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Grocery Shopping on the Old Courthouse Square

Dr. Chris Hauer, Jr., FSA, FRSA

I got a late night, long distance call from my friend, Joe Lay. He had been contacted by a representative of *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* in regard to the old H.G. Hill store on the East Side of the Courthouse Square (see Fig. 1, page 18) in Huntsville. Joe's father was the manager during the store's latter years. "I was just a little kid then. I don't remember anything about it," he said. "You're a bit older. I told them to contact you." They did.

I do remember a little about downtown Huntsville prior to 1940 BA (Before Arsenal). My knowledge of the grocery business came, so to speak, from the ground up. My grandfather, John G. Hauer, operated a well-known truck farm and bedding plant business on Governors Drive(then 5th Avenue). Half the site is now owned by the First Baptist Church. My uncle, Joe Hauer, drove the delivery truck. We would load the truck with fresh in-season produce (and bedding plants during the spring) in the evening. The next morning about 4:30, Joe would head out on his first delivery trip. My brother, Dilly, and I regarded it as a great treat to go on these rounds. We got to see Huntsville before sunrise and sometimes had breakfast at Braley's Barbecue on North Washington Street.

Many of the stores were still dark and deserted when we left the delivery at the door or on the loading dock. We made the delivery to the front door of the Hill store. I don't think it had a back loading dock. The truck frequently had to go back home for a second load, but we kids had to miss the second round when school was in session. Sometimes a call came in the middle of the day from a grocer who had sold out of something. I believe orders as small as a bushel of turnip greens or a few dozen tomato plants were delivered when someone could be spared from other work to drive the truck.

The Courthouse Square used to be a center of the grocery trade. There was Mr. Lonnie Simmons' store on the southwest corner of the Square, at Madison Street and Fountain Row (now Circle). The location became Hopper's Hardware when Mr. Simmons retired. Now the site is part of a parking deck. Also on South Side Square was Pitsinger's Market and a grocery in the T.T. Terry Store (see Fig.5, page 25) with the H.G. Hill store on East Side Square. H.G. Hill later became a part of the Winn Dixie chain. What is now called the Farmer's Market was also located on the Square. Farmers would bring their trucks and wagons and park them on the inside of the Square in the parking slots that surrounded the Courthouse, so it was called the Curb Market. To get the congestion and the litter off the Square, a market house was built in Big Spring Park north of the current City Hall; it was also called the Curb Market. (My family never sold at the Curb Market. The wholesale produce and wholesale/retail bedding plant trade was all we could manage.)

There was even a grocery department on the Clinton Street side of Dunnnavants Department Store before its great fire in 1940. Finally, the Howard Gentle Super Market, the first to use the term *super market*, (see Fig.3, page 20) appeared on North Side Square. The other downtown *chain store* (as folks called them), and H.G. Hill's chief competitor, was the A&P that took over the former Stockton automobile agency building on the corner of Eustis and Greene streets (See Fig.6, page 25). The agency had been housed in three adjoining structures. The center one was torn down to create a parking lot and the southern end became the store. There was a loading dock in the rear of the building. The half block across the street, bounded by Greene, Eustis, and Randolph, was occupied by the handsome "Old Post Office" building that stood for years after the U.S. Postal Service moved to the "New Post Office" (now the Federal Courthouse) at Clinton and Jefferson. First the Old Post Office and later its Eustis Street neighbor, the Elks Theatre, fell victim to progress, creating the parking lot that now fills that space.



Fig. 5 South Side Square, circa 1950.
Courtesy Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.



Fig. 6 A&P Super Market on the corner of Greene and Eustis, circa 1950.
Courtesy Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

But no such downtown parking area existed in the 1930s and 1940s.

Photographs in the Huntsville Public Library Heritage Room reveal that the H.G. Hill store was housed in one of downtown Huntsville's nicer Italianate store buildings. The second floor had five roundhead windows with hood moldings. Flamboyant is perhaps the most apt term for its overhanging eaves and their decorative brackets. The next building to the north was also Italianate. It was taller, with eight second floor windows, and was divided into four storefronts. But its signature architectural features seem more restrained by comparison. [Editor's note: The *Quarterly* was unable to locate these photographs.]

The H.G. Hill store occupied a double storefront with plate-glass shop windows and an entrance on the south. It was equipped with an awning extending the full width of the store that could be let up or down by inserting a crank into a geared device. This was a common technology in the days before air conditioning, anodized glass, and Cool Vent aluminum awnings. The awning was lowered to ward off the heat of the sun. (If you were caught out in a sudden shower, you always hoped some merchant had left an awning deployed. But merchants usually tried to raise them before storms because some caught and held water, and all were vulnerable to wind damage.)

Mr. Connie Lay was the manager of the Hill store. He was a courteous, energetic, and very hard working person. I recall my father remarking on more than one occasion that he didn't know Mr. Lay's salary, but whatever it was, H.G. Hill was getting a lot more than the company paid for. I still have a mental picture of Mr. Lay rushing to the front of the store to assist a customer, wiping his hands on his apron as he went. Mr. Lay and his brother, Bob Lay, who made many friends while driving the Betsy Ross bread delivery truck, eventually took over the former Linville Market on the west side of Madison Street, near Fagan Creek and operated it as Lays' Market.

The H.G. Hill store on the Square (its last sign calls it a super market) was doomed by social change. People had once walked to the store or sent a domestic on foot to do their daily shopping. People increasingly went shopping in their cars. The A&P store (see Fig.6, page 25) had the advantage of a small parking lot. When the first Huntsville Kroger store opened on Clinton Street, it had a much larger parking lot. The Hill store only had on-street parking, and that would become metered parking. The store was also rather small, only two typical downtown store fronts wide. I remember it as being rather shallow. There simply wasn't space to sustain the super market concept.

H.G. Hill thus built a new store on a wedge-shaped lot between Greene and Walker streets at Meridian, with a parking lot in the rear; and, in due course, the downtown store was closed. With the passage of time, other markets in the downtown and on its periphery followed suit. The H.G. Hill store building and many of its counterparts and neighbors were demolished.

Residents of today's Twickenham might once have walked to a major market downtown or to a neighborhood grocery on the southern or western fringe of the district. Now there isn't even a gas station/convenience store within leisurely walking distance. One may suspect that residents of the historic district who covet the more relaxed lifestyle of an earlier day would welcome the resurrection of the downtown Hill store or one of its contemporary competitors!

Note: Chris Hauer, Jr., is a native of Huntsville, Alabama. He holds the AB from Birmingham-Southern College, the MDiv from Vanderbilt Divinity School and the PhD from Vanderbilt University. He is a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Royal Society of Arts, and the Winston Churchill Memorial in the USA. Dr. Hauer is married to Elizabeth Buchanan Hauer, also of Huntsville. They have two adult children. Dr. Hauer is retired from the faculty of Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri. His professional publications are in Biblical and Jewish studies and archaeology. He has avocational interests in British antiquities and in the work of Sir Christopher Wren.



Fig. 1 South Side Square looking east (undated photograph). Notice unpaved street, no wires, Schiffman building facade, and the old Episcopal Church. H.C. Blake Company, Inc., will rent building third from right on South Side Square in the early 1890s. Courtesy Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.