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# The Significance of Historic Preservation

*Harvie P. Jones, FAIA*

## Introduction

In 1972, Harvie P. Jones won the Virginia Hammill Simms Memorial Award for his volunteer contributions to the arts in Huntsville.

An example of Harvie's dedication to the arts and preservation is found in this undated essay on the significance of historic preservation to our community:

The combined stresses of the 1930s Depression and World War II engendered a strong desire in the American people for a new and better world. As of 1945, essentially no new construction had taken place for 16 years, except for defense-related minimal housing, industries, and military bases. The Depression and the war shortages of materials, skills, funds, and labor had left our existing building stock in poor shape and inadequate both in amount and in modern amenities. Many areas of cities and towns were in a dilapidated condition; and slums, both housing and commercial, were abundant.

These conditions brought about a great desire to *clean up* the cities and towns and make land available for the new and better world that would surely be the result of victory over the Axis powers. A major player, in this *clean-up* attitude was the U.S. Government *Urban Renewal* program, under whose aegis entire areas, sometimes several blocks, were swept clean by bulldozers without any discrimination between shanties and irreplaceable 100- to 150-year-old houses, including some mansions. All this *progressive* demolition brought forth little protest.

By the mid-1960s, however, voices such as those of the historian Dr. Frances Roberts began to be heard. More people began to realize that the baby was being thrown out with the bathwater. The Urban Renewal program came to an abrupt end in Huntsville in the early 1970s when it was learned that Williams and Lincoln Streets would be 5-laned, cutting down all street trees, fences, front yards, literally shaving off the front steps of such structures as the 1860 First Presbyterian Church, and demolishing an 1880s house for a sweeping intersection at Lincoln and Williams. It was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Huntsville had begun to realize that something is not necessarily good just because it is new, and may well be the opposite. Old buildings, old streetscapes, and old trees help us to understand who we are by showing us our cultural roots in three-dimensional form. Buildings of all types are equally important, for if just one type—say, Greek Revival mansions—is preserved, then we get a distorted view of our past.

Since the 1960s, Huntsville has done a generally good job of this despite inevitable losses (we now have only fragments of two cotton mills, our main reason for 1830-1930 growth). We need to try to save every structure we can so that these continuing occasional losses do not become a total loss in the future.

## Epilogue

The *Huntsville News*, in an editorial enumerating Harvie's many contributions to the arts in Huntsville, ends with Harvie's justification for historic preservation in Huntsville :

“We ought to do it because we are Huntsville.

We ought to do it because we are the most cosmopolitan city in Alabama. We ought to do it, in the last estimate, not only to attract industry or publicize our city in the nation's eyes, though these and others may indeed be worthy endeavors.

We ought to do it because we have civic pride.”

1972

Moved at instigation of H. Jones to present domel.  
for a driveway to a bank. Arch. surv. donated by HJ

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COOPERATIVE EFFORT SPARES "STEAMBOAT GOTHIC" STRUCTURE.



*Steamboat Gothic House covers Franklin Street from curb to curb. Hand-inked note is by Harvie P. Jones, early 1974.*

*Courtesy The Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville, Alabama.*



*“A building of any period, old and recent,  
deserves to keep its own character.”*

Harvie P. Jones, FAIA

*Building Progress, 1977*

## How It All Started:

*From Mission: Progress, Vol. 1, No. 8, December, 1973*

*A publication of the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville, Alabama*

*T. Wallace Armstrong, Editor/Publisher*

For a while there, members of the Madison County Federation of Women's Clubs were beginning to think it was "Mission: Impossible." A local TV station, Channel 19, even went so far as to play the theme music from that perennially popular series during footage shot as the old Steamboat Gothic structure on Franklin Street moved to a new location. And move it did. Inch by half inch. With alarms and sidetrips, anger and laughter, optimism and pessimism.

People's National Bank, in acquiring land for their new downtown building and adjacent parking lot, acquired the historic old structure at 510 Franklin Street. They weren't initially that interested in the home [of Captain John Van Valkenburgh], which some local architects consider a significant example of Huntsville architecture; they needed the land it rested on to build a parking lot.

Bank officers, however, soon became equally interested in seeing the structure preserved. They offered to give the structure to any organization, which would commit itself to buying a new site for it, moving it, and restoring it to its original style.

The Madison County Federation of Women's Clubs volunteered. Mrs. Loxie Doud, special projects chairman, and Mrs. Myron W. Cole, Jr., co-chairman, arranged details.

Land was acquired from the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville at the intersection of south Greene Street and Lowe Avenue to house the structure following the move.

Finally came the move itself [by Don Kennedy Movers]. After about a week of delays caused by a broken drive shaft, malfunctioning jacks, and other scheduling and mechanical difficulties—all during which utility lines in the area were going up and down like jump ropes—the day of the actual move dawned.

What followed was about six hours of high and low comedy based on the theme “touch not that tree.” One broken limb caused a rather well-known attorney to shoot photographs from behind cover much in the manner of a war-painted Apache stalking the cavalry. City Planning Commission chief, Hugh Doak, after beholding the spectacle for about 30 minutes, was overheard to mutter: “People do strange things.”

Threats of suits and countersuits filled the air. As traffic lights came down to make room for the tall structure, female volunteers directed traffic; the city police had decided that the matter wasn’t within their jurisdiction.

After a series of confrontations and mediations and other negotiations, an alternate route was decided upon. The old Steamboat Gothic house cruised majestically like the river queens of old, along Williams, new Gallatin, and Lowe Avenue to her new location.



## **Remembering Harvie**

Harvie P. Jones was the guest speaker at the Heritage Junior Women’s Club in April 1973. He told the members that People’s National Bank needed the land occupied by Captain John Van Valkenburgh’s house, circa 1890, for a driveway into its proposed parking lot. Harvie mentioned that the house was one of only two Steamboat Gothic houses in Alabama.

With Lynda Doud and me at the helm of the project, the Madison County Federation of Women’s Clubs accepted the challenge of having the house moved to a wooded lot on the edge of the Twickenham Historic District at Lowe Avenue near Greene Street.

The project needed the cooperation of the city and county governments, the utility companies, and the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville. U.S. Senator John Sparkman intervened with the Department of Housing and Urban Development so that the housing authority could donate the land to the Federation.

Many volunteers were needed. But the primary volunteer and detail person was Harvie P. Jones, who oversaw the project from beginning to end.

Margaret Cole, Huntsville

## Harvie Jones and Savannah, Georgia

### *Mills Lane*

I'm not sure how I knew about Harvie Jones—he must have been famous—for about 1988, when I was starting research on my book, *Architecture of the Old South: Mississippi & Alabama*, I paid an unannounced visit to his office and began a friendly association that would last till his death in late 1998. I was a stranger and an ignorant one; Harvie was the guide, tutor, friend, and expert I needed.

During the years that I spent exploring, researching, and writing ten books on the history of Old South architecture, Harvie was the most patient of guides, the most patient tutor, generous friend, and selfless expert. In a profession populated with pompous egomaniacs, Harvie was an unselfish servant of historic buildings, eager to learn for himself and to teach others. He told me how he had stumbled into historic preservation and taught himself, and helped teach me as well as many others.

When I first visited Huntsville, I admired Harvie's work; and in 1990 I asked Harvie to be the architect for the first of some fifteen restoration projects in Savannah, Georgia. The first projects were three Federal-era houses built by Frederick Ball about 1805. There were more Federal style and Greek Revival houses. The last projects were a pair of re-created Federal houses on Warren Square, a new house in the style of Greek Revival facing Chatham Square, and restoration of the 1850 Gothic-style Unitarian Chapel facing Troup Square.

Harvie's very last projects in Savannah were typical of his selfless generosity and impulse to teach. During the spring and summer of 1998, he made three long trips: two weeks of hard work in the increasing heat of April, May, June, July, and August to photograph and make measured drawings of the seventy most important houses in Savannah. These are to be published someday in *Restoring Savannah*, a publication that will include a history of preservation in Savannah, Historic American Building Survey-style drawings of details of the best houses in Savannah, and technical do's and don'ts for builders.

Also, during these trips, Harvie began to teach a young architect named Dirk Hardison, who had just been employed by Historic Savannah Foundation, sharing his special knowledge of Southern architectural history and restoration techniques. Typically, Harvie volunteered his services for the *Restoring Savannah* project and gave Dirk, as a gift, a small library of 19th century American architecture books.

Without a doubt, Harvie was the most skilled restoration architect who has ever worked in Savannah, though he came to us, unexpectedly, from Huntsville, Alabama. It was a privilege for me to know him, and Savannah owes him a great thank you.

Mills Lane, Director, The Beehive Foundation

Savannah, Georgia

*Mills Lane was born in Georgia and educated at Harvard. He is the founder and publisher of The Beehive Press of Savannah, Georgia, and has produced more than fifty books about the history of the South including the award-winning 9-volume series: Architecture of the Old South.*



## Remembering Harvie

I have yet to meet another historic architect like him [Harvie], and probably never will. When I work on projects now, he is the standard I measure others against.

Charlie Pautler, Spring Valley, Minnesota