

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 17 | Number 1

Article 7

12-21-1990

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Pam Rogers

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Recommended Citation

Rogers, Pam (1990) "Goddard House serves as reminder of pre-Army days..." *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 17: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol17/iss1/7>

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Goddard House serves as reminder of pre-Army days ...

Pam Rogers

Article in The Redstone Rocket, October 25, 1989

It sits off to itself, slightly back from Redstone Road, surrounded by the cracked asphalt parking lots for buildings which have long since been torn down, its beauty dimmed by numerous refurbishings, face lifts and so-called "improvements."

It has a tired, faded look with its pale yellow brick exterior and white paint peeling here and there. Twin fire escape ladders leading from a balcony stuck on just for looks give it a cold, institutional appearance.

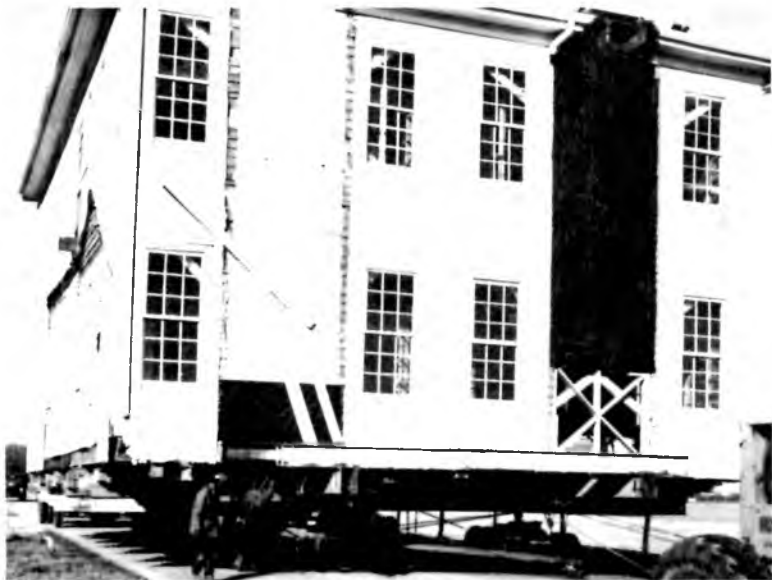
A wooden sign over the front door reads "Goddard House," a name bestowed upon it during a time when thoughts of rockets and outer space dazzled an entire nation.

Inside, a pay phone hangs on one wall in the front hall and a gilt-and-crystal chandelier dangles from the ceiling. Rooms of once-immense proportions have been cut down and partitioned off. It's hard to imagine that this building has ever been anything but a temporary place of shelter. "Home" is certainly not a word which comes to mind during a walk through the house.

But it hasn't always been this way. Although early history about it is hard to come by, it is thought that the house was built around 1835 by James Manning, who owned 2,200 acres of land in Madison County, part of which is now Redstone Arsenal. No one is sure whether Manning, described as a merchant and wealthy planter, ever lived in the house, but he owned the land at the estimated date of construction. Some of the house's original charm can still be seen in its symmetrical design, double windows, and hip

roof. You have to imagine the four identical chimneys which once graced each corner.

The house must also be imagined at another location, because it was moved to its present site in 1955.



The original clapboard siding is visible in this photo.

At least one Huntsvillian remembers the house as it once was, when it stood as a reminder of the days when the economy of the area was based on cotton, not missiles.

Nellie McAnally lived in the house for several years during the 1920s, when it was known as the Chaney house. Back then it was located near what is now the arsenal's Gate 9. Her father was the overseer of the Chaney farm, part of which was rented out to tenants who grew cotton and corn and bought their supplies from a commissary located in the old kitchen at the rear of the house.

A drive lined with cedar trees led to the front door. The house was clapboard then, and had a small porch in front and a larger, screened porch in back. Each room had its own fireplace. There was no electricity and the only running water came from a tap in the kitchen.

McAnally visited the house recently, and described to the *Rocket* the way it used to look.

“This was the living room,” she said, as she walked into a bedroom on the right front of the house. “There were big folding doors between this room and the dining room at the back, so they could open them and make a ballroom. There was a fireplace over there, with columns all the way to the ceiling, and mirrors. It was beautiful. It makes you wonder why they would want to change it all,” she mused.

In fact, all but one of the original fireplaces were removed, along with their massive chimneys. The only remaining original fireplace, in the front left room on the main floor, has been faced in pink marble.

As she walked through the house, she noted additional changes.

“This was our kitchen,” she said, entering a bedroom at the left rear. “We had cabinets along here, and on this wall a door led out to our screened porch where we ate during warm weather. There was a water faucet in here, but no sink. That was the only running water in the whole house, and there were no bathrooms,” she said.

In the back hall she pointed out where a second staircase used to be. It has been removed, along with the stairs to the attic which used to lead from the upstairs back hall.

The upstairs has been subjected to the same carving and partitioning as downstairs, with bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, hallways and closets created out of what used to be four rooms and two halls.

The two rooms on the left side of the second floor hold special memories for McAnally, for they were her first home as a married woman. She beamed as she walked through them.

Not long after she and her family moved back to town, the Army came along and bought the house and the land it sat on. It sat empty until 1942, when it was completely remodeled and used as quarters for military families. In 1953 it was shut up because of water problems. It was slated for destruction, but because visitors' accommodations were at a premium, a use was found for it.

With Redstone's guided missile and rocket program taking on national importance, it was decided that dignitaries who were bound to visit needed suitable guest quarters. Huntsville, so recently yanked from its rural slumber into the frenzy of the space race, had very few accommodations.

The house was moved over 11 miles to a spot more convenient to the central operations of the post. Once again it underwent a refurbishment, with lavish treatments like the pink marble fireplace and expensive furnishings.

The first person to sign the guest book in the "new" visitors quarters was Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, followed by Secretary of the Army Wilbur Brucker. Gone forever were the days when the house served as a reminder of a different way of life.

For McAnally, the house can still stir images of days gone by, and she retains a fondness for it, even though not all visitors today may understand. Some who have lived in the house may have even had some unpleasant experiences, she contends.

The house, according to McAnally, is haunted.

She related several instances of unearthly visitations, including strange noises in the night and ghostly apparitions.

“One morning my mother and my sister-in-law were in the kitchen. My sister-in-law was churning and my mother was washing dishes. My sister-in-law said, ‘look Mrs. Russell, there’s a dog.’ It was standing right there, in the doorway of the kitchen, and it was soaking wet, even though the sun was shining outside. It had the body of a dog and the face of an old man. Leona (the sister-in-law) threw a stick of stove wood at it, but missed. It turned around and my mother followed it, and it just disappeared,” she said.

Family members and visitors were awakened on several occasions by the sound of the huge folding doors between the living and dining rooms being slammed back, only to find them in their normal positions. When it stormed, the family could hear a baby crying outside the family room window. McAnally got so used to a ghostly hand turning the doorknob to her upstairs sitting room that she finally quit getting up to see who was there. She knew there would be no one, at least no one she could see, at the door.

M.G. Chaney, the owner of the house, used to lock himself in an upstairs back bedroom, hoping that whatever occupied the house would show itself to him, but it never did, McAnally said.

“I don’t believe it comes to everybody,” she said.

When the house was no longer needed for VIP quarters, it was changed to bachelor housing, and is sometimes used now for transient quarters.

At the time of McAnally’s visit, SFC Frank Finchum, his wife, Angie, and their children were living there temporarily while repairs were being made to their permanent quarters.

Had they seen or heard anything mysterious? Well, there was the time Angie heard running footsteps, but no one was there, and the dog barked every time he went upstairs.

“When Angie heard the noises, she called me at work,” Finchum said with a laugh. “I attribute most noises to nature. After spending two years in combat, strange noises don’t bother me,” he said.

There has been some wishful thinking about more work on the house — not a remodeling, but a restoration. But the cost of the tremendous amount of work required to return the house to its original appearance would probably be prohibitive.

A historical buildings survey performed in 1982 summed up the condition of the house this way: “Although this antebellum house represents pre-military land use, it retains little of its original integrity. The house has been extensively renovated and moved from its original site, and therefore possesses little architectural or historical significance.”



A Hermes missile is displayed in front of the house after its move to Redstone Road. This photo was made before the application of brick.