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Remembering Sarah Huff Fisk

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Riley: Remembering Sarah Huff Fisk
Remembering Sarah Huff Fisk

LINDA WRIGHT RILEY

“Beyond research there is knowing, which comes from an empathy with the past.”

—Carol Kammen, *The Pursuit of Local History*¹

When I first met Sarah Huff Fisk in 1995, I did not know that she was a founding member of the Alabama Constitution Village, or that she was the first honorary member of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association, or that she'd written and illustrated many articles and books about early Huntsville. I knew her simply as a charming lady whose family, the O. C. Huffs, had resided long ago in the “Vaught House,” a two-story Victorian home on the northeast corner of Ward Avenue and Andrew Jackson Way (then Fifth Street). In 1995, I had moved into this house myself with my husband and daughter. Seeking to learn more about the “past life” of the house, I invited Mrs. Fisk to come to her former home to share her memories. She came with her niece, Emily Pinkerton Saile, the daughter of her late sister, Martha Lee Huff Pinkerton. Mrs. Fisk also brought an illustrated book, *In The Style of Our Childhood*, that she and her sister had written about growing up in Huntsville during the 1920s and 30s.²

As they entered, Sarah's eye's sparkled with delight, “Home!” She smiled, “I feel as though I've stepped back in time.” I asked her to lead the way as my beacon to the past.

“We moved here in 1919, when I was just 4 years old,” she began.



“We met our guests in this reception room.” She smiled and pointed to the pocket door separating the two front parlors. “Does this still work?” As we pulled the old beveled door out from its track, Sarah’s hands came together playfully. “This is where Martha Lee and I gave our first ‘Punch and Judy’ shows—just like the ones we saw at Chautauqua. We practiced on our family, then invited the whole neighborhood—and charged ten cents admission.”

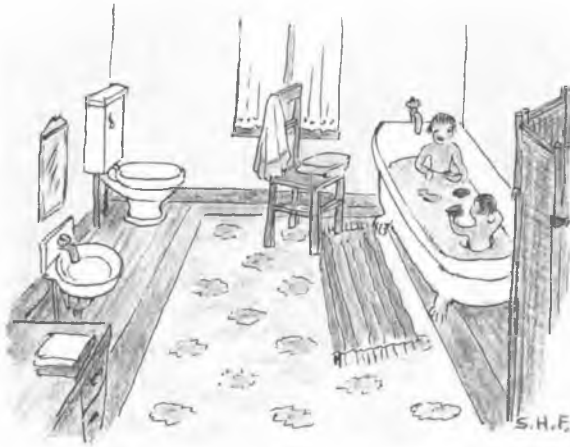


When she entered the kitchen, she said, “This is where Aunt Innie filled the oil lamps—before we had electricity.”



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Peering into the bathroom, she recognized the old ball and claw bathtub. “That’s the very one! What an improvement that was from washing in a zinc tub.”



As we explored the upstairs outdoor porch, Sarah identified the “best hiding places” on the adjacent gable roof, under the water oak tree. “Sister and I had the best time here.”



I marveled at the drawings in Mrs. Fisk’s book. Their warmth brought to life another time, full of the mirth and wonder of two little girls whose imaginations knew no boundaries.

Beyond her own memories, Sarah told me that we could find more history about the house and era in the Huntsville Public Library's Heritage Room. So we went together. We confirmed that the house was built in 1900 and that its first owner was Judge Charles N. Vaught, the son of "master builder" Nathan Vaught of Columbia, Tennessee. We even found a portrait of the Judge (a justice of the peace) and his handsome family, including his wife Robena, sons William and Dale, and daughter Laura. Sarah pointed to the daughter. "In 1919, my mother, Nellie Baker Huff, bought the house from Laura Vaught." Sarah showed me a copy of the deed from Nellie's own records.

Not too many days after our library visit, I received a surprise in the mail from Sarah. It was a 1921 Sanford Fire Insurance map of east Huntsville that she'd obtained from the archives of the City Planning Department.

"I consider this find a near miracle! It shows outlines of the houses existing in 1921," Sarah wrote, "so I've penciled in the names of the residents that I found in the City Directory. Now we have the 1921 neighborhood!" As a newcomer to this kind of research, I was dazzled by Mrs. Fisk's use of old maps, deeds, censuses and directories. She'd extracted and harmonized all her facts with such precision and care. "Isn't this fun?" she asked. I agreed—this was fun. I was caught up in "history" before I knew it and walking through time with someone who clearly knew the way.

Soon, Mrs. Fisk and I found another shared interest. We both enjoyed the works of Miss Howard Weeden, Huntsville's nineteenth century artist and writer. Sarah said, "You know, there's more to learn about Howard. She wrote under the pen name 'Flake White'—which is a pigment of paint." Howard Weeden had a pseudonym? This called for a new search.

We went back to the library and within a short time we became like children on a treasure hunt, looking for any mention of Howard Weeden—or "Flake White"—in the local periodicals of her day. Our frequent trips became our expeditions, with every new find a cause for joy. Mrs. Fisk took short-hand notes and I took photographs. We both kept ledgers of facts that filled notebooks. We had cast a wide net as we traveled up and down hundreds of columns in old newspapers, in pursuit of our subject. Where our finds would lead us, we weren't sure, but they would add up, we had no doubt. They even led us to libraries in other cities. For five years, we gathered and studied our material. In 2005, we finally published a compilation of over 40 articles by Howard Weeden,

written under her pen name, “Flake White.”³ These writings, we believed, would provide new insight into the early life of Howard Weeden.⁴

Mrs. Fisk had a sharp sense of perspective. As much as she loved discovering details, she never forgot the big picture. While working on our project, I especially remember two of our discoveries from the old newspapers and her reactions to them. One was a letter from a *Tribune* correspondent that was re-published in the *Huntsville Advocate* on August 3, 1869. The writer described his visit to the “beautiful city of Huntsville,” where he had toured the Huntsville Female Seminary, “one of the best institutes for the thorough education of young ladies in the South.” He wrote, “The Drawing and Painting Department has for its head, Miss Howard Weeden, a lady well known in the South as one of the most talented *artistes* and beautiful fair ones...”

“This is a new fact!” Sarah beamed. “1869! So soon after the War—and only 23 years old—Howard’s gift as an artist is recognized—and remunerated by the Huntsville Female Seminary. A wonderful find!”

Our other discovery involved Weeden’s own letter to the editor of the *Christian Observer*, a national Presbyterian family newspaper. In it, Weeden defends the apostolic ways of Sam Jones, a revivalist who had captured the attention of many Huntsvillians in February, 1885.⁵

“Sam Jones?” Mrs. Fisk stated her surprise. “My grandmother owned his book!” Mrs. Fisk took me to her house where she pulled from her shelf a thick, brown embossed volume of sermons by Samuel Porter Jones, entitled *Quit Your Meanness*.⁶ “Let’s read him,” she said, “Howard Weeden enjoyed this preacher. Let’s find out why.”

This is how Mrs. Fisk immersed herself in history. She made small discoveries then searched for their larger connection and significance. Often, what she found became compelling knowledge for others as well.

During our work together, Mrs. Fisk was frequently busy with other projects, usually at her community’s request. Would she agree to being filmed in an interview about the history of Merrimack Mill? Yes, Mrs. Fisk had written a publication about that in 1955, when she was an accountant for the Huntsville Manufacturing Company.⁷ Would she provide the historical significance of the Fletcher-Lowe House to assist the Lowe House Dependency Preservation Planning Study?⁸ Yes, Mrs. Fisk had those notes filed in her 1965 work with the Research Committee of the Huntsville Historical Society. Would she come to the Early Works Museum and demonstrate to a group of Brownie Scouts how pioneers made candles? Yes, Mrs. Fisk had participated in the groundbreaking for

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this museum, and had illustrated candle-making in her school textbook,
Long Ago in Madison County.⁹ And, she loved children.



The requests continued. Could she furnish any remembrances from the Chautauqua shows that toured her hometown? Yes, she gladly went to a Chautauqua re-enactment at East Clinton Grammar School where she demonstrated marionettes like the ones she and her sister had seen there in the 1920s. Would she represent her ancestral family, the A. A. Bakers, in the first Maple Hill Cemetery Stroll? Yes, she dressed in costume and brought photographs to show the many fine stone monuments carved by her great-great uncle Albert Baker (1828-1901). Would she support the Huntsville Historical Society's History Fair, held at downtown's Big Spring? Yes, undaunted by a cold and windy day, she displayed her books and drawings near the Indian Creek Canal (which is bordered by stone walls designed by her same forebear, Albert Baker). Would she supply her publications to Alabama Constitution Village, The Weeden House Museum, Burritt Museum, Harrison Brothers, Shaver's Books and others? Yes, while in her eighties, Mrs. Fisk wrote and published 3 new books, all based on her research of Huntsville's past.¹⁰ Would she have a conversation with Bill Easterling of the *Huntsville Times*? Yes. After their meeting, the columnist titled his article, "Diminutive Dynamo Buzzes With Creativity."¹¹ In it, he described Mrs. Fisk's "tall" talents as an historian, writer and artist.

Mrs. Fisk was as gracious as she was creative. She shared the history she gathered, and invited everyone she met to cherish it along with her. She worked on innumerable history preservation projects shoulder-to-shoulder with professionals and amateurs alike, often deferring any credit for herself. "Many good ideas," she once said, "are conceived by a number of people at about the same time."

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Sarah preferred to give credit to those who assisted her joyful digs through dusty library shelves and fragile documents to unearth treasures from our city's past. She spoke generously of her every comrade, and wrote thank you notes as passionately as she wrote her articles and books. Beyond her contributions to Huntsville's history, Sarah Huff Fisk leaves us an example of what it is to be a community's historian.



Sarah Huff Fisk 1915-2006

End Notes

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