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And Old Views

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And Old Views

Through the years since Huntsville was incorporated in 1811, the city government has built and occupied a succession of structures in the downtown. During much of the 19th century the principal city building was referred to as the market house, reflecting the importance of the city market as an early government function. The mayor's office, where the board of aldermen met, consisted of a single room appended to the market, while the engine house, or fire station, usually was located adjacent. The progression of city sponsored buildings through the 19th century illustrates the expanding roles both of city government and of Huntsville as a town.

The first identified market house, of unknown description, sat on the public square, which it shared with the first courthouse and the early reservoir. When the county decided to build a more substantial courthouse, to a plan designed by George Steele, it was necessary to move the market house to another location. Consequently in 1839, George Steele, who was also a city alderman, offered a resolution that a committee be appointed to locate a lot on which to erect a market and an engine house. Appointed to the committee were Steele, George Cox and Irvin Windham, who recommended purchasing the property at the southwest corner of Clinton and Washington Streets. Steele then resigned as an alderman, perhaps to avoid a conflict of interest since he had been commissioned as the arch-

itect. In September the aldermen unanimously adopted the drawings submitted by Steele and elected Windham to superintend construction. The market house was a two-story, masonry structure with columns at the Washington Street entrance. The upstairs room served as a town hall for public meetings. As the market lot had a frontage on Washington of only 35 feet, the market would have been long and narrow, probably with the engine house as a separate structure behind it on Clinton.

Huntsville's City Halls

An ordinance for the regulation of the market was adopted which set daily hours for operation, rental rates for stalls, and fines for illegal practices. It was expressly forbidden for farmers to sell food anywhere within the corporate limits except at the market house. The town constable was appointed clerk of the market and charged with ringing the bell at the start of each market day, enforcing all rules, mediating weight disputes, and preventing the sale of unsound or unwholesome provisions.

The stalls were rented to the highest bidder for a term not to exceed one year, provided that the bid was at least \$25 per annum. Products sold at the market house included vegetables, poultry, butter, eggs, lard, wax, cheese, fruits, flour and meal, and butcher's



This old photograph, looking along Clinton Street, shows the market house as it was rebuilt after the 1850 fire. Barely visible behind the tree is the bell tower over the entrance, while the 1873 engine house can be seen in the background.

meats. A bench placed along the curb of the Clinton Street sidewalk was provided free for the sale of fish.

The city also rented the hall above the market to the highest bidder, who would be required to furnish it with any number of good, substantial seats, the cost of these to be deducted from the rent. The aldermen obviously expected the market house to pay for itself.

On May 2, 1850, much of downtown Huntsville was leveled when a fire began on North Side Square and moved north, destroying both the market and engine house. The following year the city purchased an additional lot on Washington, which adjoined the market house lot, and rebuilt the market and

engine houses to a new design. Although Steele was still practicing as an architect then, there is as yet no evidence that he participated in either the plan or the construction of these structures. The market house was a one-story, T-shaped brick building with a wooden bell tower above the Washington Street entrance. Presumably the market stalls occupied the back wing, which ran parallel to Clinton Street. The engine house was a separate building behind the market on Clinton.

By 1870 the market house had become too small to house both the market and city offices, forcing the aldermen to search for additional space. Rather than erect yet another building, they arranged to have one built by private enterprise. The

city owned a vacant lot at the southwest corner of Jefferson and Clinton Streets which they sold to Mary Hundley. Mary's husband Orville then signed an agreement with the city to erect a strong, elegant and commodious city hall--opera house combination on the lot according to the plans, dimensions, and specifications stipulated by the mayor. Next, Hundley deeded a quarter interest each in the property to Larkin Sullivan, J. C. Steele, and L. W. McCravy for \$125 on the condition that they would undertake, with Hundley, to construct, prior to November 1872, the hall as described. The structure, which is variously referred to as the City Hall and the Opera House, was finished on time, and the Opera House grand opening held in December. The city offices remained here for twenty years.

The following summer the aldermen voted to replace the engine house with a new structure. C. A. Gill submitted the lowest bid for the construction; however since Gill was an alderman and a member of the committee that formulated the plans and cost estimate, it is not too surprising. Possibly the competing bidders viewed the transaction in the same light for Gill resigned his position as alderman at the next meeting.

The new engine house, completed in January 1874, was a two-story, brick structure of three bays with a gabled roof--a design reminiscent of many local antebellum residences except for the large doorways for the fire engines. Only the arched openings, the brackets under the eaves, and the corbelled chimney tops suggest its post-bellum origin.

By 1889 the aldermen were again contemplating another building project--a single city

The COVER photograph illustrates the 1873 engine house and its proud firemen, plus a group of onlookers. At this time the city also operated the scales, which were located in one bay of the engine house.

hall large enough to accommodate both the market and the city offices. The purchase of another 23 feet along Washington increased the market house lot to 87 feet on Washington by 135 feet on Clinton. The plans, drawn by architect H. D. Breeding, were adopted in June; however, three years passed before the contracts finally were awarded to Hummel and Zschaake for the stonework, H. Brandon & Son for the brickwork, Timberlake and Nance for the tinwork, and McCracken and Golightly for the carpentry, making the projected cost of the hall about \$10,000. J. R. Stegall paid \$175 for the old market house salvage.

Breeding designed an imposing, two-story, brick and stone structure with a tall corner tower and mansard roof. The building fronted 51 feet on Washington and 97 on Clinton, while the tower rose to a height of about 60 feet. The first story of quarry-faced stone contained large arched doorways which provided access to the ground level market. The second story of brick housed the city offices and was lighted by large, individual, round-topped windows. Each window broke through the eaves of the main roof to form a series of hipped wall dormers which created the appearance of a second, or double, roof. Smaller, gabled roof dormers alternated with the wall dormers and reinforced the sensation that the building might erupt through its roof.

The 1873 engine house was retained with modifications. It became the back three bays of the new city hall and was reroofed with an extension of the main mansard. A new hipped wall dormer and gabled roof dormer continued the design of the city hall proper.

With its picturesque tall tower, variety of wall textures and colors, complex roof, and multitude of openings, the hall

exhibits all the characteristics of the commercial Queen Anne style. Nevertheless, all of this variety is handled in a very disciplined manner giving a presence and continuity to the design which many buildings from this era lack.

The two types of dormers are alternated and spaced at equal intervals so that the apparently chaotic roof is, in fact,

Continued on page 17

The grandeur of the 1892 city hall reflects the growing prosperity of Huntsville, as textile mills located around the town beginning in 1890, and the increasing services offered by the city government, which finally required as much space as the market. The remodeled engine house can be seen at the far right.

