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# **“Looks Can Be Deceiving” The Story of an Ugly House**

by  
Harvie P. Jones, FAIA

The circa 1881 Bernstein House at 110 Steele Street in Huntsville, Alabama, is an extremely rare example of historic architecture; a tiny one-room-over-one-room Italianate-style house. It is of great importance because it shows how an average family lived in the latter part of the 19th century, and shows that design quality is not limited to costly mansions.

An apocryphal story that illustrates this importance is that a teacher was leading her elementary school students through a historic district, and after viewing several houses little Johnny asked, “*Miss Jones, was everybody rich back then?*” We rush to save mansions but generally neglect the type of house that most of our ancestors lived in, thus giving a warped view of history to the present and future generations, and to ourselves as well.

There had been a fire at the Bernstein House in the mid 20th century. The original tall Italianate 2/2 sashes were then replaced with inappropriate



*February, 1991 photograph before restoration. Chimney is gone, original tall sashes replaced by short “ranch house” sashes, original veranda replaced by a makeshift shed, site filled-in about 12 to 18 inches deep, giving the house a stumpy proportion. Roof cornice-mould gone.*

short and squarish, horizontal-pane, ranch-style windows. The original front veranda shown on the 1913 Sanborn map was replaced with a makeshift shed-roof, steel-columned, concrete-floored porch. The brick chimney and some roof trim were removed. The house was, in a word, ugly. But it was not the fault of the house's original design. The makeshift and inappropriate 20th century work had done this job.

One of the most important aspects of historic preservation is the knowledge and insight to be able to read beneath the ugly present conditions and see the beauty and good design that was originally present. A careful look at this ugly house showed clear evidences of the original tall Italianate sashes (their remaining trim and the clapboard-infills showed their size and style), The original brick chimney-base remained at the sail line; a patch at the roof eave showed the size of the top chimney-stack. The original Italianate roof frieze, bed mold, and most brackets remained (although the eaves-crown was gone), and a clapboard patch over the porch indicated that there was a door height opening onto a deck on the front veranda roof-top which indicated a flat-roofed, balustraded veranda.

Inside, the first floor Italianate mantel remained, as well as the original dense-pine floor, some trim, and the altered stair.

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The low site had been filled with about a foot of soil in the mid-20th century to improve site-drainage, in effect visually lowering the house a foot down into the ground and giving it a squatty proportion totally out of keeping with the tall and slender Italianate style. This fill also created a foot-deep pond under the house which contributed greatly to its subsequent deterioration.

In the 1980s, the sparsely-built Steele Street began to fill with restored, relocated, and new houses, since this was one of the only areas in the historic districts will available open building sites. There were some comments that this ugly house should be bulldozed, as it detracted from the



*Restored view sketch of May 15, 1993 traced over the photograph of the unrestored house to illustrate its potential restored appearance.*

now-gentrified street. Recognizing the imminent threat, the house was documented with numerous black/white detail photographs, notes and measurements, and a restored-view perspective drawing was traced over a photograph of the existing “ugly” condition to give the viewer a true apples-to-apples comparison between the original and the present degraded appearance. The only conjecture involved was the trim details of the front veranda, and these details were based on typical circa 1880 examples. The intent of this comparison sketch was to show that the house was originally attractive and could be again, and that the house’s small-size problem could be overcome by adding a “background” addition behind the house, keeping prominence to the Italianate original front portion. This sketch, done in May 1993, circulated for two years with some interest but no buyers.

In June of 1995, a young builder, Joe Watson, appeared before the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission with the request to demolish the house which he deemed to be “too far gone” to restore. The Commission offered to assist Joe in a further examination of the house, and to donate restoration planning and architectural assistance in order to help save this important house. This was done, and Joe decided to restore and add

to the rear of the house, initially on a speculative basis. This took a lot of courage for someone who had never done restoration, and Joe is to be applauded for this, especially since at that time there was no buyer for this “ugly house.”

Thus the house was raised back up to its original height above the soil-line, a “background” rear addition was planned, a way to conceal an upstairs bath was devised (without chopping into the original room), the details were planned and the house was restored to its now-again beautiful appearance. It just might be the prettiest house on this street where some residents had wanted it demolished.



*1996 restored view. All is based on site evidences except the exact trim details of the veranda, for which no details remained. The 1996 addition is behind the house to the right, and the upstairs bath addition is tucked down into the attic of the first floor addition, barely visible at the upper right behind the 1881 second floor room.*



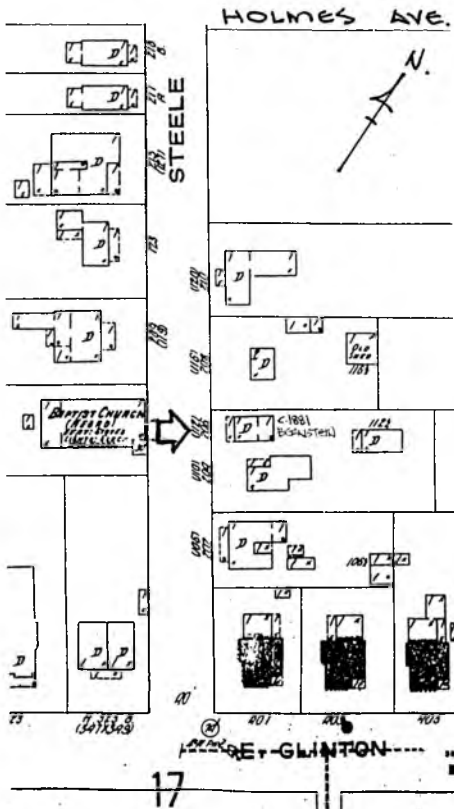
*LEFT: 1993 photograph of the unrestored roof cornice. The 1881 brackets, frieze, bed-mould and fascia remain, with only the top cornice-mould missing.*

*BELOW: 1993 photograph of the upper front wall showing the mid-20th century short ranch-style window that replaced the tall Italianate windows and the second floor door that let onto the veranda roof-balcony. The joints in the infill clapboards below this modern window reveal the height of the tall 1881 opening.*

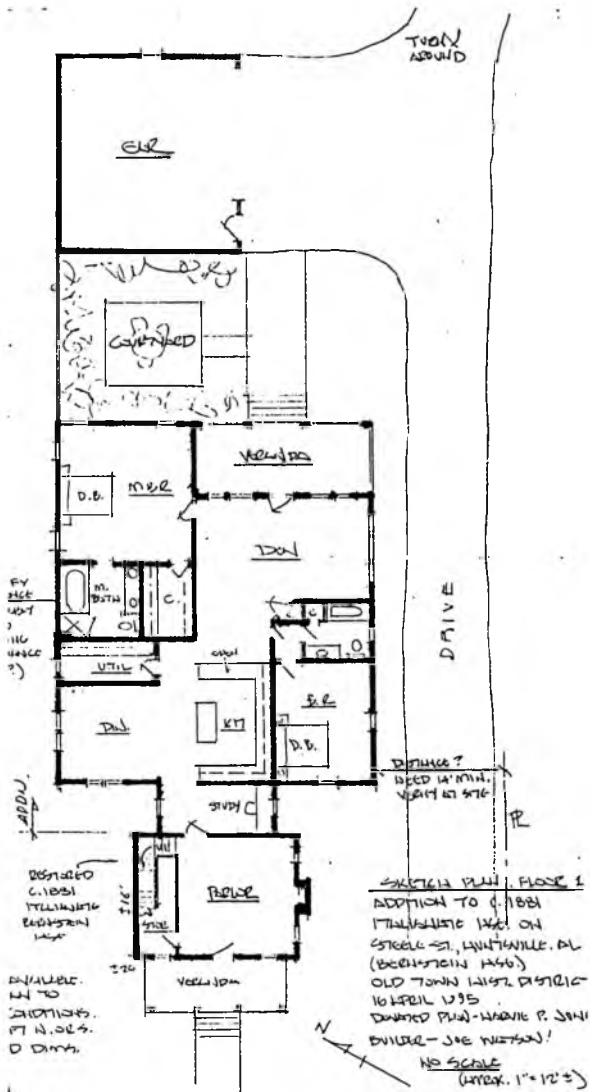




ABOVE: The 1881 brick chimney-base remained at the south side of the house, giving the size of the chimney. Joints in the roof fascia patch gave the size of the top stack of the chimney.



LEFT: Detail of the 1913 Sanborn Insurance Map of Huntsville showing Steele Street and a number of houses present by 1913. The Church shown is the original location of the First Missionary Baptist Church. On Steele Street only two of these houses remain. The Bernstein House is indicated by an arrow.



ABOVE: Preliminary floor plan showing the original small house at the bottom and the 1996 addition at the rear (top). The original tiny house thus maintains its visual prominence on the street while the rear addition makes it suitable for modern living.



Too many important and historic buildings are demolished because they are “too far gone” and “ugly” as well. Thousands of successful restorations showed that this is almost never justified. In addition, the vast majority of restorations of “dilapidated” structures are less costly than demolition and the construction of a same-size modern-design building. The most extreme cases cost only as much as the modern building, but the restored building has much more character and beauty than any modern building can muster, and typically has better technical quality since 19th century wood is highly resistant to insect and moisture damage, unlike new fast-growth sapwood which can rot in five or six years in highly-exposed locations.

The 1881 Bernstein House, once an ugly “goner” is now the beauty of Steele Street and a source of pride and pleasure for the owners, Jack and Vanetta Charlton, and for the builder who once thought of tearing it down, Joe Watson. The next time you see an “ugly” and “dilapidated” building, remember that most of this is surface cosmetics and is almost always easily corrected. Most 19th and early 20th century buildings, even small houses, were well-designed and proportioned. These are traits not usually seen today even in half-million dollar houses where the only criterion of quality seems to be cost and size.

We need to save our good architectural heritage instead of swapping it for mediocre-to-bad (technically and esthetically) modern construction.

