

9-22-1996

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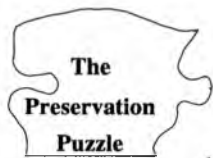
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Recommended Citation

Ellis, Diane (1996) ""The Commission" Explained," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 22: No. 3, Article 13.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol22/iss3/13>

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“The Commission” Explained

by
Diane Ellis

Information for the following article derives from conversations with Linda Allen of the city planning department and Dr. Frances Roberts, as well as from material printed in the Twickenham Historic District’s directory.

It’s become clear that many of us haven’t a clue about what the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission is or does. The name is a mouthful, confusingly similar to names of several other organizations in town, including our own. We hear people talk about “the commission,” but the bureaucratic vagueness of that term isn’t enlightening. If we’re confused, we said to ourselves, what about everyone else? It was time to do some research. Here’s what we learned.

The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission was established as a consequence of a major preservation triumph, the establishment of the Twickenham Historic District. As explained in the Twickenham Historic District’s directory, when urban renewal plans in the 1950s threatened many historic structures and streets in the original core of the city, members of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and the Antiquarian Society surveyed the area to identify structures worthy of preservation. The directory tells us that “they drew up a plan to create a historic district which would encompass many of the early architectural treasures and reflect the architectural history of the community.”

In 1965, the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association was formed to promote the formation of the district “and to aid the city in acquiring the necessary legislation at the state level to provide a commission to enforce the necessary regulations for securing and maintaining its integrity.” Frances Roberts remembers that it

took from 1965 to 1970 just to get approval from the legislative delegation to get the act to create the district passed in the legislature, and another two years to get petitions from the required sixty percent of property owners in the proposed district, whose boundaries had been set by the city planning department after guidance from the National Trust. Finally, in 1972, the directory states, “the City Council passed an ordinance which gave legal status to the District and provided for a commission of nine members for its oversight.”

Today the commission that was established to “maintain the integrity and attractiveness” of Twickenham oversees Huntsville’s three historic districts: Twickenham, Old Town, and the older section of the Alabama A&M University campus, which achieved historic district status in 1992. The area around Huntsville’s square is not an historic district, but comes under the purview of the planning department. Dr. Roberts credits Linda Allen with doing an excellent job of surveying those buildings during the early days of forming the Twickenham Historic District.

Dr. Roberts defines the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission as “a judicial body that examines proposals for changes in properties within historic districts in light of elements that affect the districts’ architecture, history and environment.” Regarding those petitioners who claim their projects won’t be visible, she says the commission works on the thesis that “it shows somewhere.”

The districts include both residential and non-residential properties. All applications to build or demolish a structure in an historic district are automatically referred to the commission. The commission reviews proposals for new construction; major and minor renovations; major and minor alterations; and repairs, additions, fences, walls, signs, and site work for game courts, pools, decks, terraces, drives and accessory structures. The Twickenham District directory states that “the architectural review process helps to protect the rights, amenities, and investments of all property owners in the districts, and aids in ensuring that future Huntsvillians will be aware of their rich heritage of architecture.”

The commission makes recommendations, but it is the city inspection department's responsibility to enforce them. There are fines and other penalties for failure to adhere to commission and/or inspection department regulations. A petitioner to the commission can appeal a commission decision to the circuit court. The commission does NOT regulate zoning, some sign ordinance matters, planting, or interior building modifications.

Members of the nine-member commission are appointed by the mayor and serve for six years. Historian Roberts and architect Harvie Jones have served on the commission since its inception. Others serving on the commission currently are Old Town resident Dorothy Adair, architect Rob Van Peurseem, lawyer Jack Burwell, city engineer Will Lewis, city planner Dallas Fanning, city inspector Hulan Smith, and city councilman Richard Showers. The commission has been successful throughout the years. Dr. Roberts believes, because dedicated, knowledgeable people with the right expertise have been appointed to serve.

The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission is the legal guardian of the legacy of stewardship established by those early preservation pioneers who helped create our historic districts. The commission's oversight of our architectural treasures reassures us that the beauty and livability of our community will endure as permanent characteristics of a changing city.

The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission meets the second Monday of the month in the meeting room of the old Chamber of Commerce building at the corner of Gallatin and Williams. Meetings are open to the public.

The HHF is the largest citizenship group without a paid professional staff. Our volunteer army has been ably led by inspired chairmen and dedicated boards of directors. Always in the wings if not in the vanguard has been the unassuming, self-effacing, indispensable and awesomely capable Harvie Jones. More than any other person Harvie embodies the spirit of Huntsville's historic preservation movement. Harvie has lent his architectural talents, historic knowledge, and time far beyond any calculable rate of return. The informed role Harvie plays in the community as its chief preservation architect is similar to Dr. Frances Roberts' role as historian. These two stellar citizens combine with other members of the Huntsville Historic preservation Commission to oversee our historic districts. They set the standard of excellence Huntsvillians could come to expect. The Foundation salutes, supports, and seeks to strengthen the role and sway of the Commission.

