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Johnson-Burwell Bungalow

Living in the Shadow of the Empire State Building

Jackson P. Burwell

In 1948 Huntsville, Alabama, was four square miles in size and had a population of about 13,000 people. It was almost as big as Decatur but not quite. I was born in Huntsville that year at Huntsville Hospital and was brought home to the house I now occupy fifty years later. In 1948 the address was 406 East Holmes Street. The house is located about three blocks north-east of the Courthouse within easy walking distance. Some time in the 1960s or 1970s, the address changed to 405 Holmes Avenue NE. I guess the city planners felt that the streets and avenues were running the wrong way and needed correcting.

My parents didn't own the house at 406 East Holmes Street. My grandfather, Ed Burwell, owned the house. My father, Ed Junior, having spent four years at war in Europe, was trying to save his money so he could start his own retail photographic business. His first store for Universal Photo Shop was located next to the old Twickenham Hotel on East Clinton Street just down from Johnson and Mahoney Men's Store. Those stores from my childhood are long gone now, replaced by a parking garage.

At five I felt quite privileged to live less than a block from the tallest building in the world. I had heard my grandfather talking about the Empire State Building and how it extended upward almost to the sky. And sure enough, when I went out the front door of my house, there was this gigantic building that just seemed to go up and up and up. It was obviously the building my grandfather was talking about. I don't know when I learned that the real Empire State Building is in New York City and that the building down the street, which is about twelve stories high, is really the old Huntsville Times Building. To this day when I go by the old Huntsville Times Building, I recall the time when I used to think it was the tallest building in the world.

When I was a small child, we kept some chickens in the back yard in a pen. At about the age of five, I learned how to strike matches without the assistance of an adult and proceeded to cause a rather large grass fire in the back yard. After the fire was put out by my mother and Annie, our cook, and having observed the chickens in a rather excited state, I didn't want to admit to my new found knowledge of pyric ignition and insisted passionately that the matches must have fallen out of my pocket and ignited themselves. Maybe even the chickens had something to do with it. But surely it wasn't my fault

My mother didn't seem to accept my story completely, based upon my observations of her general demeanor. However, I did notice thereafter that the chickens disappeared from the back yard. At the time I thought smugly that it served those chickens right for having pyromanic tendencies.

The great love of my childhood from three to ten was toy soldiers and stuffed animals. My mother, Helen Burwell, was amazingly tolerant of the disorder I could create in the living room, which was my play room. At times I would literally have hundreds of soldiers, cannons, and other machinery of war lined up in battle formation on the living room floor. I re-fought the Civil War, the War of Texas Independence, and the two World Wars a hundred times. While I do remember piling my toys away in grocery bags, I never recall being told I couldn't play somewhere.

The stuffed animals I collected were purchased within a few hundred yards of our house in a shop called "Kiddieland" that sat below the skyscraper I mistook for the Empire State Building. There were lions, elephants, a giraffe, tigers, and many more curious creatures. I didn't know it at the time, but these wonderful little animals came from Germany and were made by the Steiff Toy Company. I can remember that the most I ever paid for one of my childhood companions was \$8. Unfortunately, as one of the rituals of passing from childhood, I willingly gave my Steiff animals to my younger cousins in Jeff, Alabama. I hope that the Steiff animals were as loved by my cousins as I had loved the animals.

When I was ten, my parents finally had enough money to build a new house on the edge of town in the Blossomwood area. That was 1958. In 1977 after my grandfather's death, I returned as part owner to the Holmes Avenue house because my father had died two years before my grandfather died. When I came back, the bathroom sink that used to tower over me now was no higher than waist level. It was as though the house had shrunk. When I first moved back to my childhood home, I have to admit that I wasn't overly impressed with it. The wallpaper was tattered, window air conditioners marred the symmetry of each room, and the yellow pine hardwood floors needed a good cleaning.



Fig.2 Front view of Johnson-Burwell Bungalow.
Courtesy Jackson P. Burwell, P.C.



Fig.3 Detail on columns on porch of Johnson-Burwell Bungalow.
Courtesy Jackson P. Burwell, P.C.

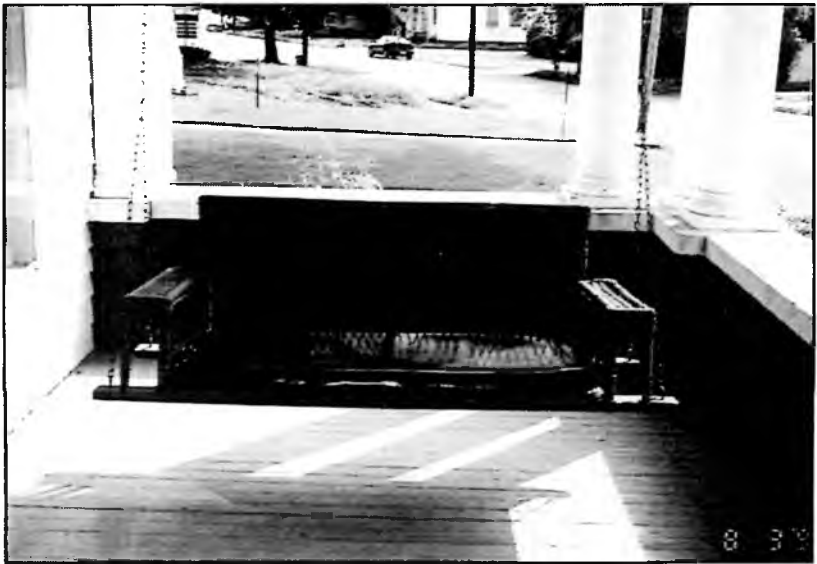


Fig.4 Front porch swing on Johnson-Burwell Bungalow.
Courtesy Jackson P. Burwell, P.C.

However, there were a lot of pluses. The ceilings that are just under twelve feet tall provide a majestic setting to live in. The oak woodwork throughout the house was in good condition and with a little work could regain its original appearance.

After I married Emily Pryor in 1981, we began talking to family members and researching Courthouse records to learn more about the home. The lot at what is now 405 Holmes Avenue NE. and the one next to it at 407 Holmes Avenue NE. were occupied by the George Warwick house in the late 19th century. Warwick was a furniture manufacturer according to an early city directory. Sometime before 1900, the Warwick house burned, and in 1903 Mary Struve purchased the lot. Mrs. Struve gave one half of the lot to her daughter Rose Struve Johnson and the other one half to her daughter Elizabeth Struve Monroe.

The house at 405 Holmes Avenue NE. was started in 1903 and completed in 1904 by Rose and her husband William Johnson. Her sister Elizabeth built the neighboring house at 407 Holmes Avenue NE. in the same year. The style of the house at 405 Holmes is referred to as a bungalow with shingles and classical columns. Rose Johnson, however, lived in her bungalow only about two years. In 1906 (or about) she and her husband moved. Perhaps they had already outgrown their new four-room home.

The 405 Holmes Avenue house was then rented. Charles Shaver, Senior, a local attorney, was born in the house in 1907 and lived there for several years with his parents. Charles Shaver's parents, like mine years later, were finally able to afford their own home in 1916 and built a home on the edge of town on what is now Locust Avenue between Adams Street and California Street. In 1923 Rose Johnson sold the house to my great grandmother, Carrie Davis Burwell; and according to the deed, Carrie paid \$7,500 for the house and lot. Carrie was the widow of Dr. Edwin Dudley Burwell, my great-grandfather (the first).



Fig.5 Detail of inset door on porch of
Johnson-Burwell House.
Courtesy Jackson P. Burwell, P.C.

In 1930 Carrie died and left the house to her son, Edwin Dudley Burwell, my grandfather (the second). After this date the house once again was rented by the owner. According to family history, the house was rented for \$25 per month. My grandfather during this period operated a farm in northwest Madison County and a country store on the corner of Pulaski Pike and Bob Wade Lane. His principal house was next to the country store, but he did maintain a city apartment in order that his son Ed III and daughter Sara could attend city schools. In the late 1930s my grandfather moved in at 405 Holmes after the death of his wife Lallah. His children had begun college.

In 1946 my father, Edwin Dudley Burwell, known as Ed, Junior, moved back to Huntsville with his wife Helen and my older brother, Dudley, and joined his father at 405 Holmes Avenue. As I mentioned earlier, in 1948, I came along. After my parents moved to their own house in Blossomwood in 1958, my grandfather stayed at 405 Holmes Avenue by himself until approximately 1971 when he had the house divided into two apartments, one for himself and one for a renter. After my grandfather's death in 1976, I moved into his side of the house a year later. My cousin Mary Alice Kelly Brinkley and her husband Dan Brinkley lived on the other side of the house. In 1980 Dan and Mary Alice bought their own home in Thornton Acres.

After my marriage to Emily in 1981, the house was returned to the status of a single family dwelling. In 1984 Emily and I had a staircase added to allow access to the second floor. The second floor, which was originally empty attic space, was transformed into bedrooms and living space. Mary Helen, our 15-year-old daughter, is upstairs; while Tom (Thomas Pryor), our 13-year-old son, is still downstairs. Also, the kitchen was enlarged and a breakfast room was added.

Since our renovation in 1984, life in our Edwardian bungalow* has remained an adventure. After several years of experimentation, I think I have finally stopped the leak around the living room fireplace. Also, the wallpaper in several rooms is starting to fray. However, Dan Brooks, who is the curator of Arlington



Fig.6 Johnson-Burwell House, showing kitchen enlargement.
Courtesy Jackson P. Burwell, P.C.

House Museum in Birmingham, made a comment to Emily and me a few years ago after the three of us had toured some historical homes in Natchez, Mississippi, that makes me feel a lot better about my childhood home. One of the houses on the Natchez tour had been redone from top to bottom resulting in the rooms looking almost new. Dan's comment was: "There was something wrong with that house. When I go home to Camden, Alabama, all the old homes have wallpaper peeling here and there. That house just didn't seem like an old historic Southern home at all."

Since I heard Dan say that, the leak stains and peeling wallpaper don't bother me half as much as they used to. I know now that Emily and I have an authentic looking old historic Southern home.

*Editor's note: *Bungalow* is defined as a one-storied house with a low-pitched roof and a wide veranda on the front only.

Two Historic Homes of Huntsville Should they be preserved?



Big Cove Road home of Wernher von Braun.
Courtesy of Margaret J. Vann.



Lafayette Circle home of Jan Davis, Astronaut.
Courtesy of Margaret J. Vann.



Fig.1 "Fairview" at time of purchase, 1974.
Courtesy Jane Barr.



Fig.2 "Fairview" in 1977 showing wrought-iron fence.
Courtesy Jane Barr.