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Fall

1979

THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE
QUARTERLY
Of Local Architecture & Preservation

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from the Editor

The National Trust for Historic Preservation annually sponsors a summer intern program which places college students and recent graduates in local communities to conduct a variety of historic preservation projects.

This year the Trust awarded interns to approximately thirty local organizations across the country with the Historic Huntsville Foundation being one of the recipients. Huntsville's intern was April Eberly, a recent graduate of the University of Maryland's school of architecture. April's twelve weeks in Huntsville were spent in redesigning storefronts for specific buildings in the downtown.

The purposes of the project were to demonstrate a variety of successful rehabilitation plans for existing structures and to increase local awareness of the qualities that constitute good rehabilitation design.

April completed renderings for three projects, each of which demonstrates a different problem and a possible solution. She worked with a variety of building types and demonstrated both restoration techniques and contemporary approaches to rehabilitation. Finally she wrote an article for the *QUARTERLY* explaining her work and examining some aspects of storefront rehabilitation that she felt were important. We are pleased to feature April's article and drawings in this issue.

When April completed her Huntsville internship, she moved to Corning, New York, where she has been hired as the design assistant for the Market Street Restoration Agency. The Corning project is one of the outstanding commercial rehabilitation programs in the country, and we wish April great success in her career.

Some Guidelines for STOREFRONT REHABILITATION



by April Eberly

*A proposed rehabilitation plan
for one block of Washington street,
by April Eberly*

When asked to sum up my experience as a summer intern for the National Trust, all I can say is "Great!"

That may be a little too simplistic a response, so I will elaborate. The project itself was extremely interesting and fulfilling to me, so much so

that I have decided to continue my career in downtown revitalization.

The people who were involved in my project could not have been more helpful, hospitable, nor more interesting. I feel I have made many good friends in Huntsville.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation was also very good to its summer interns, not only was the program run quite efficiently, but we were also treated to an interesting one week conference in Washington on preservation topics.

The city of Huntsville was a pleasant surprise. I must admit I came with a typical "Yankee" stereotyped view of what Alabama was like. I found Huntsville to be an active, sophisticated city with great scenic beauty.

I would like to especially thank the following people for their help in my internship: Harvie and Lynn Jones, whose active work in preservation should be highly commended, and special thanks to Linda Bayer who was instrumental in this project and a wonderful supervisor, whose contributions to the cause for historic preservation in Huntsville have been immeasurable.

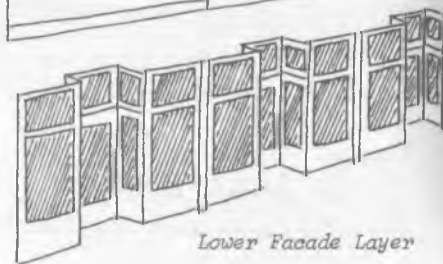
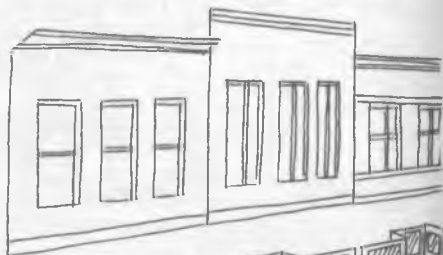
The first few weeks of my internship were involved in researching the design techniques and philosophies of older commercial storefronts. The information was quite illuminating and helpful. I will try, then, to summarize just what I think are the more important aspects of storefront design.

When designing a new storefront or rehabilitating an old one, it is important to consider not only how the storefront relates to the upper street facade, but also how it relates to the rest of the buildings along that street.

The designer must think of this storefront and upper facade as a repetitive unit forming collectively a double-layered

wall that defines an outdoor space, either the street or a square. This wall is traditionally composed of two distinct strata. The ground level originally was a continuous, undulating glass wall. This level helped to demarcate the vertical building plane but was broken every so often by an inviting, recessed area for each doorway. This wall was a delicate, invisible barrier between the pedestrian and the displayed merchandise. The continuity of the wall with its relatively unbroken sequence of display windows gave the strolling pedestrian a pleasant experience and held his interest. By gentle persuasion, the customers' eyes were captivated up and down main street, even to stores at the extreme ends.

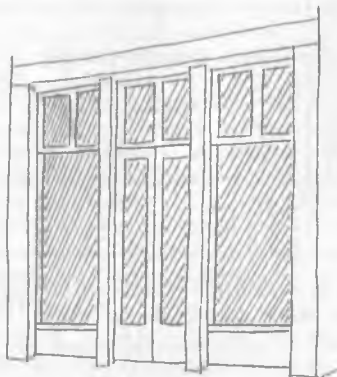
Upper Facade Layer



Lower Facade Layer

The upper layer or upper street facade was most often a brick wall with a series of window openings. From a distance, this pattern provided a rhythmic, textural interest. A closer view often revealed the use of high quality ornamentation.

When looking at the typical commercial building as a singular unit, it is evident that until the automobile age, most storefronts portrayed basic characteristics and refinements.



Most older commercial buildings contained a specific framed opening that would enclose the storefront. It is easy to recognize this frame if left uncovered, but in some cases, it is hard to tell its location if the building has been extremely altered or covered up with applied storefronts. The storefront, which was usually much lighter in appearance, was then sunk into the frame about four to six inches. Not only was this smart detailing in order to prevent the entry of water into the building, but this refinement added greatly to the sense of the storefront being contained in the building facade. More importantly, it gave one the sense that the storefront was actually subordinate to the rest of the structure.

These refinements allowed the whole building to form a business "image" contrary to the later "applied" modern storefronts which totally disregarded the upper facade.

The storefront itself was

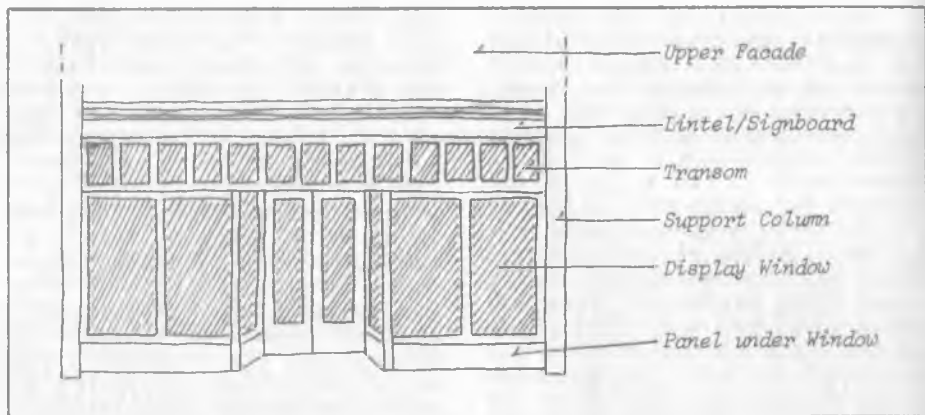
most often subdivided into several zones. The lower zone was a series of panels about one and a half feet high; the shelf for display started at the top of this panel. Next was a large expanse of glass for display windows which was divided by thin wooden mullions. The top level of the display area frequently contained transom windows; this is especially true for Huntsville. Transom windows may have been operable or decorative. They helped visually by giving the storefront a more substantial look, while breaking up the large expanse of glass and admitting daylight to illuminate the interior.

The transoms were then topped by a lintel, sometimes of iron, and a signboard. Many storefronts had elaborate pressed metal cornices above the signboard.

Most of the commercial buildings in downtown Huntsville are masonry structures, usually of brick with metal and wood trim. Many of these buildings, if rehabilitated, will need re-pointing, cleaning and/or painting of the masonry and trim.

These operations are most crucial to the success of the rehabilitation. If the masonry of the building is quite dirty or has been painted, a cleaning will make a dramatic difference. Here it is important to get an expert's opinion. Unfortunately it has been popular to clean brick buildings by sandblasting. Every recent article on masonry repair and cleaning states that sandblasting is NOT recommended. Nevertheless, this procedure remains in widespread use.

Granted, a sandblasted brick wall looks new; however, sandblasting is detrimental to the individual bricks. It re-



moves the hard-baked outer crust of the brick leaving the softer inner core exposed to slowly deteriorate by weathering. After a period of years, the bricks become pitted and almost hollowed out. A brick wall that is intact and withstood a hundred years of weathering may have little chance of survival after it has been sandblasted.

Harsh chemical cleaning may also remove the outer coating. Often just the application of water at low pressure will do an adequate job of cleaning brick.

In many instances, the brick masonry has been painted several times. If this is the case, there is little choice (besides sandblasting) other than to paint it over again.

Before painting the building, proper preparation is essential. The building should be repointed and scraped of loose paint. Muted earth-tones seem to be the more successful colors for the brick combined with contrasting trim. Color is important, but visually it is good to stick with three or fewer colors on the facade. White paint was not used as much as it is today; Victorian

tastes found it too glaring, and when used in excess, this point is well taken. Not only is it glaring, but it is monotonous.

Many new storefront designs are left unpainted and only varnished. These natural wood fronts are quite aesthetically pleasing; however, they do need to be varnished every year or so.

Another important factor in facade rehabilitation is graphic design. Any garish, modern, overly-large plastic signs should be removed (unless they are deemed somehow significant) and replaced by a smaller, pedestrian-oriented design. The lettering style should be on the plain side and straightforward. On many commercial buildings, facades had a specific area for signs, called a signboard, located just under the horizontal portion of the frame for the storefront. It is important to keep the signage at this level so that signs remain in a continuous area along the street.

Another nice effect is painting the sign directly on the display window glass at eye level, usually done in gold

leaf. Small hanging signs were also prevalent and are a good way to show a logo or symbol.

Awnings are another element that can be added to the storefront with many positive results. Besides adding color and a three-dimensional quality to the facade, awnings provide shelter and shade for the customers. They also regulate the amount of light entering the store, and if located with the right orientation, can provide effective solar control in summer and can be rolled up in winter to let in the sun's warmth.

These awnings should be made out of canvas or vinyl but never rigid aluminum. Norman Mintz, director of the Market Street restoration in Corning, New York, has observed of rigid aluminum awnings: "Primarily residential in character, these awnings are usually unattractive and inappropriate in a downtown area. A flat aluminum canopy particularly detracts from historical character."

Canvas awnings, like flags, add the small touch of color that is needed along the street while providing a sort of intermediate zone between sidewalk traffic and storefront.

After researching just how to go about the process of storefront rehabilitation, on which there is scant information, I set out to redesign my own storefronts in downtown Huntsville. Prior to my arrival the Historic Huntsville Foundation had sent out letters to the owners of suitable buildings asking if they would want this free design service. Extremely few of the owners replied. Consequently, I chose some buildings that I thought were architecturally signifi-

cant and that would benefit greatly from a storefront rehabilitation.

Interestingly enough, this approach may have been the more successful as far as getting any kind of response from the owners. After doing the actual design and showing the owner a drawing of what his building COULD look like, there was a surprisingly favorable response.



Marja's Dress Shop on North Side Square (c. 1883) immediately struck me as being a prime candidate for a new storefront design. The upper facade was virtually unaltered; the original storefront had been entirely replaced.

Views from old photographs revealed that it once had a quite standard storefront for Huntsville with large display windows, central, recessed door opening, lower window panels, and a series of segmented transoms across the top. The cornice and flanking pilasters would have been a combination of wood and pressed metal. My proposal for Marja's, as shown in the drawing, is basically a recreation of this traditional 19th century storefront design. A retractable canvas awning would complete the front. The large sign would be replaced by a smaller, more pedestrian oriented sign. The upper facade

needs new replacement window sashes, but little else, unless a new painting is desired.

Marja's was my first attempt at a storefront design, and looking back, this solution may be too literal an adaptation of a Victorian storefront. Not truly a restoration, it can almost be termed a reconstruction which is more often than not an extremely expensive and less honest way to design. Perhaps



a sensitive, contemporary design which kept the standard storefront refinements would be more appropriate.

It is a rare situation when a designer has the opportunity to design several adjacent storefronts, but this was the case with the block on the west side of Washington Street between Clinton and Holmes which is primarily owned by the Huntsville Housing Authority. In

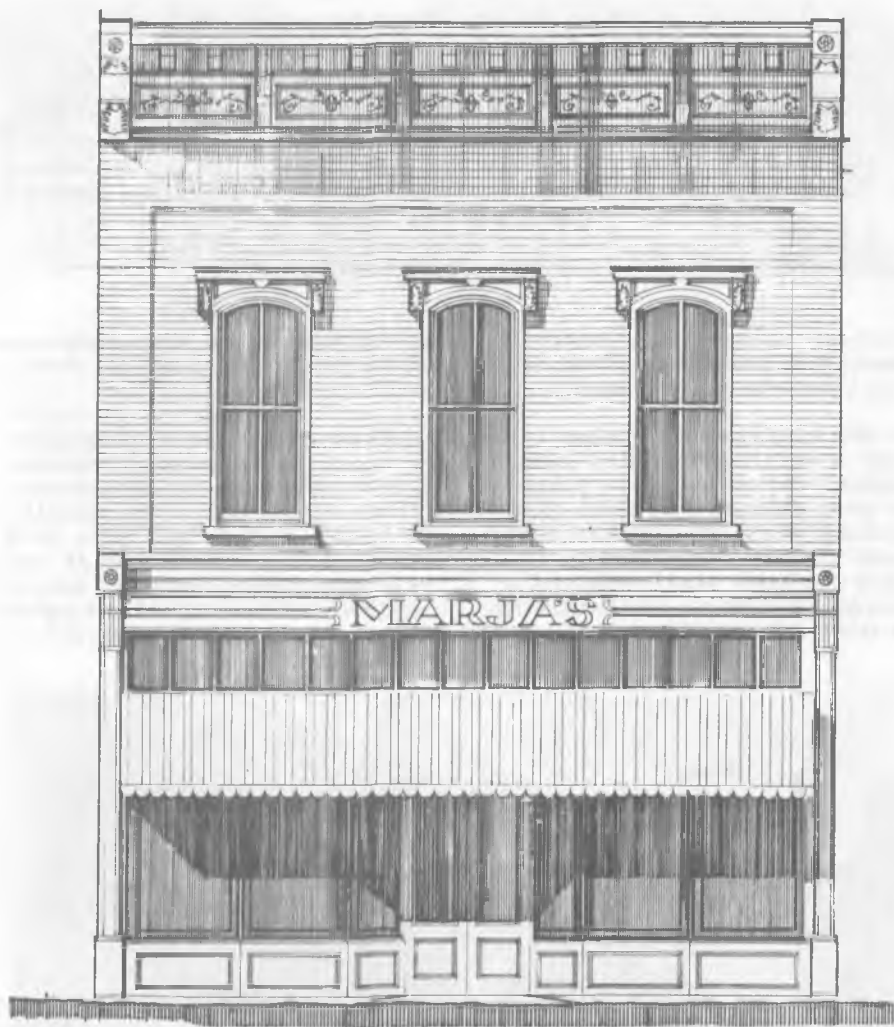
order to interest a developer in purchasing this block and rehabilitating it, I was asked to give some exterior views of a rehabilitation scheme.

There are inherent problems with this design situation, the main one being the high chance of too much similarity in the stores which would give the street a suburban shopping plaza monotony. One could get easily a series of fronts that were too uniform. I attempted to give an idea of how this block could look if it were given a set of design standards, and the stores then evolved over a period of years. The same features such as lower wooden panels, large windows, glazed doors, and transoms are repeated but rearranged and varied so that each shop has a distinct identity. The design goal was to hit the happy medium between bland uniformity and the total lack of any continuity.

The block consists of essentially two buildings with about seven storefronts in each. In many instances, it is appropriate to design the same storefront in each bay of a multi-bayed commercial building, depending on the proportions of the building. In this case, the buildings were so long and low that it would be difficult to perceive each as an individual structure.

The addition of new storefronts could be further dramatized by repainting the two buildings with colors that have more chroma and then highlighting each with a contrasting trim. I am suggesting a deep gold color with green trim for the building on the right and deep red with ochre trim for the building on the left.

The Struve-Hay building on



Jefferson Street (1900) posed another interesting design problem. The building front on Jefferson originally had three, two-story bays; however, the two second floor bays on the south burned and were removed. After a period of storefront modernization, the three bays now appear unrelated and awkward.

The exterior needs a unifying element to make the three bays again read as one building. Also this element must be visually active to achieve a visual balance with the remaining second story bay and its corner tower. A series of arched window openings is one solution to this problem. The arches tie the ground story together



in a very dramatic way which causes the tower to act as an accent to the facade design.

The two smaller stores would share a recessed opening with interior doors to again place the main entrance between the existing cast iron columns. It would also be desirable to paint all bays one system of colors. The perspective sketch visualizes this design with

canvas awnings at both entrances and in the upper floor of the last bay.

This design is a contemporary solution to rehabilitation of the structure and makes no attempt to recreate the original facade. More and more this method of rehabilitation is being thought more appropriate than reconstructing the original front. It is more honest to





our time and continues the tradition of historical variety that contributes so much to the vitality of downtown. It is also easier to avoid the appearance of being cute or quaint which sometimes results from recreations.

A modern design that repeats the materials, textures, scale and proportions of the original structure allows the

building to function on both a contemporary and a historical level at the same time.

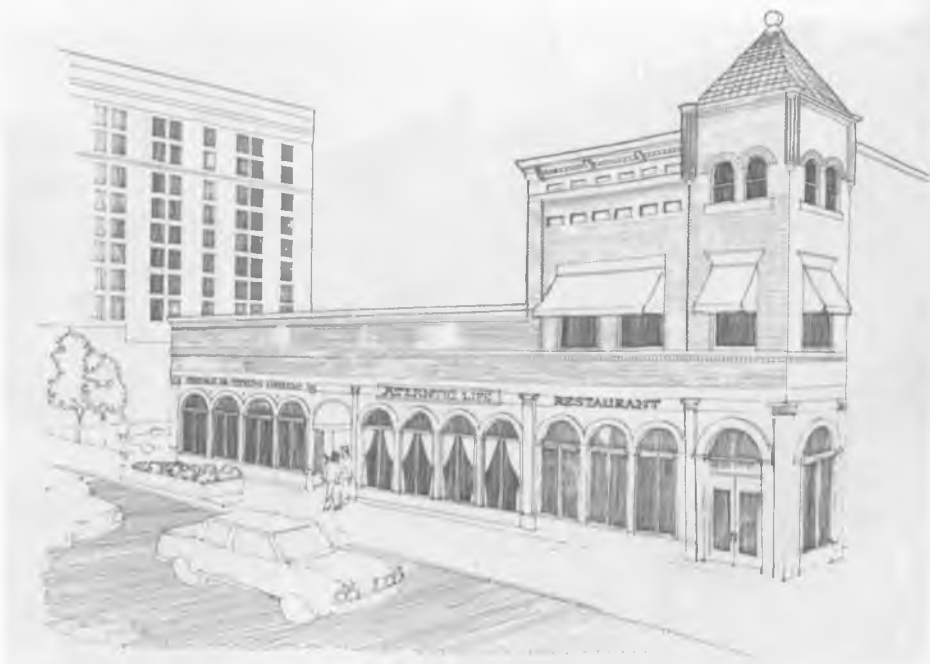
However, whether a rehabilitation design is modern or historical, it must be compatible with and sensitive to the original facade to be successful. This means that Colonial or Williamsburg details are not appropriate. They are suitable in Williamsburg and in the





long-settled regions of the Northeast but not in Huntsville which was still a dense forest at the time Colonial architecture was fashionable. The indiscriminate application of Colonial details to later buildings creates an amusement park appearance that has no relation to the life and history of Huntsville.

To conclude, I would think that successful downtowns are those that provide a number of services besides governmental and legal; they are the ones that offer a variety of things to do and see. If there is a need for new construction, treat the new structure in an honest manner. Surely there are a number of ways new construction can visually relate to its neighbors and become another building block of main street without being a reproduction of an 18th century domestic style building. It is up to those interested in promoting good architecture (architects, designers, historians and preservationists) to educate the property owners and the builders to this fact. *



FACADE EASEMENTS

A Tax Break for the Homeowner

All of the tax advantages for historic properties established by the Tax Reform Act of 1976 and the Revenue Act of 1978 apply only to depreciable properties which eliminates owner occupied houses. However, there is one tax vehicle that can be utilized by owners of historic residential properties and that is the facade easement.

A facade easement, also known as a preservation easement, is a binding legal commitment, usually permanent in nature, to preserve a building in a given condition. It is a conveyance of a restrictive covenant to a non-profit organization that assures that the architectural integrity of the structure shall be maintained. It usually applies to the exterior, or street facade, of the building but can be extended to the interior as well. The terms of individual facade easements can vary widely and may include affirmative obligations of restoration and maintenance as well as simply restrictions on change.

The facade easement is a permanent agreement that runs with the land and is recorded in the county probate office. It provides permanent protection for the building facade

even when the property changes ownership because the property passes to the next owner minus the right to alter the exterior.

The facade easement is given to a public agency such as the Alabama Historical Commission or to a private, non-profit organization dedicated to preservation such as the Historic Huntsville Foundation.

A facade easement is a method of making a charitable contribution, in the form of the building facade rather than cash, and at the same time assuring that the structure will be preserved. Because it is a charitable contribution, the owner can receive a tax savings via a deduction because the marketable value of the property has been reduced. The decreased value of the property should also be reflected in decreased ad valorem taxes. Property which will be included in the owner's estate for federal estate tax purposes will presumably have a lesser value at the time of his death than the property would have had if the facade easement had not been granted; therefore, estate taxes attributable to that property would be reduced.

The facade easement has no firm rules governing its use or

application. It can include component parts of a building, the grounds, or the interior or exterior of the structure. Each facade easement needs to be prepared in accordance with the individual property owner's intended use of the property in order to maximize his tax savings without restricting his expected use and enjoyment of it.

The terms of the easement may require that the property be maintained in good state of repair, that the property will not be subdivided, and that the property will not be altered or enlarged without the permission of the agency holding the easement. The easement can stipulate the use of the property for all time. A restriction on future usage would affect the value of the property and would specifically define the highest and best use of the property regardless of surrounding uses.

It should be understood that such an agreement to maintain the architectural integrity of the structure or property is legally binding and enforceable in the courts of law. The agency holding the easement may not be enforcing the terms today but could choose to do so in the future, and it can determine the specific maintenance required to keep the facade in satisfactory condition. It is reasonable to assume that maintenance requirements will become more, rather than less, rigid in the future and that inflation will continue to increase the cost of repairs.

On the positive side, the owner will be enabled to receive a tax savings via a deduction as a charitable contribution because the covenant reduces the marketable value of the property.

To execute an easement, the owner must have an easement drafted by his lawyer and accepted by the charitable organization or public agency. The easement must then be recorded in the appropriate county probate office. When the easement is used for the purpose of preserving a historic property, it is assumed that the recipient organization will require the property to be registered on either the State or the National Register of Historic Places. If the structure is in a historic district, the agency may require that it be certified as being of historic or architectural significance.

For the owner to qualify for the tax deduction, he must give the easement to an organization that satisfies the requirements of section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Basically, this defines a private, tax exempt organization established and operated exclusively for charitable or educational purposes. If the owner desires to give the easement to the state of Alabama, the accepting agency would be the Alabama Historical Commission.

Once the easement has been accepted and recorded, a qualified appraisal of the property must be made to determine the value of the gift. It is recommended that a well qualified appraiser be utilized in justifying the amount by which the facade easement reduces the market value of the property. A Member of the Appraisers Institute should be used.

To summarize, a facade easement is a legal means of assuring that specific features of a structure will be preserved in good condition in perpetuity. It can also be used to limit the uses to which the property

can be put. Because the easement reduces the marketable value of the property, the owner can deduct the value of the gift, as determined by an appraisal, from his adjusted gross income over a period of years. The lowered appraisal value of the property should also be reflected in lower property taxes. The preservation easement permits an owner to contribute to the future of the community while gaining a tax break for himself.

The disadvantage is that the property could be more difficult to sell because of the possible restrictions on its use and maintenance. Also keep in mind that the deduction taken as a result of the facade easement reduces the owner's basis in the property so that if sold, a prospective realization of income could incur that could be larger than anticipated.

It is important to recognize that the facade easement can be used with commercial and

industrial properties as well as with residential ones. The facade easement placed on historic storefronts is becoming an increasingly popular method of insuring the architectural integrity of commercial areas. In Macon, Georgia, a program is currently underway whereby the owner gives a facade easement on his storefront to the City of Macon in return for having it restored with Community Development Block Grant funds. Once the facade is restored, the owner is responsible for maintaining it.

It should be apparent that the preservation easement can be a very versatile tool when used for the conservation of the built environment. However because the easement is a complex legal instrument with few rules, it is important that anyone considering its use consult his lawyer and/or accountant to determine how it might benefit his particular situation. *

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The Bannister Alley house



News...

THE SMALL FRAME HOUSE on Bannister Alley collapsed in September when the contractor began repair work on it. The owner had planned to shift it slightly on the lot and then incorporate it into a new house. Unfortunately it was greatly weakened by insects and rot and fell in before any work could be done.

The house was the only known surviving example in Huntsville of the type of small, simple frame house built for people of modest means prior to the Civil War. The house originally had only one room up and one down although a small wing had been added to it later. It shared common stylistic features with the more pretentious houses of the period but in a much simplified condition.

The loss of these modest houses results in a distorted view of architectural history because without them concepts of the past tend to be derived solely from the more elaborate homes of the wealthy. The restoration of the Bannister Alley house would have been a valuable addition to Huntsville's architectural heritage.

•••••

THE HUNDLEY HOUSE at the corner of Madison and Gates should soon be getting a new, much needed roof. The city, with the encouragement of the Foundation, applied for and received a matching grant from the Alabama Historical Commission to begin exterior restoration. Plans by Jones and Herrin for the first stage of the restoration have been completed and approved, and construction bids were received in early October.

Work to be completed under this grant includes removing the worn-out roofing materials and replacing them with new metal shingles and sheet metal, making structural repairs to the roof and chimneys, and repairing the trim along the gables and eaves.

•••••

THE 1980 CALENDARS of the Historic Huntsville Foundation are now on sale. The cover of the new calendar features a beautiful color rendering of downtown Huntsville as seen from Echols Hill in the 1890s. Each month is illustrated with a different historic structure in Huntsville. Included are ante-bellum and Victorian houses and commercial buildings. The illustrations for this calendar were drawn by local artists Lee Harless, Richard Pope, and Chuck Long.

The new calendar is smaller than last year's and comes with a mailing envelope so that it can be easily sent as a gift. The price remains only \$5, and calendars can be purchased from Foundation members and from most local gift shops and bookstores.

Foundation members are encouraged to assist in the sale of the calendars as this is the major fund raising activity of the organization. The proceeds will go toward establishing a revolving fund to be used for the preservation of significant local structures. Calendars can be obtained by calling Charlotte Wallace at 883-0037.

RECORDS OF THE DALLAS Manufacturing Company are now available for research. Mrs. Warren Sockwell recently donated several volumes of material to the Historic Huntsville Foundation. These books are the minutes of the Dallas stockholders meetings and of the Dallas board of directors meetings. Taken together they cover the entire period of operation of the Dallas Mill (1890-1952) and contain much data about construction, machinery, production, personnel, and the

finances of the company.

Mrs. Sockwell's father was George S. Elliott who served as treasurer and general manager of Dallas from 1936 until the company was dissolved in 1952.

The Foundation is most grateful to Mrs. Sockwell for the generous donation of these volumes which portray a significant chapter in the history of Huntsville. They have been placed in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville Public Library where they will be available for use by the general public.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦



The GUDENRATH building on Washington street, which housed the Twickenham Pharmacy, has been razed leaving an ugly hole in an otherwise solid block. The building was both historically and architecturally significant to Huntsville, and its demolition is much to be regretted.



Reviews...

EUTAW The Builders and Architecture of an Ante-Bellum Southern Town, by Clay Lancaster. *The Greene County Historical Society, 1979. 208 pages, illustrated, appendices, index, glossary.*

Whenever possible, local historians should try to tell the story of their community with an eye on those larger events that may have had either a direct or an indirect influence on the outcome of the situation which they are examining. Such an awareness will prevent myopia, but more importantly, it will enable the reader to better understand the uniqueness of the local developments under investigation, presenting them in a generally more stimulating light. In Clay Lancaster's EUTAW: THE BUILDERS AND ARCHITECTURE OF AN ANTE-BELLUM SOUTHERN TOWN, this overview was not cultured, and therefore, the author has turned what could be a very interesting subject into one which neither has any life, nor provokes any response from the reader.

When reading this book I had a difficult time keeping my attention focused on the text. Although Mr. Lancaster has done a fine job documenting the various houses, the information provided does not go beyond what the reader himself could cull from an archive. The writing of history is an interpretative art, a notion which Mr. Lancaster has prac-

ticed in some of his other manuscripts. Why he did not follow the same instinct here is somewhat mysterious, especially when he had such a promising topic.

by John Sarn

Eutaw, Alabama, is a town that possesses a wealth of ante-bellum architecture. It is also a place that is unknown to most of those who are interested in architectural history. It would seem to this writer that confronted with such an opportunity, the author would bring in comparisons of other well-known buildings fashioned in the Greek and Roman revival styles in order to demonstrate clearly the singularity of the developments in Greene County and Eutaw before the Civil War.

Certainly this would not have been all that difficult, for the author is well aware, for example, of the beauty of Natchez. In taking some time to offer a few comparisons, the audience would have been allowed not only to examine the particular strengths and weaknesses of the architecture in the

Eutaw area, but also be given an interesting insight as to how these styles were adapted to the needs of the south central region of Alabama.

Even with this major handicap, however, there are some things to like about the book. It is very well organized insofar as the author has divided the material into easily understandable categories. Domestic structures, for instance, are analyzed under such inventive headings as "One-Story Houses" (Chapter 10), or "Story-and-a-Half Houses" (Chapter 12). Additionally, the author has set up useful developmental role models by recognizing that some of the houses in Eutaw were dependent upon other examples from such nearby locations as Mesopotamia, Alabama. By bringing such comparative information into the text, the reader not familiar with the area is able to make some value judgments with reference as to what makes Eutaw unique from other towns in the area.

Other aspects worth mentioning are the excellent drawings and useful appendices on the builders and the property owners of ante-bellum Greene County. Without the drawings, what discussion there is would often be in vain. In the Benjamin D. Gullet House (Fig. 46) for example, the photograph shows more of the shrubs than it does of the structure so that the drawings of the elevations, moldings, and interior details help to convey the richness of the building which could not be appreciated were they not included. The appendices are also of use, for what biographical and other pertinent data that could not be worked into the text is contained here for easy reference.

This notion of practicality or usefulness, however, seems to point once again to the unfortunate result of the Lancaster book. In creating essentially a reference guide to the architecture of Eutaw and Greene County, the author has not really written a definitive history. While he does compile information and organize his subject matter in an enviable manner, he has not made what he has discussed come alive in the imagination of his readers. Perhaps it would have been better had he written a catalog instead of a text, for at least then I would not have experienced any letdown in terms of expecting a story.

This is an ambitious book for a town and historical society of Eutaw's size, and the people of Greene County should be congratulated. They have a handsome, well illustrated, and expertly documented publication to make their unique heritage known to the world. However, although the skeleton of a fine book is here, the heart is somewhat lacking, an omission which does not do justice to the beauty of the subject matter.

CLAY LANCASTER is a noted architectural historian who has written numerous books on 19th century American architecture. He received his M.A. from the University of Kentucky in 1939 and did postgraduate work at Columbia University where he also taught. Two of his best known books are ARCHITECTURAL FOLLIES IN AMERICA and THE JAPANESE INFLUENCE IN AMERICA.

DR. JOHN SARN is assistant professor of art at the University of Alabama in Huntsville where he teaches architectural and art history. He received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina, and his articles have appeared in many journals.

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.

from the Chairman

Looking at the present HHF membership list, a pattern emerges that provides several clues as to the types of people who are interested in a historic preservation organization. They are generally active, involved people concerned with the quality of life in their community and taking pride in its heritage - intensely involved with the upkeep of their own small corner of the world. Many live in restored, or in the process of being restored, homes, and those who don't, form a large cheering section for those who do. Members are usually seen on historic house tours, either as hosts or touring, and find pleasure both in creating and viewing beautiful things. Many collect antiques, old books, or memorabilia. Looking at a weathered barn or a beautifully proportioned facade turns them on more than a nightclub or an expensive sports car. So does spending a fall Sunday afternoon picnicing and touring New Market, Alabama.

Clem Labine, editor of "The Old House Journal," says that preservationists are "un-American" in the sense that we oppose the conventional American idea of consuming ever more. He feels that preservationists ... are actually the new wave of pioneers. We are struggling to reverse the "use it up and move on" mentality. We are moving in and picking up the pieces. We are taking individual buildings and whole neighborhoods that have been discarded and trying to make them live again. We are cleaning up after society's litterbugs.

In teaming up with folk musicians to present a lively slide program on architectural preservation, Roy Swayze of Eutaw, Alabama, illustrates his philosophy that "preservation should be fun, or a person shouldn't get involved in it."

A concerted drive for new members for HHF will soon get underway. Membership dues provide our operating expenses, and while the Foundation has no paid staff, operating costs have risen as we have greatly expanded our activities. Preservationists are nice people. If you know someone who is interested in working for a more prosperous and beautiful city consciously taking pride in its heritage, and who would enjoy our activities, please invite that person to join.

We hope that YOU are enjoying YOUR participation in HHF. We always invite your suggestions for activities and projects and appreciate your help.

Lynn Jones



from

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