

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 24
Number 3 *Saving Historically or Architecturally
Significant Sites and Structures: What Qualifies?*

Article 5

9-22-1998

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Recommended Citation

Barr, Jane (1998) "What Preservation Means to Me," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 24: No. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol24/iss3/5>

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What Preservation Means To Me

Jane Barr, HHF Preservation Chair

From April 15, 1974, to July 17, 1976, I spent a great deal of time and energy in a house on Randolph Street. During that time, I literally tore the house apart. Over the years, the house had been made into three apartments. When I first looked at the house, my realtor (and close friend) said: "You don't want this house. I have a better one on Holmes Street." When my husband looked at it, he groaned. I was the only one who could "see the original beauty." That was enough. When my husband saw I was determined, he gave me, as a birthday gift, a one-hour consultation with a man who had a reputation for "knowing about old houses." I first met Harvie Jones when he walked into my old house. I followed him from room to room, absorbing like a sponge.

During the following two years, I'd get my husband off to work, my children off to school, do a bit of housework, and head for Randolph Street. We still lived on Monte Sano, and the Randolph Street house was empty. Down came the modern drop ceiling, down came the partitioning walls, out went the plywood paneling. The walls and ceilings were re-papered (using the first of seven layers as examples to find reproductions). Antique furniture from relatives that had been passed to my husband filled the rooms. By the time the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Candle Light Tour of Homes started in July 17, 1976, my house on Randolph Street was ready.

I wanted my house to be acknowledged as "one-of-a-kind." It was in the Twickenham District, but I submitted the necessary forms and photographs to the Alabama Historical Commission. On October 20, 1977, my house "Fairview" (after my husband's ancestral home in Ohio) was added to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage. In doing the research, I located a girl-child who had been named Magna; her last name was Carter. Before my research at the Courthouse was finished, I had information about George Hunt. On July 5, 1977, much to my surprise, I received the Award of Merit from the Alabama Historical Commission.

I never lived in the house, but I did become acquainted with the generations of people who had lived in the house. A year later I sold the house. Where is “Fairview” where Tulliola Powers McCalley Hunt and George W. Hunt lived prior to 1885? It’s the yellow house with gingerbread and a wrought-iron fence at 515 Randolph Street. The HHF *Quarterly*, Summer-Fall 1990, had an article on the garden. July 12, 1991, there was an article in the *Huntsville News* for the garden at the residence of Joann and Scott Osborne.



Fig.3 “Fairview” on Randolph Avenue, August 1998, after extensive renovation by Nancy and Harry Brock.
Courtesy Margaret J.Vann.

In 1990 I went to Buenos Aires, Argentina, on an archaeological excavation. Two years later I went to Tenby, Wales, for an excavation. On the plane home, I asked myself: “Why don’t you look in your own back yard?” The next week I invited a few friends to my home, and we started the Monte Sano Historical Association. Since then we’ve had an archaeological excavation at the pre-Civil War Fearn Home and the 1890s home of James

O'Shaughnessy (both in Monte Sano State Park). We've researched, documented, walked the sites, photographed, and filed the necessary papers with the Alabama Historical Commission to get the following on the Alabama Register: the early 1800s town of Viduta, 1994; the 1930s Monte Sano State Park, 1996; the 1880s Schrimsher Farm; and the 1950s Sunrise Terrace Subdivision, 1998.

This year we accomplished getting the Monte Sano Railway Worker's House on the National Register. Every December we distribute to our members an approximate 50-page document (briefing) of our work. Two copies are placed in the Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

To answer the question: What does preservation mean to me? It means to have a particular location acknowledged as a special place where special people lived. Not necessarily a building that is still standing as that is only four walls. It means bringing back life. It means remembering the people, even the child Magna Carter, who had a newspaper clipping of a bicycle and a page from a story about a horse, pasted on the wall when her bedroom was re-papered. (Did you know it was the custom for a child to wish for something when she was "this tall," say a five-year-old height, and the wish was supposed to come true when she was "this tall," say a 10-year-old height, the height that the clippings were pasted?) I know Magna had a bisque doll, for I found a broken doll hand in the backyard "trash dump." After Magna's family, several generations lived there with no children.

Yes, I like architecture. I spend countless hours measuring, photographing, identifying the period. But to me, the essence of all my work are the lives of the people who lived in the structures: the man who walked the halls with a candleholder, the child who cried in the night, the laughter that echoed in the halls, the whispers, the shouts, the life.



Fig.1 Wisteria inside storm window.
Courtesy David Bowman.



Fig.2 Front porch before restoration.
Courtesy David Bowman.