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G.A. Plummer, House Carpenter

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G. A. PLUMMER, HOUSE CARPENTER

by

Gary M. Griner, Senior

Introduction

In 1991, I purchased an old 2-story house which had in 1984, been moved from a lot at the corner of Clinton Avenue and California Street. While researching the history of this house, I learned that the first owner, George A. Plummer, was a carpenter who had built the house for himself in the summer

of 1900. I wondered if other Plummer-built houses still existed. Thus began a long journey through old files and court house records.

There are no permanent documents that identify the company or carpenter that builds a house. But in Plummer's case, he often accepted a mortgage on the house if the owner could not pay cash, and these transactions were recorded. He also did some speculating, buying lots and putting up new houses. This article, based on my research, chronicles George Plummer's activities during the 20 years that he was in the building trade in Huntsville.

Getting Started

There is a deed dated January 21, 1897, showing that G. A. Plummer bought 24.3 acres on "Athens Road" from W. L. Armstrong (later to be the county jailer). Plummer paid \$885 cash, a sizable sum in those days when eggs were 10 cents a dozen. Athens Road is present day Oakwood Avenue running west from Memorial Parkway. Plummer's land was on the south side of the road about where the Oak Park Shopping Center is now. At the time of the purchase, Plummer was 33 and his pregnant wife, Helen W., was 30. They had two children, Adelle Josephine 6, and Frank A., 4. Census records show that these children were born in Minnesota, so we can conclude that Plummer had arrived in Huntsville sometime after 1892. The Plummers were definitely Yankees: George born in New Hampshire and Helen in Maine. Plummer was a carpenter by trade and may have built his family a 3-room house on Athens Road, but no proof of this has been found.

The February 14, 1900, *Weekly Mercury* carried the following news item:

"City Council Meets. A special meeting of the city council was called at the instance of the county board of health. The discovery of a case of small pox had

brought both city and county authorities face to face with the problem of taking care of the afflicted... The board finally decided to purchase the house owned by Gen. Sam Moore, located at the extreme south end of Madison Street and have it moved up on College Hill and prepared for reception of patients... The board instructed the city clerk to draw up an ordinance requiring compulsory vaccination."

According to local historian, Frances Roberts, "College Hill" refers to the east end of Longwood Drive. The next issue (Feb 28) carried this story:

"Bought a Pest House. Huntsville and Madison County can now boast of a first class pest house. The city and county officials yesterday jointly purchased the Plummer estate two and one-half miles northwest of the city to be used as a hospital for contagious diseases. The consideration was \$2000. The estate consists of a 3-room house and 25 acres of land. The house is comfortably built but it is not considered large enough for the purpose and many additions will be built."

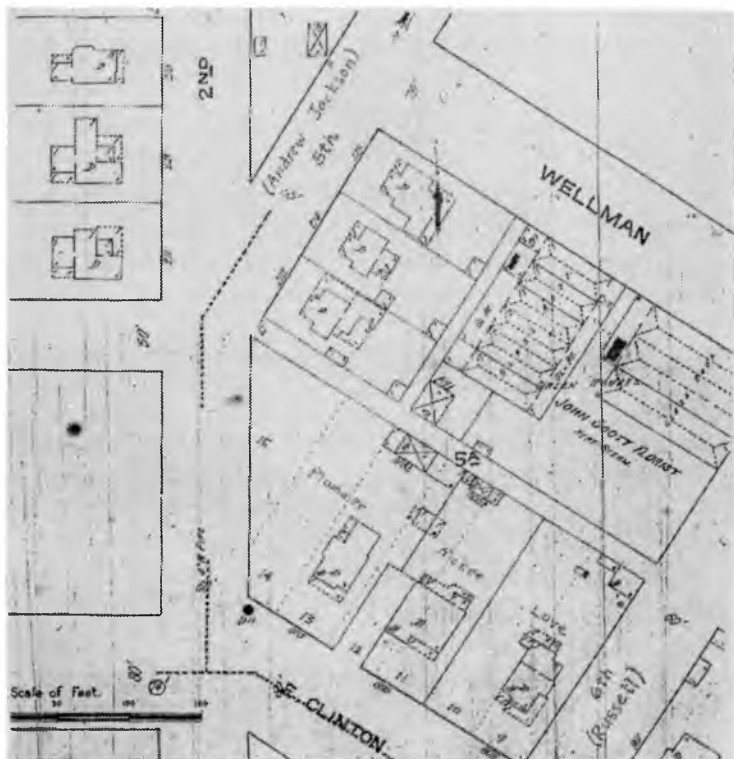
What were George Plummer's activities during those two weeks? Somehow he had managed to get the two bodies to overturn their decision to buy the Moore home and to buy instead Plummer's house which was smaller than they needed. Further, the price was twice what Plummer had paid for it 3 years before. Even if he had "improved" the property by building the small house mentioned in the article, the increase was substantial. Plummer's home became the first publicly owned hospital (note 1) but they took only smallpox patients. By 1921, the property was back in private hands. The building no longer exists.

Note 1. Record, James, *A Dream Come True*, p 105 and p 146. The first hospital for general care opened in 1904, having been left to the city by the infamous Mollie Teal.

The Plummer House

George and Helen moved their family to town. The 1900 census taken while they were renting, shows that the family now included Albert, age 2, and Helen's mother, Eva Adams, age 52. Plummer's occupation was listed simply as "house carpenter".

With his growing family and sudden prosperity, George decided to build himself a big house. At this time W. I. Wellman was developing his East Huntsville Addition, a huge tract bounded by Pettigrew Avenue (Oakwood) on the north and Wells Avenue on the south. On June 25, 1900, the Plummer's purchased lots 13, 14, and 15 of Block 101 from Wellman and J. R. Boyd for \$500, and he began constructing an 8-room house. This property was on Clinton Avenue at the NE corner of 2nd Avenue (now California Street) and was outside the town limits.



In December 1900, when his house was finished, Plummer obtained a \$1000 mortgage on it from J. E. Pierce (who later became general manager of the Times Publishing Company and editor of the Huntsville Daily & Weekly Times). The interest rate of 8% was not unlike that of today, but the note was due in just three years.

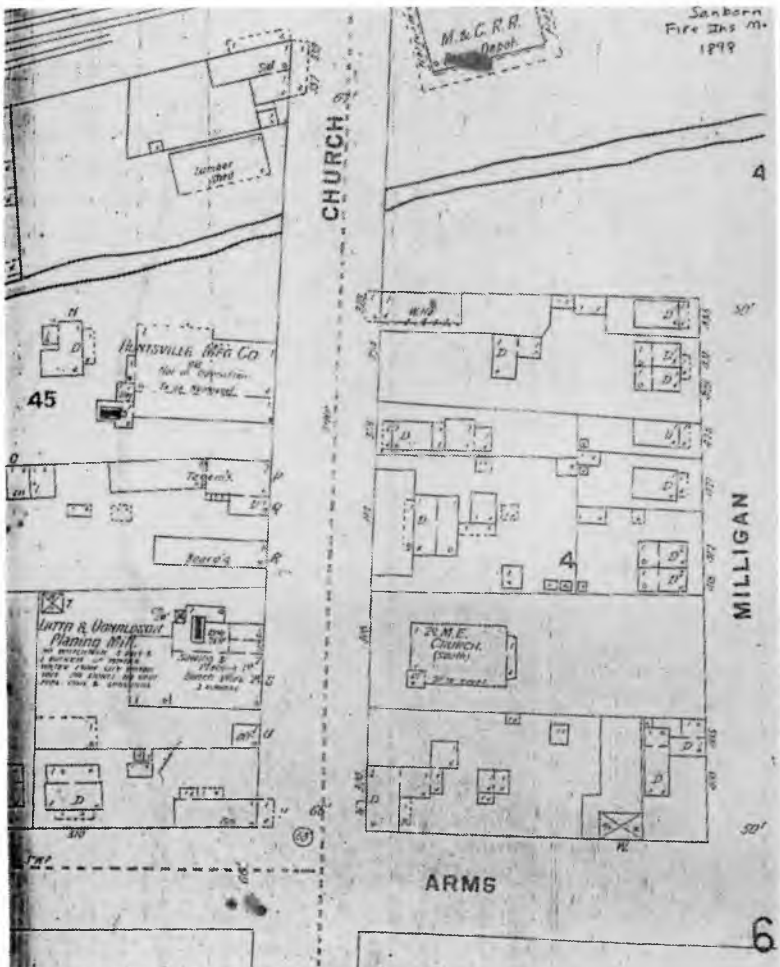
The Plummer's lived in this house for 15 years. In 1984, the building was only weeks away from demolition by the owners, the First Church of the Nazarene, when it was purchased by Anthony and Jennifer Orton who had it moved to a Dug Hill Road location by Kennedy Movers. This is the house that I now own and am restoring.



George and Helen Plummer raised five boys and one girl in this house. Built in 1900 at Clinton Avenue and California Street, it is now being restored at a Dug Hill Road site by the author.

The Planing Mill

June 13, 1901, Plummer bought the adjacent lots 12, 11, and (W/2)10 (note 2) from Wellman, again for \$500. The building boom was hitting Huntsville as the cotton mills thrived, and on October 2, 1902, Plummer took a big step: he purchases the H&L Planing Mill Company on Church Street for \$2000, exactly the amount due on the mortgage held by Sarah I. White (See map). The sellers included the president



Note 2. (W/2)10 is my shorthand notation meaning the west half of lot 10.

of the mill, Robert E. Spragins, who was a prominent attorney and businessman. He was also president of the First National Bank, the Farmer's Cotton Oil & Feed Company, the YMCA, and vice-president of the Huntsville Ice and Coal Co. Eugene E. Latta was secretary of the mill and the deed also named sellers Arthur E. Latta, Lou Q. Latta, and Susie Echols Spragins, daughter of Robert. As part of the deal, Lou Latta bought East Huntsville lots (W/2)11 and (E/2)12 from Plummer for \$400 and Spragins bought (W/2)10 and (E/2)11 for \$200.

Four days later Plummer accepted a \$465 mortgage note from S. B. Phillips (and wife, T. J.) presumably for a house he had finished at East Huntsville Block 103, lot 9. This house still stands at the NW corner of England Street and Clinton Avenue and is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Cantrell. Over the years this house has been "modernized" several times, including a front porch, a rear addition, and the mandatory vinyl siding. It has also suffered from at least two fires.



S. B. > Phillips house, built in 1902 at the NW corner of Clinton and England streets. Presently owned by Mr. & Mrs. R. Cantrell. The bay window is exactly like that of Plummer's own house.

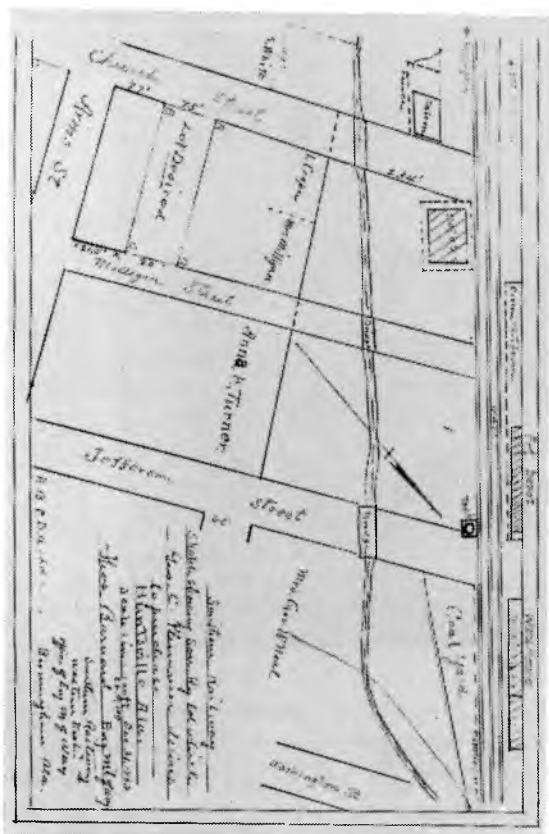
Nevertheless, the similarity to Plummer's own house is apparent (See photo). Two years later Plummer sold this mortgage for \$200 (with \$265 still due) to Susie L. Chaddock.

In the fall of 1902, Plummer decided to speculate on some land closer to the square. On October 21, he bought 16 lots (50'x150') in the Sophia Davis Division for \$1000 cash and a \$2080 mortgage assumption. This works out to about \$192 per lot. Plummer was unsuccessful in developing these lots. The only recorded transaction was a sale of lot 19 (104 Spring Street) in 1904, to Winnie Ingram, listed in the 1910 City Directory as a Negro domestic. The 1921 Sanborn Fire Map shows only five dwellings and labels the area as a "colored neighborhood". The subdivision was entirely eliminated by the Big Spring Urban Renewal Project R-32 started in 1963. Plummer's lots were bounded by Pump Street, Spring Street, and Lowe Avenue, putting them approximately where the Mental Health Center now stands.

In 1903, only one transaction is recorded: Plummer repurchased the property next door to his house from the Latta family. He gave E. R. Latta \$200 for (W/2)11 and (E/2)12, exactly half what he had sold it for the previous year. At this price it is obvious that the lot was still vacant. Presumably, Plummer was spending most of his time operating his planing mill business, although he probably had a crew available to build as well. He began to acquire mortgages from contractors who owed him for building materials. On March 4, 1905, for example, he accepted a \$1000 mortgage from James M. McKee (J.M. McKee & Sons) secured by six lots in East Huntsville (block 71, lots 9&10; block 84, lots 1&2; block 97, lots 13&15). Houses existed on only lots 9 & 10, so Plummer had, no doubt, provided lumber to McKee to build those homes. These structures still exist at 811 and 809 Ward Avenue. In October Plummer sold the mortgage to Margaret E. Graham for an unspecified amount.

Expanding Operations

Business must have been good because Plummer decided to expand his lumber operation to a vacant lot across Church Street. August 24, 1905, he purchased the property at 308 Church Street for \$800 from the Southern Railway Co. (The M.E. Church shown on the Sanborn map had been moved one lot north to 314 Church Street). The terms were \$200 down and \$200 each of the next three years at 8% interest.



This sketch attached to the deed shows the location of the lot purchased from the Southern Railway Company in 1905. Note the incorrect reference to "Geo. C." rather than George A. Plummer.

In October 1905, Plummer accepted a mortgage for \$260 from Simpson and Allie Ellet, a "colored laborer", for lot 78 in McCoullough's Addition. Apparently he had built a small house there. The next day he sold the mortgage again to Margaret Graham. Today this is an empty lot at 220 Ward Avenue just across Dallas Street from the I-565 overpass.

Once again Plummer sold his next door lot, (W/2)11 and (E/2)12. March 26, 1906, he sold it to carpenter, John A. McKee (son of James M.) for \$250. This time the property stayed sold. McKee built a house, and the 1910 census shows his family living there with 2 children. The house was gone by 1975.

In 1906, Plummer teamed with W. J. Bennett to build the city a "natatorium" (note 3). The 50'x50' swimming pool was located near Big Spring Branch. At the same time Plummer was also constructing a meeting house for the West Huntsville Church of Christ on 8th Avenue. This building had outdoor privies and was heated with wood stoves. On May 1, 1906, Plummer accepted a \$360 mortgage on the property to be paid off at \$25 per month. The mortgage was signed by elders J. I. Jones, J. A. Jenkins, and J. T. Reed. Unlike many of Plummer's loans, this was paid off on schedule, December 24, 1906. The wood frame building (see photo next page) was used until 1948 when it was replaced by a brick structure. At present the property is owned by the Huntsville Free Will Baptist Church.

Only one transaction is on the books for 1907. On January 30, Plummer received a \$375 mortgage from Frank and Zulika Vaughan for property at the corner of "Big Cove Road and Whitesburg Road" (lot 8). The mortgage specified that the "grantors now reside..." there, so apparently Plummer had built them a house. The note was to be paid off at \$30 every three months. A year later the mortgage was sold to

Note 3. This swimming pool may have been a forerunner to Burnam's Swimming Pool at Big Spring Park.



Plummer built this "meeting house" for the West Huntsville Church of Christ in 1906. Congregational photo taken about 1933.

Thomas (Terie) P. Wade, a local insurance broker. Wade was to buy several of Plummer's properties in the next ten years. Today Vaughn's lot is at the corner of Governors Drive and Madison Street, the site of the Colonial Bank parking lot.

Early in 1908, Plummer teamed up with J. E. Pierce to bid on land sold at public auction. On February 5, they jointly purchased about three-fourths of block 99 in East Huntsville. This block was bounded by Pratt, Wellman (not yet opened), 6th Street (now Russell) and 7th Street (now Coleman). The property was purchased for \$740 from the estate of Milton Humes to satisfy mortgages held by Martha M. Burk of Lebanon, TN (\$380) and Mary L. Windham (\$360). Humes was an attorney and industrialist who had started the Madison Spinning Mill, later to be known as the Abingdon Mill and finally as Lincoln Mill. While \$740 was a cheap price for what amounted to 12 standard size lots, eight of them faced Wellman Avenue which did not yet extend east of 6th. Apparently Plummer and Pierce believed that Wellman would soon be extended, but they were wrong. As late as 1928, the street was still not built and even today no home in that block fronts on Wellman Avenue.

March 25, 1908, Plummer accepted a \$250 mortgage from Henry Landsden for lot 1 of the Carl E. Cramer addition. The document specifies that Landsden was "living on the property," probably in a house built by Plummer. He was to pay \$20 per quarter. The Cramer addition was east of Franklin Street, and lot 1 was at the SE corner of Franklin and Murphy Street (now Rands Avenue). Today this is 901 Franklin, and the one-story frame home has been replaced by the Cramer Travel Agency building.

Plummer kept letting J. M. McKee & Sons purchase building materials even though McKee still was having a cash flow problem. He took a \$600 mortgage from McKee on a piece of commercial property described as the "Hundley Stable lot on Clinton Avenue". To the east across an alley was the City Engine House (note 4) and to the west, a "barber shop occupied by Levi Scruggs". McKee defaulted on the mortgage and the property was sold at public auction for \$700 to Robert E. Spragins. This entire block is now occupied by the Municipal Parking Garage.

The Long Downward Slide

By 1909 Plummer had overextended himself. Many people owed him money and were not paying on time. On March 9, Plummer and Pierce obtained a \$750 loan against their block 99 property from Sidney J. Mayhew, president of the Huntsville Bank and Trust Company. This may have been a personal loan since the mortgage refers to Mayhew as "Chairman, Board of Pastors and Elders of the Presbyterian Church". The money was borrowed at 7 percent interest for one year but was not actually paid in full for ten years.

On August 24, 1909, Plummer mortgaged his Church Street Planing Mill for \$2200. This was the former H&L Planing Mill property that he bought in 1902 on the west side of the street, not the lumber yard on the east side. The lender

Note 4. This was the Fire Department. The public library was upstairs. See *Photographic Memories: A Scrapbook of Huntsville & Madison Co.*, by Elise Hopkins Stephens, 1991 (p 54)

was Peter Lombardo, who operated a meat market at 300 Arms and later at 224 Jefferson Street (note 5). Interest payments of \$176 were to be made on the anniversary of the loan in 1910, 1911, and 1912, with the principal also due in 1912. Plummer was able to make only the first two payments.

The only other transaction recorded in 1909 was a mortgage of \$105.95 from Bettie Evans for "part of lot 47" in the Sophia Davis Division. Lot 47 was at the corner of Creek Street and Lowe Avenue and was not part of the 16-lot tract that Plummer had purchased in 1902. Whether this represented payment for new construction or only remodeling cannot be determined.

Fannie Miller was listed in the 1910 City Directory as a "laundress, colored". On April 27 of that year Plummer accepted a surprisingly large \$500 mortgage from her for a 65'x150' lot on the west side of Madison Street, 93 feet north of Williams Alley (now St. Clair). The mortgage was transferred to R. E. Smith and paid in full in 1919. Whatever house Plummer built for Fannie Miller was destroyed to build the present Twickenham Village Shopping Center.

That summer Plummer and the other property owners adjacent to Milligan Street deeded Southern Railway the right to lay tracks down the center of Milligan and across Arms Street to the property of John Willis Baer on Jefferson (note 6). Besides Baer, other signers were Mrs. Belle Weil, Glenn Wells (for W. J. Bennett & Co.) and N. K. White. The rail spur and Milligan Street disappeared in the 1965 Central City Urban Renewal Project and Arms Street became Monroe Street.

Note 5. The Lombardo Building (1922) now at 315 Jefferson Street is presently home to the Railroad Station Antique Mall.

Note 6. Who was John Willis Baer? His name does not appear in any city directory of the period. Perhaps he was an absentee landlord.

The U.S. Census taken in April 1910, indicated that his mother-in-law was no longer living with the Plummers but that three more sons had been born: Daniel (1902), Joseph (1904), and George Jr. (1906). It was also noted that a total of eight children had been born but only six were living. Since all of the children were 2 years apart except Albert, it is likely that the deceased children had been born in 1896 and in 1900, the same year he built his house on Clinton Avenue.

So we find George and Helen with six children, a \$2200 mortgage on the business, plus other debts. There was increasing competition by others who were entering the building business and the records indicate that Plummer was not building expensive homes. One must remember that the Civil War had ended only 40 years prior, and Plummer had that distinctive New England accent. Of course this is pure speculation. It is possible that those who could afford to build expensive homes did not need to have Plummer finance the construction and this is why there are no existing records. But we do know that the lumber yard was in stiff competition with both A. M. Booth and C. W. Robinson Lumber Company on Meridian Street and with W. P. Dilworth Lumber Company located just across the Southern Railroad tracks on Church Street (where it still is today).

If Plummer's business was in trouble it was not apparent from the one-third page ad that he placed in the 1910-1911 City Directory, offering "all kind of building supplies" and "building contractor service." [See ad on page ??] He also bought a small ad on the front cover. Booth, however, took out a full page ad and the Baker Planing Mill on N. Washington also advertised.

February 9, 1911, Plummer paid \$90 to W. A. Sibley for lot 13, block 1 of the Fairview addition. When sold in 1913 to Teri Wade the price was only \$120. Evidently no house had yet been built.

In August 1911, Plummer bought two more lots in Fairview; this time from A. W. Newson who was the actual

developer of the large tract which extended between Oakwood Avenue (Pettigrew) and McCullough Avenue. Plummer paid \$190 for the two lots. Like all original deeds in this subdivision, the following legal stipulation appears "...for the ten years next hereafter ensuing, that neither he nor his heirs nor assigns will sell or lease to colored people the property...." This property (lots 1&3 of block 14) was sold for \$700 in 1913 to M. N. Renegar, an employee of Dallas Mills (and of acceptable color), so evidently a small house had been built in the meantime. Today this is the corner of Oakwood and Minor, the site of a modern 4-plex apartment.

It was the summer of 1912, and George Plummer did not have \$2376 to satisfy the loan against his Planing Mill. Though payment was impossible, he still was able to make other small investments. In July he purchased at auction a 60'x40' lot on Jones Street in "Chelsa" from a Lucy Jorgenson. This area (now Chelsea Lane) is off Triana Blvd. just south of Johnson Road. At that time (before Redstone Arsenal was formed), Triana Road continued all the way to the town of Triana. Nevertheless, it was not choice real estate. Plummer paid \$129 for the lot and got \$164.24 for it as part of his 1913 sale to Teri Wade.

January 16, 1913, Plummer accepted yet another mortgage in Fairview: block 1, lot 11 and 20 feet of lot 9. John H. Brazelton, Jr, who in 1910 lived "on Wells Avenue beyond the city limits" signed over a \$260 mortgage. Perhaps Plummer had built a house for Brazelton, but I have been unable to determine if the present dwelling dates that far back.

Plummer and Pierce still owned jointly most of block 99 in East Huntsville, but S. J. Mayhew held the \$750 mortgage. A deed dated March 17, 1913, shows Plummer getting half-interest by paying James H. and Matilda Mayhew (heirs, perhaps?) an amount of \$332 and then, only a month later, the Mayhews turned around and loaned him another \$350 on the property. A strange arrangement.

Foreclosure

On October 1, 1914, Plummer lost his Planing Mill to Peter Lombardo through foreclosure. With fees, \$2379.60 was owed. He had paid \$2000 for the mill, mortgaged it for \$2200, made two interest payments of \$352 total for a net cost of only \$152 to operate a major business for twelve years. Looked at this way, it was not really a failure, especially if the business had been making a profit. Plummer still had his house and lumber yard free and clear.

The next summer, July 17, 1915, Plummer sold his own home for \$2000 to Edward B. Mooring, owner of the Mooring & Glover Grocery on Meridian Street. The day the sale closed he purchased 171 acres from W. T. Mayes for \$1000. He did not use the cash from his house sale but borrowed the money from Felicia C. Hubbard. The mortgage was signed by her guardian, Ellelee Humes (widow of Milton).

The new Plummer property was located on the east side of Monte Sano on Dug Hill Road at what is now called Robinson Drive (note 7). Approximately half of this acreage is farm land but it is not known if Plummer actually started farming. The 1916-17 City Directory has six listings under "Lumber", but G. A. Plummer is not one of them. Probably he built a house and/or barn because on December 2, he was able to obtain another \$1000 loan against the property, again from Hubbard/Humes. Today there are no buildings on the property that date back to 1916. The existing house is owned by Annie Robinson and the part of the property fronting on Dug Hill Road is being developed as the Cheval subdivision.

Nothing is known of Plummer's activities in 1916, but on October 28, at the Ringling Brother's Circus a flash fire resulted in the destruction of several dozen horses whose remains were buried on the Pest House property on Athens Road - Plummer's former home.

Note 7. I find it a fitting coincidence that 69 years later Plummer's own house made the journey to Dug Hill Road.

July 26, 1917, Plummer settled a debt owed to William P. Dilworth by deeding him an 85'x142' lot in East Huntsville Block 99 on Pratt Avenue. The price was \$5 "plus considerations".

On January 26, 1918, the entire Dug Hill tract was sold to Oscar Drake for \$2000, and the Plummers probably left the Huntsville area. Where did they go? Unfortunately, someone else must solve this puzzle. I do know that George Jr. received Social Security benefits in Alabama and had SS# 417-01-2036. Local resident, Dorothy Adair, recalls the Plummer children visiting from time-to-time after leaving Huntsville. She believes they may have then lived in Birmingham, Ms. Adair also has a few books and pieces of furniture from the Plummer estate sale.

As for the remaining Plummer property, the ill-fated Block 99 was disposed of as follows: a 45'x142' lot to carpenter Herman L. Smith for \$250, August 16, 1919; the entire Wellman Avenue side (158'x320') to Katherine H. Scott for \$500 plus the \$750 mortgage still owed to S. J. Mayhew. Katherine was the wife of John Scott who operated a large greenhouse on the next block east on Wellman Avenue and across the alley from the old Plummer house on Clinton. As to the remaining 15 lots in the Sophia Davis Division, I can find no record of their disposition (note 8).

The final court house record for George A. Plummer was the sale of his lumber yard property on Church Street for \$2000 to J. W. Turner, September 12, 1919. This was considerably more than the \$800 he had paid for it, but storage sheds and buildings had been added, and perhaps building material stock remained.

Note 8. They must have been sold, of course, or else Plummer's heirs have a claim on the Mental Health Center.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following persons for aiding my research for this article: Dorothy Adair, Gil Brady, Robert Cantrell, Charles Cramer, Robert Cramer, Frances Roberts, Annie Robinson, Robin Wadley, Jennifer Orton, and Glynn Woods. Special thanks to John Rison Jones, Jr. for reviewing the manuscript. The author must, of course, take responsibility for errors of fact or omission.

Griner on Griner

A man, so they say, identifies with his occupation. I'm an unemployed aerospace engineer. The defense cut-back of 1993/1994 has given me lots of time to restore my 1900 house and to write the George Plummer article for *The Quarterly*.

A native of Ohio, I graduated from The Ohio State University and the University of Colorado. After stints in Virginia and New Jersey, I arrived in Huntsville in 1972 to work for Science Applications International, Corp. I have also worked for UAH and General Research Corp.

At one time or another I have been a member of the Huntsville Concert Band, UAH Wind Ensemble, Community Chorus, Huntsville Little Theater, SPEBSQSA (the Barbershop Quartet Society), Huntsville Track Club and the Huntsville Grotto (that's the local caving group). I quit pole vaulting when I turned 50 (much to my mother's relief) but still am involved in coaching and officiating the sport.

The Plummer article is my first attempt at historical research, not counting the two years I spent digging up old high school track and field results. The idea was to establish the all-time top 10 performers at Huntsville High in each event, both boys and girls. I still maintain these lists and also have the most complete (only?) list of winners from former City Championships and Section Championships, if anybody cares to see them. I suppose one could argue that cave exploration is also historical research of a sort. I find cave surveying and mapping especially fascinating.

Last, but not least, I'm a husband (to Peggy), father (one son and three daughters), grandfather (five times).



This house was built for Azel A. Love before 1908, probably by Plummer and/or John McKee, both neighbors. The house has been moved to 904 Wellman and is now owned by Glynn Woods.