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**A House for All Time:
The New Old House on White Street**
by Sim Liddon

When my wife, Barbera, and I began searching for a lot on which to build, we looked in the old part of town, which still had an intimate, small town atmosphere about it. We favored one particular lot on White Street, one of perhaps five empty lots available in the historical district, and a visit to the courthouse determined the owner. But would he/she be willing to sell? A phone call that evening evoked the response: "I can't believe this. My wife and I are sitting here discussing whether or not to sell that lot, and you call asking about buying it." Well, we all felt providence was guiding us, and within three or four minutes a purchase price was agreed upon.

White Street is an old street, appearing on the 1861 map of Huntsville, but as far as I know this particular lot on the east side near its intersection with California Street had never before had a house on it. It is now part of what is called the Halsey-Yeatman addition, one of the oldest residential areas in Huntsville. However, when it was surveyed and divided into lots back in 1888, it was described on the original plat simply as "Building lots situated on the east end of Poplar Hill, owned by Messers. W. L. and C. H. Halsey and J. R. Yeatman;" not a subdivision or an addition but just "building lots." The land had been a part of the community of Twickenham before the name was

changed to Huntsville in the early 1800's, and much later the lot had been owned by the Harrison brothers, of Harrison Brothers Hardware. Over the years it had been used by area garden clubs for their plantings, and in clearing the lot hundreds of day lilly bulbs were unearthed by the bulldozer and given to various recipients, including the Burritt Museum. Boxwoods, Jackson vine, and cherry laurel had all been planted years before and were found on the rear of the lot.

The building site determined, we proceeded with the house plans. Wanting the fun of designing it, and preferring to put my money directly into mortar and bricks, I drew the plans myself. From the onset the focus was on making sure the house looked old and fit into the historical district, which meant many walking trips through downtown Huntsville to get a feeling for its antebellum architecture.

Because the lot itself was somewhat narrow, seventy feet across being considered ample width for a residential lot back in 1888, there were restrictions as to what could be done architecturally. It was two hundred feet deep, however, and still quite buildable. And, as it turned out, a two story federal house could fit the lot quite nicely. The width of the lot, then, determined the general style and the dimensions of the house across the front. Its exact location on the lot was determined by the Japanese magnolia in the front and the big pecan tree in the rear, two of the many trees we wanted to save.

Barbera and I always liked the front porches we knew as children, where one could sit and rock and watch what is going on up and down the street. So a front porch was a necessity, except that federal houses had no front porches. Here in Huntsville, however, Victorian porches were added to federal houses years after they were build; and without knowing we were mixing architectural styles, we went ahead and planned for a porch. Wanting something a little less ornamental than the usual Victorian porch, we left off the scrollwork on the cornice, but we added octagonal columns. Tim Schremsher and Louis Booth, our builders, installed the columns in the historically correct manner with the columns themselves extending somewhat beyond the cornice.

One of our most important and hardest decisions was the choice of brick. The brick most recommended as giving an old, historical look was much too brown for our tastes. We wanted something more red, and we finally decided on a particular wood-





mold brick made in Columbus, Georgia. The single front step and the brickwork of the front walk was the suggestion of Bill Nance, artist and landscape designer, who helped with the back patio. You will notice one particular brick on the north edge of the front walk that is different and somewhat larger than the

others. Imprinted on it are the letters “P & Q Yazoo City Miss,” with the letters “ss” backwards. P and Q stand for Pugh and Quakemeyer, the owners of the old brick yard which at one time stood atop what we as kids knew as “brick yard hill” in Yazoo City, Mississippi. The brick itself was taken from Barbera’s great grandfather’s house in Yazoo County when it was torn down years ago. This makes it the oldest item in the construction of the house, dating probably to the late 1800’s.

We decided to include a water table in the brickwork to give it a unique and distinctive look, and the brick company in Georgia sent more pieces for the water table than I had thought we needed or had ordered. There were enough left over to incorporate them into the top part of the back patio, something that looks very good, but was not planned until the bricking of the patio itself.



As just implied, the back patio itself is two tiered. I knew pretty much what I wanted for the bottom part, the planting areas on either side, the circular pool with a fountain, and the steps down to a semi-circular back area, etc. However, it took Bill Nance’s artistic eye to design the top part, with the planted areas and the wide steps down to the bottom level, done so that one could add a pergola if it were later desired.

The low stone wall bordering the lawn and planted area in the back was built by hand, my own hand, on several hot afternoons in the summer of 1993. Many of the stones came from the front porch of the house next door. They were renovating their porch at the time and needed to dispose of their debris. I needed stones; so it was good for both parties.



Designing the interior floor plan was fun. I wanted to open the front door and be able to look straight down the hallway, through the dining room, and out the back of the house to the patio, the pool and fountain, and beyond. And, from the beginning we knew we wanted large rooms with ten foot ceilings downstairs and nine foot ceilings upstairs. Although truly historical houses have higher ceilings, we felt that the ten foot ceilings downstairs would be enough to give the correct feeling of height and a sense of spaciousness. The three large entrances into the living room and the glass transoms above the doors add to the feeling of openness. But what we did with the back of the house adds even more to that feeling.

While we wanted the front to appear similar to the old historical houses nearby, we felt no such restrictions for the rear and more private part away from the public's view. Thus, once you get into the house it opens up, with



large sliding glass doors and transoms across the entire back and large plate glass windows in the sunroom.

We wanted our private living space downstairs, including the master bedroom and bath. The stained glass window in the master bathroom we bought locally. Barbera and I both preferred old stained glass to something new, and it probably came originally from an old church in this area. It was already about the right size, although we did have to add some border to make it fit properly. Another major feature of the inside was the use of shutters for the window



treatment, something we had seen in several historical homes here in Huntsville. The spindles for both the interior stairs and the outside porch railing were hand made by Tim and Louis from planks of poplar they obtained in Tennessee especially for this purpose. The flooring on the first floor was of five inch oak, simulating the wide planking found in the old homes.

Two additional guest bedrooms, a bath, and a large walk-in storage room are upstairs. In case a future occupant will need more bedrooms, however, we painted the storage room and finished it out with shutters and molding similar to the rest of the house. And, because a bathroom would be needed if two bedrooms are added, we brought the plumbing upstairs and marked it on the subflooring to be found if needed later. If the second floor is ever remodeled, and a door is needed at the front of the storage room; a frame for a doorway can be found in the wall between the storage room and the upstairs sitting area, behind the built-in cabinets.

Barbera and Maria Bosley, our decorator, selected the interior paint colors. They chose Williamsburg colors from Martin Senour; Paprika for the sun room, a teal color called Apothecary Shop Blue for the living room, Sweet Honey Yellow for the hallway and dining room, and Beatrice Blue for the bedroom. The only color downstairs that was not a Williamsburg color was the bright red in the kitchen, which was mixed to match some favorite hand-painted pottery and dishes done by Gail Pittman.





Besides the choice of colors, we also agonized over the selection of molding. Although federal houses had no molding, we sure wanted some. A variety of choices were considered, and we decided eventually on a combination of four pieces, the two principle pieces being of a concave and a dentil molding. Two that, interestingly enough, we had originally rejected when considering them separately.

For the sake of esthetics, we used a copper standing seam metal roof on the front porch; and for the sake of our pocketbook, asphalt shingles were used over the two story part of the house. The rear of the house posed problems. Because of the extremely low pitch of the roof over that part of the house, the possibility existed that rain water would run off very slowly, possibly accu-



mulate and cause a leak. For financial reasons, I considered both a corrugated metal roof and a specially applied asphalt shingle roof. But there was still the clear possibility of a future leak. So, in the end, a standing seam metal roof was the only sensible option.

A second construction related problem at the rear of the house concerned fire regulations and the installation of the brick on the second story, above the roof I just mentioned. The building regulations had changed only months before, and any brick had to rest on nonflammable material all the way

to the ground. Previously the steel beam on which the second story brick rested would have been tied in to wooden studs, but this was no longer possible. An engineer designed metal posts to uphold the beam, and the whole affair was secured with large bolts to a concrete foundation, requiring a large crane for the installation.

All in all, building the house was a lot of fun, and the most-prized compliments came from the many, many workmen who came in for some particular project and said, "Boy, its really a job remodeling one of these old houses, isn't it?"



Sim Liddon has been in the private practice of psychiatry in Huntsville for over twenty-five years. Barbera, his wife, has lived in Huntsville only nine years since they were married in 1986. They have known each other since she was three and he was five years old, having grown up together in Yazoo City, Mississippi. He went on to Vanderbilt University, Johns Hopkins Medical School, did a residency in Rochester, New York, and was on the staff at several universities before moving to Huntsville in 1970. Barbera went to Mississippi State University for Women and to the University of Mississippi, and had lived in Gulf Port and Jackson, Mississippi, before eventually moving to Huntsville. She is an active volunteer and presently serves on the Board of Directors of the HHF.