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## The Double-Jeopardy of the Circa 1848 Humphreys-Rodgers House

Harvie P. Jones, F.A.I.A.

The citizens of Huntsville, with initiative and effort, have saved a considerable number of historic buildings from the bulldozer in the past 20 years. Few if any buildings have had to be saved twice in that time period, however. The circa 1848 Humphreys-Rodgers House has that distinction. This is a brief outline of its story, which compares favorably with the old silent-movie thriller series, "The Perils of Pauline." Instead of Pauline tied to the railroad tracks, the Humphreys-Rodgers House has been in the path of the bulldozer twice since 1971 and only narrowly escaped each time, the last in a most dramatic fashion.

### The First Peril:

In 1971 plans were under way to construct the Von Braun Civic Center directly across the street from the Humphreys-Rodgers House, then empty and occupied by vagrants, who had built a fire in the middle of the floor of one room among other depredations. Weeds stood waist-high around the house. A tall chicken-wire fence had been erected in an unsuccessful effort to exclude the vagrants. The empty house and site of about 1.4 acres were for sale at a commercial valuation that would exclude residential use. The impending presence of the Von Braun Civic Center across the street made it highly likely that the historic structure would be demolished and a fast-food establishment erected on the site to cater to the thousands of visitors who would be coming to the Civic Center upon its completion.

Rather than sit back and mutter "too bad, that's progress I suppose," several citizens had learned by then (1971) that **preservation requires taking the initiative and making an**

**effort.** It was clear that the house could only be saved by finding a compatible commercial use for it and its sizable site near the planned Civic Center that would enable the house to earn its keep and be a commercial asset rather than a hindrance.

A feasible plan seemed to be to use the house as a centerpiece for a low-rise 100 room motel which would wrap around the back edge of the site, with parking tucked beneath the rooms. The historic building would thus continue to visually dominate the site and could serve as the motel entry, office, restaurant and meeting rooms (with a low kitchen addition at the rear). A sketch plan and an aerial perspective were prepared. Hall Bryant, Jr. contacted various people who might be interested in the adaptive-use preservation plan (a term not yet invented). Among those contacted were Jack Chambers and Bob Wilkinson of the Huntsville Coca Cola Bottling Company, whose plant was a short distance to the west. A meeting was arranged and the preservation plan was presented. Mr. Chambers graciously let it be known that he was not interested in developing any motels or restaurants, leaving the preservationists disappointed and without other good prospects for saving the house.

It was soon learned that the Huntsville Coca Cola Bottling Company had bought the building and its site not for the purpose of demolition but of preserving it for company receptions, staff training and similar compatible uses that were much more desirable than being the centerpiece for a motel. Bob Wilkinson became intensely interested in the house, its history and its possible compatible uses for Coca Cola. The house was nicely restored and became "The House for Coca Cola." Hundreds of items of Coca Cola memorabilia were displayed. In 1977 the structure was entered on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1989, an extensive amount of additional restoration was accomplished. The house seemed safe.

## The Second Peril:

In 1990, the Huntsville Coca Cola Bottling Co. needed to add a bottling line. They examined expanding the west bottling line by moving the front of the building forward toward the street. They examined adding to the west side of the plant. Every avenue of expansion, except disturbing the house, was examined. To the consternation of Bob Wilkinson the only workable expansion plan was into the historic structure. The house was therefore regretfully offered in mid December 1990 to the Historic Huntsville Foundation "in pieces," with the requirement that the site be cleared on a short timetable of three months (March 1991). A firm commitment was required by January 14, 1991. This tight timetable did not allow the luxury of exploring in a methodical way various possibilities, looking for sites, funding and possible purchasers of the reassembled house on another site. Fast action was the order of the day, and several Foundation members devoted many hours of their December and January "holiday" workweeks, evenings, and weekends seeking a solution.

The consensus of the Foundation Committee was that it would be most desirable, and probably most feasible financially to disassemble and reassemble the house on an empty lot in one of the historic districts with an expanded rear wing that would provide modern bathrooms, kitchen, etc., thus enabling the house to once again become a private home, in a protected historic district. Efforts were thus launched to find a suitable and available site, and an interested contractor who might execute the project on speculation of selling the reassembled historic structure at a profit.

Charles Caldwell Jr. of Caldwell Home Builders expressed such an interest on December 20, 1990, and an intensive search for a site began. Since the house was 57 feet 6 inches wide, a site of at least 81 feet 6 inches wide would be required to avoid the need to obtain a zoning variance.

The Foundation decided, due to the extremely tight time-frame, to explore "all possibilities at once" in the hope that if one failed, another would succeed. To that end, Constitution Hall Village had been contacted on January 3, to see if they might be able and willing to accept the house. They were interested, and a location just behind Constitution Hall on Gates Avenue was discussed. The Foundation provided a site plan to confirm the "fit" of the house.

Up to this point (early January 1991), there was no serious consideration given to moving all or part of the structure intact, since a rough estimate of the weight of just the front part was 350 - 400 tons. It was felt that while that size of "intact move" technically had been done and could be done, the cost would be prohibitive. This assumption was a mistake, for on the evening of January 7, a call was received from Hollis Kennedy of Hollis Kennedy House Movers. Hollis had looked at the house, was concerned about its impending loss, and felt that "it could be moved." The response was "at what cost do you think it (the front and oldest part) could be moved?" He quoted a figure that was much less than our previous guess. Possible time-tables, routes and insurance questions were discussed. Since we knew that Hollis had successfully moved the 1860's Jackson County Courthouse (a smaller but solid brick building) we felt comfortable with exploring this "intact move" in more detail. Mr. Caldwell and Mr. Kennedy were asked to do so.

Meanwhile the site search, much aided by Nancy Van Valkenburgh, had turned up at least four empty and suitable locations in historic districts. One was easily reached by an "intact" move. The other three involved more difficulty. None of this mattered, for none of the sites were, upon inquiry, for sale. It was quite a blow to have a willing contractor (who would finance the work on speculation), a good housemover at an affordable price, and no place to move the house.

In 1989 - 1990, the City had engaged the planning firm of LDR International to update the downtown master plan. This firm recommended that the city-owned block bounded

by Williams, Gates, Madison and Fountain Circle be devoted to a site for endangered and moved historic structures to complement Constitution Hall Village and perhaps provide specialty shops, restaurants, etc.

The Constitution Hall Village Board and staff were meanwhile working diligently to find a way to move and preserve the house. Their solution was to implement the LDR downtown plan and to place the house at the N.W. corner of Gates Avenue and Fountain Circle, facing north, where it would be visible from Constitution Hall Village and only a half-block away.

Thus one possibility of saving the house failed and another worked. On January 10, 1991, representatives of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, Constitution Hall Village and the Huntsville Coca Cola Bottling Co. met in Bob Wilkinson's office to discuss final details. Bob Wilkinson approved the arrangements and the second "save" of the Humphreys-Rodgers House was under way, all accomplished in record-breaking time (about 3-1/2 weeks) over the busy holiday season by many volunteers who were determined not to lose this beautiful, irreplaceable historic house.

The preparation work began quickly. The Huntsville Coca Cola Bottling Co. had in late 1990, at the Foundation's request, made careful measurements of the house to document it and to aid in its possible reconstruction at another site. The Foundation also made about 150 annotated documentary photographs and notes for the same purpose. The rear wing (built between 1901 and 1913 per the historic "Sanborn" maps) was carefully dismantled by J. T. Schrimsher Construction Co., the components stored, the bricks removed and cleaned one-by-one, all for the hoped-for reerection of the rear wing. The front and oldest part of the house, built in two sections in the c. 1848 - 1861 Greek Revival period, was prepared for moving by Hollis Kennedy House Movers. The house and chimney-stacks were thoroughly strapped with steel angles, cables, and braces. Kennedy decided to move the large front upper porch intact

with the house "because it makes better pictures." Steel beams, called "pins," were inserted at close intervals through the foundation walls under the first floor. The house was slowly jacked up, via the "pins," to several feet above grade. The pins were supported on two 60-foot heavy transfer beams that rested on numerous hydraulically-leveled "dollies" which enabled the weight to be evenly distributed on each dolly while the house passed over curbs and uneven soil.

Early on March 27, 1991, the move began, and was completed with only minor difficulties. There remains the task of restoring the house and reconstructing the rear wing with some adaptations for modern use by Constitution Hall Village. Firm plans for the type of use have not been announced, other than it will be used in the Village's interpretive program and not as a shop or restaurant, which is to be applauded. Various fund-raising events are planned, and public contributions are needed to complete the task. After the Herculean efforts to get this far, this is no time to drop the ball.

### Some Lessons From All This:

1. Once a building has been "saved" (as many have been in Madison County in the past 20 years) you cannot relax. There are now several important historic Madison County buildings previously saved that are again on the endangered list. Still others are now endangered for the first time.
2. Don't assume that a building "can't be restored," or in this case "can't be moved." Check it out and get the facts. Many buildings are now beautifully restored that were regarded by many, particularly in the 1945 - 1970 "Urban Renewal" destruction, as "not worth saving." One sample comment from a contractor in 1984, "This thing ought to be 'renovated' with a bulldozer." This particular house, c. 1828, is now in its original state of beauty, restored by a contractor and craftsmen

who had eyes to see the beauty and basic soundness behind decades of neglect and vandalism.

3. Don't assume that it would cost too much to restore a neglected building. Rarely does the cost of renovation/restoration even equal the cost of new modern construction, much less exceed it. Huntsville has many examples to bear this out.
4. If rescue time is tight, try every plan you can think of simultaneously. You don't have the privilege of trying one plan at a time.
5. A lesson learned by the time of "The First Peril" in 1971 is to work on saving a structure when you think it may become endangered, rather than waiting for the bulldozer to arrive and then getting excited. Lying down in front of the bulldozer is dramatic, but only results in quicker demolition and an "us and them" mentality on the part of the owners and preservationists. Much better results are obtained by taking a helpful attitude and trying to help an owner make economical and practical sense out of preserving the building. Several Huntsville buildings have been rescued from scheduled demolition this way. There are more cases than not where the economic and practical sense lies on the side of preservation rather than demolition, even disregarding the historic, cultural and esthetic factors.

While Madison County has had many preservation "saves," we have had many losses as well. To our knowledge, at least 14 early 19th century Federal Period houses have been deliberately demolished or burned since 1970. At this rate, it is ironic that someone in 2020 may have to look at a 1977 replication in Constitution Hall Village to try to get an idea of what a Federal Period building looked like.

A more extreme irony is that the pre-1819 Sheriff Neal house existed until c. 1964, only 6 years before a replication of it was planned for Constitution Hall Village. It had been



moved in the 1920's across Madison Street from its original site, expanded, and served in the early 1960's as offices for the Huntsville Planning Commission. Several aerial photos exist that show it. It was mid-block between Madison Street and Fountain Circle on the north side of Gates Avenue. One definition of a historic building is one that is torn down about ten years before a copy of it is built. The Neal House case fits this to a tee.

A final lesson is to try to save every historic building you can, for you are going to lose some now, and lose some more in every coming decade. The Humphreys-Rodgers House shows us that if you save it once it may again be lost in a decade or so. Eventually you end up with complete gaps in historic building types and periods. Huntsville lost its last intact Federal Period commercial building in the 1960's, for example.

An elitist approach of saving "just the best" or "just the oldest" is also invalid. A true sense of history is gained by seeing a complete picture, not "just the best" or "just the oldest." Ideas of "the best" also change. In the 1920 - 1960 period, Victorian architecture was reviled and demolished or remodeled indiscriminately. The same was true of Federal Period houses in 1850 - 1890, which we now consider to be almost priceless.

The moving and preservation of the c. 1848 Humphreys-Rodgers House is one small partial success in an unending effort. It was a partial success because a historic building has deep roots in its soil just as does a tree, and should therefore not be moved. There is always a sense of something not right about a building that has been moved. To illustrate the importance of this factor, the National Register of Historic Places will not accept moved buildings. However, if the choice is lose it or move it, moving it should be preferred. At least four other historic buildings in Madison County have been moved in the last 20 years to save them from certain demolition: The Greek Revival clapboard church moved to the UAH campus (Student Art Gallery), a

Gothic Revival house on Madison Street moved to the City of Madison, The "Steamboat Gothic" Van Valkenburgh house moved from Franklin Street to Lowe Avenue, and a Federal Period house moved from Redstone Arsenal to Rainbow Mountain in Madison.

The Historic Huntsville Foundation has not relaxed and is currently working on two other historic structures that appear to be endangered. The Foundation saved Alabama's oldest hardware store (Harrison's) by the extreme measure of buying it and opening it. There is no lack of determination in its constant efforts.

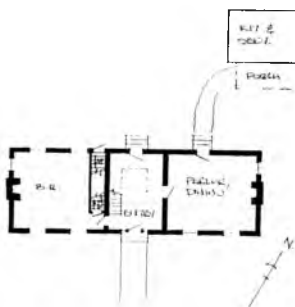
Why work to save all these "old buildings" anyhow? The answer goes much deeper than "they are attractive and we can't afford that kind of design, workmanship, and material anymore." To find the answer, all you have to do is go to a recently-built subdivision of houses, of whatever price range — \$80,000 - \$300,000 — it doesn't matter. The new houses may all be very nice, but "there is no there there," as Gertrude Stein once said of vapid Oakland, California. **Old buildings and old streets are part of our moorings, our roots in life.** They help us to understand who we are, how we got here, and where we may go from here. Historic architecture (and history in general) is therefore important even to those who proclaim no interest in it, for everyone is concerned with who he is and where he might go in life. The Historic Huntsville Foundation's goal is to assist in answering those concerns.

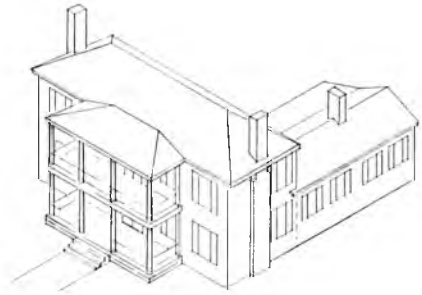


Circa 1848 configuration, based on the architectural evidence (a joint in the wall and floors at the left side of the entry). Gable roof is shown on the 1871 "View of Huntsville." The present hipped roof is not original and apparently dates from a c. 1890's remodeling.

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Configuration shown on the 1861 maps and the 1871 Bird's Eye view of Huntsville.

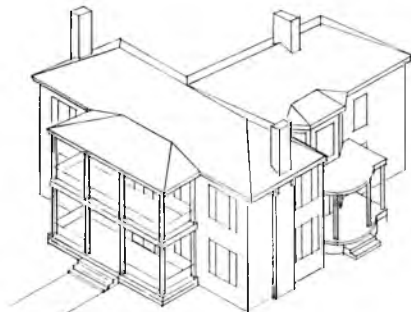




Configuration shown on the 1896 Sanborn Co. Map. Note that the rear wing is not like the one that is shown on the 1913 map (illustration 4), and is not present on the 1871 Bird's Eye View or the 1861 map. It was probably built in the 1870's when attached kitchens became the rule and torn down in the early 20th century remodeling. A front porch of the 1913 (present) size is shown on the 1896 map. Therefore it seems likely that the present porch and hipped roof were in place in 1896. Their design and materials are appropriate for that period.

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Configuration shown on the 1913 Sanborn Co. map, which is the 1991 configuration.

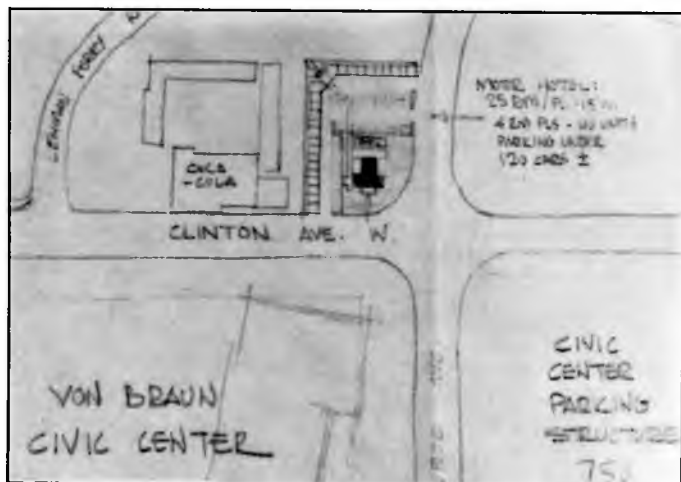


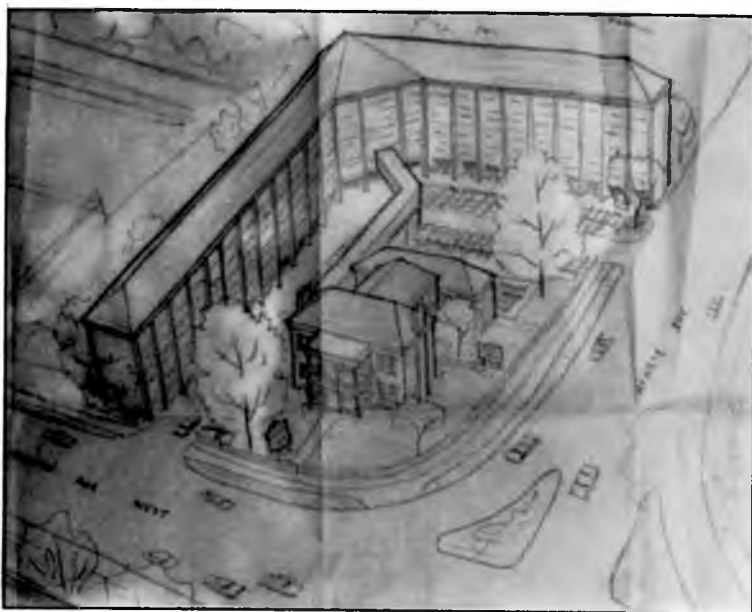


Sept. 1971 photo, when the house was empty and weed-grown, occupied by vagrants and for sale at a high commercial valuation for the land, with planning for the Von Braun Civic Center under way, to be directly across the street (Peril One).

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1971 plan sketch showing the proposed Civic Center and a possible way of saving the house by having it be the prominent centerpiece for a low-rise "background design" motel at the back of the site (Peril One).





1971 perspective view of the possible adaptive-use plans shown in illustration No. 2.

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1990 photo of the house as restored and landscaped by Coca-Cola in the early 1970's (the resolution of Peril One).





March 1991 photo of “moving day” with the front part of the house raised onto steel “pins” (small lateral, closely placed beams) which in turn rest on large transfer beams supported by hydraulically-leveled dollies. The back pre-1913 wing has been carefully dismantled and stored for future re-erection (Peril Two).

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Detail of a dolly, transfer beam and pins.





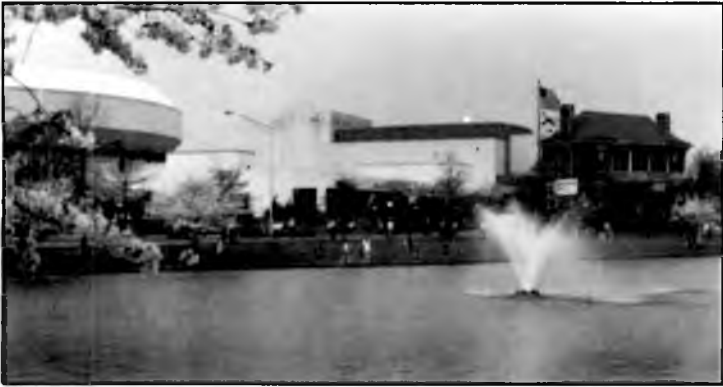
Detail of steel pins and wooden intermediate blocking to support the solid brick walls at close intervals. No cracking occurred due to the move.

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Pulling the house onto Monroe Street from its original site at Monroe Street and Clinton Avenue.







Passing in front of the Von Braun Civic Center and the Lagoon, along Monroe Street.

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Hundreds of people watched the move, here in front of the Civic Center on Monroe Street.





The end of the journey, facing north to Gates Avenue, with the Constitution Hall Village Neal House, and Constitution Hall in the background (resolution of Peril Two).

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*Harvie Jones of Jones & Herrin Architecture/Interior Design is known to all of our readers for his years of dedicated service to architectural preservation throughout the South and especially Huntsville. He and Lynn were recently honored for their sustained volunteer effort in the community. The cause of historical awareness and architectural preservation has been nobly served.*