn and cotton. In 1933 Laura McCracken also died—leaving two mortgages on the property still unpaid.⁷

By the middle of the Depression, with all the McCrackens deceased and no money in the estate to repay the debts, one of \$1,800 from 1915 and a second for \$995, the house was again sold at public auction in 1934 for \$7,000 to J. C. Smith, who held the two unpaid mortgages.⁸

It was at this point that HABS appeared to document the house. Interestingly, there are two almost identical photographs of the front façade taken one year apart by different photographers. The one dating from March 1934 shows a deteriorating, closed-up, apparently abandoned house. This would have been just days after the house had been sold to Smith, and the occupants had been absent for some time. The following year, HABS sent another photographer to the house; this picture reveals the house to still be in the same sad state of disrepair, but the blinds are open and a figure—perhaps Mr. Smith—is standing on the portico. The only two interior shots hint at long occupation, suggesting that perhaps the house was sold

with its contents, there not being any local heirs to collect them.

The saga of the Horton-McCracken house gets hazier as its end nears. Whether it was occupied by the new owner, rented, or sat vacant for the next ten years is not known, but in 1944 the property changed hands when Herbert Ray purchased it. At the time, Ray owned Ray Auto Company, the Ford dealership, on Meridian Street and also lived on Meridian Street north of Oakwood Avenue. As Huntsville boomed in the 1950s and '60s, his business became Ray & Pearman, and he moved to a new house on Echols Avenue.⁹

The Horton-McCracken house was demolished in 1949 and the land subdivided into lots for a new residential development called Colonial Hills (possibly a naive nod to the old mansion?). The subdivision entry is from Delaware Boulevard and the Horton house site extended south as far as Baxter Avenue. In 1967 a new elementary school also named Colonial Hills was constructed across Meridian Street, slightly north of the old house site; the school has since been renamed for Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁰

Although the McCrackens owned and occupied the house for half a century, there was never enough money to make alterations or even undertake routine maintenance. The positive aspect of this situation is that the house was in almost original, if shabby, condition; the negative, is that people frequently consider run-down property as ripe for demolition and redevelopment, particularly when the community is prosperous and growing.

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 Diane Robey, Dorothy Scott Johnson, John Rison Jones, Jr., and Frances C. Roberts, *Maple Hill Cemetery, Phase One* (Huntsville, Alabama: The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, 1995), 29; Dorothy Scott Johnson, *Madison County, Alabama Deed Books* (Huntsville, Alabama:

- Johnson Historical Publications, 1976), 53; Deed Book H, 250; Marriage Book 3, 326; Deed Book H, 434, Madison County, Alabama; Nancy Rohr, "The News from Huntsville," *Huntsville Historical Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1999, 12.
- 2 Nancy Rohr, *Incidents of the War: The Civil War Journal of Mary Jane Chadick*, (Huntsville, Alabama: Silver Threads Publishing, 2005), 59.
- 3 Deed Book R, 257, Madison County, Alabama.
- 4 *Acts of the General Assembly of Alabama, 1836-1838*, the original act for the Madison Turnpike Company could not be located, but Act 53 of 1836 referenced and amended the original act approved January 9, 1835; Act 133 approved February 2, 1839, established the Meridianville and Hazel Green Turnpike Company; James Record, *A Dream Come True, Vol. 1* (Huntsville, Alabama: James Record, 1970), 266.
- 5 Probate Case #1325, Madison County, Alabama.
- 6 Probate Case #2498, Madison County, Alabama; Chris Edwards and Faye Axford, *The Lure and Lore of Limestone County* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Portals Press, 1978), 34-35.
- 7 Deed Book RR, 130; Deed Book GGG, 408; Deed Book MMM, 570; Deed Book XXX, 549; Deed Book 77, 52; Deed Book 102, 555; Probate Case #7670, Madison County, Alabama.
- 8 Deed Book 141, 113, Madison County, Alabama.
- 9 Deed Book 165, 555, Madison County, Alabama.
- 10 1949 Madison County Tax Blank for Herbert Ray, n.p.

The David Wade House



The house that David Wade built during the antebellum decades was located on the north side of Bob Wade Lane just east of Mt. Lebanon Road. It was a massive structure of solid brick, two tall stories above a raised basement. The giant wooden entablature was basically a false front that obscured the parallel gables behind and terminated the enormous portico of six rough Doric columns, set on simple, ground-level bases. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

The Wade house was constructed west of the Meridianville Pike by David Wade who had migrated to Madison County from Virginia when he was about 33 years old. His wife, also born in Virginia, was Eliza Grantland, and together they reared six children in Alabama. David made his first land purchase in April of 1817 when he acquired 640 acres for \$3,520, which became the heart of his plantation and the site where he constructed his extraordinary house. It is not known when he began construction; probably he first built a simple log house for his growing family while



The design of the portico was apparently unique in Madison County with its unstuccoed, brick columns rising two-and-a-half stories from the brick-paved ground with no porch at the main floor level. A crude set of wooden steps without railings provided access to the front door, which was a half-level above ground. Surely this arrangement was a later adaptation after the entry level porch was removed for whatever reason; a series of holes and discoloration on the front brick wall strongly support the removal of a more formal treatment, including simple pilasters at the corners of the facade. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935



Pat Jones, when writing about the house for the Huntsville Times, repeated a family story that the house was inspired by the image of a house on a clock that David Wade brought with him from Virginia. Close inspection does reveal that the lower panel of this mantel clock contains a house having the same general appearance as the Wade house. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

he made plans for his mansion and gathered materials. He must have made slow progress for when he wrote his will in 1857, he was living in the mansion, but it was not completed nor properly furnished. He died four years later, and his will directed “that my whole estate shall be kept together under the control and management of my executrix for the space of ten years at least...[and] I direct that my executrix shall have my mansion house in which I now live finished in good style and genteelly furnished at the expense of my estate—But I do not wish her to buy furniture at extravagantly high prices. . . .”

David Wade was most insistent that what he had amassed and built be maintained and remain in the family. Interestingly, he appointed his older daughter Amanda as his executrix and directed that he wished his “daughters Amanda and Harriet to live upon my plantation, and to be supported out of my estate, so long

as my estate shall be kept together; and occupy my manor house.” Neither Amanda nor Harriet married, both spent their entire lives in their father’s house, and Amanda ran the plantation until her death. David’s two sons challenged the appointment of



The fireplace mantels are of Greek Revival derivation, but they lack the boldness and scale that characterize the house. Naturally, only the mantels in the formal rooms would have been photographed, so those upstairs or in rear rooms may have been more influenced by Federal tastes. This mantel retains the traditional black finish. The wooden ceiling is unpainted. Nothing is known of the deer's history. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

Amanda as executrix, and a special administrator was designated by the court in 1862; but surviving records suggest that Amanda basically had control and her brothers were out of luck.¹

Just how well Amanda controlled her father's estate and the dispersal of her own estate was revealed on the day of her death in January 1895 at age 78. She took no chances that her executor or a court could ignore her wishes by the simple expedient of signing her will on the day she died, having previously deeded the plantation, manor house, all the stock, tools, machinery, and her personal property to her nephew Robert B. Wade. She retained a life estate, to include rents and profits from the plantation. (Harriet, who had kept house for Amanda, preceded her in death.) Amanda had signed, but not recorded, two additional deeds the previous October disposing of other property in her

possession: 700 acres in the Big Cove were given to another nephew, T. B. Wade; and an additional 100 acres, also in the Big Cove area, were deeded to her niece Mary Anne Mills. These three deeds were also recorded on the date of her death. Her will stated that she had conveyed the bulk of her property by deeds of gift, and



This two-room, brick structure behind the house reputedly was the original kitchen and dining room. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

she directed that her two remaining properties be sold for payment of her debts and the “remainder used for putting monuments over my grave.” Ironically, the Wade cemetery, located beyond the house, has no stones so it is impossible to know who was buried there and whether her wishes were ever carried out—the one request she could not control. ²

Robert B. Wade may have lived in the mansion from 1895 until 1940, but he owned it only sporadically, apparently suffering from a cash flow deficit. A peculiar relationship with Lena Garth began in 1916 when he sold her 845 acres for \$24,000, including “the land on which we now reside,” but excluding the livestock, agricultural equipment, 3,000 bushels of corn, 50 tons of hay, 4 tons cotton seed, a saw mill, engine and boiler. Presumably he continued to live there as a tenant since Lena resided on Franklin Street and already owned numerous other properties. In 1920 Robert repurchased the property “known as the Robert B. Wade homestead



Built to the same massive scale as the house, the smokehouse still stands today in excellent condition. A huge fireplace on the ground floor produced smoke to preserve the meat, which was hung from rafters on the upper level. The small, louvered side vents now have glass installed behind them. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

plantation.” But problems persisted; six years later he deeded the property to Allen J. Shamblin, his son-in-law, for assumption of a mortgage of \$30,000, to be paid as balance of the purchase money. Wade’s tax assessment for 1926 listed 480 acres on the north side of the road with improvements consisting of a six-room, two-story residence, two barns, and eight cabins. The following year the son-in-law and daughter deeded the property to Wade’s wife Fannie L. Wade for love and affection and assumption of the \$30,000 debt. By 1929, Lena Garth was again the owner when she purchased it for \$34,000 at public auction when the Wades could no longer stave off default on the mortgage. Lena Garth died in 1938 still in possession of the Wade plantation, and it was irretrievably lost by the Wade family when the trustees of her estate sold it in December 1941—just one year after Robert B. Wade died.³

The new owners Samuel and Jennie Harris were identified as farmers, but their residence initially was on East Clinton Avenue, leading one to suppose that they might have rented the Wade house, perhaps to the Wades or Shamblins, or perhaps it sat empty. The HABS photographs taken in the summer of 1935, while under the second ownership of Lena Garth, show interiors filled with furniture, mementos, and a stuffed deer head, indicating that the house continued to be occupied by someone. Pat Jones, writing about the house in the mid-1930s for the *Huntsville Times*, stated that it was then occupied by Rene Rush Shamblin, a granddaughter of Robert B. Wade.

Whether occupied or empty, the Wade house stood until 1952 when it was torn down and a new four-room concrete block house constructed. In 1954 the HARRISES deeded the western portion of their farm, which included the antebellum smokehouse, to Samuel, Jr., who erected a brick residence. The smokehouse, an imposing structure, still stands today as the last remnant of David Wade’s once outstanding plantation complex and of the struggling grandson who could not hold his inheritance together during perilous economic times, but who left his name on Bob Wade Lane.⁴

The impact that the David Wade house had on people is evident by its inclusion in the HABS archive. Four years later, Frances Benjamin Johnston chose it as one of

only four antebellum structures she photographed in Madison County. Johnston, a nationally renowned architectural photographer, had been commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation on behalf of the Library of Congress to photograph noteworthy antebellum structures in the South for which she spent two months working in Alabama. However, in the four years between the HABS session and the arrival of Johnston, deterioration of the Wade house became apparent; Johnston's photograph of the façade reveals that the boards of the entablature had begun to rot and drop off. Yet the house stood for another dozen years.⁵

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 Dorothy Scott Johnson, *Cemeteries of Madison County, Alabama, Vol. I* (Huntsville, Alabama: Johnson Historical Publications, 1971) 160; Deed Book C, 107; Will Book 1, 277; Probate Case #2444, Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Will Book 2, 409; Deed Book 75, 401 & 403, Madison County, Alabama; Johnson, 160.
- 3 Deed Book 111, 379; Deed Book 119, 421; Deed Book 123, 562; Deed Book 134, 100; Deed Book 138, 157, Madison County, Alabama.
- 4 1953 Madison County Tax Blank for Samuel Harris, n.p.; Deed Book 216, 78, Madison County, Alabama.
- 5 David Robb, "The 1939 Tennessee Valley Architectural Photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston," *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, Vol.XXVI, Nos. 1&2, Spring/Summer 2000, 4.

The Burritt House



This undated photograph shows the Burritt house with its Federal-style porch and original 9/9 window sashes. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

The Burritt house, an early example of Federal architecture, stood on the south side of Eustis Avenue, the site later occupied by the Madison County Health Department for more than 50 years until its recent relocation. The frame house was identified from its long ownership by the Burritt family, first by Dr. Amatus Robbins Burritt (1833-1876) and his wife Mary King Robinson (c.1848-1920) and subsequently by their son Dr. William Henry Burritt (1869-1955), whose Monte Sano retirement home is today the city-owned Burritt on the Mountain—A Living Museum and historic park.

The construction date of the Eustis Avenue house is problematic because early

deeds conveyed two houses. Block 47, a half-acre tract fronting 150 feet on Eustis Avenue and 150 feet on the east side of Greene Street, contained the Burritt house on the eastern half. By 1829 this tract contained a “two-story frame house now occupied by John Read [the Burritt house] and also one small brick house now occupied by John Martin.” It is not known which house was constructed first; thus the purchase price, often an indicator of construction, could apply to either or both houses. In 1815, while Alabama was still part of the Mississippi Territory, LeRoy and Judith Pope sold 30 acres to the commissioners of Huntsville for \$750. This tract, which included Block 47, was bounded roughly by a line halfway between Eustis and Randolph avenues on the north, Church Street on the west, Williams Avenue on the south and Lincoln Street on the east. The following year the commissioners sold Block 47 to Holden (Holdin) W. Prout for \$150. In 1817 Prout



After its 1908-1913 conversion to a boarding house, the dwelling gained a new porch that extended the width of the façade. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

resold the property for \$1,500, indicating some construction to explain this tenfold increase. In 1819, the year of Alabama's statehood, the block again sold for \$1,500. Two years later it sold for \$4,000, but to further complicate matters, this deed also conveyed about 20 acres on the eastern side of Meridian Street. Thus it is difficult to attribute the increase in price, but it is tempting to date the house from this period. In the early 1830s the property changed hands several times, each deed stating the lot remained occupied by John Read and John Martin. Apparently Read retained possession of the eastern part until he took title to the Burritt property about 1835. His firm of Read & Read sold staple and fancy goods until its dissolution in the late 1850s. Read resided in the house until his death in 1861. In that year the Hartley & Drayton Map of Huntsville shows a modest two-story frame dwelling with a long two-story brick outbuilding extending in an "ell" along the eastern side. This housed the kitchen as well as living quarters for the house servants. ¹

Probate court records of the Read estate track the home during the Civil War and the ensuing lean years. An 1863 policy from the Lynchburg Hose & Fire Insurance Company protected the house "against loss or damage by fire to the amount of \$4,000 for one year, viz \$2,500 on the two-story building...\$1,500 on the two-story



Detail of the Federal doorway with fanlight. The sign advertises, "Furnished Room For Rent." Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935



Fan detail on staircase. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

kitchen, servants rooms adjoining, all covered with shingles.” The annual premium was \$60. ² At this time Read’s daughter Mary and her husband Jeremiah Clemens occupied the home. Clemens, a lawyer, novelist, and U.S. senator from 1849 to 1853, is best remembered for his wartime politics. A member of the state secession convention in January 1861, he opposed the dissolution ordinance, favoring instead certain slavery concessions from the federal government. A local diary relates numerous occasions of his hobnobbing with federal officials during the Union occupations of Huntsville. ³

Read’s estate, like many others from this period, amassed large debts and was declared insolvent in late 1866. To satisfy creditors the probate court ordered the assets sold and in 1867 the home was advertised in the *Huntsville Democrat* as: “a two-story frame building in good repair, containing seven rooms, a kitchen, servants rooms, stable, and all necessary outbuildings.” Mary K. Burritt bought the



Federal mantel in northwest room. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

property for \$5,200 at auction in 1868 but did not receive title until the purchase price was paid in full in 1877. The lot now fronted about 84 feet on Eustis Avenue and extended to Gates Avenue on the south, and it remained in Burritt family ownership for over 70 years.⁴

Dr. Amatus R. Burritt was born in Springfield, Illinois, educated in Cleveland and came to Huntsville in 1853 or 1856, depending on the source. Like his son, he practiced homeopathic medicine, based on the belief that illnesses could be cured by drugs that would induce symptoms like those of the disease. This in turn would reinforce the body's ability to cure itself. In 1866 he married Mary King Robinson and the couple had two children, Carrie Boardman and William Henry, before his death of cancer in 1876. Little is known about Carrie as neither marriage nor probate records for Madison County could be found, but apparently she married Albert E. Matthews and had one son, A. Burritt Matthews (1885-1941). Dr. William



A rear view of the house in 1935 showing part of the brick addition. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS

Burritt graduated from Vanderbilt Medical College and by 1896 he established a homeopathic medical practice in Huntsville. After the death of his first wife, he married Mrs. Josephine Drummond of St. Louis and, according to the 1900 census, he continued practicing medicine in Huntsville. Before 1910 they moved to her hometown where he was remunerated as a manufacturer of rubber goods. It is believed he received numerous patents for automotive tires in the United States and Europe. By 1920, according to the decennial Missouri census, he was retired.⁵

In 1891 Mary Burritt was found to be of unsound mind and confined in the Alabama Insane Hospital (Bryce Hospital) until her death. Her son, daughter, and son-in-law were appointed guardians to manage her affairs. It appears that Carrie died sometime after 1896 and Albert Matthews before 1913. Their son Burritt Matthews was declared of unsound mind before 1913. With no member of the Burritt family living in Huntsville, the house was no longer needed as a residence.⁶

According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, the property was remodeled between 1908 and 1913. The small front porch with four columns centered over the front door was replaced by one extending the length of the façade, its gently sloping roof supported by five columns. The windows, originally 9/9, were replaced with a large single pane per sash. Perhaps interior modifications were made at this time for the 1913 map indicates the property was a “boarding house.” City directories from the 1930s and 1940s list multiple tenants.

After Mary Burritt’s death in 1920, the property passed to her son William and grandson Burritt as joint tenants in common. On order of the circuit court in 1923 the estate was divided into two equal parts with Burritt Matthews, by guardian, receiving the Eustis Avenue house. He died in Tuscaloosa in 1941 and his uncle, as only surviving heir, inherited the property.⁷

After Josephine’s death in 1933 Dr. Burritt returned to Huntsville to build his retirement home on Round Top Mountain. This local landmark was constructed in the shape of a Maltese cross to afford optimum views. The current mansion, completed in 1938, is the second on the site, the first having burned upon completion. Both homes were unique in that over 2,000 bales of straw were used to insulate the walls. Upon his death in 1955, he willed the home and furnishings to the City of Huntsville as a park and museum with an annual stipend of \$10,000 included for maintenance.⁸

In 1949 Dr. Burritt deeded the Eustis Avenue property jointly to the City of Huntsville and Madison County for a new health department to bear the name of his father. The building was designed at the height of the Modern movement by architect Wilmot C. Douglas of Birmingham and opened to the public in late 1952, constructed at a cost of \$166,808. The health department has long since outgrown the spatial constraints of a building designed to serve a smaller community. While its architectural style is unusual in Huntsville and deserving of preservation, the property is being conveyed to two adjacent churches for expansion plans, and like the Burritt house before it, apparently faces a date with the wrecking ball.⁹

Notes

- 1 Deed Book M, 253; Deed Book F, 307; Deed Book H, 766; Deed Book E, 151; Deed Book F, 44; Deed Book G, 334; Deed Book P, 547, Madison County, Alabama; Probate Case #2429, Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Probate Case #2429, Madison County, Alabama.
- 3 Lucille Griffith, *Alabama, A Documentary History to 1900* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1972), 381; Nancy M. Rohr, *Incidents of the War, the Civil War Journal of Mary Jane Chadick* (Huntsville: Silver Threads Publishing, 2005), 69, 87, 111, 134, and 148.
- 4 Probate Case #2429; Deed Book BBB, 523, Madison County, Alabama.
- 5 “Health Center Opening Result of Big Program,” *Huntsville Times*, 21 December 1952, 30; “Death of Dr. Burritt,” *Huntsville Weekly Independent*, 24 August 1876, 3; Probate Case #4097, Madison County, Alabama; “Dr. W. H. Burritt Passes At Age 86,” *Huntsville Times*, 18 April 1955, 1; 1900 United States Federal Census, Huntsville, Alabama, Roll T623-28, 8A; 1910 United States Federal Census, St. Louis, Missouri, Roll T624-821, 9A; 1920 United States Federal Census, St. Louis, Missouri, Roll T625-959, 4B.
- 6 Probate Case #4097; Probate Case #6773, Madison County, Alabama.
- 7 Deed Book 130, 111; Probate Case #9285, Madison County, Alabama.
- 8 “Burritt Museum and Park Guide Book”; Will Book 7, 205, Madison County, Alabama.
- 9 Deed Book 201, 101, Madison County, Alabama; “Health Center Opening Result of Big Program,” *Huntsville Times*, 21 December 1952, 30.

The Demolition Continues



Huntsville has been practicing the teardown for years, but the practice has gained in popularity since 1950 when the city's most spectacular economic transformation and period of expansion began. In addition to those losses already discussed, we have traded the city's premier example of an Italianate villa for a metal box, demolished two neoclassical courthouses for an oversized glass tower that obliterates the scale of the Square, replaced the historic Carnegie library with a parking garage, and torn down Cotton Row (West Side Square) for a hulking office building, leaving a gaping hole in the West Side Square building wall. Urban renewal made Swiss cheese of the downtown, tearing down the significant and the insignificant alike.

Now the Madison County Health Center building is slated to become a teardown. This will not be Huntsville's biggest architectural loss but perhaps its most embar-

“Any reigning style is in its own time excessively praised and, in the next, excessively denigrated. Each era says to the preceding, “How could you?” So with Modern. Style-conscious people back in the 1940s looked at Academic styles with disdain and took up Modern as a sacred cause; in the late 1970s Modern in its turn began to be derided.”

—Alan Gowans

rassing. This building, unlike the others cited, sits in a historic district that is both locally designated and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This district was established to preserve a living archive of Huntsville architecture from the city’s founding into the 1970s. The Health Center building is now 54 years old—old enough to qualify for the National Register on its own merits without being part of a historic district. Yet it is not being protected nor preserved.

The building was opened just as Huntsville’s star was taking off. Local officials hoped for great things and were desirous of demonstrating that Huntsville was not unsophisticated, but was in synch with both the times and its new destiny. Wilmot C. Douglas, an architect known for favoring Modern design, was commissioned to prepare plans for a building for the health department. He received his architectural degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology and practiced in several seaboard states prior to settling in Birmingham in the late 1930s. For Huntsville, he produced a plan that was Modern in design, scaled to its surround-

ings, easy to construct (a necessity to stay within a public budget), but not without those features that placed it squarely within its time. The entrance is recessed in a porch created by intersecting wall and roof planes and articulated by a textural pattern of projecting brick headers. The double doors are glazed and flanked by large, single panels of vertically ribbed glass. Both the first floor window to the west of the entry and the ribbon of windows above are set off by broad, shallow, slanting brick reveals on either end that subtly enliven the wall surface. The buff-colored brick,



Huntsville's previous U.S. Courthouse and Post Office was an imposing structure completed in 1890 on the west side of Greene Street between Eustis and Randolph avenues. It became a teardown in 1954 to make way for a surface parking lot, thereby setting a dangerous precedent for future public buildings. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

the metal casement windows, the flat roof, the ribbed glass sidelights, the asymmetrical front, and the lack of classical ornament make this a building that is a true, unaltered expression of its age.

It is the only remaining public building from the early 1950s that retains its distinctive character, a character that was emblematic of the city's space mission. Still, it is destined for the landfill. The half block that it sits on will soon be owned by churches, and nothing is so valuable to churches as seas of parking. So the Twickenham Historic District will exchange a significant public structure for one more blank parking lot.

What alternative could there be for this building? It is too small to continue serving its intended use. Its years of being operated with insufficient funding have left its interior in a dilapidated state, although the exterior needs only cleaning. Other Huntsville buildings, far more deteriorated, have been renovated and put to new uses and are now a focus of community pride. The unfortunate reality is that when a new structure is erected on the site of a historic teardown, it is almost always inferior in design, materials, and craftsmanship. When the intended new use is parking, the insult to the neighborhood and community is shocking.

The world that emerged after World War II embraced many new ideas. The visual arts, music, dance, drama, furniture, automobiles, and architecture all evolved in new and modern directions. Huntsville tentatively stuck its toe into this exotic pool, with the Health Center and Huntsville Utilities buildings being the most notable public structures dating from the 1950s. With the demolition of the health department building, we will have obliterated the evidence that Huntsville participated in this new, modern age—an age in which the city, ironically, achieved its most significant identity.

Future generations of Huntsvillians will look at photos of the health department building and wonder what we could have been thinking when we razed it for parking—just as many today question the loss of the third Madison County courthouse and of Cotton Row.

THE QUARTERLY EDITORS

Note

Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture, Social Function and Cultural Expression* (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 271.



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Historic Huntsville Foundation

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

The Foundation **owns and operates** Harrison Brothers Hardware; **owns and leases** the Harvie Jones Building; **operates** a warehouse of architectural artifacts and materials for reuse in historic preservation; **publishes** *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, the 2001 winner of the Alabama Historical Commission's Exceptional Achievement Award, and *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; *Gatsby Remembered: An Evening at the Russel Erskine*; 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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Annette Philpo't, Executive Director
Historic Huntsville Foundation
124 South Side Square
Huntsville, Alabama 35801
Telephone: 256/539-0097
E-mail: preserve@hiwaay.net

Historic Huntsville Foundation
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Huntsville, Alabama 35801

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