

# The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

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

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Article 10

9-22-1998

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### Recommended Citation

Ellis, Diane (1998) "Madison County Health Department," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 24: No. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol24/iss3/10>

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## Madison County Health Department

Diane Ellis, Executive Director

### Madison County Health Department

One of the most talked about pieces of real estate in our town these days is the property at Green Street between Eustis and Gates Avenues. Here stand two buildings different in appearance from one another but linked by a shared past of usefulness to the community. Plans to relocate the health department services housed in the buildings have sparked keen interest in the property's future and triggered debate about the importance of the buildings involved.

Are these structures historic?

The health department building facing Eustis Avenue dates from 1952. I have in front of me a black-and-white photograph (see front cover) of the building that appeared in 1955 in a book commemorating Huntsville's sesquicentennial. The photograph was taken on a sunny day, and the play of light and shadow on the building emphasizes its simple, clean lines, and modern attitude. This is handsome building. The brick faces that are canted toward the windows and the ribbon window design remain faithful to the building's geometries while the windows themselves offer an appealing suggestion of a cottage casement. The photograph shows the building's original sign, which was attractive and in harmony with the overall architecture.

"The health department building's main design," Harvie Jones notes, "is overlapping planes with a horizontal emphasis." The light colored brick is typical of the building's *art deco* or *art moderne* style. It is the only building of this architectural style in Twickenham and one of only three in Huntsville (East Clinton School and the Henderson Bank Building are the other two).

I happen to like the health department building. It evokes for me formative years spent in the Midwest, where architecture of this type, with its hint of the prairie, is a familiar part of the built environment.

But apart from my taste is the fact that the health department building is a rare Huntsville example of a highly regarded architectural style. It's an artifact of a particular moment in time. Furthermore, the building is associated with a person prominent in Huntsville's history. Dr. William Burritt, whose home on Round Top Mountain became the city's first museum, donated the land at Eustis and Green to the city and county so that a health services building could be erected.

Finally, the health department building occupies an important site on a significant block in an historic district. (The property is a few steps away from the Episcopal Church of the Nativity, one of the state's National Historic Landmarks.) Almost 50 years old, the building is quietly at home in the spot it was designed for, an integral part of an architecturally diverse neighborhood that would be less interesting without it.

For these reasons, I'd have to say the health department is an historic building. With that designation comes responsibility; historic properties must be protected. In this case, proper interior renovations and code upgrading can give the building a new life of service, as apartments or condominiums, office suites or church-community meeting places.

As for the exterior, all that's needed is soap and water and careful landscaping to restore it to the fine specimen pictured in the 1955 photograph. If it's true that it takes about 50 years for an architectural style to be understood and appreciated, the health department may be about to get some respect.

(Thanks to Harvie Jones for information used in this essay.)

## **The Weil House**

What about the house at the corner of Gates Avenue and Green Street, now used by environmental health services?

According to information from the city planning department, the Weil house was apparently built in 1897 on the site of an earlier house. In 1929, the house was extensively remodeled by local architect Edgar Lee Love. City planner Linda Allen has suggested that Love "...deserves to be recognized as the city's first active preservationist for his efforts to document and preserve Huntsville's nineteenth century architecture." Among the many buildings Love designed in Huntsville during his 30-year career, were the downtown YMCA, the Masonic Temple, the Dunnivant's building, and the old Butler School. He was also an early proponent of adaptive reuse, a concept particularly topical where the health department buildings are concerned.

At age 101, the Weil house has escaped flood, fire, tornado, and demolition by neglect or design. Even its remodeling is more than 60 years old. And like the 1955 health department building, the Weil house is associated with a person who made a significant contribution to Huntsville. Moreover, the Weil house occupies a prospect even more important than the health department, which faces a county parking lot directly across the street and a city lot on the far corner. The Weil anchors a corner of an intersection that includes the 1818 Bernstein House, the 1819 Weeden House, and the 1910 McCalley-Stockton House across the street on Green Street. By virtue of its age, connections, and location, the Weil house merits historic status and our preservation efforts to extend its life another 100 years.

(Thanks to Linda Allen of the city planning department for information used in this essay.)

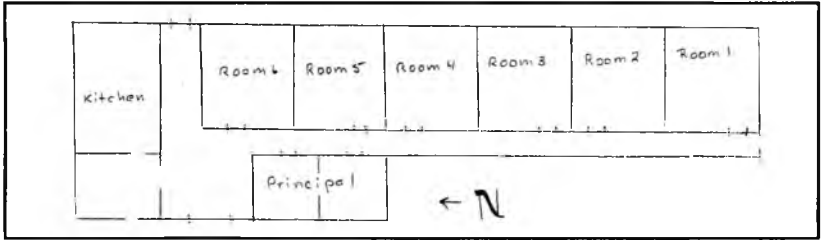


Fig.1 Monte Sano Elementary School, floor plan 1959.  
Courtesy Jane Barr.



Fig.2 May Day Program c. 1960s, Monte Sano Elementary School.  
Courtesy Jane Barr.