

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 24
Number 1 *Restoration and Remembrance: The
Huntsville Pilgrimage*

Article 7

3-20-1998

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Harvie P. (1998) "The 1835 Mary Bibb Mausoleum," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 24: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol24/iss1/7>

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The 1835 Mary Bibb Mausoleum

by Harvie P. Jones, F.A.I.A.

In Huntsville's historic Maple Hill Cemetery sits a small jewel of 1835 Greek Revival architecture. It was designed by, and signed by, Huntsville's first and still finest architect, George Gilliam Steele. It is a diminutive Greek-temple-form structure of only 5 feet x 9 feet 6 inches in plan, built of carved limestone, with a gently sloped pedimental stone slab roof, corner pilasters with delicate "egg-and-dart" carved capitals and molded bases; all on a stone stylobate. The delicate molds are counterpointed by the expanses of smooth stone-slab walls. That Steele's name is engraved in tiny Roman letters, "Geo. Steele, Arch't," in the lower corner of the west wall, indicates his satisfaction with his classical design.

This handsome structure demonstrates that large size or great elaboration has nothing to do with the quality of a work of architecture. The Bibb mausoleum is small, simple, and beautiful. Its proportions are approximately those of a "quadruple cube," 5 feet x 9 feet 6 inches in plan, and 9 feet 6 inches high to the roof ridge.

This type of geometric proportioning has been the primary basis of setting architectural proportions since ancient Greece. In the middle ages, architects were called "geometricians." Geometry was used to set the design of buildings and their components, and "measurements" came only as a result of the initial geometry and subsequent artistic refinement.

This secret has been lost in the 20th century. Now buildings are typically set by measurements, with geometric proportioning as an afterthought, if considered at all. The proliferation of awkwardly proportioned modern buildings is the painful-to-the-eyes result of this "backwards approach" to proportioning.

By 1988, the Bibb mausoleum, then 153 years old, was in serious condition. Prolonged water penetration through the joints in the limestone roof slabs had caused freeze-spalling of the entablature stone. Considerable chunks of the architraves, taenia molds, frieze and cornice

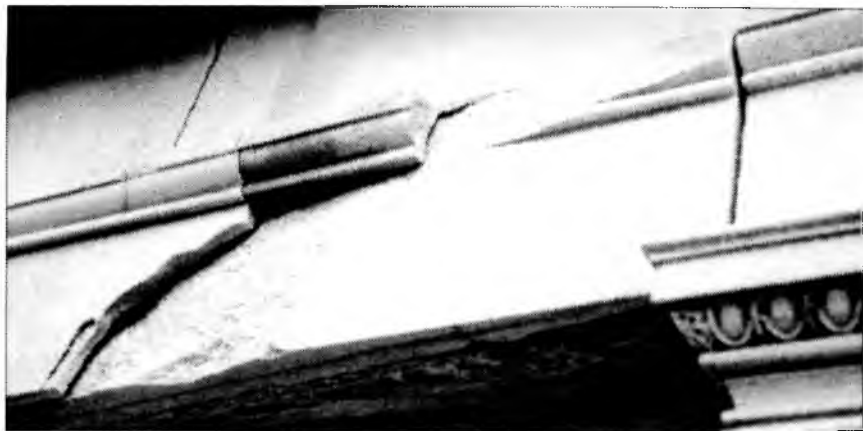
were fallen, and many freeze-cracks were present in the stonework. It was apparent that a two-step approach was needed to (1) restore the building and (2) prevent the recurrence of the water penetration through the roof slab joints that had caused the problem.

Since there is no type of caulking that will permanently seal joints in stone roof slabs, it was decided to cover the roof with an inconspicuous but highly durable material that needs no maintenance. The material used was flat, solid zinc sheets, which weather to a soft gray that is compatible with the warm gray limestone. The metal seams are flattened to further diminish its visual presence.

For the repair of the spalled and fractured carved limestone details, a material developed in Holland specifically for stone restoration was employed— “Jähn Stone Restoration Mortar.” This material contains no plastics, a very important characteristic and not the case with other such products. Its physical properties match that of the limestone and it can be modeled to recreate moldings of spalled areas. The finished results are excellent.

Nine years of planning, fund-raising, and restoration were required in the restoration of this beautiful structure. It was worth every minute of it. Most funding and much effort was supplied by the Huntsville Pilgrimage Association. Monetary contributions were also made by Bibb family members and the Historic Huntsville Foundation. The zinc roof was installed by Guenther Huber-Delle, a highly-skilled metalsmith, trained in Germany, who owns CopperWorks Co. in Decatur. The stone restoration was executed by “Jähn” trained craftsmen from Wasco of Nashville. Architectural work was donated over the nine year period by Jones & Herrin, Architects, of Huntsville, on behalf of the Historic Huntsville Foundation.

It would have been easy to let this diminutive work of architectural beauty continue to crumble into ruin. That it was restored and preserved is a credit to the conscientiousness of Huntsvillians, not only in conserving a memorial and burial site, but in saving a fine work of architecture that serves to remind us that restraint and beauty of proportion, not grandiose size and elaborateness, constitute architectural quality.



Detail of Mary Bibb Mausoleum, Maple Hill Cemetery, before restoration.
 Courtesy Margaret Belle Crow.



Detail of Mary Bibb Mausoleum, Maple Hill Cemetery, after restoration. A craftsman from Wasco, Nashville, finishes the restoration of the damaged stone.
 Courtesy Margaret Belle Crow.



View of recently repaired early graves, looking from the Bibb Mausoleum towards Wells Avenue, Maple Hill Cemetery. Some of these graves may have prompted William H. Thomas's 1851 comment "It is pleasant to meditate among the tombs" (see page 39). Courtesy Margaret Belle Crow.