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And Old Views

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And Old Views

In the last issue of the QUARTERLY, the history of the Huntsville Female College was traced so it seems appropriate to examine its competition, the Huntsville Female Seminary, in this issue.

The Seminary was also a private school chartered by the state, operated by a board of trustees, and located on Randolph street, but it had a longer history than the College, being in operation, more or less, from 1831 until 1905.

These 19th century academies, colleges, and seminaries were usually established by a group of wealthy citizens who desired to provide schooling for their children in the absence of publicly supported education. They would form a board of trustees to purchase property, erect facilities, and hire a principal who was responsible for day-to-day operations.

The trustees sent their children to these schools, but other children were permitted to attend by paying a tuition. As the schools often attracted students from outside the immediate vicinity, boarding fa-

cilities were regularly included.

These schools taught a course that would be roughly equivalent to today's secondary education, although they often accepted much younger children as well. Young ladies could begin their formal schooling at the College or Seminary and then transfer to a northern boarding school to finish, particularly if their fathers were wealthy and eager to see them well educated.

The course of instruction for girls relied heavily on music, elocution, and foreign languages although they also received some training in subjects such as geography and chemistry.

The Huntsville Female Seminary was originally chartered by the state legislature in January, 1831, with Thomas Bibb, Thomas Fearn, John Martin, William Clarke, Alexander Erskine, Thomas Brandon, and James Pleasants named as trustees. A legislative act of 1832 gave the Seminary tax exempt status although this was the only public assistance it received.

The Huntsville Female Seminary

In 1836 the trustees purchased the tract of land on which the school had been operating. It contained almost three acres, extending from Eustis to Randolph, and at the time included the steward's house (513 Eustis), the classroom building, and perhaps a third structure used as a boarding house. Nothing is known of this first school building except that it was a brick tene-

ing the steward's house to Preston Yeatman. Yeatman resold his piece to John Lewis, and the steward's house ceased to have any connection with the Seminary.

At this point the history becomes confusing. According to Henry Smith, who was principal of the school after the Civil War, the organization of the Seminary was no longer kept



ment, probably of two stories in the Federal style facing Eustis street. It seems likely that it was erected as a house and adapted to school use.

A few months after the Seminary purchased this property, the trustees divided it in two and sold the east half containing the school building to Alexander Erskine, who was a trustee, and the west half contain-

ing the steward's house to Preston Yeatman. Yeatman resold his piece to John Lewis, and the steward's house ceased to have any connection with the Seminary. At this point the history becomes confusing. According to Henry Smith, who was principal of the school after the Civil War, the organization of the Seminary was no longer kept

Regardless of the exact

legal status of the school, it continued to function. During the 1850s, Robert Fearn, Sr., accumulated a large portion of the stock from the original 1831 issue and then proposed a reorganization. Fearn's goal was to increase the stock, thereby raising enough money to enlarge and repair the school's building. In 1854 the Seminary was rechartered, and the new school, which survives in old photographs, was erected. The following year Erskine sold the Seminary lot back to the trustees.

Stylistically the new school, designed by George Steele, was a distinct departure from the other structures in town. It was in the Gothic Revival style which developed as a picturesque reaction against the staid formalism of the Federal and Greek Revival styles.

The building was placed on Eustis street but faced Randolph which gave it an enormous front lawn. The main portion of the structure was a two and one-half story brick box, gabled on the facade, and having a central one-story portico. A two-story wing extending to the east was recessed along the front to provide a covered walkway on both levels and was accented by an asymmetrically placed three-story tower. It is basically a classical scheme that has been transformed by an abundance of Gothic details which appear to be merely tacked on the facade rather than integrated in the design.

The most plausible explanation for this appearance is that Steele enlarged and remodeled the existing building instead of designing a totally new structure. This would explain both the curious siting

on the property and the flatness of the main facade with its spindly corner towers projecting above the cornice.

The wing which was designed in the Gothic Revival style is more successful; it has a dynamic quality produced by balancing the solidity of the tower against the voids of the two-story pointed arches. The Gothic crenelations along the cornice and drip moldings over the windows serve to enliven the already romantic design. The feeling of the entire wing is emphatically vertical, in contrast to the main block which is static with vertical elements attached at the corners. A nice touch at the entrance is the Tudor arched top-light which echoes the arch of the portico (as seen on the cover).

Although the Seminary is not totally successful architecturally, it is nevertheless significant. The Gothic Revival in its ante-bellum phase never gained widespread acceptance in the South, and its use here was confined primarily to churches. The choice of Gothic for the Seminary is a curiosity, and it would be interesting to know if the idea originated with the trustees or with the architect. At any rate, it provided the Seminary with a distinctive identity not easily confused with that of the Female College on the same street, and it presented the image of a school in the vanguard of contemporary thought.

The Seminary continued to function under the new charter until the Civil War when it was occupied for about eighteen months by federal troops. It remained closed until 1867 when the Reverend Henry Smith of Virginia was made principal.

He made repairs to the building and reopened it as a day and boarding school.

However, a loan made to the Seminary precipitated a protracted legal fight in the 1870s from which the school never fully recovered. Robert Fearn, Sr., held a note against the school on which his son as executor demanded payment in 1865. As the interest was two years overdue, the trustees voted to sell the property; the sale was advertised but never took place. Consequently in 1868, Robert Fearn, Jr., assigned the bond to Henry Smith, the principal, who also demanded payment. According to the trustees, Smith had had possession and use of the school property from 1867 until 1874. Smith then asserted a further claim against the trustees for repairs and improvements he had made to the property during that time. The court ordered the property sold, and in 1877, it was purchased by Smith at auction. The deed noted that the property was called the Rotherwood House.

By then, Smith had been replaced as principal by Mrs. Fanny Ross, and a few months after the auction, he sold the property to her. A newspaper account of 1880 notes: "The closing exercises of the Rotherwood Home will take place this evening. The programme will consist of vocal and instrumental music, calisthenics, reading of essays, recitations, and awarding of medals by George S. Gordon, Esq., and of diplomas by the Principal Mrs. F. A. Ross." ¹

Mrs. Ross defaulted on her payments, and in 1887, Smith resold the school to James D. Anderson who had become principal in 1885 after the school

had been closed a year. Anderson ran the school for several more years, again under the name of the Huntsville Female Seminary, although it was then in a deteriorated condition. Several attempts were made to reopen the school during the first five years of this century, but they failed. In 1902 Anderson died, and seven years later his children sold the Seminary property to A. M. Booth.

The end for the Seminary finally came in 1912: "Work has begun for the tearing down of the old Huntsville Female Seminary between Eustis and Randolph streets. The property is owned by A. M. Booth, a prominent contractor of the city who will, as soon as the debris is removed, erect two cottages for rent on Eustis street and an eight-room residence on Randolph for his own occupancy. This will be welcome news to the citizens of that neighborhood, as it has been for a number of years, a great menace to both streets." ²

1 DEMOCRAT, June 2, 1880, page 3.

2 DEMOCRAT, April 4, 1912, page 3.



ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Huntsville Public Library: cover
and page 21
April Eberly: pages 3, 9, 10 top,
11 top, and 12
Linda Bayer: all others

The COVER photograph (ca. 1890) shows the student body assembled in front of the Huntsville Female Seminary.