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THE PUBLIC INN: 205 Williams Avenue

by Lauren B. Martinson

On October 29, 1819, the Huntsville Newspaper, *The Alabama Republican*, announced as follows:

ENTERTAINMENT—William E. Phillips informs the public that he has opened a public house in the south part of Huntsville, a few doors below the printing office, where he will accommodate travelers and a few boarders in the best manner and on the most reasonable terms.

Such was the birth of The Public Inn.

The Public Inn was built during Huntsville's brightest and most prosperous times. The first census from Madison County, taken in 1816, showed a population of 14,200 people. A short four years later in 1820, the second census was taken, revealing

an increase in the population of the County of over 5,000 people to a total of 19,565 inhabitants. The aggregate population of Madison County was three times that of any other county in the State.

At the time the Public Inn was built, Huntsville was crowded with people, and hotels were taxed to their utmost limit to lodge the throngs of transients. *Early History of Huntsville, Alabama* states that around the time the Public Inn was built, "So general was the recognition of the merited yet over weaning mastery and domination by Huntsville of the commercial and political life of the whole state, that in spite of its geographic location, the economic necessity and advantage of making Huntsville the capital of the state was boldly contended for by her prominent men, and freely admitted by other leaders of thought from all parts of the state." Because of this domination by Huntsville, the Constitutional Convention for Alabama was held in Huntsville at the current location of Constitution Hall Village.

The great increase in population of the entire Alabama Territory by 1819 warranted the admission of Alabama into the Union. On March 2, 1819, the U.S. Congress passed an act authorizing the people of the Alabama Territory to hold a convention in Huntsville for the purpose of drafting a State Constitution. The meetings were held in an assembly hall (which has long been removed) at the northwest corner and the intersection of Franklin and Gates Streets. Because of its close proximity, it is generally assumed by local historians that some of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention stayed at the Public Inn.

The original site of the Public Inn was on the northeast corner of Williams Avenue and Madison Street where SouthTrust Bank is presently located. The front of the house faced

Madison Street and Big Spring Park. The house was built by John Adams and was operated as an inn from 1819 until 1821 by William E. Phillips. Phillips later went on to operate and own the Bell Tavern on the public square until the mid 1830's, when he became so deeply mired in debt that he left for Mississippi.

The Inn was built in two stages. The east side of the house was built first in 1818 and the west side was probably added in 1832 since the metal downspouts which were located on each front corner of the house were embossed with this date. These downspouts remained on the house until the 1980's, but are unlocatable now.

The house displays several early federal characteristics such as a symmetrical 5-bay facade, gabled roof with exterior end chimneys, rigidly rectangular shaped, tall proportions, delicate dentil molding and medallions decorating the box cornice, and central stair-hall with 20 foot square rooms. Underneath, in the basement of the house, can be seen the hand-hewn framing. In the attic, it is interesting to note that the eaves on the original section of the house have hand-carved wooden pegs at the intersection of the eaves. The 1832 addition does not contain the pegged eaves.

The Public Inn is one of the few framed buildings to survive from the federal period. Its age, construction and stylistic features all make it a significant structure contributing to the historical and architectural character of the Twickenham Historic District. The vernacular architecture of the Public Inn is similar to the buildings in Constitution Hall Village which contain examples of the federal style that date from 1780 to the mid 1830's. The term "Federal Period" means the architecture of the early years of the American Federation. A more accurate stylistic label would be "Neo-Classical" with influences from the English

architect, Robert Adam, who in turn was influenced by newly-uncovered (in the mid 18th century) Roman houses that were buried in Pompeii and other archeological sites. These characteristics melded with holdover influences from Georgian architecture of the 19th century, which was inspired by both 16th-century Baroque architecture and the Italian architect, Palladio, who had made a study of ancient Roman public buildings.

Sometime around 1927, a two story framed Victorian addition was made to the rear of the house, doubling its original size. A colonial revival bungalow style porch of one story was added across the front where the parking for the house is located today. This porch was composed of a low brick wall, paired wood columns and a low hipped roof. The front and second story windows were altered at this time as well.

The interior of the original portion of the building features a central stair-hall with a single room to each side on each floor. The staircase has a half-turn with landing, scalloped brackets on the stair ends, and rectangular balusters. The interior trim was probably installed during the 1927 renovation. The house still contains the original heart-of-pine floors in the front section and oak floors in the Victorian addition. It is also interesting to note that the oak floors were installed over the heart-of-pine floors in the front west side apartment. This was the popular thing to do in the 1920s to cover the pine sub-floor. In 1992, the oak floors were removed to expose the original heart-of-pine floors in the front section of the house.

The rear addition and most of the outlying alterations date from 1927 when the house was moved to its present site and renovated for apartments. In 1981, Suzanne Roberson divided the house into two apartments. Her renovations and restoration

were completed by the present owners of the house with the guidance of local architect, Harvie P. Jones, FAIA. It currently has two apartments: one three bedroom, two and one-half bath apartment, which is being used as an attorney's office; and one two bedroom, with one-half bath apartment. Both sides have an outdoor courtyard and separate entrances.

In 1980, then owner Pizitz applied for and obtained certified historic structure status for the property, and the house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ownership records of the house show a multitude of owners and uses, and the deeds of record of sale prices fluctuated widely during the ante-bellum period, which is probably more indicative of local economic conditions than of the true value of the property.

The property was originally deeded on September 1, 1815 as a part of a 30 acre tract from Leroy and Judith Pope to John Brahan, Peter Perkins, David Moore, Lewis Winston, as commissioners for \$750.

On August 21, 1820, John Brahan, David Moore, Jesse Searcy, Henry Stokes and John Read, commissioners, sold the property to Steven Neal for \$212. The next day, Steven and Fannie Neal sold the property to William Phillips for \$200.

On February 1, 1821, William E. Phillips and Eliza Phillips sold the property to Henry Cook for \$2,200. This deed stated the property was formerly owned by John Adams, Esq.

On April 1, 1828, the property was sold by Henry Cook to William Patton for \$1,400. This deed stated, "Whereon the said Cook has and does yet reside, his family dwelling formerly owned by John Adams, then by William E. Phillips, together with the buildings of every description, fences and c."

On November 7, 1836, the property was deeded by William and Martha L. Patton to William McDowell for \$3,500. The deed stated, "The same occupied by Joseph D. Bradford as a dwelling house."

On December 28, 1837, the property was sold by William and Priscilla W. McDowell to Eleazer L. Andrews for \$3,888.65. The deed stated, "Occupied by Joseph B. Bradford as a dwelling in the year 1836 by said McDowell and wife in the year 1837."

On November 9 1843, the property was deeded to John F. Mills for the sum of \$1,010 and the deed stated, "Now occupied by Edwin R. Wallace, Esq. as a family residence."

On December 19, 1843, the property was deeded from John F. and Caledonia R. Mills to William J. Mastin, Frank Mastin, James H. Mastin and Gustavus L. Mastin for \$1,055 and the deed stated, "Now in the occupancy of Edwin R. Wallace, Esq. "

On December 28, 1843, the property was deeded to Edwin R. Wallace for the sum of \$1,400 with the deed stating, "On which the aforesaid Edwin R, Wallace now resides." On the same day, Wallace mortgaged the property to Samuel Peete, James W. McClung, Thomas Brandon and Silas Parsons for \$1,400. The mortgage was satisfied four years later on September 6, 1847.

On December 6, 1849, Edwin R. Wallace sold the property to George Beirne for \$4,000 plus interest. Included in the deed were the dwelling house and ground lot, a slave and the law library of Wallace consisting of 750 volumes. Beirne sold the property to Sarah Lipscomb on December 6, 1852 at auction for \$2,505.

On August 31, 1860, Sarah Lipscomb sold the property to Ferdinand L. Hammond for \$3,000 and the deed stated, "Now occupied by John H. Coleman as a dwelling house."

Ferdinand Hammond sold the property to John J. Coleman on September 7, 1861, for an undisclosed amount of money with the deed stating, "And whereas the said Coleman has purchased (and fully paid for) from Mrs. Sarah Lipscomb the house and lot in the said city (which is now occupied by one William J. Stoddart as a family residence)."

After the Civil War, the property was sold on September 36, 1881 by John J. Coleman as administrator for Mary K. Cooper for \$3,700 at auction with the deed stating, "House and lot now occupied by James L. Cooper as a family residence."

On March 30, 1897, Mary K. Cooper sold the property to Luke Matthews at auction for \$1,525. Luke and Myrtle V. Matthews sold the property by quitclaim deed on March 23, 1899, to Mary Cooper for the sum of \$1,971.87.

On May 30, 1910, Mary May Cooper sold the property to John W. Johnson for \$1,250 at auction.

On June 5, 1912, John W. and Carrie Belle Johnson sold the property to Robert C. Allen for \$1,200.

In the mid-1920s, the Gulf Refining Company expressed interest to placing a gas station on the property, and on November 1, 1926, Robert C. and Nannie L. Allen sold the property to Gulf Refining Company for \$9,500, the largest amount ever paid for the property to date. The deed provided however that the grantor Robert C. Allen “hereby reserves the buildings on said lot and agrees to remove the same from said lot, at his own expense, within 30 days from the date thereof.”

On November 17, 1926, Robert C. Allen bought the lot where the house currently stands at 205 Williams Avenue from Laura M. Powell for \$1,339.80. The lot measured 62 feet by 58-1/2 feet which was considerably smaller than the prior lot of 73 feet by 100 feet. Sometime in late 1926, the house was jacked up and rolled on logs the one block from its original site. Several Huntsvillians, including the late Lawrence Goldsmith, remember watching the house being moved on logs and pulled by either mules or trucks to the lot adjoining the Goldsmith’s property. After the house was moved to its present location on Lot 4, Block 69, a Victorian addition was added in the back, doubling the size of the house. It was sometime shortly after this that the house was divided into apartments and rented. It has been related to the current owners that the occupants included some of Huntsville’s “ladies of the night.”

On December 14, 1946, Robert C. and Nannie L. Allen deeded the property to J. H. Williams, superintendent of banks of the State of Alabama for \$5,000 at auction.

On May 19, 1937, the property was deeded to Harry J. Coons for \$5,240. On July 3, 1939, Harry J. and Sue Chase Coons deeded the property to Walter J. Price for \$4,000. On May 19,

1944, the property was deeded by Walter J. and Myra M. Price to Lillian Zion Pizitz.

Despite the Public Inn's significance as an example of federal style architecture, the house was almost lost in 1973. In the October 28, 1973 edition of *The Huntsville Times*, the paper alerted its readers with the headline: "Historic Huntsville House in Danger of Demolition." The article stated, "Another historic Huntsville house, one that dates back almost to the foundation of the City, is in immediate danger of demolition." Fortunately, the efforts of local historian Martha Sims Rambo and architect Harvie P. Jones saved the house from demolition. At the time, the only prospective buyer for the property let it be known that he would demolish the house to make room for a parking lot for his nearby property.

The Pizitzs held the property until the 1980s, until they conveyed it to Suzanne Roberson, who with the aid of Floyd Rutledge, set about restoring the house. Before the renovation was completed, however, the property was conveyed back to the Pizitzs. Doug and Kathryn Martinson and Doug Martinson, II purchased the house from the Pizitz estate in 1991, and completed the renovations. It is currently used as residential and commercial rental property. ■