

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 8 | Number 1

Article 1

9-1-1981

The Maria Howard Weeden House

Harvie Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Harvie (1981) "The Maria Howard Weeden House," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 8: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol8/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

THE MARIA HOWARD WEEDEN HOUSE

In honor of the opening of the Maria Howard Weeden House as a Huntsville museum of nineteenth century architecture, furnishings and history, this issue of the QUARTERLY is devoted to an examination of the house, its gardens, and its occupants.

Harvie Jones discusses the architectural significance of the Howard Weeden House, which is an outstanding example of Federal period domestic building; Sarah Fisk recounts the planting and cultivation of the gardens by Jane Weeden and her daughters, Howard and Kate; and Frances Roberts traces the history of ownership of the Weeden House property since 1810 and comments on each owner's role in Huntsville's history.

The Howard Weeden House is open Tuesday through Saturday (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) and Sunday (1 p.m. to 4 p.m.).



OPPOSITE: The spectacular curving staircase in the entry hall of the Weeden House. COVER: The front facade of the Weeden House at 300 Gates Street.



Rear view of the Weeden House from the southeast

The Structure

by Harvie Jones

BACKGROUND

The style of American architecture termed Federal was generally popular during the period 1776 to 1835. This style was greatly influenced by the light and elegant designs created by the English architect Robert Adam who practiced in England from 1750 to 1780. Adam, in turn, was strongly influenced by the newly discovered interiors of ancient Roman houses, which were revealed by the archaeological excavations at Pompeii and Spalato in the mid 1700s. These cities had

been buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79, and their excavations illustrated for the first time that ancient Roman interiors had been decorated with very light, elegant motifs such as colonettes, urns, molds, and swags. Adam's work, based on these examples, contrasted strongly with the heavy interior decorative elements of the Georgian period (of the first two thirds of the eighteenth century), which had been derived from the heavy ornament of Roman public buildings.

The Weeden House, located at 300 Gates Street, is a superb example of Federal period domestic architecture as constructed in Huntsville. The house was recorded in 1934 as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey and is located in the Twickenham Historic District, a National Register of Historic Places district.

carved piece. (These flutes are repeated at a much smaller scale on one of the upstairs mantels--an interesting example of design continuity.) The underside of the boxed cornice is decorated with a series of carved wooden blocks called, in the Corinthian order, modillions.



The roof cornice and frieze on the front facade.

WEEDEN HOUSE EXTERIOR

Constructed in 1819, the Weeden House is a two-story, ell-shaped, brick house having a gabled roof and a center hall layout. It is called a five-bay house because there are five windows across the facade on each level. The roof cornice and the frieze below the front roof eave are loosely based on the classical Corinthian order. The frieze features a leaf-patterned, cast lead design topped by a band of small vertical wooden flutes; each of these hundreds of flutes is a separate, hand-

A three-room kitchen and service building at the rear of the house was removed during the period 1934 to 1950 to make way for a garage. However, this kitchen-service building was measured and photographed in the 1934 Historic American Buildings Survey, and its foundations are still intact under the soil. It is hoped that this original service building will be reconstructed.

Architectural evidence shows that the six-room, ell-plan Weeden House was built all-of-a-piece, whereas most of Huntsville's surviving Federal period houses started with just

two rooms. These starter houses had one room on each floor, with sometimes a small room in the upper stairhall, and a separate kitchen and service building; various later additions increased them to their present size. Thus the Weeden House must have been unusually ambitious for Huntsville in its initial conception and was certainly ambitious in the refinement and extent of its woodwork. No other surviving Federal period Huntsville house has woodwork of the elaboration of the Weeden House.

The entry with its semicircular, leaded glass fanlight and slender, reeded colonettes is particularly beautiful. The glass sidelights also were leaded in a pattern of semi-circles, as is evident by the cut-off ends of the lead came that remain along the edges of the sidelights.

Architectural evidence indicates that the exterior brick walls were not painted until after the mid nineteenth century. Originally the brick mortar joints were "pencilled," that is, lined with quarter inch wide white paint stripes to emphasize and visually straighten the joints. This practice of pencilling joints became widespread after the Revolutionary War, when cheap apprentices were not available to laboriously tool the joints in beaded or grapevine shapes. Pencilling was almost universal in Huntsville prior to the Civil War; the author has seen few houses of the period without traces of striped joints, which was done as a part of the new construction rather than as a later touch-up.

The brick on the two street sides of the house is well formed and laid in Flemish bond

(alternate bricks turned end-ways)--a beautiful pattern but expensive even in 1819. Since most people, then and now, believe in spending money where it will show, the sides of the house away from the streets display an irregular and cheaper brick laid in the less expensive common bond and executed in such a casual manner that sometimes the courses of brick do not even meet at the corners. It is endearing, rather than demeaning, to see evidence that people were people in 1819, just as they are now, with all their faults and virtues. The writer has seen only two Federal period houses in the Tennessee Valley that have Flemish bond brickwork on all sides; the vast majority are like the Weeden House.

The double-hung windows with twelve panes (or lights) in each sash are counterbalanced with ropes and iron weights; this is an unusual feature because most houses of the period had sashes that were held open by a wooden turn-latch or a metal friction-catch. Many of the window panes are the original, thin (about 1/16 inch) cylinder glass, which contains beautiful irregularities. To make cylinder glass, the glassblower first would blow an elongated bubble, let it cool, cut off the domical ends to form a cylinder, then reheat the cylinder and slit one side so that it flattened into a sheet. The sheets were then cut into individual panes. The irregularities in the glass are a result of this hand process.

The wooden elements of the Weeden House are joined by pegged mortise and tenon connections. To make such a joint, the end of one member is trimmed to make a tenon which is slipped into a slot (mortise)



The sidelights of the front entry are flanked by extremely attenuated, reeded columns grouped in pairs. The leaded glass of the sidelights has been replaced.

cut into the other member. A peg--called a treenail, later slurred into trunnel--is inserted through both to hold them in place. The window sashes in the Weeden House have pegged corners as do all the blinds, mantels, and doors and the concealed connections of the door frames, rafters, and joists. The ends of the tenons can be seen at the edges of the blinds and doors. A machine

for making concealed tenons was not invented until later in the nineteenth century.

The Weeden House has flat arches of brick over its windows, whereas many of the Federal period brick houses have lintels of heavy eight inch deep cedar. The Weeden window sills are of wood, which was the normal practice; the writer has seen no brick sills on Fed-

A typical Weeden House window with twelve panes in each sash, lintels of brick, sills of wood, and wooden blinds.



eral period houses. The window jambs (vertical wooden sides of a window) are semicircular on the outward edges--a frequent and elegant touch in Federal period architecture.

The design of the wooden foundation vents is common for houses of this period but is, nevertheless, very elegant for so prosaic a device. The vertical bars of the vents are



A foundation vent illustrating the diagonally placed bars and the three-quarter round mold framing the opening. Notice the Flemish bond of the surrounding brickwork.

The Weeden House has blinds, not shutters. Blinds have blades with openings between them, whereas shutters are solid-paneled to exclude light and air when closed. In fact, these blinds are referred to as "Venetian blinds" in writings and contracts of the early nineteenth century. Solid shutters apparently were used only on commercial buildings for security purposes because this is where the few survivors are found. Venetian blinds functioned to block the summer sun without blocking the cooling breezes and to discourage the entry of insects, for insect screen wire was not invented until the late 1800s. Blinds also provided security to a house with open windows.

twisted forty-five degrees so that their vertical corners, rather than their flat faces, face outward. This produces a rhythm of angular adjoining faces in lieu of a dull row of flat bars. Another refinement can be seen at the corners of the frames where a three-quarter round mold is used to create a decorative bead, which adds greatly to the appearance of these vents.

The Weeden House chimney tops now curve inward towards the roof, as they do in most old houses. The explanation is that rain-wetted lime mortar slowly forms a chemical compound that swells the mortar joints, thereby expanding the wall vertically. Since the

outer face of a chimney receives more moisture from its increased exposure to rain, it swells more, resulting in a curve over the house.

The Weeden House was built on unstable soil and has been settling, like the Pisa Cathedral in Italy, ever since. A close look at the brick walls reveals that none are level or plumb. The dining room is several inches lower in the southwest corner than in the northeast corner. In the late 1970s, many tons of cement were injected at high pressure into the soil beneath the house in an effort to stabilize it.

WEEDEN HOUSE INTERIOR

The glory of the Weeden House interior is its entry, which is brilliantly lighted by the large leaded-glass fanlight, the sidelights, and the window over the gracefully spiralling stair. (In 1970 this entry

was found to be rather dark and gloomy because the high rear window had been blocked by a bathroom addition.) The rear wall of the entry is curved in a cylindrical shape to follow the spiral of the stair. Thus three major curved elements--fanlight, stair and rear wall--are present in the entry, a reflection of the Adamesque influence. More ambitious houses of this period had entire rooms in the shape of ellipses or circles--such as the Octagon House in Washington, D.C.--in imitation of the English designs of Robert Adam.

The pine flooring in the entry is fairly narrow, less than three inches wide, and has tight joints, whereas flooring five to six inches wide with open joints is usual for the period and is found in the other Weeden House rooms. It was first thought that later flooring had been laid over the original wide flooring in the

The leaded-glass fanlight of the front entry as seen from the inside.





The front entry of the Weeden House

entry, but investigation proved that the tightly laid, narrow flooring is original. Further research has revealed other Federal period houses exhibiting this same variation between the entry and the other rooms. The probable explanation is that many Federal period wooden floors were covered by some material such as wall-to-wall carpeting (three foot wide strips sewn together), woven straw matting, or even canvas, a custom documented by contemporary drawings and paintings. Probably the entrance floor was not meant to be covered; therefore, the builder took special care in cutting and installing the narrow boards to get tight joints and vertical grain.

A careful examination of the floor near the baseboard in the northwest parlor reveals hundreds of carpet-tack holes--proof that the Weeden House did have wall-to-wall carpeting at some date. The oriental rugs in the house today are representative of post-Civil War fashion when oriental rugs became both popular and less costly. Illustrations from the Federal period more frequently show small "Turkey rugs" (as oriental rugs were often called) being used as parlor table coverings; perhaps they were too expensive for most people to walk on.

Although the Weeden House floors have traces of varnish on them, varnish is another post-Civil War fashion. Prior to the Civil War, wooden floors were periodically scrubbed (sometimes using sand and bricks) to keep them a light bleached color. A look under the rugs still reveals this bleached finish, for the later varnish was applied only around the edges of the rooms.

The dense pine flooring is very thick (about 1 1/8 inches) and is laid directly on the floor joists without a subfloor. The floor boards have tongue-and-groove joints, but shrinkage has opened many cracks, which explains the reputation for draftiness of early nineteenth century houses. Recently, insulation has been added under the Weeden House floors.

The flooring was mechanically sawn by water-powered sash saws, as was all of the wood except for the large members, such as floor joists, which were ax-hewn and pit-sawn (hand sawn). The local sawmills in 1819 probably consisted of water-powered sash saws (up-and-down saws). Some areas of the country had steam-powered sash saws as early as the late 1700s, but none are known to have been in operation here that early. Mechanically powered circular saws also existed in the late 1700s but were not used much until the 1830s. The earliest circular-sawn lumber found in Huntsville thus far is in the 1860 Huntsville depot and in parts of the 1860 First Presbyterian Church. The fact that this church has only a little circular-sawn lumber combined with the sash-sawn lumber indicates that the circular saw must have been a new and novel item in 1860 and its product not available in large quantities.

One interesting detail of the Weeden entry stair is the manner in which the scroll pattern on the stair edge compresses, yet holds its design, where the stair steepens at the start of the spiral. Another is that several of the balusters are not of wood but of iron--a clever and unobtrusive structural device, which stiff-

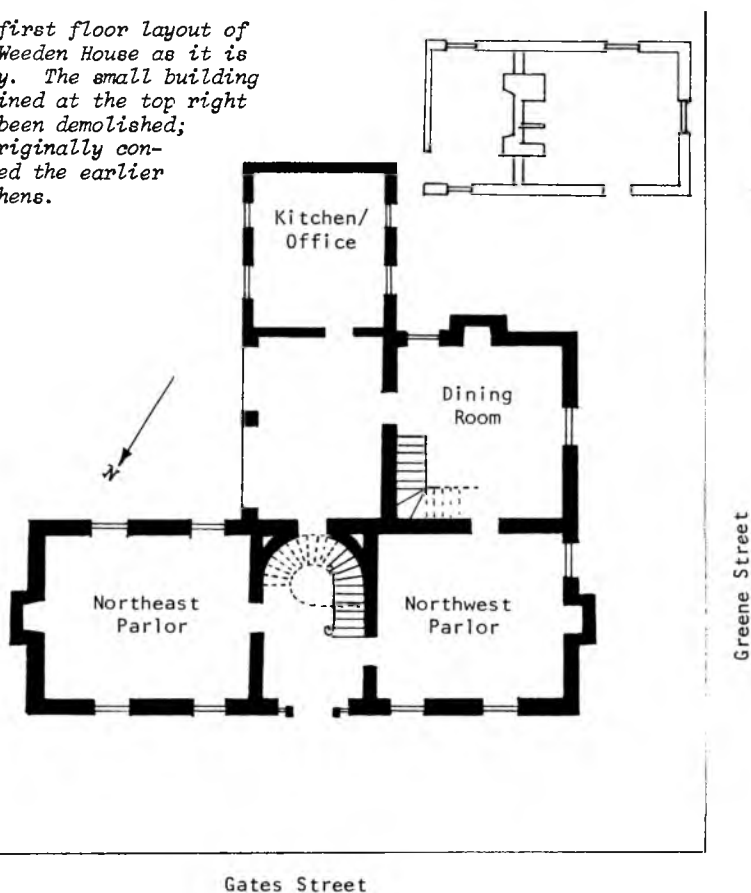
fens the rail and probably forms a truss to support the cantilevered edge of the stairs.

The two-paneled door beneath the entry stair is Greek Revival in design, perhaps dating from the 1850s, rather than Federal. The six-paneled doors in the remainder of the house are of Federal design and represent the most common configuration for doors of this period, although occasionally four-paneled doors were used. The missing Federal door from the rear of the entry hall was

curved to fit the curve of the wall, an elegant and unusual but not unique feature; an examination of the door frame head from the back porch confirms this design detail.

The stair rail is roughly circular in cross section to fit the hand and is the most frequent shape used during this period. The stair balusters are small and rectangular in cross section, a feature that is universal in surviving houses of the period in Huntsville. No turned Federal period balus-

The first floor layout of the Weeden House as it is today. The small building outlined at the top right has been demolished; it originally contained the earlier kitchens.





This detail of the stair scrolls shows how the pattern compresses as the stairway begins to curve.

ters have been observed by this writer, either here or elsewhere, although there must be some exceptions.

A small ivory button is centered in the bottom end-spiral of the stair rail. The tradition is that this signifies payment of all debt on the house.

The mantels in the two front rooms of the first floor are Greek Revival, perhaps dating from an 1850s remodeling. The change in scale from Federal to Greek Revival is most noticeable; the Greek Revival forms are heavy and simple--even blocky--and contrast greatly with the delicate Adamesque molding found on all the original woodwork. The two Greek Revival mantels and the entry hall rear door are the only

later elements in the Weeden House, making it a rare example of basically unaltered Federal period construction. However, these later features represent part of the history of the house and are to be kept in place. They were in the house during the life of Maria Howard Weeden and so are important historical elements.

The interior doors are very thin, just 1 1/8 inches. This is considerably thinner than a modern house door (1 3/8 inches) but is typical of the Federal period. The locks are reproductions of the original "Carpenter" brand rimlocks that were in the house, one of which survived on the dining room door.

The interior woodwork of the Weeden House is the most elab-

orate in Madison County and is intact except for a missing chair rail in the northwest parlor and the above mentioned mantels and door. Because the design of the chair rail is not known, the rail has not been replaced. Delicate reeding and fluting are extensively used as a decorative motif, particularly in the panels surrounding the windows. Rep and chevron patterns also appear in these panels and in the northwest parlor: these were made by gluing hundreds of pre-cut sticks into a gouged channel in the baseboard or window sill.

The dining room contains one of the three original Adamesque mantels still in the Weeden House (the other two being on the unrestored second floor). The dramatic difference in scale and design between the Federal and the Greek Revival is readily apparent when comparing this mantel with those in the front parlors.

The wall and mantel colors present in the Weeden House rooms today are the early nineteenth century colors used in the house. Behind the door in each room and under the entry stair is an unrestored rectangle of plaster that retains all the various paint colors of the house's history. The brown-painted woodwork was actually grained, that is, painted in streaked patterns to imitate various woods. An unrestored example of graining can be seen at the top of the door frame between the northwest parlor and the dining room. It is hoped that the graining will be replicated when finances allow and a skilled grainer is available.

The black paint covered with shiny varnish on the mantels

is a replication of the original finish and, moreover, is the most frequent color found on Federal and Greek Revival mantels, a conclusion that is based on the results of scraping numerous mantels. The black color contrasts handsomely with the strong Adamesque colors, such as the deep pink found in the dining room. On



This mantel, located on the unrestored second floor of the Weeden House, displays the delicate reeding and fluting that were typical of Federal period decoration.

the lower right side of the mantel in the northeast parlor is an unrestored bit of the original black paint.

The rear stair enters directly into the room above the dining room with no separation, which is a fairly common feature of Federal period houses



This window in the northeast parlor of the Weeden House is elaborately ornamented with a variety of decorative motifs.

in this area. An unusual and attractive detail is the heart cut out design in the end-scrolls of this stair.

In the northeast parlor, bull's-eye corner blocks appear at the top of the door and window frames; decorative corner blocks are unusual in Federal period houses although other examples do exist. However, the backbanded window and door trim found in the other rooms is quite typical for the period.

The Weeden House rooms have no crown molding at the top of the walls, nor does any known Federal period house in this area. Some owners have recently added small modern crown moldings to Federal period rooms in the mistaken belief that it "ought to be there," but it should not. Occasionally however these rooms did have wide wallpaper borders at the top of the walls. In the Weeden dining room, the rose pink wall paint stops short of the ceiling by about eighteen inches, indicating that a wallpaper border once decorated the upper walls of this room.

The nails used in the Weeden House are square cut nails of various sizes made by machine. By the late 1700s most cut nails were made by either water or steam powered machines. Only a few nails of special shape (such as large-headed) were handwrought in the early nineteenth century, which was, after all, the age of the Industrial Revolution.

The baseboards in the Weeden House have no small shoe molds at the floor since shoe molds were a later device. During the Federal period, the baseboard bottoms were scribed to fit any irregularities in the

floor plane, creating a much neater detail than tacked-on shoe molding.

The first floor ceilings are twelve feet five inches high, while those on the second floor are eleven feet one inch high. The house may appear to be completely symmetrical on the front, but it is not: the room on the left of the entry is two feet wider than the room on the right (21' 10" versus 19' 10"). In fact, very few of these old houses that appear to be mathematically symmetrical really are--our eyes deceive us into thinking they are because that is what we expect.

WEEDEN HOUSE SITE

The original kitchen was a separate structure located about thirty feet from the rear door. This separation kept kitchen heat and smells out of the house in the summer and lessened the risk of fire. However some Federal period houses in Huntsville did have cooking fireplaces in the main house, normally in a half-sunken ground floor.

An 1861 map of Huntsville shows that there were several outbuildings with the Weeden House; an 1871 "Bird's-Eye-View" map shows how these buildings were shaped. Their uses are not known, but one must have housed horses and conveyances and another would have been the "necessary."

The Weeden House is said to have had an iron fence at the time of the Civil War, but probably the original fence was of wooden pickets, a more common type of fencing in 1819.

The 1819 Maria Howard Weeden House is a fine and almost un-

altered example of Federal period domestic architecture. By studying it, we can gain general insights about Huntsville lifestyles in 1819 and specific insights about the life and art of Maria Howard Weeden in the

late nineteenth century. But more importantly, we can learn to understand our own times--for historic architecture helps us to evaluate our own times within the greater historical context to which we all belong.



The Gardens

by Sarah Huff Fisk

Passers-by along Gates Street on a summer day in the late nineteenth century must often have paused to gaze in delight at the colorful garden that transformed the east lawn of Weeden House into a sweet-scented realm of beauty.

Jane Eliza Brooks Urguhart, wife of Dr. William Weeden and creator of this charming spot, might have given her English and Scotch ancestry credit for her special way with flowers.¹ But her ideas were by no means confined to clipped hedges and formal plantings. Instead she chose old-fashioned flowers, such as heliotrope, peonies, lemon verbena, pinks, and hollyhocks. Roses were her special love, and she planted sturdy stock that continued to flourish for many years to come.

When Dr. Weeden bought the house in 1845, the grounds were quite extensive, reaching from Gates to Williams with a half-block frontage on each street.² There was plenty of room for flowers as well as the indispensable vegetable garden. Funds were ample, servants available, and the project must have been an inviting one to a

gardening enthusiast.

However, tragedy came suddenly in late 1846 when Dr. Weeden died while on a trip to New Orleans.³ His widow, though well provided for, was left to nurture their young family, which eventually included Maria Howard, born six months after her father's death. In this time of sadness and responsibility, the planning and care of a garden must have offered much needed solace.

Exactly when the first plants were set out is not known, but surely there were many treasured roses, cuttings, roots, and seeds transplanted by the family from their former home on Weeden Mountain, southwest of Huntsville. How these flourished or in what stages the garden progressed can only

1 James E. Saunders, *Early Settlers of Alabama* (New Orleans: 1899), pp. 454, 455.

2 *Deed Book EE*, p.520, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

3 *Probate Record XII*, p.272, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.