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COURTHOUSE RENDERING RECOVERED UNDER HOME from...

“Saturday with Bill”
by Bill Easterling, *Times*
Columnist

Huntsville Times,
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The drawing lay face up in dirt beneath the old house and suffered the degradation of time: Mold crept across its facade in dramatic fashion; soot and smudges heavily soiled its once-vivid images; water stains peppered its entire appearance.

Yet the very place where the illustration languished in untended obscurity could be what saved it for posterity.

It's as dark as a dungeon in a crawl space that's part of the Freeman House basement, and being where no sunlight ever touched its face probably saved the picture.

That and an alert Central Presbyterian Church custodian named Nathan Dean [see picture above]. He was there the day workmen hauled the print out from under the house and pitched it on a pile of junk bound for the landfill.

“Don't throw anything away,” he said, “until Miz Samples sees it.”

Carol Ann Samples, who grew up in Central Presbyterian, had been made chairman of the Freeman House Task Force by the elders and given complete authority in renovating the historical house next door to the church on Lincoln Street.

Custodian Dean thought the unframed drawing hauled from under the house looked important. Samples was positive it was important when she looked at it. As a Huntsville native, she recognized it as the courthouse which stood on the downtown square until being razed more than three decades ago.

“I thought we were going to have to give Carol Ann CPR,” declared Central pastor Rev. Dave Reynolds.

The discovery was taken to architect Harvie Jones, who eventually helped authenticate it wasn't just another piece of paper but an original rendering of the Madison County Courthouse which stood from 1914 until 1964. It was drawn in 1913 by Nashville architect C. K. Colley, who had apparently been commissioned for the job. That means it could have possibly lain beneath the Freeman house for 83 years.

Church history

If Central Presbyterian Church—founded in 1810 and holding services in its current sanctuary on the corner of Randolph Avenue and Lincoln Street since 1899—hadn't purchased the Freeman House for a music conservatory and other church and civic endeavors, the valuable drawing might have languished in its black prison until finally rotting away.

How it came to be where it was found is a mystery that may never be solved. However, one thing's pretty certain: If Clarence Colley was in town to gain approval for his rendering, it's a good bet he stayed at Miss Sallie Freeman's boarding house on Lincoln Street.

Standing on land originally granted to LeRoy Pope in 1815, the house was built in 1906 and purchased in 1922 for \$7,500 by Tom Freeman and his wife, Sarah Mason Freeman.

While they were “Mister Tom” and “Miss Sallie” to the public, family members called them “Papa” and “Nana.”



The late Sarah Mason Freeman, who passed on her love of cooking to her granddaughter, Alyce Palmerlee Smith.

As “Miss Sallie,” Mrs. Freeman ran the city’s foremost boarding house. When Redstone Arsenal was being planned and built, most of the Army generals and other dignitaries sent here to oversee the project slept and ate at the Freeman House until an Officers’ Club was finished.

Tom’s and Sallie’s children were Harry Mason Freeman, Florence Mai Freeman Palmerlee, Alice Freeman, and Louise Freeman Chunn. Tom Freeman died in the 1950’s and Sallie Freeman died in the house at the age of 92. Alice Freeman, who never married and had been a

teacher at West Clinton Elementary School, ran a first-grade type of class called “Beginners School” in the dining room of the house after her mother quit taking in boarders.

Central bought the property from the heirs in 1991 after Alice’s death.

The old house holds many memories for Alyce Palmerlee Smith and Sally Ann Culver, two of Miss Sallie’s granddaughters.

It was a “wonderful house to have grown up in,” said Mrs. Culver, who recalled a house filled with “cotton boys, generals, school children and lots and lots of Huntsville people looking for a home-cooked meal and lots of fellowship.”

Cotton boys

The “cotton boys” were brokers who stayed out back in a small house while in town trying to sell cotton crops to buyers downtown on Cotton Row. “Papa” had a fondness for sitting up late at night playing cards with the boys, which didn’t set well with “Nana.” She endured, however, and made sure the cotton boys and other boarders always started the day with plenty of her homemade biscuits.

Both Smith and Culver recalled a small upstairs fire which didn’t result in much damage. After firemen put the blaze out, Nana made them sit on the front porch to rest while she served cake and coffee. Smith said her grandmother shopped at the A&P grocery store on the corner of Eustis Avenue and Green Street every morning, and when the stock boys carried her supplies home, she always served them a piece of cake.

And all the while, with life being lived loud and long at 205 Lincoln Street, C. K. Colley’s historic drawing gathered mold and mildew in the darkest corner of the Freeman House basement.

Ironically, after being found, it returned to Nashville, the architect’s home, where Christine Young, a conservator of paper and photographs, worked a minor miracle in restoring it. “It was in pretty bad shape,” said Young, “but it was pretty clear to me it was a vintage piece.” She began a tricky renewal process in November and completed it in early December. Feeling the drawing would benefit from greater rigidity, she attached it to a new 4-ply buffered ragboard.

Now that the aged drawing has been resurrected and restored, the church plans to share it with the public. The original will be displayed in the Freeman House at some point in the future, and 14-by-20-inches prints of this historical find will be sold for \$50 each beginning in about 30 days. Orders can be placed now by calling either 532-1249 or 534-8446.

Samples said all proceeds from the sale of prints will be used for the Hawthorne Conservatory of Music.

Madison County's third courthouse was a building whose demise was roundly criticized by many in the historical community. When it was torn down to make room for the courthouse which sits on the square today, locals used its bricks to build patios, planters and barbecue pits at their homes. Only the old bell, made in 1849, was preserved, and although it remains out of sight on top of the 11th floor mechanical, it still tolls its timely hourly message.

The bricks in various yards, the bell—and now the drawing. These are all that remain of the noble rendering C. K. Colley brought to Huntsville all those years ago. How his drawing ended up in the damp darkness beneath the Freeman House can only be a source of speculation, for the architect died of heart failure at age 87 in 1956.

Postscript: Moved by his experience as “watchdog” for Carol Ann Samples on the Freeman House restoration project, Nathan Dean recently stopped at another local Presbyterian church being renovated and collected several items from a pile of junk headed for the landfill. He brought them to Samples and asked, “Are these valuable?” — History has a way of infecting most everyone it touches.



Alyce Smith and her granddaughter, Lorin Young, at the biscuit block inherited from Alyce's grandmother Sallie Freeman. The sifter, rolling pin and a biscuit cutter that belonged to Sallie were discovered in the bottom of the biscuit block when it was moved to Mrs. Smith's home.