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Hotel Twickenham, corner of Washington Street and Clinton Avenue. The Parking Garage is now on this site, but the block to the north has changed very little.

Huntsville's Old Hotels

by Joberta Wasson

Huntsville's old hotels were always exceptionally fine, on a par with many of the best in much larger cities. This was no happenstance. Even in its earlier years, Huntsville had two distinct advantages: it was on a major trade route between other cities, and it was a very pleasant place for a sojourn. According to old accounts, traveling salesmen planned their routes so that their longest stop-overs would be in Huntsville where they knew they would find

comfortable rooms, good food, and nice surroundings.

For people fortunate enough to live in Huntsville, there was another advantage. The hotels made marvelous centers for parties, club meetings, and dances; and Huntsvillians have always taken great pleasure in social gatherings. It is interesting to speculate that the hotels may help explain why. Perhaps because there was always a delightful place to gather, people just naturally socialized more often.

VERY EARLY INNS. We do not know exactly when the first tavern in the area was built. We do know there was one opened well before 1819 by George Russell on the Deposit Road south of New Hope, near the Tennessee River. This road had been opened by Andrew Jackson in 1813 during the Creek Indian Wars. It ran from Winchester, Tennessee through Madison County near the Three Forks of Flint River, and continued south across the Tennessee River to Fort Deposit, which Jackson established that same year in what is now Marshall County.

An inn which frequently attracted the famous Andrew Jackson as a visitor was the Green Bottom Inn, built in 1815. It was located several miles north of Huntsville on

what is now Highway 231, near Alabama A & M University. This unique establishment boasted an attraction not often found at hotels. It had a race track. John Connelly, the proprietor, loved horses and possessed the champion of the South, Gray Gander. General Jackson often brought his favorite horse to race against Gray Gander, but Gray Gander was never beaten by the General's, or anyone else's horse. James K. Polk was a visitor at the inn, also.

The Green Bottom Inn, after it ceased to be a tavern, became part of the A & M campus in 1891 and served for years as its president's home until it burned down in 1931.

The tavern and stage stop at neighboring Moores-



Green Bottom Inn where Andrew Jackson often stayed. It was located where Alabama A and M University is now. Built in 1815, burned in 1931.

ville in Limestone County is another local early inn. Deed records imply that the surviving structure was built between 1825 and 1828 by Griffin Lampkin. Besides being a popular stage stop, the Mooresville Tavern housed a post office. In 1819 an Act of Congress established a post road from Mooresville to Huntsville, authorized the Mooresville post office and delivery of mail between the two towns.

By the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1819, there were at least four inns within the town of Huntsville. One of these, a two-story frame building in the Federal style, is still standing and is now undergoing restoration. Originally, it was located at the corner of Franklin and Gates Streets, but was moved many years ago to the north side of Williams Avenue, between Franklin and Green Streets. This must, without a doubt, have been the Planters Hotel. (Editor's note: see "A New Tavern" advertisement on page 6.) Even now, after more than 160 years, this building

is sturdy and foursquare.

The most prestigious inn, however, must have been the Huntsville Inn on the east side of the Public Square. Notables usually stopped there. President James Monroe's arrival at the Huntsville Inn was probably the most disconcerting call a celebrity ever made at a Huntsville hotel. He registered there, utterly without warning, one day in early June, 1819. The efficient proprietor, Mr. Irby Jones, prepared a grand feast the next day, and after the proper dignitaries had been quickly invited, a memorable banquet ensued.

It seems a miracle that none of the taverns burned before 1850. In that year the Caldwell House, along with many other buildings, was destroyed by fire. In 1855, the Bell Tavern burned, too. After this second calamity, plans were made to construct a new hotel on the same site, a local corporation being formed for the purpose. Among its subscribers were Governor Reuben Chapman and Dr. Thomas Fearn.



Detail of box cornice of the Williams Avenue house undergoing restoration; believed to be the former Planters Hotel.



Artist's view of the Huntsville Hotel in the 1860's before an annex was added at right. Built 1858, burned 1910 and 1911.

HUNTSVILLE HOTEL. The forthcoming Huntsville Hotel became the town's first real luxury hostelry. Four stories high, with ornate iron-work trimming the facade, it was of neo-classic design. It occupied the northwest corner of Jefferson Street at the Public Square. The interior was furnished in what the media of the day described as a "tasty and elegant" style, part Moorish, part Louis XVII, part merely contemporary Victorian. For its time, this hotel must have been the epitome of elegance and comfort. It brought much pleasure to the townspeople as well as to travelers. Even during the Civil War and the dour reconstruction period, there were evenings of gaity, such as a

grand fancy dress Ball in June, 1866. Any financial woes it may have suffered were dissipated by - of all things - a health scare.

A veritable epidemic of yellow fever broke out in the South in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But, for inexplicable, if fortunate reasons, Huntsville never was affected. Scores of refugees from other towns, particularly Memphis, spent the dangerous summer months in Huntsville, many occupying the Huntsville Hotel.

For many years, the Huntsville Hotel remained a popular and elegant landmark. But it, too, eventually met the fate of its predecessor - destruction by two fires, one in 1910 and one in 1911.

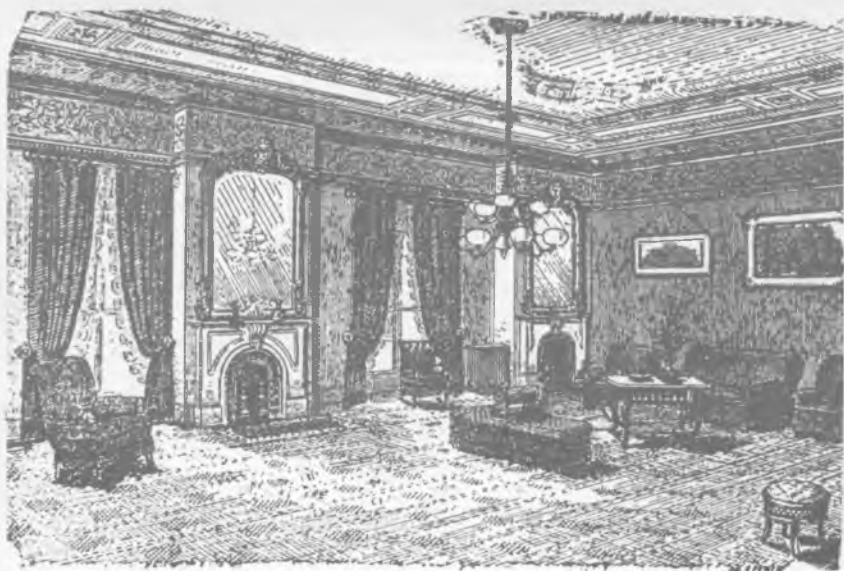


The Huntsville Hotel pictured between 1901 and 1908. Built on the site of the Bell Tavern at the northwest corner of the Square where the Henderson Bank Building is now located.



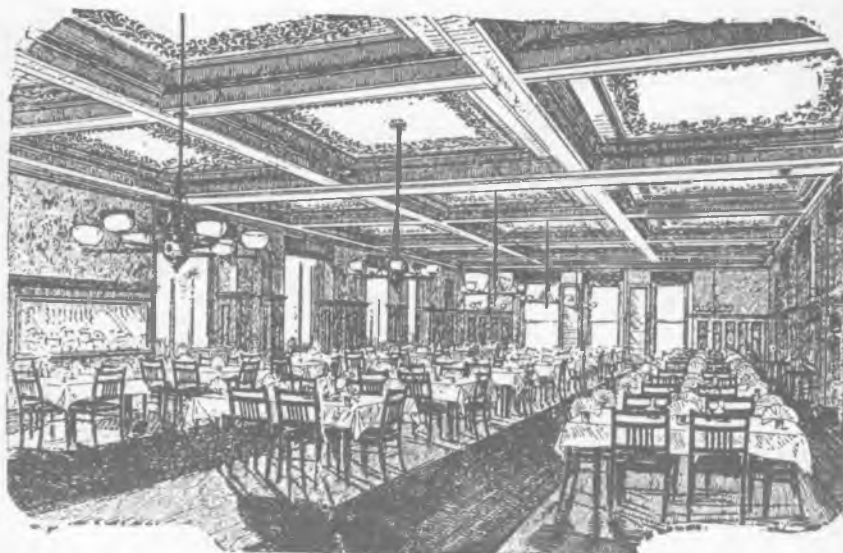
The Huntsville Hotel fire, November 11, 1911.





MAIN PARLOR HUNTSVILLE HOTEL.

Copied from **The Independent** newspaper, March 28, 1890.



DINING ROOM, HUNTSVILLE HOTEL.



The Huntsville Hotel Bar. Copied from **The Huntsville Post**, December 27, 1900.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

THE MONTE SANO HOTEL.

The yellow fever scare that helped increase business at the Huntsville Hotel was not without impact upon a corporation named the Huntsville and Monte Sano Improvement Company and upon its president, Mr. James O'Shaughnessy. This group was making plans for a resort hotel and health spa.

On June 1, 1887, Huntsville's most fabulous hotel of all time, the Monte Sano Hotel, opened its doors. Located on a bluff high atop Monte Sano Mountain, it afforded a panoramic view of the valley below. Healthful mineral springs bubbled nearby. The building itself, a rambling, five-story brown wooden structure with an encircling porch, was architecturally fashionable rather than beautiful. But inside,

luxurious furnishings, impeccable service, and gourmet dining made The Monte Sano the acme of perfection.

All manner of delightful diversions - music and dancing every night, parties, excursions, and games during the day - enlivened the scene. The ever-bubbling mineral springs provided the guests with healthful potions for "taking the waters", which was all the rage during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Almost immediately, The Monte Sano became one of the leading spas of the nation. By August, it had registered more than a thousand guests. In its heyday, names such as William H. Vanderbilt, William Waldorf Astor, and Jay Gould appeared upon its register.

Business continued brisk

through the next decade, except for a few seasons when it did not open at all. Then, suddenly, after a successful season in 1900, it ceased operations. Why?

One problem seems to have been transportation. The road up the mountain had fallen into disrepair. The little railroad spur, running between the train station and the hotel, closed down after a wreck frightened off passengers, even though there had been no injuries. But surely the carriage road could have been repaired! Something else had to have gone wrong, but exactly what remains a mystery. By the summer of 1901, cattle and hogs were running at large on the unkempt hotel grounds.

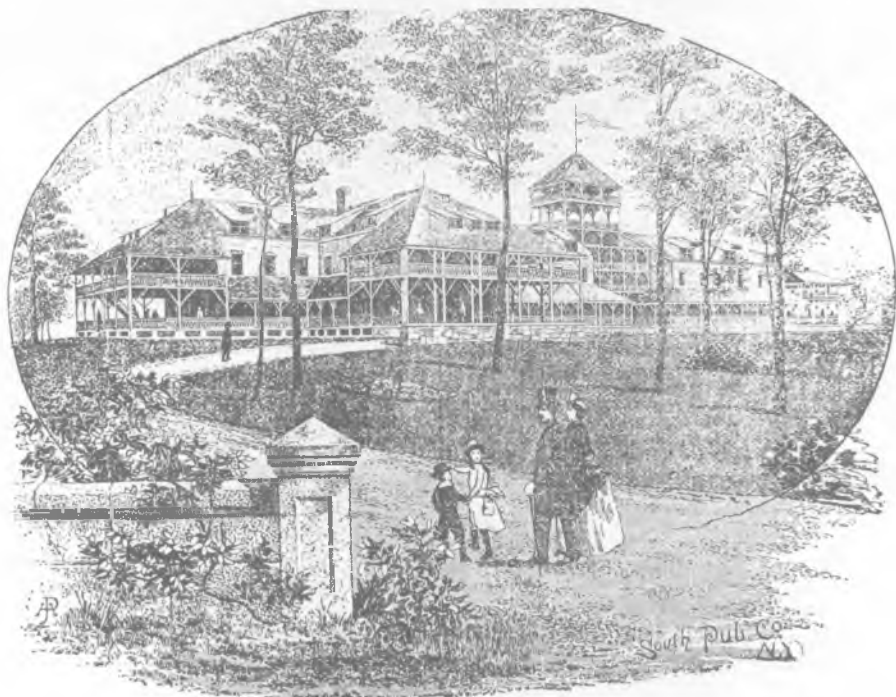
During the next few years, several futile attempts were made to improve transportation up the mountain. A suggestion to

turn the hotel into a tuberculosis sanitarium was disregarded. In 1909, the hotel was sold to Lena Garth and her father, Horace Garth, for a summer home. They paid \$20,000 for grounds, buildings, and contents. But this was not the end of the Monte Sano story. Not quite.

In November of 1916, banner headlines in the local newspapers declared that the Monte Sano resort was being prepared for a reopening on a grander scale than ever before. It was to be transformed into a country club. What's more, it was to be one of the largest and most select clubs in the nation, with all manner of activities available. A golf course was to be constructed; there would be tennis and fishing; a celebrated pack of fox hounds would be maintained for fox hunting; there would be a stable of horses; and,



Hotel Monte Sano, front entrance at right. Built 1887, demolished 1944.



Hotel Monte Sano, front view. Copied from **The Independent**, April 25, 1890.

for indoor pursuits, bowling, billiards, and dancing. The club was to remain open all year round, and there would be rooms available for overnight guests.

A key man in this project was Mr. Alan Jemison of the Jemison Real Estate Company of Birmingham. (The firm is still in existence.) He presented the concept to the city council with a request for free water. (**The Democrat**, November 8, 1916). A date for the opening was set most positively as January 1.

Stockholders in the enterprise were sought, and two campaign directors were hired

to solicit money for needed improvements. (**Mercury**, May 30, 1917). The Garths had apparently leased the property, as there is no record of a sale.

There was no January 1 opening, but work on new plumbing and electrical wiring got underway early in 1917. A May 1917 issue of **The Democrat** states that jolly parties from nearby cities bent on spending the heated term in this natural refrigerator would soon be welcome.

Statements concerning the accessibility of the mountain to downtown Huntsville were extremely san-



Hotel Monte Sano, back view, April 1927.

guine, though. The grounds could be reached within fifteen minutes, said the ads, because the hotel was just three miles from the center of town.

The Democrat for April 11, 1917, says that the materials for the road repairs had come, and everything would be shipshape soon.

"All that needs to be done is to raise twenty-five thousand dollars."

The club did actually open on an informal basis, Sunday, June 24, 1917. The manager, Mr. Harvey Hughes, said there would be music and dancing every afternoon and evening. Light lunches would be served. There would be a

Parlor, Hotel Monte Sano, June 1897.





Hotel Monte Sano Lobby, 1890.

Hotel Monte Sano Dining Room, 1890.



formal opening later, after the improvements were completed, he declared.

An article by Tracy Pratt, written that same year, (*The Democrat*, April 18, 1917), speaks of the new country club as one of Huntsville's prime assets (as it certainly would have been if it had become firmly established). Unfortunately, this was a war year. People were buying war bonds instead of investing in country clubs. The twenty-five thousand dollars needed for improvements did not materialize. Few visitors cared enough about the music and dancing and light lunches to brave the rough, rutted, unrepaired roads. Only a bird could have covered the distance in fifteen minutes. There never was a formal opening. The

property reverted to the Garths, who owned it until the building was sold for salvage in 1944 and was torn down.

In the meantime, in downtown Huntsville, calamity had struck again. The main building of the Huntsville Hotel burned in November, 1910, except for a few rooms. (One traveling salesman slept peacefully through the fire, arose at seven, dressed, and stepped into the hall to find himself in a charred ruin. He exited by way of a skylight). In 1911, the annex burned, too.

MCGEE HOTEL. The only leading hotel left in town was the McGee, a small, though charming, family-style establishment. It had been built in 1869 and was located on the present site of the



The McGee Hotel. Copied from the *Mercury*, June 15, 1892. Built 1869, burned Christmas day 1924.



Hotel
Twickenham,
Clinton Avenue
view.
Built 1914,
demolished
1975.

Terry-Hutchens Building on Jefferson Street. Its facade was lovely, with a wrought iron balcony overlooking the street, and ornamental gables over all the windows.

Transients may have had trouble finding enough rooms during this time, but the townspeople enjoyed the usual dances and parties and

dinners there. The small ballroom was large enough to accommodate the tango and the two-step. The Study Circle, a ladies' club organized at the McGee in 1909, is still active and is, this very year, celebrating its 75th anniversary.

The McGee suffered the same fate as so many of its



The old City Hall and City Market occupied the southwest corner of Washington Street and Clinton Avenue before the Twickenham Hotel was built there.



Groundbreaking for the Hotel Twickenham, April 23, 1914.

predecessors. It burned to the ground on Christmas day in 1924. But, it did not serve as Huntsville's prime entertainment center as long as 1924, anyway. A new hotel, the Twickenham, had already superseded the McGee.

TWICKENHAM HOTEL. Plans for the Twickenham aroused the interest of the townspeople to a high pitch. Even the groundbreaking ceremony was charged with excitement. On the appointed day, April 1, 1914, all stores suspended business from 1:30 to 3:00 p.m. The schools closed at noon. Brass bands played. Dignitaries made speeches. Then, at the climax of the festivities, at 1:45, one of Huntsville's loveliest belles, Elizabeth Cooper

(Mastin), surrounded by a bevy of pretty maids of honor, broke ground with a golden spade. Exactly at 2:00, all the factories in town blew prolonged blasts on their whistles, simultaneously. What a send-off!

The sturdy building which was subsequently constructed on the southwest corner of Washington and Holmes Streets was fireproof, a first for a Huntsville Hotel.

In March, 1915, invitations to a grand opening celebration banquet went out to almost everybody in town. The manager, Mr. Quincy Love, greeted guests at the door. Mr. John Scott, the florist, had decorated with masses of flowers, many of them well-

wishers' gifts, such as a horseshoe done in roses, ferns and carnations, signifying success. The dinner menu included, among the more exotic dishes, green sea turtle and braised sweetbreads.

The Twickenham, with a fine ballroom and party rooms, met the townspeople's highest expectations, but Mr. Love had no intention of letting it be a mere social center. Under his efficient management, it won recognition as the best American-plan hotel in Alabama. (*Times*, June 28, 1925). It became a favorite with honeymooners, as well as businessmen.

Mr. Love, himself, deserves more than passing attention. He was one of the most interesting personages ever associated with Huntsville hotel life. Abrupt and gruff in manner, intolerant of careless or foolish behavior, uncompromisingly honest; it is not surprising that he was highly respected, but somewhat surprising that he was very well liked, too.

A 1917 *Times* ran an announcement for him which is typical of the man. It concerns a Red Cross banquet for which he had received 125 reservations. He says, in effect, that he is expecting exactly 125 to attend, not 124 or 126. Also, he expects the 125 to all be on time.

Mr. Love's untimely death in 1925 dealt a blow to the Twickenham from which it never recovered. His wife managed it for awhile, and then his son, Quincy, Jr., but never with his success. However, even after the new Russel Erskine Hotel was built in 1929, it continued to be popular for small



Demolition of the old Twickenham Hotel to make room for a new city parking garage; June 2, 1975.

parties and dances. Many Huntsville ladies recall fondly the Saturday night USO dances which were held there to entertain the servicemen during World War II.

The Twickenham was closed to guests in 1971 and served as a Senior Center for several years before being torn down to make way for a parking garage.

YARBROUGH HOTEL. The Yarbrough, which opened in 1924, was a commercial hotel without a ballroom or party rooms. Four stories high, with eighty rooms, it catered to businessmen. The capable Mr. J. D. Smith managed it successfully for many years, but it finally closed when motels became established. It is still standing on the Southwest corner of Washington and Clinton Streets, presently undergoing renovation.



The Yarbrough Hotel at the corner of Washington Street and Holmes Avenue was built in 1924 as a strictly commercial hotel. It is presently undergoing renovation.



RUSSEL ERSKINE HOTEL.

The last of the fine hotels, the Russel Erskine, could not have been built at a worse time. It opened in January, 1930, just as the Great Depression began. A corporate group had started plans for its construction back in 1927. The name "Russel Erskine" was a deliberate ploy to entice a hometown boy who had made good to invest in the project. Mr. Russel Erskine, the highly successful president of the Studebaker Corporation, was a Huntsville native. He did invest, but meagerly.

Indeed, the hotel did not turn a profit until the beginning of World War II, and was kept solvent largely through the efforts of Mr. Lawrence Goldsmith, its principal stockholder. De-



Built in 1930, the Hotel Russel Erskine on Clinton Avenue is now an apartment building for the elderly and the handicapped.

spite its problems, the twelve-story structure was considered the finest hotel in North Alabama from its very first years. It dominated Huntsville's social life as "The Hotel" until the mid 1960's.

One businessman wrote an unsolicited letter of appreciation at the end of its first year, saying he traveled a great deal and always selected one outstanding hotel each year to compliment.

"This year," he wrote, "the palm goes to the Russel Erskine. This is not a provincial tribute. My assignments took me to fifteen states." (Daily Times, January 4, 1931).

In the late 1960's, when new motels were plentiful on

outlying roads and businesses were leaving the downtown area, the Russel Erskine lost patronage because of its inconvenient location and poor parking facilities. It closed in March, 1971, a few weeks after the Twickenham ceased operation.

Several attempts to revive it have failed. It has now been recycled into a highrise apartment complex for the elderly and disabled.

So all of the old hotels are gone, as such. We may think of them with nostalgia now and then, but the new motel-hotels which have replaced them serve our present needs better. The motels' chapter in history will be written some time in the future.



Russel Erskine Hotel Lobby. At left is doorway to Ballroom; electric wall-fans are between the windows.



Ballroom of the Russel Erskine Hotel - an Elks Club meeting.

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