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Linda Bayer

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Huntsville's Expanding City Limits

by Linda Bayer

White settlement of the Huntsville area began in 1805 when John Hunt traveled south from Tennessee in search of the Big Spring. He was soon joined by other pioneers, and in 1809 the general assembly of the Mississippi Territory approved legislation establishing a town in Madison County to be called Twickenham. It was to be the county seat, and five commissioners were charged with procuring not less than thirty nor more than 100 acres of land to be laid off in half-acre lots with the exception of a three acre plot which was to be reserved for public buildings. On July 5, 1810, the commissioners accepted the plat of Twickenham, containing 72 half-acre lots plus the undivided public square and Big Spring block. The original town was bounded by Williams, Lincoln, Holmes, and Gallatin/Henry Streets. The next year the name was officially changed to Huntsville, the more popular name by which the settlement was commonly known, and the following month, on December 9, 1811, Huntsville was incorporated by statute of the Mississippi Territory legislature, although no boundaries were specified.

On December 14, 1819, Alabama became the twenty-second state, and three days later the Alabama legislature set the town limits of Huntsville at "one quarter of a mile from each side of the public square."

Throughout the nineteenth century, the various town limits described a square, the boundaries of which were parallel to the sides of the public square and the center of which was the center of the public square. In 1828 the town limits were enlarged by the state legislature so that the boundary lines were each one mile in length.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, annexations or alterations to the city limits could be made only by an act of the state legislature; however, the Alabama Code of 1852 contained enabling legislation that permitted annexation by referendum in all incorporated municipalities. Ten inhabitants of a town could petition the judge of probate for an alteration of the town's boundaries. The judge would then direct that an election be held, and all white, male inhabitants over twenty-one years of age could vote for or against the proposal. If approved by a majority of the voters, the annexation became effective upon decree of the judge of probate. Provisions for annexation by referendum remained in effect for Alabama cities--with variations in the method of initiating and conducting them--until 1947 when legislation was passed specifically for Huntsville. This 1947 enabling legislation required the judge of probate to order an election held whenever

the city council passed a resolution stating that the public health or public good required that an area be brought within the limits of the city.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Huntsville held only one referendum on annexation, but it was initiated by legislative act rather than by a petition of residents. Held in 1852, the referendum to make Huntsville's town limits each two miles long was not approved by the voters. This expansion of the town was finally achieved in 1866 by act of the legislature, bringing the total land area of Huntsville to four square miles. In 1871 the new Glenwood Cemetery (on Hall Street) containing approximately ten acres was also annexed. However in the final boundary change of the nineteenth century (1876), the town limits were reduced to one and one half miles in length.

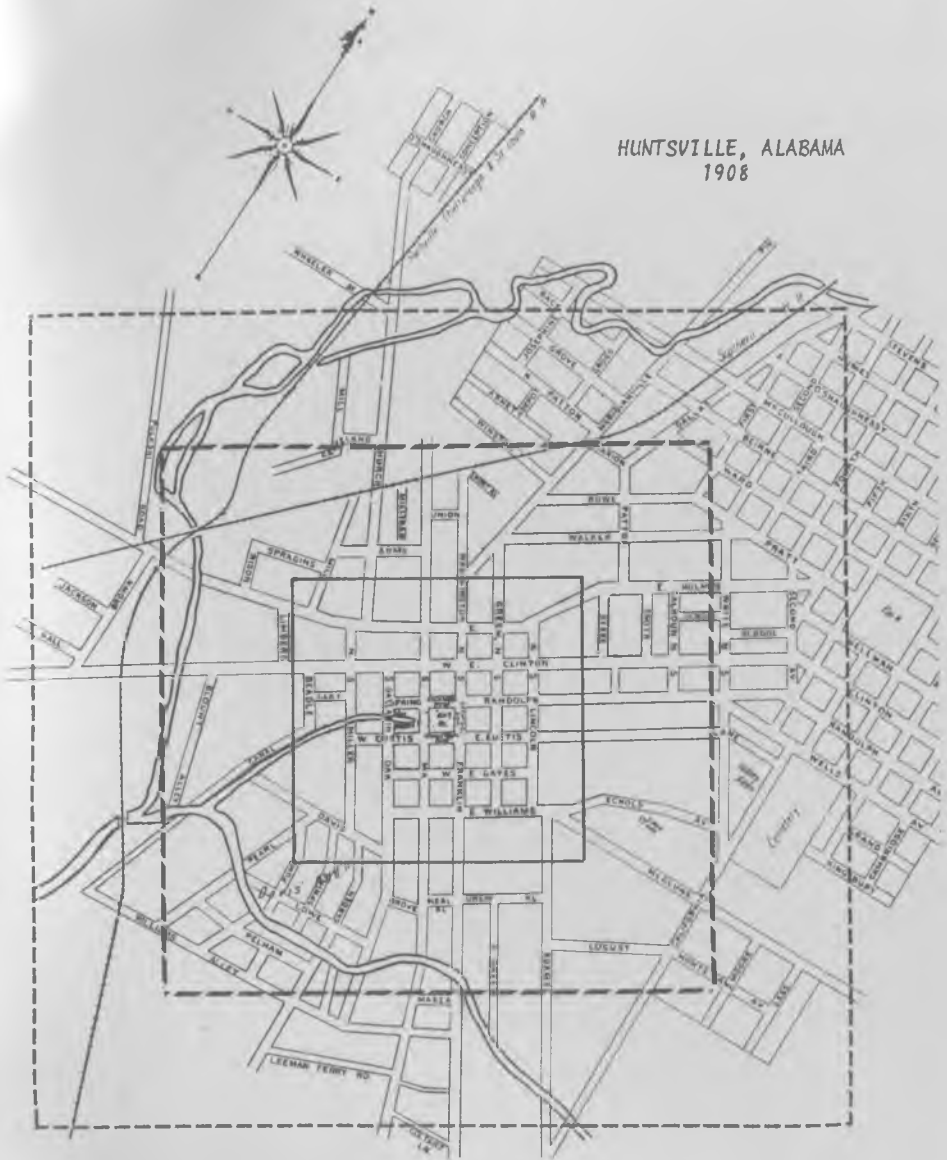
Huntsville maintained this size, 1440 acres, until 1925 when one hundred acres of East Huntsville Addition were brought into the corporate limits by referendum. Twenty-two years elapsed before further annexations occurred; in 1947, another sixty-five acres of East Huntsville Addition were added to the city, as well as more than one thousand acres lying south and east of the corporate limits encompassing the Mayfair and Blossomwood neighborhoods.

The decade of the 1950s was a time of dramatic expansion and growth for Huntsville. The population of the city jumped from 16,000 to 72,000 residents while the amount of land within the city limits skyrocketed from just under 3,000 acres to over 32,500 acres, an incredible 1,097% increase for the

decade. From 1950 to the end of 1955, the city annexed eight parcels of land containing almost 7,500 acres. However Huntsville's single biggest increase occurred April 14, 1956, when the Alabama legislature approved an act that redefined the city's boundaries and incorporated an additional 14,000 acres contained in five tracts. Just three years later, on February 24, 1959, the legislature approved the annexation of the Whitesburg School tract and called for referenda on four additional areas. Three of these were passed by the voters, while the fourth--Sherwood Park/Research Park--was defeated. These four approved annexations added another 8,300 acres to the city. The result of all this annexation activity during the decade was an increase in the size of Huntsville from slightly more than four square miles in 1950 to fifty-one square miles in 1960. Even more startling is the fact that while the population more than quadrupled during the decade, the number of persons per acre decreased from six in 1950 to just 2.2 by 1960.

Huntsville continued to grow during the 1960s, but at a slightly less phenomenal rate. The population within the corporate limits almost doubled during the decade, while the acreage of new land incorporated showed a 112% increase. Over 12,000 acres were annexed in 1963, which included the Research Park area, much of Jones Valley, part of Huntsville Mountain, and a tract on the north side of Winchester Road; the next year four successful referenda resulted in the annexation of another 9,600 acres, which set the present northern boundaries for the city. During 1965 four separate annexations added yet another 9,300 acres,

HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA
1908



HUNTSVILLE'S 19th CENTURY CITY LIMITS

- 1819-1828: One quarter mile from the Public Square
- - - - - 1828-1866: One half mile from the Public Square
- 1866-1876: One mile from the Public Square (not shown)
- - - - - 1876-1925: Three quarters mile from the Public Square

with the majority of this land being the new airport property and a tract along Highway 72 near Chase. The approval of four more parcels at the end of the decade brought the total of new land added to the city during the 1960s to 36,630 acres.

In 1971 the state legislature provided for a third method of annexation--by petition to the city clerk of all property owners within an area contiguous to the corporate limits. Upon receipt of the petition, the city council could annex the area by ordinance. This method of annexation was simpler and quicker than either legislative act or referendum and was utilized six times during the next decade in Huntsville, mostly for small tracts

of land.

By 1970 Huntsville's explosive growth period was over. The city's population, which had increased by 92% during the 1960s, experienced only a two percent increase during the 1970s. Similarly, the amount of land annexed showed only a 4.7% increase during the 1970s, as compared with a 112% increase for the previous decade. Nine annexations added only 3,267 more acres to the city, of which 3,100 acres were part of the Green Mountain tract.

The annexation of 27 acres of Chase Industrial Park in 1980 brought the total acreage within the Huntsville city limits to 72,584 or 113.4 square miles.

HUNTSVILLE: ACREAGE AND POPULATION SUMMARY

	Area in Acres	Percentage Change	Population	Percentage Change	Persons/Acre
1860	640	-	3634	-	5.7
1870	2560	300.0	4907	35.0	1.9
1880	1440	-44.0	4977	1.4	3.5
1890	1440	0	7995	60.6	5.5
1900	1440	0	8068	0.9	5.6
1910	1440	0	7611	-5.7	5.3
1920	1440	0	8018	5.3	5.6
1930	1548	7.5	11,554	44.1	7.5
1940	1548	0	13,050	12.9	8.4
1950	2728	76.0	16,437	26.0	6.0
1960	32,659	1097.0	72,365	340.3	2.2
1970	69,290	112.0	139,282	92.5	2.0
1980	72,557	4.7	142,513	2.3	2.0

This article is based on research conducted by Juergen Paetz and the author for the City of Huntsville Planning Department.