

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 5 | Number 1

Article 3

9-1-1978

Old Town Historic District

Historic Huntsville Foundation

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Historic Huntsville Foundation (1978) "Old Town Historic District," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol5/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.



127 Walker, 1889

Old Town Historic District

Huntsville's newest National Register listing is the Old Town Historic District which was accepted July 18, 1978. This district which lies on the northeast edge of the central business district was originally created by city ordinance in 1974 and contains 263 structures spread over almost 100 acres. The addition of Old Town to the Register means that those properties within the district that are income-producing and certifiably significant are eligible for renovation under the provisions of the Tax Reform Act of 1976.

Residential construction in Huntsville was seriously underway by 1815 with many of the wealthy cotton planters choosing to erect their homes southeast of the Courthouse Square along Williams, Adams, and McClung, a rolling, wooded area

outside of the city limits. Other early residents built their homes scattered along the other streets of the town and several lived on the Square itself, often dividing their structure between residential and business uses.

Several factors had a decided influence on the character of early Huntsville housing. The town population was small - not quite 3,000 by 1850 - and land was abundant. Transportation was either by foot or by horse which required people to live within a reasonable distance of the courthouse; two miles was usually the limit for a pedestrian city. The combination of these factors meant that most people lived within a mile of the town center, but because the population was not large, each family could have a generous plot of ground for their home, often an acre or more.

This was important since the average ante-bellum home consisted of much more than a house; each residence also required a collection of out-buildings. The house itself contained only entertaining rooms, bedrooms for the family, and perhaps a dining room. All

the other functions of daily life were conducted in specialized accessory structures that could include any or all of the following: slave quarters, smoke house, kitchen, gin press and house, barn and stables, grainary, corn mill, mule shed, wellhouse, dairy and wood shed.

Obviously a lot of land was needed to accommodate all these separate structures. The kitchen was removed from the house to minimize the danger of fire to the main structure and to keep it cooler since the cooking fire had to be kept burning all summer. This dispersal of household activities was rendered functional by the presence of slaves who carried out the chores. The result was a town with homes set on spacious grounds but concentrated within a mile of the courthouse.

705 Randolph, 1889





413 Holmes, before 1860

By 1861, the Huntsville map shows that about 25 houses were located within the present boundaries of Old Town, but most of these have been demolished to make way for more contemporary structures or they have been remodeled beyond recognition.

The western half of Old Town was incorporated into Huntsville by act of the state legislature in 1843, but of the three main thoroughfares only Clinton and Holmes were opened before the Civil War. The land between Clinton and Randolph was owned by George Steele, Huntsville's premier ante-bellum architect, and he developed this property to face onto Randolph causing the south side of Clinton to become backyards. Steele's own house was the first to be built on this tract. The north side of Clinton also remained undeveloped, probably because the land between Clinton and Holmes was low and swampy, often standing under water, and not considered suitable for building sites. One early feature of Clinton street was the brick yard of George Steele in the 500 block which

in 1858 became the site of Steele's Machine Shop, erected by George's son Matthew who took over his father's brick building and architecture business. At the east end of Clinton was the site of Green Academy, an early boys' school which was built in 1821 and destroyed during the Civil War.

At the east end of Clinton was the site of Green Academy, an early boys' school which was built in 1821 and destroyed during the Civil War. The site was later deeded to the city to be used exclusively for public schools, the first of which was designed by Matthew Steele and erected by J. M. Hutchens in 1882.

Another famous school, Huntsville Female College, was built on a large lot between Clinton and Randolph in 1853, but it also faced Randolph. The building was designed by George Steele and was an imposing two-story, brick structure on a full raised basement with a central portico of two-story columns. The school burned in 1895 and was not rebuilt.

The only street to be developed during this early phase was Holmes and most of the houses were on the north side of the street. The early residents of this area who can be identified were store owners and professional people. There was a mayor, physician, planter, an attorney, several merchants, and the register of the U. S. land office.

The Dill-Rice home at 118 Calhoun is the largest of the surviving ante-bellum homes. It was built in 1856 and was probably designed by Matthew Steele for Isiah Dill who was a prominent local attorney. It is a good example of the Greek Revival style with its formal, symmetrical facade and classical detailing. Two other homes, 413 and 505 Holmes, are small, one-story structures, also of solid brick construction, representative of early 19th century tastes with their centered entrance, regularly spaced windows, gable roof, and lack of applied ornament.

However, late in the 19th century, a porch, decorated with exquisite jigsaw cut woodwork, was added to 505, and 413 was slightly altered when the roof was raised.

Serious development of Old Town began in the 1880's and was influenced by the location of the Memphis & Charleston depot on the north side of town and by the establishment of a cotton spinning mill on Jefferson street one block south of the M & C tracks. The coming of the railroad in 1859 changed the town's focus from the Tennessee River to the depot as the source of contact with the outside world. However since in-town transportation had not improved, it naturally became advantageous to locate as near the depot as possible.

In 1892 the Dallas mill opened north of the Old Town area. The construction of this, Huntsville's first large textile mill, signaled the start of a period of prosperity

105 Calhoun, ca. 1905'



and growth for the town and an end to the post war depression. As other mills opened in Huntsville during the next ten years, Huntsville became a scene of great activity, and people flocked to the city to partake of the new employment and opportunities offered.

Housing construction boomed as the newcomers doubled the town's population. The sparsely settled land of Old Town became popular because of its proximity to town and the depot. The ends of Holmes and Clinton west of town were also filled with Victorian homes at this time as was any vacant land near the Square, but urban renewal and redevelopment have obliterated these neighborhoods so that Old Town is unique in preserving its Victorian character. This can be seen in its high concentration of closely spaced, ornate Victorian houses of frame construction which make a dramatic contrast to the formal brick homes set on large lots of the ante-bellum period.

There were several reasons for this change in streetscape. People were still confined to an area they could easily walk which meant that the practical limits of the ante-bellum community had remained constant, but at the same time, the population had greatly increased. Twice as many people had to be accommodated on the same amount of land area; naturally the portion of land available for each house was reduced.

Two changes in life style also influenced the relationship of the house to its environment. With the abolition of slavery, detached kitchens and other accessory structures became less and less convenient as the housewife was forced to

take over more of the chores herself. Moving the kitchen into the house was much more efficient. This shift seems to have appeared earliest in those homes of the less wealthy who were the first to experience a lack of servants. Also as the century progressed, the number of goods and services available in the marketplace increased so that fewer chores had to be carried out at home.

As the specialized outbuildings became superfluous, they were eliminated. And as they disappeared, the amount of land required for a home decreased. The final result of all these factors was that neighborhoods which were built predominantly at the end of the 19th century tended to be densely packed on narrow lots. Also during this time, the contractor-developer became common; naturally the more houses he could build on a tract of land, the larger the profit he made.

In 1871 the east half of Old Town was incorporated into the city limits, and Walker street was opened to development during this decade. The majority of the Old Town houses are typically Victorian. They are of one or two stories of frame construction with steep hipped and gabled roofs and asymmetrical facades created by a projecting front parlor and bay windows. An L-shaped front porch elaborately decorated with fancy cut woodwork was absolutely essential. The layout often retained the central hallway, but rooms were of varying size and shape depending on the function they were to fulfill.

Typical of the small, one-story Victorian houses is 105 Calhoun with its steep, truncated hipped roof gabled over

the projecting front room and side bays. The L-shaped porch is decorated with a band of spindles and delicate turned brackets at each post. Similar in style but even more picturesque are 408 and 410 Holmes (1897) which each have a polygonal tower at the corner.

The Keniston house at 615 Holmes (ca. 1894) is also a

of spindles and chamfers. The centered gable features a large semicircle of latticework surrounded by rosettes.

One of the most imposing homes is the Baughn house at 705 Randolph built in 1889. It is a huge, two-story house of Italianate massing topped by a mansard roof and embellished with a three-story



611 Holmes, 1906

small structure but displays the fine Queen Anne detailing that could be applied to even a modest home. The roof erupts with false gables while the porch and front ell are extensively trimmed with paneling and spoolwork.

The McCaleb house at 424 Holmes (1888) has a symmetrical facade but is notable for its distinctive ornament composed

tower. The various window groupings are particularly interesting.

Old Town continued to grow during the early years of the 20th century as a middle class neighborhood of merchants and professional people. In 1902 a new public school was erected on the Green Academy site; it was a two-story brick building designed by Herbert Cowell.



709 Randolph, 1919

This structure was replaced in 1938 by the present school which is a fine example of the Art Deco style of architecture.

House design during the first decade was a mixture of late Victorians, Colonial Revivals, and bungalows, although by 1915 the latter had gained supremacy. The McMeans house at 611 Holmes (1906) is a good example of the Colonial Revival design with its formal, symmetrical facade and classical detailing all interpreted in wood.

A less typical Colonial Revival design is seen at 514 Holmes which was enlarged and given a full second floor in 1902 by architect Cowell who also modernized the windows and facade and added the off-center porch.

The bungalow house form was created to fit the needs of

the smaller family without servants. Coming of age simultaneously with the automobile, it was the first widely popular style to incorporate the carport as an integral part of the plan. Bungalows were typically of wood or stucco construction of one floor with perhaps a partial second floor. The large roof extended unbroken to shelter the always present porch which was enclosed by a low wall of masonry and tapered piers. The windows were grouped.

The most interesting house from this period is 709 Randolph (1919) which is a Prairie style house inspired by the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright fifteen years earlier in the Chicago suburbs.

There has been a minimal amount of new construction in the district since 1940. During the middle of the century,

the area began to deteriorate, and when the population boom of the 1950's occurred, many of these fine older homes were converted to apartments and boardinghouses to the detriment of both them and the neighborhood. Now however, their charms have been rediscovered and slowly the area is returning to a district of well tended, single family dwellings.

Old Town represents an important era in Huntsville's history, when the town was a prosperous cotton mill center, and it stands today to remind us of a way of life that can not be recreated. Old Town is a valuable historic resource to be appreciated by residents and visitors alike. *

615 Holmes, 1894

