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# GEORGE STEELE

## Huntsville's Antebellum Architect



*by Linda Bayer*

In the half century before the Civil War, Huntsville was a small, rural county seat of several thousand people supported principally by the cultivation of cotton. In comparison with the more populated Northeast, it was a frontier region. Yet Huntsville during these years had the extraordinary good fortune to possess a *bona fide* architect, a transplanted Virginian named George Gilliam Steele.

The importance of his presence can be appreciated when it is understood that there were

very few architects in the entire country even though building was of prime importance in settling a new land. The first school of architecture in the United States did not open until 1867, and the only practicing architects who had been formally trained were foreigners who immigrated after attending school in their native country.

A client desiring to erect a building would look about for one already finished, which he thought suitable to his purpose,

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*The material in this article is based on research conducted by Patricia Ryan and Linda Bayer.*

and then bargained with a builder to erect a similar one. An English architect arriving in New York in 1832 recalled that "the majority of the people could with difficulty be made to understand what was meant by a professional architect."

George Steele began his career as a builder, but the excellence of his buildings and the diversity of his designs place him in the ranks of a true architect. He stayed abreast of the shifts in architectural styles, and it was most likely he who introduced new styles into Huntsville.

George Steele was born in Bedford county, Virginia, on April 1, 1798, to George and Sally Gilliam Steele. His mother died shortly after he was born, and his father remarried. There are no records of Steele's attendance at any college in Virginia, and according to his obituary, he was self-educated. His early life in Virginia remains a blank, but apparently he moved to Huntsville about 1818. A great many of Huntsville's early settlers came here from that section of Virginia, and it is likely that Steele traveled to Alabama with friends.

Whether or not he had any experience as a builder in Virginia, he was soon engaged in Huntsville as a brick-builder. The earliest structure that can reasonably be identified as his work is the house on Randolph street which he built for himself. In December of 1823, he had married Eliza Ann Weaver who had moved to Huntsville with her family in 1815, also from Virginia. Their first child, a son Matthew, was born the following year, and Matthew was soon joined by seven broth-

ers and sisters, all but one of whom grew to maturity.

During the first year of marriage, Steele purchased from LeRoy Pope ten acres of land which was bounded roughly by Clinton, Randolph, Lincoln, and Calhoun streets. On part of this parcel he erected in 1824 a brick home for his growing family. Its design was based on the Federal style which was predominant in Huntsville at that time for domestic building.

Federal houses as interpreted locally were regular brick boxes having no projections of any sort to break the flat walls. They were topped by a steep gable roof, which terminated flush with the gable end walls, and the front eaves were finished with a box cornice. Usually a chimney was centered in each end wall. The front was three or five bays; the number of bays being the number of openings per story across the facade. In a three-bay house, the entrance was in either of the side bays while in a five-bay house it was in the middle. Many houses began as three bays and were later enlarged to five as finances permitted or as space was needed. The two added bays were always placed on the side by the entrance bay to create the central entrance five-bay form. If there was a porch, it was one-story and only slightly wider than the door. A toplight and sidelights around the door permitted natural light into the hallway.

The Federal house, when expanded to five bays, was symmetrical. Openings were evenly spaced and aligned vertically. Ceilings were high. Decoration was minimal, limited mostly to incised lintels, porches, and entrance lights, and was always

of a delicate, elegant design. Motifs were classically inspired, and the curve was favored.

Inside, a hallway extended straight through the house from the front door to the back. The stairway to the second floor was located in this hall; it was often U-shaped with one or two landings depending on the width of the hall. The newel was often a plain tapered post with only ring moldings for ornament. The bannister was round in cross-section and curved at each change of direction in the stairs; balusters were rectangular and placed two per step. Stair ends were decorated with curved brackets sawn from a flat board.

If it was a three-bay house, either one or two square rooms would open off of the hall on one side; in a five-bay house, this arrangement would be repeated on each side of the hall. The woodwork was often delicately fluted while the mantles were adorned with the classical motifs made popular by the Adams brothers in England. These included sunburst patterns, swags, and vases as well as elongated, fluted columns.

The Federal and the Greek Revival which followed it were styles that were designed from the outside in. The facade was arranged to appear correct from the street and then the inter-

ior was laid out to fit behind it. There was little differentiation among rooms; only the decoration was more elaborate in the entrance hall and in the main parlor.

#### STEELE HOUSE

Steele's own home at 519 Randolph fitted this description before later alterations were made. Greek Revival details were added to the house after it was completed; these



*Steele House, 519 Randolph*

include the porch, the front doors, and the roof which extends beyond the end walls and has cornice returns. During the Victorian era, extensive additions were made to the house; some of them have been removed although the bayed wing on the west remains.



*Feeney House  
414 Randolph*

with the wall along the end gables and neatly boxed along the front where it has a moderate extension beyond the wall. This was built as a two-room house, one up and one down connected by a stairway which has the round, curving railing, rectangular balusters, and decorative stair brackets that are traditional with the Federal style.

FEENEY HOUSE

The basic three-bay house of the 1820's is even easier to understand when looking at the Feeney House (414 Randolph) across the street. It was enlarged during the 1920's, but these additions are at the rear so that the facade remains much as it was built. There are the three bays with the entrance in the east side but no porch, merely a simple flight of steps (built 1977). The windows are vertically aligned under flush lintels, and each sash contains twelve panes or lights. There are no sidelights, only a small rectangular toplight. This is obviously a simple house without many pretensions, yet the chimney on the east side is pure sham, included to balance the functional one at the other end. The stucco finish was applied during the 1920's when the first addition was constructed. The roof is flush

YEATMAN HOUSE

The Yeatman House is another example of Steele's early work although in this instance he was probably responsible only for constructing the masonry shell and plastering the walls while another workman was hired to do the finishing woodwork. Steele was always referred to as a brick-builder, and it seems that he confined himself to masonry buildings exclusively.

The normal practice in the antebellum period was to hire a mason who erected the foundations and walls, and then to hire a carpenter who completed the structure and finished the interior. This accounts for seemingly haphazard design features such as stairways that cut across door frames. Since there was no communication between mason and carpenter, and usually no drawn plans, the

mason would do his job leaving the carpenter to fit in the interior detailing the best way he could.

The contract for the Yeatman House at 528 Adams states that Steele was to erect a brick dwelling on the foundations which were already laid. Steele would supply all the necessary materials and would be paid \$300 plus an unspecified balance one year later, probably another \$300. Since Steele constructed all of his buildings with solid brick walls, and since he usually supplied all the materials, he needed a source of brick. For this reason he established several brick yards around town where the brick was made by hand, the actual work probably being performed by the children of his slaves. As one clay pit was exhausted, he would set up his yard at another location. It was also common for the brick

to be manufactured at the building site which eliminated transportation problems.

Steele owned a large number of slaves, many of whom were trained in the construction trades and were probably responsible for the actual work of erecting a building. He also hired additional slaves whenever he needed extra men to complete a job.

Steele provided considerable employment for other contractors in town. When he agreed to design and oversee the total erection of a structure, he would rely on local masons, plasterers, carpenters, and painters to supply materials and/or labor.

The Yeatman House is an excellent example of the three-bay house that was enlarged to five. The original section

*Yeatman House, 528 Adams*



erected by Steele in 1826-7 is the south side which is in the Federal style. However by 1853-5 when Steele built the two northern bays, architectural tastes had altered. Although the addition appears to match the original, the windows indicate that a change has occurred; the first story windows are taller with paneling beneath, a hint that even greater changes might appear on the interior where, in fact, the parlors have marble Italianate mantles.

The porch, while seemingly from a later era, is so perfectly proportioned and executed that it looks correct. Actually, it is a Federal style porch but built with Gothic columns instead of classical and decorated with exquisite jigsaw scrollwork. It is entirely possible that Steele could have designed the porch since his first Gothic Revival work predated this addition by seven years. At any rate, it functions beautifully to minimize the variation in windows by visually separating the two sides.

#### COX HOUSE

The Cox House (311 Lincoln) of 1825-6 is harder to analyze since it has been modernized at least three times. It has the traditional five-bay facade and gable roof, but the other features are not Federal. It is only speculation at this time, but it appears that the original portion of the house built by Steele in 1825 was the northern three bays. These rooms have Federal detailing, and the house would have looked much like the Feeney House.

Sometime between 1835 and 1861 the south two bays were added as was the one-story bedroom on the north. Presumably

at this time the pilasters across the front were added as a concession to the Greek Revival vogue.

At a still later date, an owner desired to update the house to the Italianate style. During this remodeling which probably occurred shortly after the Civil War, the windows were rounded at the corners and the double Italianate front doors were installed. The last alter-



*Cox House, 311 Lincoln*

ation took place in the 20th century when the present porch was added, the false roof gable was constructed, modillions were added along the eaves, and the roof was extended at the gable ends, all intended to give the structure a vaguely Colonial Revival appearance.

If this synopsis is correct, it is possible that Steele was

responsible for the first addition in the Greek Revival style as well as the original half dwelling. Only further research will unravel the precise history of the Cox House.

In the early 1830's, the Federal began to be replaced by the Greek Revival style which was popularly thought to be the most appropriate style for the young democracy and was avidly embraced and adapted for every possible building function. It caught on quickly in the Northeast where architectural styles and tastes were formulated and refined.

#### CABANISS HOUSE

The introduction of the Greek Revival in Huntsville was probably due to Steele who kept current of changing fashions through reading and travel. The Cabaniss House at 603 Randolph appears to be the first structure by him to incorporate Greek Revival elements. The transition from Federal to Greek Revival in domestic architecture was gradual; elements of the latter would first be grafted onto a Federal house, often appearing initially on the interior. This transformation was particularly noticeable with the Federal and Greek Revival since they retained the same structural shape and layout with the Greek influence being felt predominantly in an increased scale and massiveness and in the decorative detailing.

The main body of the Cabaniss House is the traditional three-bay Federal design, but the porch has square paneled columns, the door is double with each leaf having a single full length panel, and the top-light is rectangular rather than fan-shaped, all distinctly Greek Revival treatments.



*Cabaniss House, 603 Randolph*

In February of 1835, two large building projects were under consideration in Huntsville, a structure to house a branch of the state bank and a new courthouse for the county. Steele was asked to submit proposals for both structures, and the following month he took a trip to Charlottesville, Washington, and Baltimore to study first hand the new construction in those cities. He returned to Huntsville with an understanding of and an appreciation for the fully developed Greek Revival style which he utilized in his designs for both projects. The trip was a turning point for Steele as he won the commission as architect for both the bank and the courthouse.





FIRST ALABAMA BANK

*First Alabama Bank, West Side Square*

Both designs were based on the Greek temple form as epitomized by the Parthenon. The bank, now First Alabama on West Side Square, is a symmetrical block with regular fenestration. The roof is a low pitched gable terminating in a pediment above a colossal order (more than one story) entrance portico of six Ionic columns. The facade is finished in smooth stone while the side and back walls are constructed of brick stuccoed to resemble masonry. Pilasters support the portico where it intersects with the building and are repeated at the other corners.

A flight of steps up to the raised entrance imparts a sense of grandeur. The side doors and the second story windows of the facade were added about 1900. Inside, the second floor which originally served as the bank clerk's apartment has been

removed to create a single high banking room. The small offices on either side of the entrance were added in 1899. The building is a beautiful adaptation of an ancient temple form to function as a bank in 19th century America. Its elegance and fine proportions make it one of the outstanding Greek Revival structures anywhere.

#### MADISON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

The Madison County Courthouse designed by Steele, now demolished, was the second of four courthouses to occupy the Public Square. It was essentially a variation of the temple form developed in the bank, although as both were drawn during the same months, it is not known which influenced the other. The courthouse retained the same rectangular shape and low pitched gable roof but added a second portico since it

was free-standing on the Square and approachable from all sides.

Each portico was composed of six Doric columns while pilasters were repeated along the side walls, an inexpensive method of creating the illusion that the building was colonnaded on all four sides.

The brick walls were stuccoed to achieve the smooth, white texture of masonry construction so important to the Greek Revival. A giant copper dome topped by a classically inspired, circular monument terminated the roofline. Domes were of Roman origin rather than Greek but were frequently added to otherwise Greek Revival structures, particularly government buildings.

Steele not only designed both buildings but had a part in their execution. He was the contractor for the bank, and

although he sublet much of the work, he was responsible for constructing the building. For the courthouse, he was merely the overseer, the county representative who made certain that the contractor was carrying out the work competently and correctly.

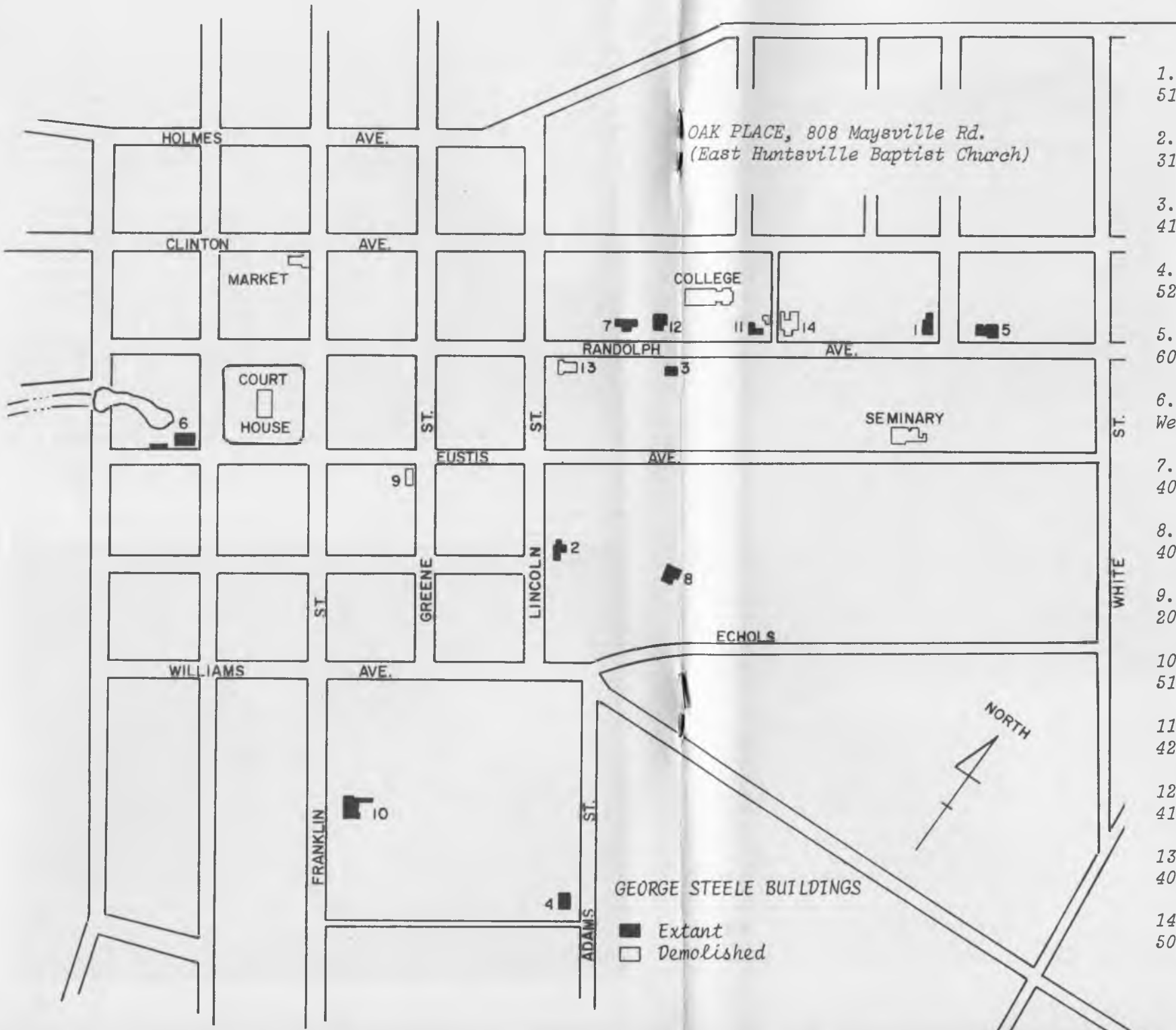
The bank and courthouse were both completed in 1840, and the impact of the two gleaming white temples within a few feet of each other on the Square must have transformed the downtown and provided a tremendous boost to civic pride.

#### MARY BIBB MAUSOLEUM

One other design by Steele dated 1835 survives. This is a mausoleum for Mary Bibb in the northwest section of Maple Hill Cemetery. It is the Greek Revival at its simplest being a

*Madison County Courthouse, Demolished*





1. STEELE  
519 Randolph
2. COX  
311 Lincoln
3. FEENEY  
414 Randolph
4. YEATMAN  
528 Adams
5. CABANISS  
603 Randolph
6. BANK  
West Side Square
7. PURDOM  
409 Randolph
8. POPE  
403 Echols
9. EPISCOPAL  
208 Eustis
10. FEARN  
517 Franklin
11. FIGURES  
423 Randolph
12. PRESIDENT'S  
413 Randolph
13. PRESBYTERIAN  
406 Randolph
14. CHADICK  
501 Randolph

GEORGE STEELE BUILDINGS

- Extant
- Demolished

*Mary Bibb Mausoleum  
Maple Hill Cemetery*

miniature building stripped of all but the essential elements needed to identify it as such. It is constructed of smooth stone and has a low pedimented roof and pilasters at each corner. "Geo. Steele" is chiseled in small letters at the bottom. It is proof of Steele's ability to handle the style with economy and understanding.



#### OAK PLACE

By the time Steele was completing the bank and courthouse, he realized his family needed more space and his children, an appropriate setting from which to engage in Huntsville society. He purchased 320 acres of land east of town and, about 1840, began construction of his second home to be called Oak Place.

For the design of this house Steele again utilized the Greek Revival, but he took great liberties with it to produce a unique house that suited his own tastes and requirements. He had no client to please and was free to experiment with floor plans other than the symmetrical center hall layout.

The structure is a cube with a hipped roof so low as to be visually negligible; the entrance is centered with only one large window on either side. These are of immense scale ex-

tending from the foundation nearly to the ceiling and are framed by small pilasters. The entrance, originally of double sliding doors, is emphasized by a one-story, tetrastyle portico of square and round Doric columns. The square outer columns are repeated in the two-story pilasters that accent the corners and in the columns that support the second story porches on the east side and the loggia that ran across the back and is now enclosed with concrete blocks.

On the exterior, Steele utilized the Greek Revival vocabulary but in a very austere manner; he created a bold, strong statement that relies for its impact on its proportions and handling of structural elements. It was obviously designed by a man who was supremely confident of his abilities and felt no need to enhance his basic design with extraneous decoration.

On the interior, the structure is equally unconventional. It is a split-level house so designed to provide the proper

height and scale for each room. To the west of the hall and on the same level was an immense parlor while the rooms to the east were raised a short flight of steps to provide more intimate space in the smaller parlor and bedroom suite which also permitted generous ceiling heights in the basement below where the dining room was located. A back hall and stairway lead to the second floor bedrooms.

there was once a kitchen, ice house, stable, barn, and others.

Steele by this time was a prosperous man and active in community affairs. He served as a trustee of Greene Academy and of the local branch of the state bank. He was successful in his chosen career receiving most of the major and many minor building commissions in town.

He farmed Oak Place but only

*Oak Place, 808 Maysville*



The architectural detailing inside is equally restrained and bold; moldings are massive, and mantles are heavy and simple, composed of wood pilasters carrying entablatures.

The house was the center of a large plantation and was physically connected by a sheltered walkway to the complex of out-buildings needed to sustain all the functions of plantation life. Although nearly all of these have been demolished,

to provide necessities for his family and servants. He raised vegetables, fruits, and grains, but no cotton. At his death, he owned 74 slaves many of whom were skilled mechanics. When these are added to the nine members of his immediate family plus the relatives that often lived with them, it is obvious that Oak Place had to produce a great quantity of food.

When Oak Place was a prosperous family home, well tended

and complete with its outbuildings and gardens, it must have been a magnificent estate, sited as it was in the country, atop a slight knoll, with the mountains as a backdrop.

#### PURDOM HOUSE

The Purdom House at 409 Randolph was probably built by Steele since it is located on the tract of land he purchased from Pope. The original four-room house was constructed in the 1830's and comprises the three western bays. The mantle in the front parlor is a fine Federal design with an exaggerated layered shelf. In the early 1850's, Steele was again commissioned to add two, one-story rooms, one at each side of the original back parlor to make the house T-shaped. The new room on the west has Greek Revival detailing and tall transomed doorways while the east room was probably remodel-

ed during the 1860's when a room was added in front of it to form the fourth bay of the facade. This room is also Greek Revival, but the moldings are deeply fluted.

In 1936 the house was converted to apartments. During this construction, the second floor rooms were added on the east front and across the back, and the present Colonial Revival porch was built.

#### POPE HOUSE

One of the more extraordinary creations of Steele is the portico of the LeRoy Pope House at 403 Echols. Pope had built a Federal style home in the early 19th century, and after his death, his son William commissioned Steele to add a majestic porch to it.

*Purdom House, 409 Randolph*





Steele had the task of fitting a giant portico onto a Federal house. Greek Revival was the current rage, but a two-story porch in that massive style would overwhelm the delicate detailing of the existing structure. The solution he chose was to erect a portico with the scale of the Greek Revival but lightened with Federally derived motifs. It features six colossal columns of the Roman Doric order which are unfluted and more elongated than the Greek and hence less massive.

The pediment is truncated, probably to achieve the greatest space within the acute corner angles without having the peak extend to such a height that the roof would necessarily dominate the house. The flat roof deck is adorned with a light, airy railing of latticework. The pediment features a large lunette in the center with delicate carved fans radiating toward it from each corner. The

*Pope House, 403 Echols*

frieze below is similarly decorated so that the overall effect is one of delicacy. It is a magnificent achievement, and the house stands today as a unique expression of Steele's creativity.

#### EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Another example of Steele's versatility was the old Episcopal Church of the Nativity built in the Gothic Revival style in 1846-7 at the corner of Eustis and Greene. It was a small, rectangular, brick building with a moderately pitched gable roof. The entrance was in the gable end facing Eustis, and a square tower, as tall again as the building, rose above the doorway. Both the tower and the brick parapet along the eaves were deeply battlemented. The windows were pointed at the top and appear

*Episcopal Church, Demolished*



FEARN HOUSE

The next Steele project that can be identified is an addition to the Thomas Fearn house (517 Franklin) in 1849 in which Steele was to add the southern two bays to an earlier house. This is one of the few Steele commissions for which the contract is available. However in it, Fearn outlined in the greatest detail the exact work to be performed, even specifying room sizes, window placement, wardrobes, doors, moldings and locks. Steele was to supply all materials and carry out the construction which he agreed to do for \$2000.

to be placed in a recessed panel of the same outline. It is a charming structure of pleasing proportions. The church stood on this site until the 1870's when it was disassembled and the materials reused to build a church on Jefferson street. It too was razed a few years ago.

The specific wording of the contract opens a question as to who actually designed this addition, but regardless of the answer, the resultant house is

*Fearn House, 517 Franklin*





an exquisite Greek Revival design. It is a regular masonry block with pilasters employed to create the rhythm of a colonnade while an exceedingly low pitched roof makes the house appear to end at the cornice. A wide frieze spans the house above the pilasters. The windows are symmetrically spaced with the first floor ones extending to the floor, a common Greek Revival treatment. The porch is a miniature portico of four fluted Doric columns supporting a fully defined entablature.

The exterior is pure Greek Revival but treated in a light, delicate manner; it is sublimely pleasing but not overwhelming. It lacks the sense of weight and austerity with which Steele imbued Oak Place, and a comparison of the two structures illustrates the diversity inherent in the Greek

Revival style despite the limiting stylistic constraints.

#### FIGURES HOUSE

The Figures House at 423 Randolph is another transition structure having an essentially Federal facade with Greek Revival woodwork on the interior. The first portion dates from the late 1840's and included the hallway and rooms on the west side. The east rooms appear to have been built by Steele in the mid-1850's. In the late 1920's a major addition was constructed on the back to convert it to four apartments; two more were added in the 1950's. The stucco finish was applied in the 1920's to unify the old and new portions.

The exterior displays the traditional five-bay facade with central entrance, gable roof with box cornice, and gable end

*Figures House, 423 Randolph*



chimneys. The attractive Greek Revival inspired porch was constructed in 1978 to replace an awkward bungalow porch, and it is built on the foundations of the antebellum one. The house has just been restored to its original appearance.

big for the house.

Built in the late 1840's, the house passed through six owners before it was purchased in 1886 by Amos Jones, president of the Huntsville Female College, for use as his residence.



PRESIDENT'S HOUSE

*President's House, 413 Randolph*

The President's House (413 Randolph) of approximately the same date is harder to assess because of the foliage and later alterations. This is a three-bay house, but here the Greek Revival influence has been carried to the exterior by the use of pilasters at the corners supporting a plain frieze. A detail not seen elsewhere is the false-front wall of similar design that disguises an ell on the east. The porch is not original, and the roof has been extended with bracketed eaves making it appear a size too

It adjoined the college grounds, and Jones connected it with the school by a passageway.

#### HUNTSVILLE FEMALE COLLEGE

Steele's last two projects were school buildings erected in the early 1850's. Steele designed the Huntsville Female College in 1852, and construction began in 1853 on a parcel of land he owned on Randolph. It was a large brick building of two stories on a raised basement; the center pavilion had a two-story elevated portico



of six Ionic columns and pediment and was flanked on the east by a smaller pavilion. It was an imposing edifice in the Greek Revival style but was destroyed by fire in 1895.

#### HUNTSVILLE FEMALE SEMINARY

The Seminary building designed by Steele was erected in 1854-5. Stylistically, it was a distinct departure from the College. It was the second of his buildings in the Gothic Revival style, probably a deliberate decision to provide separate identities for the two schools. Constructed of brick, it was asymmetrical, towered, turreted, battlemented, and had pointed arches and drip moldings. In 1912 it was demolished to make way for houses.

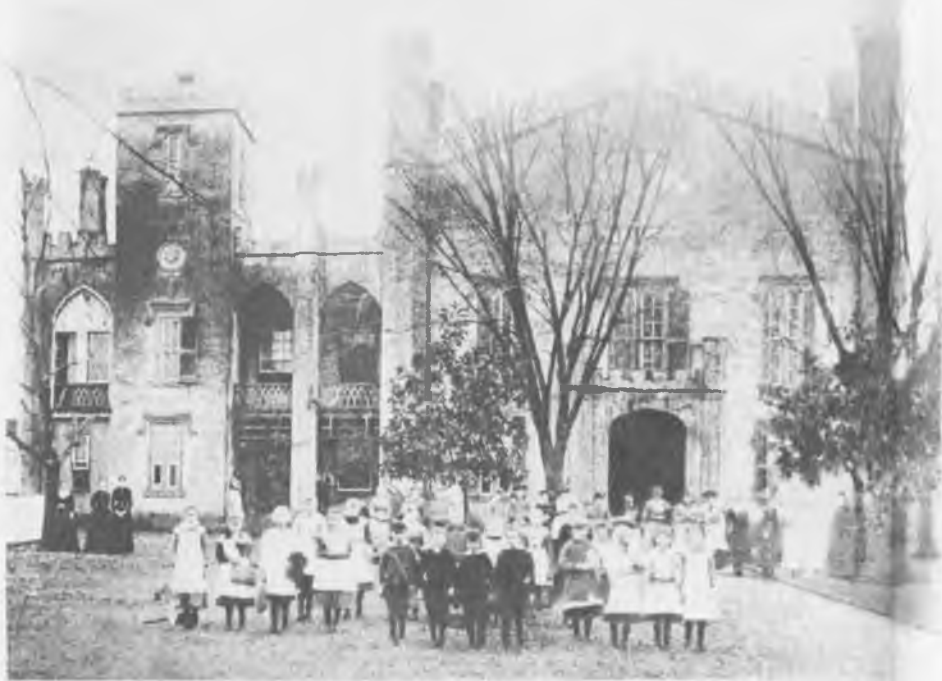
Steele was also connected with the design and/or building of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church on the site of the present Central Presbyterian Church, the city Market House at the southwest corner of Clinton and Washington streets, several commercial buildings on South Side Square, and the Chadick house on the present site of 501 and 503 Randolph, all of them now demolished.

After a career spanning thirty years during which he changed the face of Huntsville, George Steele died on October 21, 1855, and was buried in Maple Hill Cemetery. His obituary in the SOUTHERN ADVOCATE summed up his life and career:

"He was self-educated - physically, mechanically, mentally, artistically. Of an iron will, indomitable energy and keen sagacity, he met difficulties but to overcome them and kept straight on to the goal of merited success. He was eminently a practical man - a cultivated Mechanic - a thorough Master Builder - an accomplished Architect. He had not only learnt the drud-

gery of his profession but soon passed beyond and became an undertaker, a designer, a creator. His judgment, his taste, his artistic skill have become monumental....

"Capt. Steele was of a warm, generous, impulsive nature. He was not free from faults; who that's mortal is? But they were mere specks in the pure gold of his character...."



*Huntsville Female Seminary, Demolished*

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