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*Ellen Richardson  
and  
Kellie Corder*

## **OAK PLACE**

by

**KELLIE CORDER AND ELLEN RICHARDSON**

If we could go back in time, we would go to about, oh, 1841. Fields of cotton and pasture would be visible for miles around and clear blue skies would greet you with a smile. That is how we would have wanted to feel, looking out of a window of the only one-year-old Oak Place, built right on a hill overlooking a valley.

What wonderful parties Mr. George Gilliam Steele must have had. Little children playing and screaming with happiness, while more sophisticated men and women lounged in the parlors and party rooms, talking about the latest gossip, livestock, or politics. Oak Place would survive many happy and hard times before this architectural masterpiece would become a decaying eyesore to its surrounding community.

Through the years, Oak Place has been put through many trials. Unfortunately, unpaid debts forced the Steele heirs to sell the house after the hard times of the Civil War. And the property changed owners a number of times through the years.

One of the most dramatic and most remembered events in Oak Place's history started in 1960 when the East Huntsville Baptist Church bought the Maysville Road mansion. When they bought it, they never thought they could use the building without tearing it down. In 1965, a building program was begun and a gym was built just east of the worn down, decaying house.

In 1977, when the growing congregation needed more space, they voted to tear down Oak Place and construct on its site.

It was then that Harvie P. Jones, a Huntsville architect, became involved in the long, sad story of Oak Place. Mr. Jones worked to find out how the house could possibly be made into an education and administrative building. He only had a short time to save the antebellum house.

Without the drawings from the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and a Thanksgiving holiday, Mr. Jones says the job would not have been completed in time.

With his finished plan, Mr. Jones went and explained to the church that they could fit all of their needs and wants within the house's boundaries. They could also make the church so it could follow the city codes. Mr. Jones had won. The church voted and followed the plan.

After the church and the congregation voted to restore Oak Place, many crucial events happened that would be very important to the survival of Oak Place.

Since Oak Place is over fifty years old and is registered in the National Register of Historic Places, the church qualified for a 50/50 grant for restoration from the Department of the Interior. The East Huntsville Baptist Church received a grant of exactly \$55,000 and, to top that, the congregation matched it. They donated their time as unskilled workers.

As a fund raiser, the tour of George Steele buildings was sponsored by the Huntsville Historic Foundation. All proceeds were donated to the church. The remaining money needed was borrowed from a bank.

The major construction was nearing completion in the fall of 1980. At that point, the church realized that they would not have enough money to complete the interior of Oak Place. Nancy Van Valkenburgh, then president of the Historic

Huntsville Foundation, decided to contact the Women's Guild of the Huntsville Museum of Art. She suggested that Oak Place be used as the 1980 Decorator's Show House to raise money for Oak Place. The guild and the church agreed. One dollar out of every four was donated to the church. On July 19, 1981, the completed Oak Place was dedicated.

We would like to dedicate this report to all who have helped Oak Place become an "architectural masterpiece" once more. We would like to thank Mr. Harvie P. Jones, Mrs. Nancy Van Valkenburg, Mr. D. Lee Kilbourn, the congregation of the East Huntsville Baptist Church, and the surrounding community for saving Oak Place. We believe that Oak Place is an important part of Huntsville and that if we do not respect our history, then our future generations will not respect us. We thank those that believe that also.

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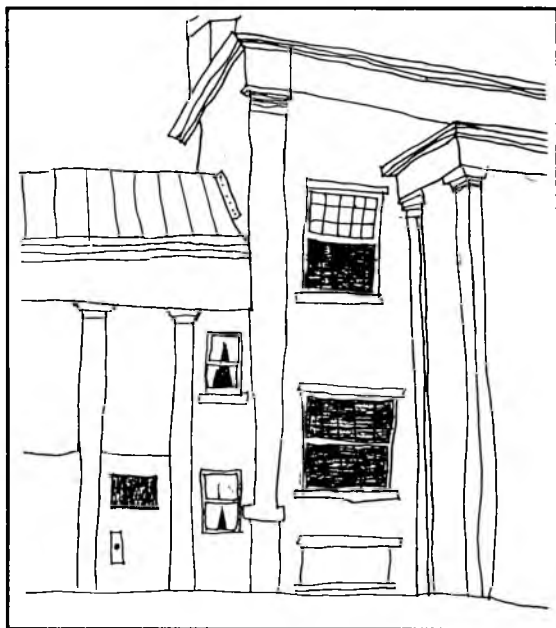
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*Kellie Corder is 11 years old . Her hobbies are softball, swimming, and babysitting. Her favorite house style is Queen Anne.*

*Ellen Richardson, also 11, loves to collect anything having to do with unicorns. Her favorite architectural style is Gothic.*

*RIGHT:  
Oak Place  
by  
Kellie Corder*



*BELOW:  
Oak Place  
by  
Ellen Richardson*

