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THE MILL SCHOOLS OF HUNTSVILLE

by Aida Reinbolt

The mill schools, sometimes called the village or suburban schools, were originally built for the benefit of the Huntsville textile workers. Located outside the city limits, these schools came under the jurisdiction of the Madison County School System.¹ They became city schools after 1955 when the Huntsville city limits were extended.

The textile mills built and maintained the schools while the County provided and paid the teachers. This partnership worked fairly well until the mills began to close or changed ownership. The result was that the schools were sold (or just given) to the County.

In the early 1900's, the mill schools were simple dwelling houses accomodating a few children. The majority of school-age children worked in the mills. Gradually, as child labor legislation and compulsory education laws freed more and more children from the mills, larger and more permanent school buildings were constructed.

¹The textile mills were located outside the city limits in order to obtain tax advantages.



Rison School was built by Dallas Mills as a mill village school in 1920 at 509 Oakwood Avenue. The building is scheduled for demolition, being in the right-of-way for the I-65 highway.



An early Dallas Mill Grammar School (predating the Rison School and approximately on the same site) was housed in the old Moore home. This newspaper photograph was copied from **The Huntsville Mercury**, Century Edition, July 23, 1916.

There were four such schools in the vicinity of Huntsville. Three large mills each supported a school of its own. The fourth school, near three small mills, was dependent on philanthropic donations and the county for its subsistence.

Northeast of the city, one mile from the center of town, were the Dallas Manufacturing Company and Rison School. Built in 1921 at a cost of \$80,000, it was named for William R. Rison, former vice-president, treasurer, and general manager of the mill. This handsome green stucco building served as an elementary school and high school until it was sold to the county in 1942 for the nominal sum of \$10,000. Incorporated into the city school system in 1955, the building continued to be used as an elementary and junior high school until it was closed in 1967. After serving as a daycare center and temporary arts center, the building was abandoned. The land it occupies at 509 Oakwood Avenue is destined soon to become part of a new highway.

Adjacent to the Dallas Mill was the Lincoln Mill of Alabama. Its school was named for the owner, William Lincoln Barrell. Lincoln School, located at 1110 Meridian Street, was completed in 1929. (See picture, page 20.) The mill paid \$60,000 for the building and equipment. After fifty-six years, having served as an elementary school, a high school, and every other combination of grade school, this attractive, pale green and white painted concrete and steel building continues to serve the children in its vicinity. In 1982 this unique building was placed on the National Register of Historic Buildings.

Southwest of the city was the Merrimack Manufacturing Company. Its school, known simply as Joe Bradley, was named for the agent and general manager of the mill, Joseph J. Bradley, Sr. This school, located at 3405 Triana Boulevard, was opened in 1919, but it was enlarged in 1925 when several classrooms and an auditorium were added. The Merrimack Mill became the Huntsville Manufacturing Company in 1946 when it was purchased by the M. Lowenstein Corporation. The school, valued at \$300,000 by the County Board of Education and the mill officials, was presented to the county as a gift in 1951. The area was annexed to the city in 1956, and although the original building has been removed, an annex added in recent years continues to provide administrative office space for the Huntsville Board of Education.

A short distance from the Merrimack Mill was another mill village, or rather, a cluster of three villages known collectively as West Huntsville. Three small textile mills provided the livelihood for the residents of these villages. None of the mills was willing to undertake the responsibility for providing a school for its children. However, through the efforts of a Presbyterian missionary, Jessie House, and a young teacher, William P. Fanning, the mills were persuaded to donate a dwelling house for the first school. When this



This picture was identified (on back of photo) as an early school built by Lincoln Mill; when this building was outgrown, the mill built the present Lincoln School in 1929 on Meridian Street (see picture, page 20).

building was outgrown, a small amount of money was raised among the parents; the rest - \$3,000 - was given by philanthropist Virginia McCormick to build an eight room wooden building.² This structure sufficed until the county built a more substantial schoolhouse. Today an attractive red brick building constructed by the city school system is situated at 3001 Ninth Avenue, the site of the original wooden building. Children attending this school today play in the shade of three large trees planted by Mr. Fanning for the comfort of the mill children.

The mill managers were very proud of their schools and were sympathetic to the needs of the children of their employees. One of the most commendable actions taken by the mills

²Virginia McCormick, part-time resident of Huntsville and daughter of Cyrus McCormick, contributed generously towards the welfare of the mill workers, with the help of Grace Walker, her secretary.



Merrimack School predated the Joe Bradley School which was completed in 1919.

was the addition of the high school grades to each of their elementary schools. This action was suggested by the four mill school principals and had the support and approval of the county school system. First the parents, and then the mill management, had to be convinced, but finally all four schools became accredited high schools by the process of adding one new grade a year.

From 1929 to 1950, these high schools provided the children of the mill villages the opportunity of obtaining a high school diploma and the possibility of going on to college if they so desired, and many did. In 1951 West Huntsville High School was replaced by a new consolidated school, the S. R. Butler High School, and all high school-age children from all the mill villages went there.

Except for the Lincoln School, the mill schools of old are no more, but the legacy of the schools lives on in the roster of alumni who have profited from the privilege of attending these schools. They were especially fortunate to have had the exemplary leadership of many devoted teachers and the four stalwart principals - Cecil Vincent Fain of Rison, Edward Anderson of Lincoln, Edward F. DuBose of Joe Bradley, and John Homer Crim of West Huntsville. Mr. Crim became



This photograph of Joe Bradley School on Triana Boulevard was taken before additions were made to the building in 1925.



The old West Huntsville School on Ninth Avenue has been replaced by a modern brick school building on the same site.

principal of the new Butler High School. Mr. DuBose continued teaching at Joe Bradley, and later at Ridgecrest Elementary, until he retired. He recalls having taught three generations of children of one family.

Among the graduates of the mill schools are professionals, statesmen, and successful business people who do not hesitate to give credit to the mill schools for the start they were given on the road to success.

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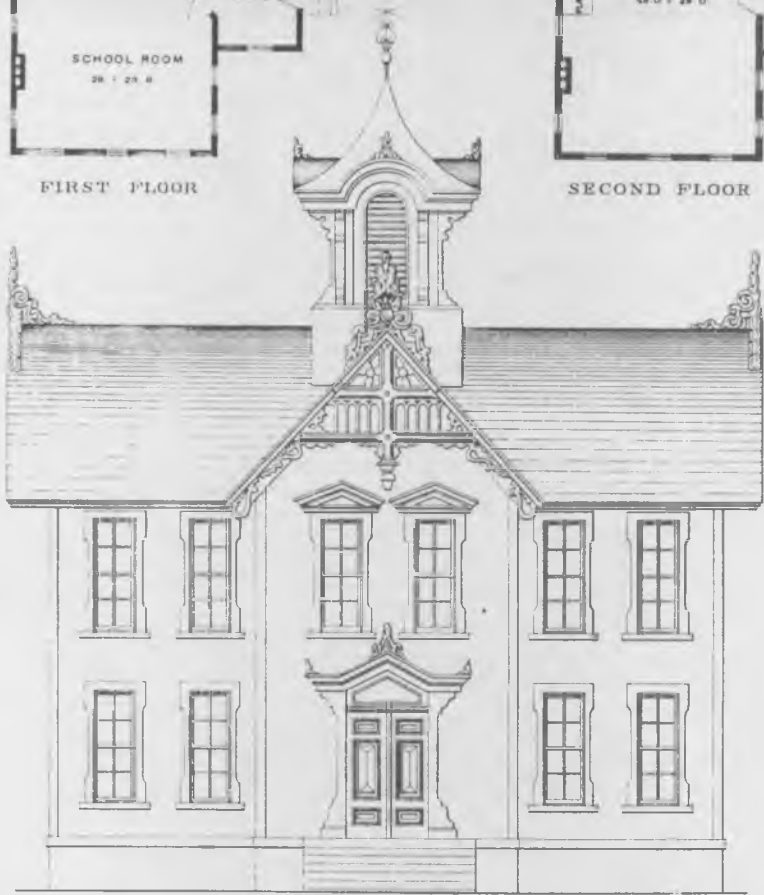




FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



FRONT ELEVATION

SCALE 1/2 INCH TO FOOT

DESIGN FOR A FRAME SCHOOL-HOUSE

E. E. MYERS, Architect. Springfield, Ill.

Illustration from an 1878 pattern book, **Bicknell's Village Builder and Supplement**, published by A. J. Bicknell and Co., New York.