

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 8 | Number 2

Article 1

12-21-1981

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Recommended Citation

Bayer, Linda (1981) "Edgar Lee Love: Huntsville Architect and Preservationist," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 8: No. 2, Article 1.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol8/iss2/1>

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Edgar Lee Love

HUNTSVILLE ARCHITECT AND PRESERVATIONIST

by Linda Bayer

The following article was originally published May 1906 in the national architectural journal **Indoors and Out**. The author was Edgar Lee Love, a practicing Huntsville architect who probably deserves to be recognized as the city's first active preservationist for his efforts to document and preserve Huntsville's nineteenth century architecture. Unfortunately Love's files and records are not available, but a few of his activities that are known suggest that Love was exceptionally concerned about the fate of the city's historic structures. His observation, contained in this article, that the first Cumberland Presbyterian Church was torn down "to make way for a more modern but less artistic building" illustrates his awareness that contemporary designs were not necessarily an improvement over older styles.

Edgar Love was born in Missouri in 1867 and moved to Huntsville in the early 1890s. After his marriage in 1894, Love erected a home for his wife and himself; its unusual triangular shape indicates that Love might have acted as his own architect and contractor for this project. The 1900 census lists Love as a carpenter although in fact he began working as a construction supervisor for a local architect in that year. All of which suggests that Love had some building experience prior to his arrival in Huntsville and was just waiting for an opportunity to train as an architect.

This chance came in 1900 when Herbert Cowell, an architect from Joliet, Illinois, moved his practice to Huntsville. His affiliation with Love began immediately and advanced rapidly; in 1903 Cowell and Love were awarded the commission to design the

Carnegie Library in Decatur. In 1905 Cowell left Huntsville to return to Illinois, by which time he had completed a number of commissions including the Van Valkenburg-McCauley House on Franklin Street, the second East Clinton Street School (now demolished), and the Struve-Hay commercial building at Jefferson and Holmes streets. Working with Cowell on these varied projects must have provided Love with all the formal training he needed, for after Cowell's departure, Love opened his own architectural practice which continued until his death in 1936. From 1913 through 1915 he also maintained an office in Birmingham where he was awarded several commissions. During his thirty year career, Love designed many local structures including the YMCA, the Masonic Temple, the Huntsville Carnegie Library, the DUNNAVANT'S building, the old Butler School, and numerous residences.

The first years of this century in Huntsville probably provided only sporadic employment for an architect, leaving Love with sufficient time to devote to personal pursuits. He was obviously attracted at an early date to the numerous early nineteenth century buildings still standing in Huntsville. Although the local newspapers occasionally mourned the demolition of yet another antebellum mansion, Love apparently was the first person to consciously study and record the city's historic architecture. By the date of his article—1906—he had already examined the prominent local structures for similarities in design and construction techniques and had begun research to determine construction dates and building histories. The errors that

appear in this article are natural in light of the fact that Love was conducting pioneer work, and he probably relied on personal recollections for much of his information.

Among Love's other known preservation activities were proposals for adaptive reuse of existing buildings—a concept popular today but not so common when Love began advocating it. In 1911 the owners of the Elks Theatre contemplated converting it into an “up-to-date” hotel and commissioned Love to draw the plans. As the *Mercury* reported, “Architect Ed Love has figured out a way of providing enough rooms to meet requirements by putting two stories on the business section instead of only one and without making use of the theater....Architect Love opposed ruining the theater also, and he got busy with his pencil with the result that he now has rough outlines of a plan that will solve the problem.” [November 22, 1911, p.1] One receives the impression from this description that Love determined to save the theater although not specifically so requested by his client.

His interest in preserving Huntsville landmarks through renovation surfaced again two years later when the county commissioners needed a larger courthouse. On that occasion, Love proposed to preserve the existing courthouse (designed by George Steele) but enlarge it by adding wings on the east and west to match those on the north and south. Love's proposal was rejected and the courthouse razed, but not before Love had made detailed measured drawings of it. The following year, 1914, Love supplied plans to renovate and enlarge the Russell house on

Madison Street for use as the new city hall. Throughout his career, he routinely remodeled many residential and commercial buildings in addition to designing new structures.

Another preservation project in which Love played an active role was the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). In 1933 the National Park Service began compiling a graphic record of the nation's historic buildings, which provided work during the Depression years for unemployed architects, draftsmen, and photographers. During 1934 and 1935, recording teams worked in the Huntsville area making measured drawings and photographs of some twenty structures. Love directed the work of several of these teams, in addition to redrawing his plans of the demolished Madison County Courthouse for inclusion in the survey.

Considering Love's sustained interest in Huntsville's nineteenth century architecture and his various contributions to its preservation, it seems likely that he amassed a valuable collection of documents on the subject. The inventory of his estate lists “four files filled with records of houses, research work, and drawing paper” and also notes that his architectural library was sold by his ex-wife. These materials—if they still exist—would greatly expand our knowledge of the role Edgar Love played in the development of Huntsville's built environment and of the condition of many antebellum structures which are no longer available for study.

The following article is reprinted in recognition of Edgar Love's early attempts to foster a preservation ethic in our community.