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Gianni De Meo

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# Harrison Brothers

## A Photographic Essay by Gianni De Meo

Essence. History. Tradition in continuity. This to me is Harrison Brothers' spirit and what I tried to capture in images. The cluttered walls and seasoned floors speak softly of times past, of genteel and elaborate expressions of originality in a time when television was not the medium.

It was a place, I'm sure, where you would be known by your name, and seen as part of an integral life which today we so much yearn for. It speaks of belonging, of memorabilia that now has almost a transcendental essence, which brings you, me, anyone, to a time past when recognition is to know and be known.

In a time of insecurity, incohesion and separation from a stable past, Harrison Brothers provides a welcome point of reference and immersion into a past which seems so distant but which is reachable.



*Born near Rome, Italy, John moved to New York in 1974 at the age of 14 with his immediate family. Among the many experiences that the city provides, the best to him were related to studies. He graduated from Brooklyn College with a B.A. in Political Science and later on in life, after having attended Università "La Sapienza," he completed a Master's Degree in Italian International Studies at New York University in 1989. John is now employed at Intergraph as a translator, having resided in Huntsville for the past five years. Of Huntsville, he has written, "I found an old part of myself in this town, which links me to the special Italian Renaissance spirit. I write poetry, create art, play percussion, capture essences in photography and exercise my most delectable of hobbies, that of a person involved in an aesthetic love of life.*



D. T. Harrison

R. S. Harrison

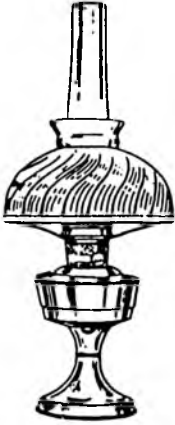
# HARRISON BROTHERS

Established 1879



On the South Side of the Courthouse Square  
HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

## A BRIEF HISTORY



*A century-old Huntsville tradition; Owned by a non-profit group; Staffed by volunteers; Repository of 20th century retailing memorabilia; Oldest operating hardware in Alabama; Listed on the National Register of Historic Places; A favorite haunt of both natives and visitors; Scene of numerous retellings of past Huntsville happenings; and Focus of wondrous stories recounted by loyal customers. Harrison Brothers is all of these and more.*

The first set of Harrison brothers began business on Jefferson Street in 1879 as tobacco wholesalers but moved in 1897 to a building on South Side Square, then known as #3 Commercial Row, where they introduced a line of cream-colored crockery called Queen's Ware.

Four years later a fire began in a nearby feed store and quickly spread to the adjoining buildings before being contained. A contemporary newspaper account stated that Harrison Brothers suffered about \$4,500 damage to its building and stock, while the business next door at #2 Commercial Row experienced even larger losses although both buildings remained standing. Shortly after the fire, Harrison Brothers bought #2 Commercial Row and hired a local contractor to repair the two buildings, construct a unifying facade for them, and build an addition to the rear of their original building at #3.

When Harrison Brothers reopened for business, #2 had become a furniture store while #3 continued to offer a selection of Queen's Ware. By 1913 the brothers had replaced the Queen's Ware with hardware stock, and although Harrison Brothers occasionally experimented with the retail sale of clocks, jewelry, appliances and various other types of merchandise during the next seventy years, hardware and furniture remained the basis of the business.

James B. and Daniel T. Harrison, the first pair of Harrison brothers, had come to Huntsville during the late 19th century from Tennessee where they had run a tobacco shop. A third brother, Robert S. Harrison, joined Daniel T. in the purchase of their first building on Commercial Row. Robert's two sons Daniel S. and John began working in the store part time while still young boys, and after Daniel T.'s death in 1940 and Robert's in 1952, the second generation of brothers assumed management and ownership of the store.

Either brother could extract just the right bolt or the precise garden tool requested, an amazing feat of memory considering that nothing was ever discarded. The purchase was carefully wrapped in a piece of brown paper ripped from a large roll and then tied with string from a nearby cone. Prices were reasonable, sales tax was never added, and few deliveries were made.

The Harrisons did not believe in advertising either. A story is related that Robert Harrison, when approached by a foolhardy ad salesman, replied: "Look young fellow, we have a nice business here. You can see we have a good inventory on hand. If I started advertising with you, we'd probably sell out of a lot of this merchandise, and I'd just have to turn right around and order some more. Thank you, but no!"

**Daniel Harrison died in 1981, and when John became ill in October of 1983, the store was closed. John died that December, and when none of the heirs expressed an interest in running the business, it appeared that this unique Huntsville tradition would die with him. Although the Harrison heirs were unwilling to assume management of the store, they were equally reluctant to have the stock dispersed, the buildings gutted, and the Harrison Brothers name and tradition relegated to an historical footnote.**

**Faced with the imminent demise of the city's most historic store, the Historic Huntsville Foundation undertook to save both the building and the business. The directors of the non-profit, preservation organization became convinced that keeping the store in operation was the only viable way to preserve this most tangible piece of Huntsville's history. Negotiations between the heirs and the Foundation produced an agreement whereby the Foundation would purchase the buildings, the name, the fixtures and the inventory. Although the Foundation had always considered its role as one of preserving buildings, the membership unanimously voted to save the Harrison Brothers' structures and the hardware business as well.**

**On July 31, 1984, the Foundation officially became the new owner of Harrison Brothers and immediately began planning for the store's grand reopening. Twenty-two Foundation members spent the next Saturday conducting an exhaustive inventory of the contents, which was followed by an extended but inconclusive cleaning of the premises. A full-time manager was hired to direct the day-to-day operations. The opening of Harrison Brothers under its new management took place in October preceded by a spectacular street party on the Courthouse Square.**

**Harrison Brothers is special to Huntsville because it has maintained its turn-of-the-century appearance, inventory, fixtures, and merchandising techniques into the 1990s. Although the firm was judged to be very progressive in its early years, the store apparently had not changed significantly since it became a hardware and furniture store in the teens, and the brothers successfully resisted any urge to update the business or embrace new fashions in retailing. The Foundation's ongoing inventory of the store's contents has revealed ledgers dating to the 1880s, buggy whip holders, hundreds of horseshoes, several saddles, and a wealth of old advertising signs.**

**The store front remains essentially as remodeled in 1902, but the buildings themselves are considerably older. Historical research and physical evidence both indicate that the front third of the two buildings dates to the 1830s. The brick party walls, huge hand-hewn beams, and gabled roofs hidden behind the 1902 parapet are all remnants typical of the antebellum structures that once lined Commercial Row. Both buildings were extended to the rear sometime before 1884, and the final addition occurred during the 1902 remodeling. The buildings were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.**

**But the interior of Harrison Brothers is its real glory! The long narrow stores, joined near the rear, retain their wooden floors marked with a row of brass numbers to facilitate the measurement of rope, chain, and screen from large rolls. The walls are lined floor to ceiling with old wooden display cabinets fitted with bins, drawers, shelves, and storage niches fronted with shallow glass cases to display the interior contents. Tables hold a selection of canning equipment, heavy kitchen crockery, cast iron skillets,**



cornstick pans, and muffin tins. Barrels are filled with a multi-colored array of long handled garden implements and walking canes. Huge galvanized wash tubs and wooden nail kegs line the floor below a display of birdhouses while a six-foot-long, crosscut saw blade hangs from the beaded board ceiling.

A bare minimum of milk-glass globes illuminates the center aisle of the store, supplemented by a few bare bulbs hanging above the side counter. The natural light pouring through the glass front is complemented near the rear by a flood of light filtering down from a skylight above the open shaft of the hand-operated freight lift.

Tall angled ladders attached to ceiling tracks roll the length of the store providing access to the upper levels of shelves. An imposing four-drawer cash register, with rows of colored buttons to activate the dollar and cent flags, sits near the front of the store across the aisle from an ancient scale used to weigh nails and other bulk goods. At the rear, where the two halves of the store connect, stands a huge desk piled high with papers, invoices, catalogs, and decades old calendars, while a massive floor safe, its design of painted flowers faded nearly to obscurity, rests against the opposite wall.

The Foundation has endeavored to continue the appearance and feel of the hardware side much as the Harrisons left it. At the time of purchase, the west side of the store was filled with a variety of tall, wooden rockers flanked by fireplace equipment and mountains of clay flower pots. Today this side of the store is stocked with an eclectic mix where one can still purchase porch rockers, marbles in bulk, terra cotta garden ornaments, handmade whirligigs, crockery, rugs, woven coverlets, and hard candy displayed in 19th

century biscuit jars as well as make selections from a vast array of contemporary merchandise that arrives daily.

Since 1984 the store has operated with the assistance of some eighty volunteers who double as clerks and tour guides. The Historic Huntsville Foundation has received both local and national recognition for this unique and important preservation project, and Harrison Brothers has become one of Huntsville's most popular destinations for residents and tourists alike. □

## **THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION**

*The Historic Huntsville Foundation is a non-profit organization established in 1974 to encourage the preservation of historically or architecturally significant sites and structures throughout Huntsville and Madison County and to increase public awareness of their value to the community. Membership is open to all interested persons and entitles them to receive the Historic Huntsville Quarterly, to attend lectures on preservation topics, to go on field trips to nearby historic sites and cities, to assist with Trade Day, and to receive invitations to all Foundation activities.*

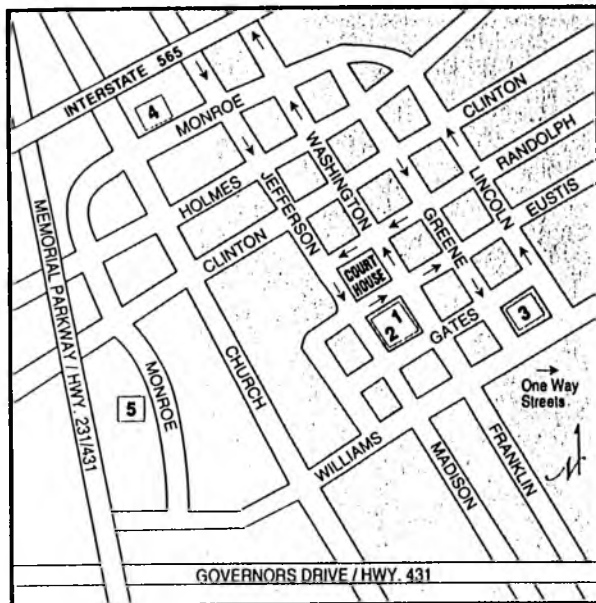
*To become a member of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, send your name, address and telephone number with a check to*

**Historic Huntsville Foundation  
P. O. Box 786  
Huntsville, AL 35804.**

*Membership dues are \$15 for an individual or family; \$25 for an organization; \$25 to \$99 for a patron; and \$100 and above for a benefactor.*

# HARRISON BROTHERS HARDWARE

OPEN WEEKDAYS 9 TO 5 & SATURDAYS 10 TO 2



**From I-565:**  
Exit 19 to  
Jefferson St/  
Downtown;  
Go south 5  
blocks; Turn  
left at South  
Side Square.

#1 Harrison Brothers Hardware #2 Alabama's Constitution Village  
#3 Weeden House Museum #4 Huntsville Depot Museum  
#5 Tourism Information, Von Braun Civic Center & Huntsville Museum of Art

## Harrison Brothers Hardware

124 South Side Square \* Huntsville, Alabama 35801  
205-536-3631

Owned and Operated by  
**THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION**  
Since 1984