

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 20 | Number 3

Article 7

9-1-1994

315 White Street

Nancy M. Munson

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

Munson, Nancy M. (1994) "315 White Street," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 20: No. 3, Article 7.
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol20/iss3/7>

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.

315 WHITE STREET

by

Nancy M. Munson

In 1893, James B. and Daniel T. Harrison purchased the lot at 315 White Street for \$400. The brothers were new tobacco and hardware merchants in Huntsville, having first established Harrison Brothers in Smithville, Tennessee, in 1879. Brother James had visited Huntsville on buying trips from Smithville and selected the town for their new home. Daniel and James were accompanied on the move by their sister, Cora, who had kept the store's books in Smithville and by their youngest brother, Robert.

James B. Harrison and his wife Sallie (Sarah) Holmes (a Smithville native) took title to the lot soon after marrying and in 1893 built the house which presently stands at 315 White Street. At the same time, James and his brother Daniel built an almost identical house further up the hill at 403 White Street. A newspaper account in the August 23, 1893 *Huntsville Democrat* mentions "Two handsome residences in course of erection on White Street opposite Mr. Frank Fickling's house [400 White Street] which are, we understand, the property of Mr. Harrison." The plans for this pair of houses had been published in a plan book or in some other form; however, the source has yet to be found.

In 1920, the widowed Mrs. James B. Harrison sold 315 White Street to another widow, Mrs. Lucy Frances Norris. Mrs. Norris lived in the house and rented out apartments for nearly fifty years until my husband, Bill, and I purchased it from the Norris family in 1975.

When Bill and I and our two daughters, Sibyl (10) and Katharine (8) moved into the house in 1975, we were fortunate to have the last Harrison brothers as our neighbors. Daniel T. and Cora Harrison had never married, but the youngest brother, Robert S., had three children: Daniel F.

(who married Lucille Coons), John W. (who married Carroll Drake) and Mary Margaret (who married Earl Smallwood). Daniel F. and his wife Lucille lived at 401 White Street (built by Daniel's father, Robert S.) and John W. Harrison, by this time a widower, lived at 405 White Street (built by Daniel T. Harrison).

Daniel and John were true gentlemen in the old fashioned manner. They were unfailingly courteous and gentle and did their best to make us newcomers feel welcome. When we special ordered our old drip coffee pot from Harrison Brothers it was delivered personally to our door once received by the store. Naturally, everything was wrapped in brown paper and neatly tied with white string. When Daniel found out that Bill and I were interested in local history and traditions, he brought down a big bag full of tender poke weed shoots and told me how to make poke salad. I must admit, the leaves wilted before I could work up enough enthusiasm to attempt the project.

Sibyl and Katharine used to make Easter baskets for the Harrisons and always enjoyed their company. In 1983, when Sibyl was in high school, she interviewed John Harrison for a school project. This taped interview became a valuable source of oral history as John passed away the following year. In the interview, John told how his "Uncle Jim" (James B.) was the first to build on the Harrison family lots on White Street, which at the time comprised the entire east side of the street between the present California Street and Eustis Avenue. Mr. Harrison recalled White Street around 1910:

We mostly walked. Of course we had horses and buggies—and bicycles. White Street was just loose limestone rock. And when you rode a bicycle [on it], it just didn't turn out. And too, I never saw it burn but there was a gas post right there, gas light, right at the corner of what's White Street and White Circle. I guess the electricity was out there, I guess about 1906 or 1907.

Of the municipal services, John remembered:

The city had a one-half inch water line [and] for some reason they never covered it—just left it exposed ... at the side of the street. In the winter it would burst and my father and Uncle Jim would go out and patch it.

He said that everyone just walked downtown to do their shopping because “it was the only place to go.” This tradition continued well past World War II when everything anyone needed was available downtown: hardware from Harrison Brothers; clothing from T. T. Terry’s, Dunavant’s, and various specialty stores; medicine and treats from Tom Dark Drugs; groceries for the A&P on Eustis Ave.; furniture at Sterchi’s; and banking, library facilities, hotel/restaurants, movies, etc.

Mrs. Lucy Frances Norris purchased the house in 1920, from Sallie Harrison whose husband had died of the flu. The original title is in Mrs. Norris’ name because she was widowed the year she moved from New Market, Alabama to Huntsville. Since this was before the days of Social Security, Mrs. Norris made her living by dividing the house into four apartments and renting out three of the four. When Huntsville boomed during and after World War II, the influx of newcomers left few places for them to live. Our house, like many other big, old, downtown houses, gave new arrivals a first home in the growing city and provided a livelihood for its widowed owner.

Lucy Frances Norris was born in 1875. She died at age 103, in 1978. She owned 315 White Street from 1920 - 1975.

Precise information on what life was like at 315 White Street is scarce for the years



1920-1940. It is known, however, that the house was heated with the six coal fireplaces. Mr. Frank Woodard, Mrs. Norris' grandson, remembers that the fireplaces were still in use in the mid-1940's when he was a child living in the house with his parents. To supplement the fireplace heat, Mrs. Norris had a small coal "heater" in the kitchen which was vented into the flue of the dining room fireplace. Mr. Woodard recalls that his mother and grandmother baking potatoes in a small oven located inside the flue. Before the coal "heater" and a newer gas stove were added to the house, a large kitchen range most likely provided for cooking and for heating the surrounding area.

Bertha Woodard, Mrs. Norris' daughter, on the front steps of 315 White Street. She gave us this picture years ago so that we could see what the steps and posts looked like for restoration purposes.



Coal for cooking and heating was stored behind the house. A three-part out-building located in the back yard served as a coal shed, smoke house, and tool shed. There were three doors in a row on the long side to the left. The shed speaks eloquently of daily needs or problems and how they might be solved.

1938, Frank Woodard is swinging. In the background is the back porch.



Mrs. Norris was a strong-willed and self-reliant woman. She was also a practical perfectionist who advised one of her tenants never to let anyone else wash her good dishes. Mrs. Norris enjoyed the company of and became good friends with some of her female boarders.

In 1952-53, when they first married and moved to Huntsville, Jack and Billie Grosser lived in an upstairs apartment. By then, gas space heaters placed in each room struggled to heat the drafty, chilly house. Billie remembers wearing a bathrobe and catching the hem on fire trying to stay warm by backing up to the lone heater in their room. The Grossers' apartment was furnished when they rented it, but sparsely so. When their Aunt Thelma visited the newlyweds, she went directly to Sterchi's and bought some furniture on the condition that the store deliver it on the spot. Sterchi's was closing by then, but agreed to the terms and the Grossers got some much-needed chairs and tables.

Billie says that shortly thereafter, she obtained employment at the Huntsville Electrical System (a forerunner of Huntsville Utilities). There she joined an office of about five women whose responsibilities included taking payments from customers. Billie remembers the more colorful of their customers around power bill payment time. Dr. Burritt's checks were always recognizable when they arrived because he would place the stamp directly on the check, omitting an envelope. When payment was sent in an envelope, some arrived addressed simply to "Blood Suckers" and the street number. Fortunately for the Grossers, they were able to find more suitable quarters and moved before the hot weather of summer arrived to make the upstairs apartment truly undesirable.

Other tenants of Mrs. Norris in 1952-1953 included Marge Bledsoe and her mother, La Vina Stewart. Marge's father, Master Sgt. Eugene Stewart had come with his family from Fort Bliss, Texas, along with other military personnel connected with Werner Von Braun and the team of German rocket scientists. In 1952, however, Sargent Stewart was transferred to Germany and his family could no longer live "on post" at Redstone Arsenal. While Marge attended college

in Tuscaloosa, her mother resided at 315 White Street until her father could obtain housing for them in Germany (not an easy or automatic thing at the time). Mrs. Stewart lived in the downstairs apartment next to Mrs. Norris. Both women enjoyed each other's companionship, being separated from their families by geography and early widowhood. How nice this was for both.



Mrs. Norris, I am told, also found a "foster daughter" in Domi Yeskawich, the Asian bride of Korean War veteran Mike Yeskawich. Before the couple moved to Huntsville, Mrs. Norris had never known anyone from Asia and was not sure about having Domi and her husband as tenants. Domi's good nature and cooperativeness soon won over Mrs. Norris, however. The two became fast friends and Domi earned a place as one of Mrs. Norris' favorite tenants.

*Domi Yeskawich and daughter Florence
in front of downstairs fireplace.*

Mrs. Norris also loved to garden; more precisely, to raise flowers. Joyce Edgar whose parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Sullivan, moved next door in 1944, remembers helping her in the garden. The whole of the back yard, from the house to the back fence was all flowers. Amy Hatley, Mrs. Norris' granddaughter also says, "Grand-mother continued to maintain meticulously planned gardens at the back of the house. These were glorious and quite the envy of the Twickenham community."



*Joyce Edgar,
age 10, in 1947.*

As was the custom of the day, Mrs. Norris completed her domestic responsibilities by early afternoon. Then, freshly clothed in an afternoon dress, she was ready to read or to work on her tating, or to entertain visitors who stopped in. I heard from more than one person that everyone who stopped for afternoon tea with Mrs. Norris, said she always wore white gloves. Later I learned that perhaps a part of Mrs. Norris' reliance on white gloves was to conceal her fingernails which were stained from gardening and which stubbornly resisted cleaning. I guess I follow in Mrs. Norris' footsteps as far as loving to grow things is concerned, and I can identify with her frustration over futile nail scrubbing. (I have just heard that one dedicated British horticulturist loads up under his fingernails with soap before going into the garden. I think I'll try that. I wish I could pass along the suggestion to Lucy Frances.) Mrs. Norris sold bouquets at \$1 apiece, I am told, and donated all the proceeds to the First Baptist Church. She also prized the large pecan tree in the backyard (which still stands) for its small but delectable nuts.

Before the holidays, she shelled and sold these. The profits were also donated to the church. We love this tree too, and agree that the nuts are especially tasty.

Large, old pecan tree with old, perhaps original, one-car garage. Bill rebuilt the doors in 1993.



By the time my husband and I bought the house in 1975, it had been closed up for about six years. This period of disuse took its inevitable toll, allowing plenty of grime, dirt, and mildew to accumulate on most wooden surfaces, warping some floor boards and cracking lots of plumbing fixtures and pipes. When Bill looked at the house before buying it, the real estate agent turned the water on, and a pipe burst above a downstairs ceiling. All the plaster and lots of water cascaded down while Bill ran to a neighbor for a wrench.

On the day in June, 1975, when I first crossed the threshold of 315 White Street, family in tow, I had never seen the house before. While Bill was buying the house, the girls and I had stayed behind in California. The children needed to finish the school year and I had to sell our house and deal with the innumerable details of moving. Bill had sent me pictures of our new home, but the reality of four kitchens with not one workable sink (a legacy of old, unused apartments), bare bulbs dangling on wires from the ceilings, and the dank, musty interior came as a real shock. After I suppressed my initial urge to run away, however, I began to see what had prompted Bill to buy the house. High ceilings (11' 4") and large windows (two panes over two) filled the house with light and air once the old drapes and Venetian blinds were pulled aside. The floor plan was a charming assemblage of

rooms of all shapes and sizes delightfully put together with little regard for symmetry, but with a subtle and charming balance all its own.



Downstairs kitchen with white paint, bare bulb, and space heater in 1975.

The house is a two-story frame Victorian with wrap-around porch and modest gingerbread and spindlework. The woodwork is heart pine throughout that had originally, we believe, been grained. The floors are heart pine, although three rooms downstairs plus the foyer had been "Modernized" by being covered with narrow oak flooring. Three chimneys and six fireplaces (three downstairs and three up) originally provided heat in the winter. The fireboxes are narrow and designed to burn coal. The mantels throughout are golden oak, two of which had over-mantels which were mirrored, turned and ornamented with applied carvings. The living room fireplace has heavy twisted columns that reach the floor, a spindle gallery at the top of the overmantle and original decorative ceramic tiles surround the firebox and cast iron cover. Throughout the house, transoms distribute light and air and the moldings are wide and fluted with bull's eyes at the upper corners of windows and doors.

The original oak living room fireplace with its decorative ceramic tile, cast iron cover, and beveled glass mirrors.



The two front doors have glass in the top half. Heavy coffered oak panels make up the bottom half of the main door while the other front door at the far end of the wrap-around porch is pine with ornamental carvings and lighter proportions. When we arrived in 1975, both doors were fitted with lovely, large Victorian screen doors. When the front two doors and the back door were opened, the house was extremely well ventilated. We have kept the screen doors but no longer use them. By just opening windows in the

spring and fall, there is delightful cross-ventilation in the house.

*These screen doors might be original.
They were here in 1975.*

As we began renovation, our first efforts went into the kitchen and bathrooms. We wanted to use the original kitchen as our kitchen, which meant getting rid of the three extra ones. Fortunately, no basic structural changes had been made in our house. To eliminate one kitchen, we simply removed cabinets that had been installed at one side of what had originally been the dining room. We knew that this room had been the dining room because of a built-in corner china cabinet with a charming back door access from the kitchen. No other structural change was necessary except to repair the ceiling collapse due to the water from the broken pipe.

*The china closet with door to
the kitchen at right. The cabinet
has a back door entry from the
kitchen.*



Eliminating the two upstairs kitchens was a little more strenuous. At some time in its history (probably before 1920), our house had a chimney fire which resulted in the roof being burned. When the roof was replaced, the roof line was altered and two back rooms added to the upstairs. These had been used as kitchens by Mrs. Norris, but became a large bathroom

and a bedroom for us. To make the change, we carted out old rickety cabinets and had to cover the cheap pine floors with carpeting. In both rooms we chose to sheetrock over poor quality, narrow, beaded board siding and added a much-needed linen closet to the bathroom.

In creating our new kitchen, we tried to preserve as much as possible of what had been in the old one. The floor was covered with asbestos tile that had been securely installed over well-glued-down black felt paper. The room was paneled in wide beaded board siding and had the original heart pine floor. Unfortunately, the walls were under many coats of old



white enamel (Mrs. Norris used to paint every spring) that dripped over the beaded edges. While the electricians, plumbers and heating contractors were working to rewire, plumb, and install the central heating, I was on a ladder applying Strypeze to the walls. I never forgot those 11'4" ceiling heights as I waited and scraped. Over and over again.

Kitchen walls are beaded board. Open shelves hold cooking utensils.

The house had few kitchen cabinets so we installed open upper shelves, left the wood natural, and refinished a Hoosier cabinet that had been Mrs. Norris'. We had lower cabinets built to resemble the beaded board of the walls and sanded the floor to expose the beautiful pine, once we scraped off the asbestos tile. We finished the hardwood floors with three coats of satin gloss polyurethane. This has proved very durable, although after nineteen years, two floors need refurbishing. The kitchen has a nice pantry which provides adequate storage for groceries and large utensils.

During this long process, Bill and I became amazingly adept at using a drum sander and edger. In fact, one of the most flattering accolades I received as a workperson was from Mr. James Dean, the plumbing contractor (not the actor). He said that I worked harder than his men and that he would hire me if I wanted a job.

While I struggled to strip the kitchen walls and Bill taught summer school, Mrs. Corrine Sullivan, our neighbor, was a godsend. When I was too tired to move and flopped down under the pecan tree, she used to bring me iced tea and a congealed salad. There were many times when she brought cold lemonade to Bill and me before we had any refrigeration—or a kitchen for that matter.

After the kitchen, we turned our attention to bathrooms. The house may have had indoor plumbing from the beginning; when we arrived there was a small upstairs bathroom with a clawfoot tub, wall-hung sink and commode that said “push” on the flush lever. We brought all these fixtures downstairs and installed them in a small bathroom that had been added on the north side of the house. (This bathroom had previously been filled with modern fixtures which were broken.) In the upstairs bathroom, we installed a pedestal sink and commode and now use it as a half-bath. Our major bathroom is the ex-kitchen adjacent to it.



The downstairs bathroom holds all the original fixtures salvaged from the upstairs bathroom: a clawfoot tub, wall-hung sink, and commode.

Throughout the house (with the exception of the kitchen and the two new additions upstairs), the walls are lath and plaster. No walls or ceilings were ever

painted. All were papered: the ceilings with "ceiling" paper in a vague cloudy or shadowy pattern and the walls with a damask-type pattern or an Adam-style scroll and urn pattern. We papered all the downstairs rooms except the living room and the kitchen, and painted upstairs except for the central hall off the main staircase and foyer, which we papered as it had been.

We believe that the original lighting fixtures in the house were electric. Two of these were of a peculiar finish: a sort of dark, spotted copper was applied over solid brass. We had both stripped to the brass and lacquered. They now hang in the dining room (originally one of twin parlors) and the living room (the original front parlor). A simple brass ceiling fixture with a cone shaped globe (see photo of foyer as it was when



we bought the house) originally hung in the foyer. We refinished it and it now hangs upstairs at the head of the stairs. We were fortunate to find excellent sources for old ceiling fixtures in the area and have replaced our bare bulbs in this way.

Dining room chandelier.

Heavy pocket doors originally separated the twin parlors. These were removed at some point and replaced with glass French doors. We are sorry to lose these original doors but we like the lightness of the glass transom and French doors.

While we know a good bit about the original state of the house, there are still areas of uncertainty. We do not know what sorts of curtains or draperies were originally used. This was a simple, comfortable, middle class household in a small town, so we have kept window treatments light and simple with half-shutters or muslin curtains with fringe.

As far as the woodwork is concerned, we have chosen to paint it cream in most rooms. It was difficult to distinguish between layers of paint when scraping and sanding, but we believe the woodwork was originally grained with brown or umber striations over a tan base. We stripped the mantels and they remain that way at present. Faux finishing might be an interesting future project.

We love the big windows with old glass that makes things ripple when you change your vantage point. We did a lot of restringing of window weights which in some cases we had to retrieve from their pockets. Bill and I re-puttied many windows and repaired many cross mullions. Windows were a major project with each room we restored. The windows all had to be removed, the glass taken out, reglazed, the weights restrung, window stop molding replaced and all rehung. Window sills were a nasty strip and scrape job. We used chemical strippers and very sharp blades and sandpaper. We did not try heat guns, which may be a good idea. Bill would have our collection of scraper blades resharpened frequently.

Over the years we continue to enjoy working on and learning about the house. We are developing new gardens where Mrs. Norris' old ones were. Old bulbs remain which once were hers, and we too enjoy adding our lives to the history of 315 White Street.

We built an arbor and fenced herb garden in the spring of 1994. My husband built the high, board fence to replace the cedar posts and wire fence which was there in the 1970's.





ABOVE: The back yard, looking toward the house in 1975.

BELOW: The original roofs and posts of the back porch were retained, but lattice was added for summer comfort.





LEFT:
A corner of
the lattice-
enclosed back
porch, 1994.

BELOW:
Mother robin
with babies in
the nest in our
gingerbread,
1994

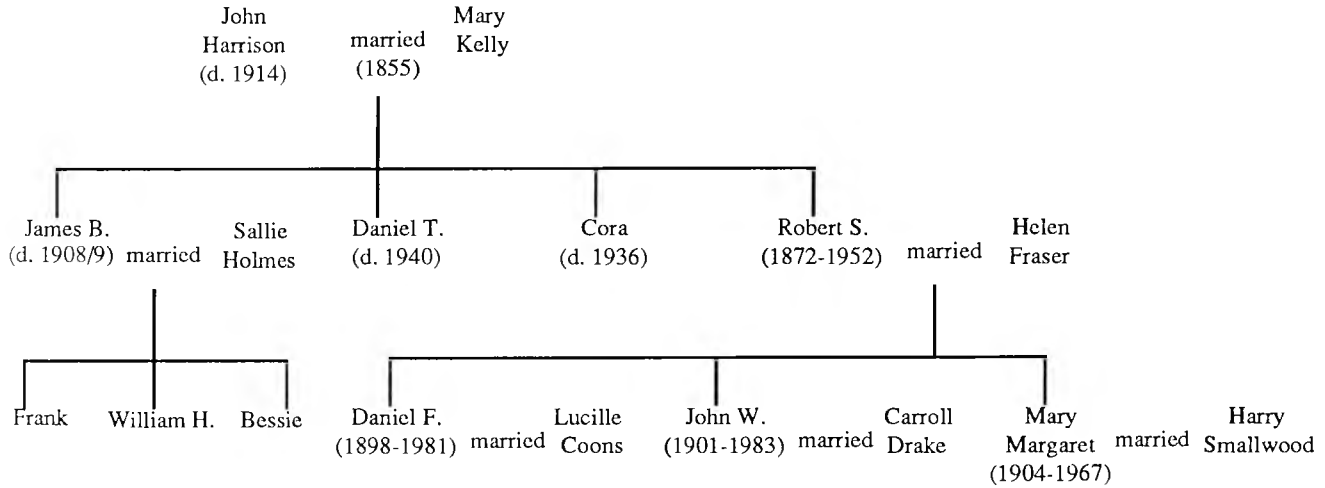




The foyer and stairs leading to second floor in 1975.

Harrison Brothers
 - abbreviated genealogical chart -

174





Harrison Brothers, 1908