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The Huntsville Pilgrimage Association's 1998 Tour

by John Rison Jones, jr.

On Saturday, April 18, 1998, the annual tour of the Huntsville Pilgrimage Association will feature six historic residences. Two are superb antebellum houses. Four are late 19th and early 20th century buildings, including a recent, highly successful restoration of an 1881 rental property.

Four churches, the Church of the Nativity, the First United Methodist Church, the First Presbyterian Church, and St. Mary's Church of the Visitation, will be open all day on tour day, as will Harrison Brothers Hardware Store and the Masonic Temple, Helion Lodge Number 1. Individuals with Pilgrimage tickets will receive free admission to Huntsville Depot Museum, Alabama Constitution Village, and the Weeden House Museum on tour day. The Regions Bank, constructed in 1835 by noted Huntsville architect George Steele, will serve as Pilgrimage Headquarters.

The morning Pilgrimage tour will feature three late 19th and early 20th century residences: the Neece-Lotz House, the Lane-Davidson House, and the Bernstein-Charlton House. Two antebellum residences—the Smith Academy-Leberte House and the Cruse-Bassett-Welker House—and the early 20th century White-Fursdon House will be shown on the afternoon tour.

The earliest of two antebellum houses featured on the Pilgrimage is the Cruse-Bassett-Welker residence at 600 Franklin Street. It was built for Samuel Cruse about 1818. A handsome Federal-style townhouse, it may be the work of Thomas and William Brandon, Huntsville's earliest builders.

The simplicity and elegant brick work of the Cruse-Bassett-Welker house make it an excellent example of Federal architecture. Its style resembles that of residences in Franklin, Tennessee and Abingdon, Virginia. The rose-brown hue of the brick is especially notable. The fan light transoms to the south and east and the Adams-style mantel in the parlor are fine decorative features. Visitors should note the separate buildings that once housed the kitchen (later made into an apartment) and the smoke house.

The house's north wing was added in the 1920s.

In 1834, the Cruse property was deeded by Peter Hoffman to Samuel Peete, an attorney originally from Limestone County, who married the daughter of Benjamin S. Pope, who lived down the street at 621 Franklin. In 1846, Huntsville surgeon Dr. John V. Bassett purchased the property (family tradition holds that the Bassett family were already living in the residence). Five generations of the Bassett and Young families occupied the house until 1993, when Sophie Lowe Young, the last Bassett-Lowe descendant, died.



*The Cruse-Bassett-Welker House, 600 Franklin Street.
Courtesy Huntsville Pilgrimage Association.*

Sophie Lowe Young, the daughter of druggist Ben Lee Young and his wife Sophie Davis Young, was Dr. John Bassett's great-granddaughter. Through her mother's family, the Mannings, Sophie Lowe Young inherited magnificent Federal-style furniture that had once filled the Manning's imposing residence, The Grove. One of Huntsville's grandest residences, The Grove stood near the present Mental Health Building on Gallatin Street. It was demolished about 1912.

Before the demolition, Sophie Davis Young moved The Grove's handsome early furniture to the Young's Franklin Street residence, where they are today a special feature of the Cruse-Bassett-Welker house. Six family portraits, originally part of The Grove's elaborate furnishings, were given by Sophie Lowe Young to the Weeden House Museum, where they may be seen by Pilgrimage visitors.

The second antebellum residence on the 1998 Pilgrimage is the Smith Academy-Leberte House, 706 Adams Street. It was built for attorney David Humphreys and his wife in 1853. In June of 1854, Dr. Carlos Smith, who lived next door at 704 Adams, purchased the property to house his Smith Academy, one of several Huntsville schools for young males (Dr. Smith later served as president of the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa from 1874-1878).

The original two-story building preserves the original handmade glass window panes, mortised mantels, wide-plank pine flooring, staircase, and six-by-six cedar sills and woodwork. The triple-thick walls are constructed of handmade brick, inside and out. The downstairs ceilings are twelve feet high; the upstairs ceilings are eleven feet. Later owners made only two major exterior alterations, removing an entrance stoop and, at some time later, painting the brick.

In 1993, Dr. and Mrs. Mark Leberte purchased the property. With the help of architect Harvie Jones, additional living space, an enclosed courtyard, a detached guest suite, and a garage were added at the rear of the building.

The post-Civil War residences on the 1998 Pilgrimage include two handsome late 19th century residences at 509 and 507 Adams Street. The earliest, the Lane-Davidson House, was built in 1888 by newspaperman and lawyer Charles Lane, the son of Madison County Circuit Court Judge George W. Lane.

In the late 1880s Charles Lane, who had a growing family, decided to build a residence next door to his father, who lived at 511 Adams Street. The family moved into the house in 1889. The residence has an asymmetrical front gable and a full-width porch. It is a fine example of Colonial Revival architecture, a style which became very popular after the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition.

Next door to the Lane-Davidson House is another Colonial Revival residence, the White-Fursdon House. It was built about 1912 by Edith Branch Law White as a residence for her mother. In later years, the front porch was enclosed. The property was inherited by Mrs. White's son and remained in the family until 1994, when it was sold to Huntsville antiques dealer Valerie Fursdon.

Of particular interest are the furnishings reflecting Ms. Fursdon's love of antiques and objects d'art. Ms. Fursdon is a native of England; her collection reflects her taste and knowledge of English and Continental styles.

Across town is an area known as the East Huntsville Addition that was developed by the Dallas Manufacturing Company in the late 1880s. In 1892, the company deeded property in the addition to Moses H. Neece, who built a Victorian residence on the lot at 704 Holmes Street. Its original style—Free Classic Hipped Roof Queen Anne—is a complex blend of late 19th century architectural features. In 1995, it was acquired by Peter Lotz, the present owner.

Extensive modifications to the Neece-Lotz house show a blend of Victorian and modern Greek Revival styles. The second story has been opened and dormer windows added. A period staircase from a Victorian residence in south Alabama now enhances the entrance hall.

Perhaps the most innovative house on the 1998 Pilgrimage is the Bernstein-Charlton House at 110 Steele Street. The property was originally part of a large tract purchased by John Brahan in 1809. Later, Huntsville's noted antebellum architect George Steele acquired much of the land bounded by Holmes, Lincoln, Clinton and Calhoun Streets for his business. In 1881, merchant Morris Bernstein purchased the 110 Steele Street lot. Bernstein built the first house on the site, a small two-story house with one room on each floor, probably as rental property.

Run-down and regarded as an eyesore, the Bernstein house has recently been imaginatively restored. Mr. and Mrs. Jack Charlton, who acquired the property in 1995, worked with builder Joe Watson and architect Harvie Jones to rescue and improve the small house. A low, inconspicuous addition creates a large living space for the new owners. A porch with Victorian-style “gingerbread” creates an inviting entrance into the old building and the new addition.

The 1917 Masonic Temple, Helion Lodge Number 1 (Alabama’s oldest Masonic lodge) will be on view throughout the day. The Temple’s entrance hall contains early memorabilia of the Lodge, including the large-scale portrait of George Washington, painted by Huntsville artist William Halsey in 1849 for the original 1825 Lodge building. The portrait, a copy of the well-known Gilbert Stuart “Lansdowne Washington,” is one of the state’s most important art treasures by an Alabama artist.



Helion Lodge Number 1, 409 Lincoln Street. Courtesy Huntsville Pilgrimage Association.

The Weeden House Museum will also be open all day. Among its treasures are the six family portraits given by Sophie Lowe Young to the museum after her death. The portraits of Manning and Lowe family members include four works by Kentucky artist John Grimes, who worked in Huntsville in 1820 and 1834. These portraits are being restored by a generous grant from the Doris Burwell Foundation. Portraits of Nicholas Davis, jr, and his wife Sophie Lowe Davis, both by Huntsville artist William Frye, are scheduled for restoration later in the year.

The Huntsville Pilgrimage Association's 1998 tour of historic buildings offers a wonderful glimpse into Huntsville life from statehood to the present, and an unusual opportunity to enjoy some of Huntsville's art treasures.