Early Huntsville's West Side Square

Joyce Smith

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Each city has a vital spot which in its distant past provided the spark for expansion, the location of a community surrounding that site. Huntsville's vital point was the Big Spring, the existence of which was carried in tales by the Indians to far-off places.

The name of the first white man to behold the spring's gushing force is uncertain--perhaps Old Man Ditto, Samuel Davis, the Criner brothers, or John Hunt. We do know that Hunt was the first to build a cabin on a hillside near the spring in 1805. Other settlers soon followed and in only four years the Indians had ceded the lands to the Federal Government and the great land sales commenced.

LeRoy Pope, called the "Father of Huntsville," purchased the Big Spring and surrounding lands for $23.50 an acre, an unheard of price in those days.

The spring and bluffs above it were important in providing water for the settlement and points on a compass for the surveyors. The streets of the new city with the short-lived name of Twickenham were laid out parallel to the bluff which ran N 34°W. This street lay-out looked very neat on the map but occasionally caused consternation to land owners,
who discovered that their carelessly written deeds had divided their adjoining lots with a true N-S line. In reality the land was divided on the diagonal, leaving each owner holding a triangle of land.

Despite the fact that the rocky bluff circling the spring was infested with rattlesnakes, the narrow strip of land above it was eagerly sought-after property. This area became the west side of the courthouse square. As early as 1816 there were several two story brick buildings serving as storehouses and advertising elegant assortments of dry goods, hardware, crockery, and groceries. Shopowners promised merchandise of superior quality at wholesale prices, and pledged that no exertion should be wanting in order to merit a share of the public patronage.

By 1819 there were five general merchandise stores and the offices of three lawyers on this block. At least nineteen lawyers and twenty-one physicians were practicing in Madison County. Apparently some citizens were dissatisfied with the fees charged by the doctors, as evidenced by the following statement signed by several doctors in the Alabama Republican:

In consequence of certain unfriendly reports having been industriously circulated to the injury of the Faculty of Huntsville they have thought it a duty owed themselves and the public to make known the rates of charging:
For a visit in town -- $1.00
For a visit in the country -- 50¢ to $1.00 per mile, according to circumstances
Prescription -- $1.00
Medicines as usual
All visits at night double

In 1816 the first bank in what would be Alabama
and one of the first in the Mississippi Territory was chartered by the Mississippi Territorial Legislature. It was the Planters and Merchants Bank and it occupied a two-story brick building on the bluff. This building, as well as the other edifice on the block, used every available inch of land. William H. Brantley, in his book Banking In Alabama, 1816-1860, gave a brief description of the building and said that it extended fifty-four feet in a westerly direction where its rear hung precariously, almost directly over Huntsville's Big Spring.²

LeRoy Pope was the first and only president of the bank. The Board of Directors read like a "Who's Who" listing. They included John W. Walker, John P. Hickman, Thomas Bibb, David Moore, John Brahan, John Read, John M. Taylor, Nicholas Pope, James Manning, Thomas Percy, Henry Chambers, and James Clemons, all of Madison County.

Old issues of the Alabama Republican give glimpses into the brief but eventful life of this bank and its employees. One editorial noted:

Mr. Hill, the clerk in the Huntsville Bank, arrived in town on Monday last with about $50,000 specie from New Orleans. In accomplishing the trip, we understand Mr. Hill has had many difficulties and dangers to encounter, from the great value of his charge and the suspicious character of those who were necessarily entrusted with the secret. This valuable cargo was brought up to the mouth of the Cumberland in a steamboat, but it being impracticable to ascend that river on account of low water, he was compelled to come up the Tennessee in a keel boat to Florence, thence to take wagons to Huntsville.³

The bank was robbed twice. The first robbery in 1822 netted $5050 in bank notes from the cashier's desk while he was upstairs eating supper. A servant
in the bank supposedly tipped off the thief when the
teller went upstairs. Fortunately, he overlooked
$1000 in specie in the same desk.

Two years later the bank was again robbed, this
time of $29,000. The cashier, William G. Hill, who
had brought $50,000 from New Orleans with no
worse effects than fright, was not so lucky this time.
Mr. Hill was on his way to the director's office up-
stairs when the robbery occurred. The Alabama
Republican reported:

We understand that he had taken the bundle from an
iron chest and was approaching the back door of the
passage which had previously been left unlocked,
with a candle in his hand, when it was suddenly
burst open by the robber, who stunned the cashier
by a blow on the head, and possessing himself of the
money, made a precipitate retreat out the back way. 4

To add insult to injury the bank sued Mr. Hill for the
loss, claiming negligence and defalcation but he was
acquitted. The money was never recovered nor the
robber apprehended.

On February 1, 1825 the bank's charter was
voided by a Proclamation of Alabama Governor
Israel Pickens. Four years later, almost to the
exact day, fire raged on the west side of the square,
entirely consuming six brick tenements including
the former home of the Planters and Merchants
Bank. It was thought that the fire was set to cover
a robbery.

In this way Alabama's first bank with a colorful,
turbulent history vanished from the scene. How-
ever, it remains in memory and the site now holds
a handsome marker erected by the Alabama His-
torical Association.
1 *Alabama Republican*, August 8, 1818, 2.

2 *Alabama Republican*, September 22, 1820.


4 October 15, 1824, 2.

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