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401 Lincoln Street

Winston-Orgain-Sammons House : The Evolution and Restoration of a Federal House

by Aida Reinbolt

The restoration of an old house is a dirty, difficult, frustrating, and expensive task. However, it is also a very satisfying one when it is completed. Dr. and Mrs. F. Calame Sammons discovered all of these facts when they undertook the restoration of the Winston-Orgain home that they purchased five years ago. Recently, as the sun shone through the many small panes of their modified Palladian style windows, it reflected off the clean white walls and highlighted the warm tones of the original heart pine

floors. Only a photographic record of conditions before and during restoration remained to portray the effort made to arrive at this stage of perfection.

This attractive two-story Federal style house with Victorian accents was bought by the Sammonses when they decided to return to the doctor's hometown to set up practice in his specialty, orthopedics. The home is situated in the Twickenham Historic District, an area in downtown Huntsville which contains many fine examples

of antebellum and Victorian architecture. For Dr. Sammons, the location had the advantage of being close to the medical district, and they were fortunate to have found the house vacant and for sale.

Built circa 1815, the Winston-Orgain house is one of the oldest homes in Alabama. According to its title history, the land on which the house is situated was originally purchased by LeRoy Pope from the United States Government in 1809. When Arthur F. Hopkins, local attorney and delegate to the Alabama Constitutional Convention, bought the land from Mr. Pope on December 2, 1819, the property, according to the deed, consisted of a half acre lot with a brick house and other buildings which had been built by a Colonel Peter Perkins. Mr. Hopkins sold the house in 1827, and between that year and 1935, the house changed owners twelve times. Mayme G. Woodard bought the house in 1935, and it remained in her family until the Sammons family bought it from her heirs (the Winstons and the Orgains). During its one hundred seventy-odd years of existence, the house has undergone extensive alterations.

An important consideration for Dr. and Mrs. Sammons in the acquisition of this antebellum home was the fact that it was habitable and could be occupied during the process of restoration. This proved to be a mixed blessing, as the photographic records reveal. Often, furniture was stacked on other

furniture as rooms had to be vacated for renovation to proceed. However, the major projects are now finally completed, and although there are still minor items to be attended to, now is the time for enjoyment and reminiscence.

Before any restoration was attempted, Dr. and Mrs. Sammons met with Harvie Jones, an architect with the Huntsville firm of Jones and Herrin. Mr. Jones, an expert in the field of historic restoration, examined the house and then made drawings of the way he believed the house had appeared in its several stages of evolution into the building acquired by the Sammons family. Tracing the outlines of a historic home is similar to solving a mystery. When the old wallpaper and plaster were removed, and the floorboards were taken up during renovation, it was very gratifying to see how very correct Mr. Jones had been in his visualization.

Several important points were ascertained. The oldest portion of the house is the north wing, which was originally a brick Federal half-house - a two story structure consisting of a room downstairs and a room upstairs. This was a typical first step in the construction of a home in the early nineteenth century. In this type building without an enclosed permanent stairhall, there was usually a temporary entry and stairway placed on one side of the structure, connecting the two floors. But in this house, restoration work revealed that there was an interior



Restoration work upstairs in the north bedroom revealed where the ceiling had been raised to the height of the newer ceiling in the Federal addition - during the process of removing old wallpaper layers, the plaster came off with the wallpaper on the later, higher area of wall, but but remained attached to the original wall.



corner staircase in the large first-floor room, instead. Also, constructed on the north side as part of the original house was a small one-story office. This smaller room is again serving its original purpose.

Several years later an addition containing two Federal style rooms, plus a central stairhall connecting the two parts, was built on the south side of the house. This was a typical method of home enlargement during this period. It is presumed that, at this point, the original stairs were removed. The ceilings in the new rooms were higher than the original ones, so the ceiling in the older upstairs bedroom was raised to standardize the

roofline with that of the addition. The second-story floor in the new portion, being higher than the floor in the older part, made the original bedroom a "sunken" room reached by two steps down from the new hall. In this sunken room there are also two steps up to a unique raised closet. This closet and another one on the opposite side of the upstairs hall are additions of the Victorian period.

The bracketed Victorian front porch was probably added at the same time the two closets were constructed. Dr. Sammons considered removing this porch, at first, in order to restore the integrity of his primarily Federal style house, but Mr.



North bedroom after restoration. Note the raised closet door and hallway door (left), both opening to the higher-level floor of the Federal addition.

Jones advised against it. There are several houses in the vicinity with similar porches, which Mr. Jones surmised may have been the work of the same artisan. These additions are now about one hundred years old and therefore deserve their place in the historical style of the area. The porch does not detract from the clean lines of the house and helps to protect the beautiful front door from the weather.

The doorway is outlined by a Roman arch faced with large limestone blocks which had been painted, as had the exterior of the brick house. Dr. and Mrs. Sammons removed the paint from the blocks, revealing the natural beauty of the stone. These limestone blocks enhance the nat-

ural wood finish of the Victorian period front door, which is hung in a Federal era doorframe and embellished with a massive brass door knocker.

After deciding on the extent of restoration, the next onerous task was finding contractors to do the work. There were not many contractors willing to take the risks involved because there are many unknowns hidden behind the layers of paper and paint in an old house. Two contractors familiar with restoration work did accept the challenge, but with an open-ended contract. Wallpaper removal was not included; therefore, Dr. and Mrs. Sammons did a major portion of the wallpaper peeling and paint scraping



Detail of limestone and brick arch surrounding the Federal doorframe of the front entrance.

themselves, not because they especially wanted to do it, but finding people to undertake the task for them was difficult and would have been costly.

When the many layers of wallpaper were removed, the plaster to which it had been adhering these many years came off with it. Dr. Sammons correctly surmised that the wallpaper was all that was holding up the plaster. Mrs. Sammons has kept some samples of the wallpaper, and it is interesting to note that the designs are very similar, all large floral patterns in shades of rose, light blue, and light green.

Without the concealing layers of plaster, the previous changes and additions were revealed on the interior

brick walls. The outline of the original corner staircase was clearly visible, as were the original doors and windows that had been boarded up or bricked in. Outlines of the original chair-rails were evident, too, downstairs and upstairs.

Removing wallpaper and plaster was dirty work, but the biggest mess came, according to Mrs. Sammons, with the opening of the sealed fireplaces. Previous occupants had burned coal, and the accumulation of soot was overwhelming. Again, the effort was rewarding when a charming arched fireplace was revealed in one of the upstairs rooms, and it has been retained in its original shape. The mantels above the fireplaces were restored when possible, copied, or re-



ABOVE: In the north room on the first floor, the outline is clearly visible of the original corner staircase and, under it, the original doorway to the office. Chair rail outlines also are visible.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: In the center hall of the Federal addition, the original exterior doorway (left) and window (behind stepladder) are visible to the left of staircase. They were later filled in with lath and plaster. (In solid brick construction, plaster is laid directly on the brick.)

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: The center hall as it appears after restoration.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: The arched fireplace, which had been sealed up, after restoration.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT: Detail of Federal mantel in the first floor south room of the Federal addition.





TOP: North room on the first floor, after restoration. The mantel is original but the arched china cabinet was probably added later. **BOTTOM:** Detail of the north room mantel. It took Dr. Sammons at least a year to refinish this beautiful mantel with its many finely carved details.



placed. One replacement mantel was found in the Historic Huntsville Foundation collection of salvaged house parts, and was beautifully restored by the Sammons themselves.

The primary objective of restoring this house has been achieved. As much of the original structure and trim as was feasible and practical to save was preserved, while making it a comfortable home with modern conveniences. As examples of the integrity Dr. and Mrs. Sammons exhibited in their preservation efforts are three items that survived renovation only because they were historically interesting. One is a small patch of wall which has been left exposed because it shows the original hewn laths plastered with red clay. Another survivor rescued from under layers of paint by Mrs. Sammons is an attractive bottle glass transom. Not especially attractive, but interesting nevertheless, is an outside ventilation grate which is now extant in an inside wall.

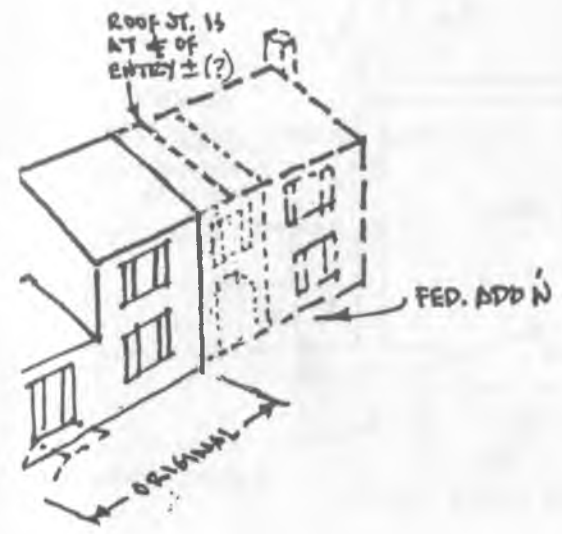
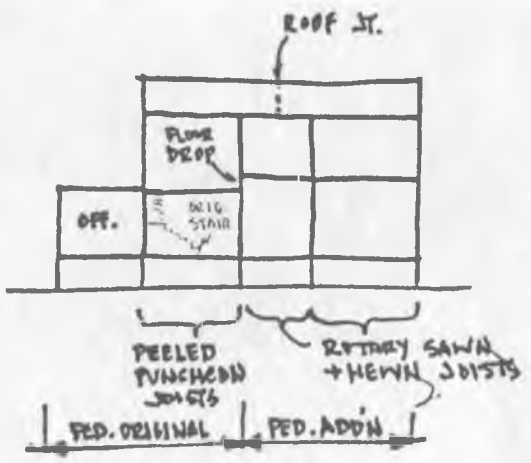
Attempts at modernization while preserving the original features led to problems. The floor of the original part of the house was laid directly upon huge peeled puncheon joists which, in turn, were laid directly on the ground. This arrangement left very little crawl-space in which to install plumbing, wiring and ductwork for heating and air-conditioning. The problem was solved by having the smallest worker available to maneuver in this limited space. Another problem occurred when the solid brick walls, twelve inches thick, had to be breeched to accommodate electrical wiring.

Nevertheless, Dr. and Mrs. Sammons have persevered and can be proud of their accomplishment. They have graciously opened their home to us and allowed their story to be told in order to encourage other preservationists to carry on, in spite of any pitfalls that may be lurking in odd places.

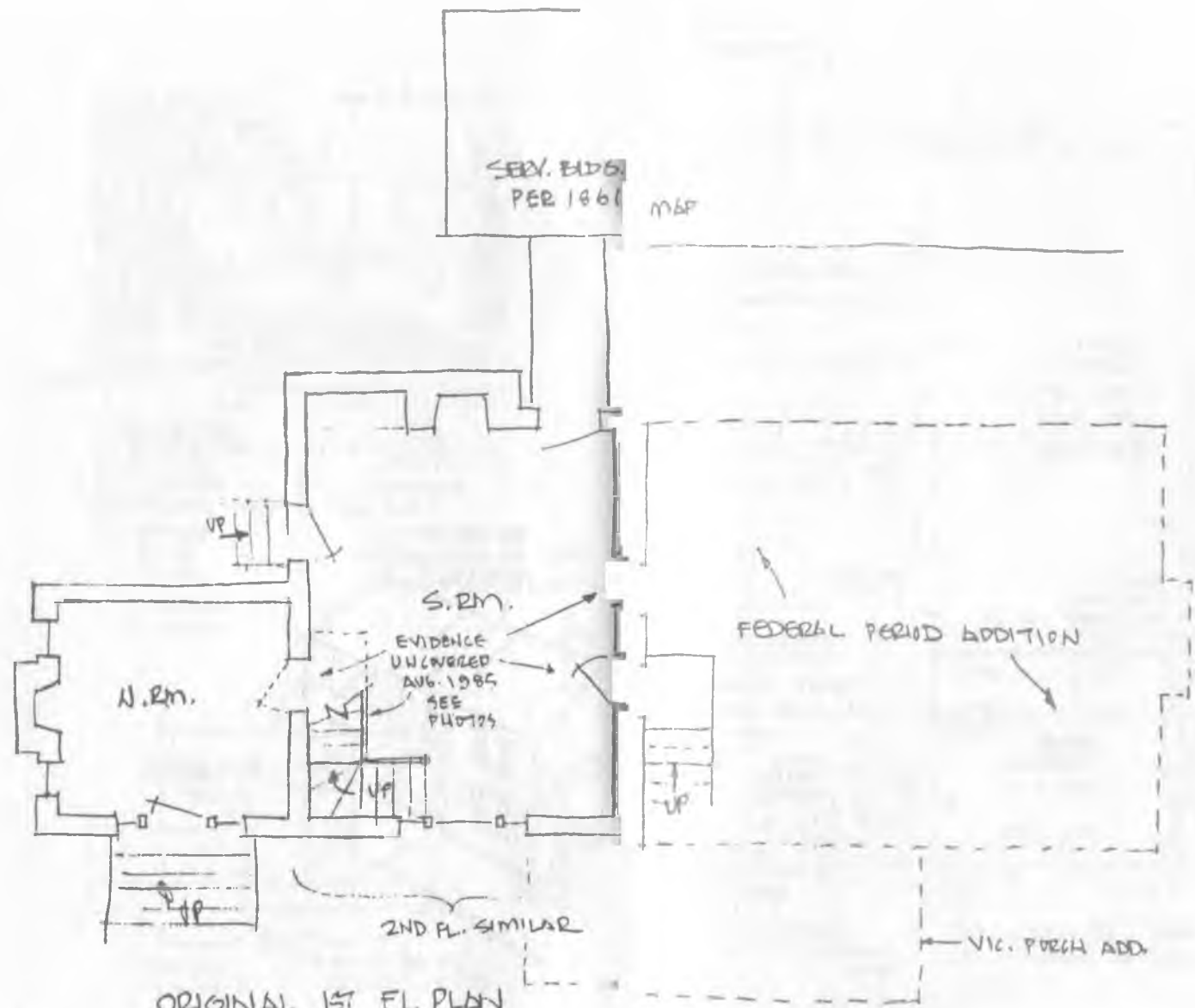




ORIGINAL HOUSE: 401 Lincoln Street
 FINISH BOND, EXPOSED STONE FNDN, PUNCHDOWN FL JOISTS
FED. ADDITION: RUNNING BOND (NO HEADERS) NO EXPOS. STONE FNDN. SAWN (+ HEWN) JOISTS

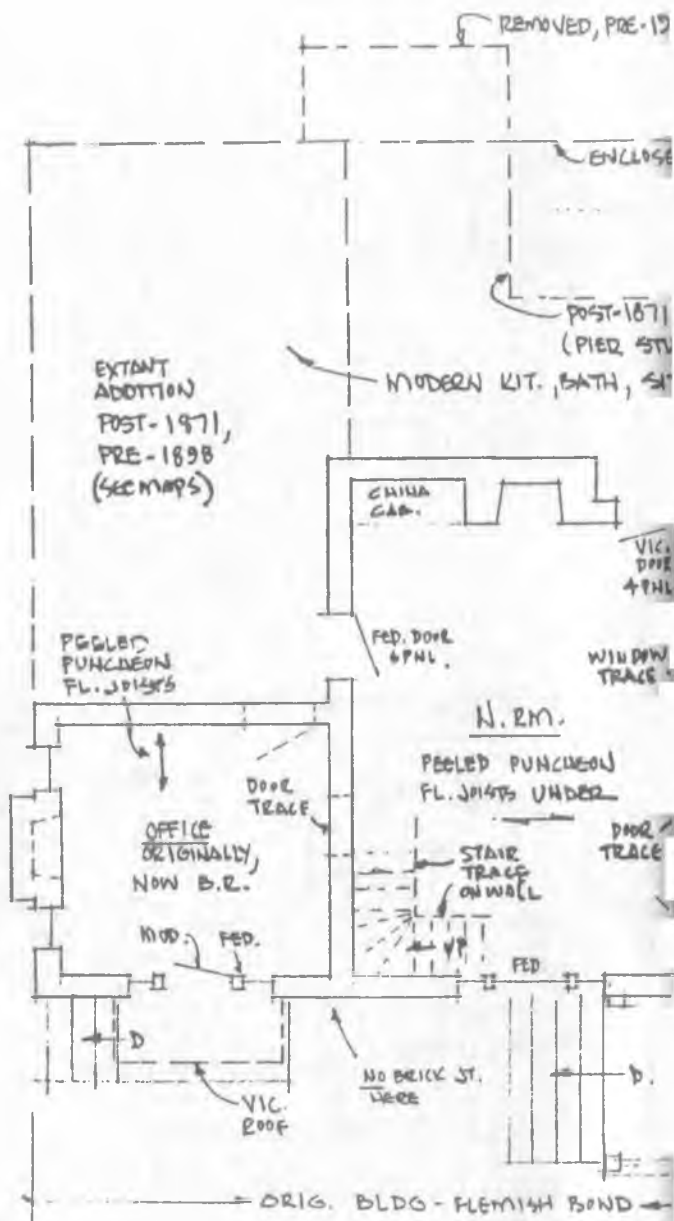


31M w. 1984
 NR Jones
 Revis. 7 Sept '05



ORIGINAL 1ST FL. PLAN

1815 WINSTON-ORGAIN HOUSE
 401 LINCOLN ST., HUNTSVILLE, AL.
 NO SCALE - APPROX. 1/8" / FT.
 7 SEPT. 1985 HP JONES, FAIA



EXTANT
ADDITION
POST-1971,
PRE-1898
(SEC MAPS)

PEELED
PUNCEON
FL. JOISTS

OFFICE
ORIGINALLY,
NOW B.R.

N.R.M.

PEELED PUNCEON
FL. JOISTS UNDER

STAIR
TRACE
ON WALL

NO BRICK ST.
HERE

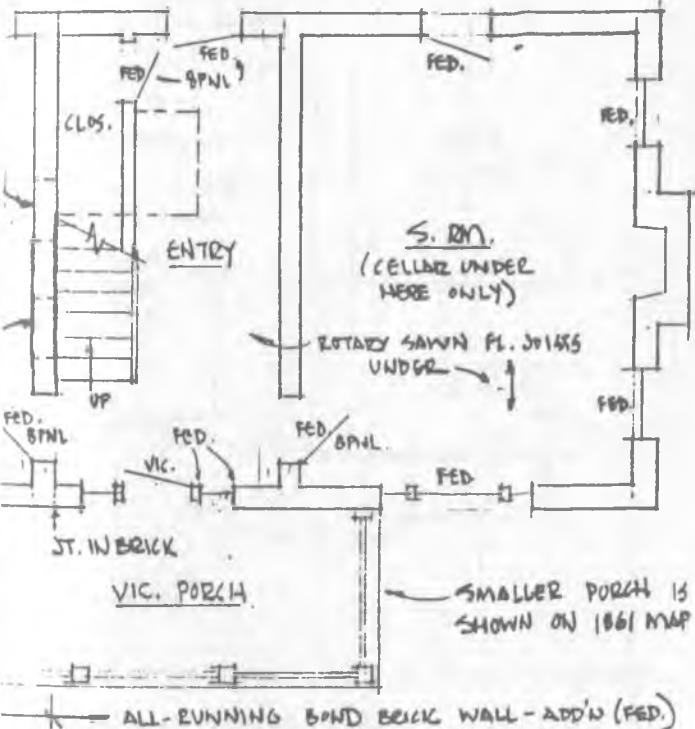
ORIG. BLDG - FLEMISH BOND
1815 WINSTON - ORIGIN LIKE
SKETCH 1ST FL. - NO SCALE



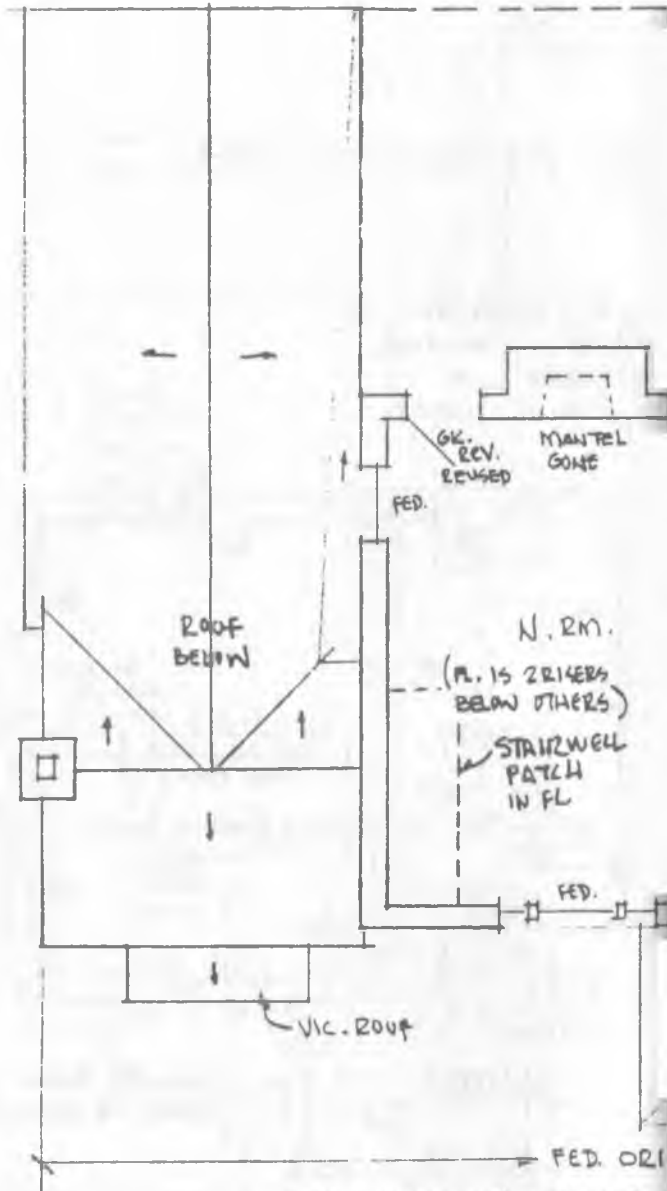
84, POST-1913

D PORCH (POST 1913) EXTANT IN 1984

PRE-1898 PORCH EDGE
BS STILL IN CRAWL SPACE)
TING, STUDY



- 401 LINCOLN ST., HUNTSVILLE, AL.
APPROX. 1/8" / FT.) 24 MAR. 1984 H.P. JONES, F.A.I.A.
REVIS. 2 SEPT. 85 HJ

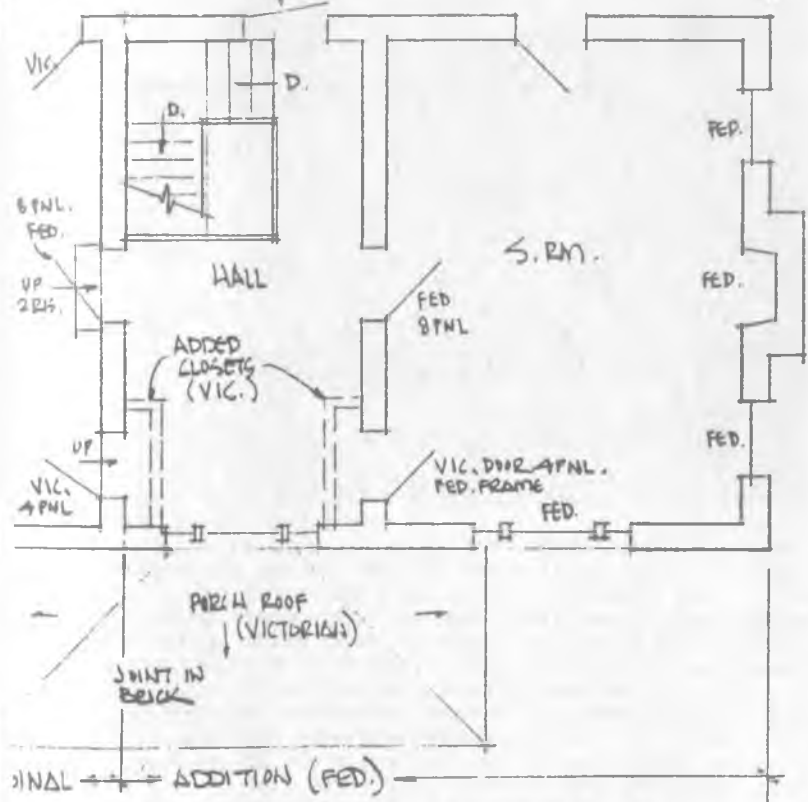


1815 WINSTON - ORIGIN
 SKETCH 2ND FL. - NO SLAB

POST-1913 ROOMS (BATH, B.R. ETC.)

SINCE NO BACK PORCH SHOWN ON 1861 OR 1871
 MAP AT 2ND FL., ALL REAR DOORS
 MUST BE POST 1871

REUSED GREEK REVIVAL DOOR (2 PNL)
 W/ FED. TRANSOM



401 LINCOLN ST., HUNTSVILLE, AL.
 : (APPROX. 1/8" / FT.) 24 MAR. 1984 H.P. JONES, F.A.I.A.

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Large peeled puncheon* joists, found under the original part of the house, were laid directly on the ground. The thick heartpine floorboards were then laid directly on the joists. Even after one-hundred-seventy-plus years on the ground, the yellow poplar wood, which is highly resistant to insect infestation and rot, is in good condition and remains in place under the house. The more conventional joists under the Federal addition were rotary sawn and hewn.

* Puncheon - A heavy, broad piece of roughly dressed timber. **Webster's New World Dictionary**, Concise Ed., 1969.