Bragg-Kavanaugh House: A Sears House in East Huntsville

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol10/iss1/6

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There are undoubtedly a number of Sears "Honor Bilt" homes in Huntsville and Madison County, although only three such houses have come to the attention of the Historic Huntsville Foundation. None of the three is documented as positively being a Sears house, but rumor and hearsay indicate that these homes were ordered from Sears.

One such house is located in the proposed East Huntsville Historic District, at 1506 McCullough Avenue. Now owned by the Ben Kavanaugh, the Colonial Revival style home was built in 1912 by Huntsville merchant J. D. Bragg on land he owned at the northeastern edge of town.

No documents have ever been found to verify that the house came from Sears, but all the previous owners have said they heard that it was a Sears house.

The Kavanaughhs have talked to the original owner's grandsons, Henry Bragg and James Bragg, Jr., about the origin of the house. The Braggs remember their grand-
father saying he chose and ordered the house from the Sears catalog, and when several boxcar loads of materials arrived at the depot, the components were hauled by wagon to the construction site.

Kavanaugh even wrote to Sears for information, but they had no early records of Huntsville area sales. However, he was able to determine that the house was built in 1912 by searching through old tax assessment records at the county courthouse. So far, the Kavanuaghs have found nothing to indicate the model or purchase price; they had hoped that the house was "The Magnolia," a Colonial Revival model of 1918. After finding that their home was a much earlier model, the Kavanuaghs also saw many differences in the two houses when they saw floorplans for "The Magnolia."

During the process of restoration of their nine room house, they found evidence of changes made during years past - a couple of
doorways had been moved, a couple others had been sealed up, and some closets had been added.

They also found evidence of the mail-order origin of their home. Located in the attic is a baseboard stenciled with the name "J. D. Bragg," a shipment serial number, and "CVT Co.," which Kavanaugh believes stands for Charles Van Torn Company, possibly a local builder who constructed the house for Mr. Bragg, or perhaps "CVT Co." produced the precut millwork for Sears. Identical stenciling appears on the backside of all interior trim and door facings. Also in the attic, they found some beams with unused precut notches, perhaps for an optional wall or partition, indicating the beams were cut before they were purchased, rather than being cut as needed.

"Colonial style" overmantel in living room.
Several structural components of the house typify options in the Sears mail-order packages, most notably, the redwood siding. Redwood was not easily available in Huntsville in 1912. Other materials, offered by Sears and used in the Kavanaugh's house, include cedar shingles, oak beams, joists and studs, and very dense heart pine flooring from a pine variety not grown locally.

Interior features denoting a possible Sears design include the "colonial style" oak mantel, a built-in china closet in the dining room, and an original brass light fixture with a globe having a raised design of "akanthos" leaves.

Even though documentary proof eludes them, the Kavanaughs choose to believe that Mr. J. D. Bragg did, indeed, order his spacious, charming house from the Sears catalog.

Built-in china cabinet in dining room.

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Historic Huntsville Foundation is interested in learning of other Sears houses in the area. They need not be documented; rumor, recollection, structural evidence, etc. would be sufficient justification for further research to be done for verification.

Information and questions concerning other possible Sears houses in the area may be directed to the Quarterly Editor, Historic Huntsville Foundation, P.O. Box 786, Huntsville, AL 35804, or by calling 883-8474.