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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol33/iss1/6

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1819 Huntsville as a Trading Center

SARAH HUFF FISK

By 1819, a flourishing agricultural economy existed in Madison County and the surrounding area, with Huntsville as the principal trading center. Since cash was scarce and the value of bank notes uncertain, cotton and other crops often served as the mediums of exchange. Many merchants accepted the purchaser's note, secured only by the signatures of the maker's friends or by a crop yet unproduced. This credit system was a risky one for all parties concerned.

Storekeepers also faced the awesome problem of getting merchandise from the market centers of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Usually, they had to make the buying trip in person, returning overland with their goods in wagons, or coming round the long way by sea to New Orleans, up the Mississippi, and down the Tennessee. Under these conditions, merchandise was not always "seasonable" when it reached Huntsville.

In spite of these difficulties—and others, trading in Huntsville was brisk and competitive. Included in the area mapped are more than 31 stores and shops that have been authenticated as existing in 1819 and located as to site. Along Commercial Row, on the southeast side of the Square, were 13 stores—about the same number as are there today. Stores and shops fronted the Square on all sides, with few vacant lots. A surprising number of the buildings were brick, and many had two stories, with the merchant dwelling in part of the store, or elsewhere on the lot.

Most merchants carried a large and general assortment of goods, which included not only the common staple needs of the large plantations, small farmers, and tradespeople, but the more exotic and elegant items demanded by the many affluent families who lived in or near the town.

On February 9, 1819, Samuel Hazard & Co., whose two-story brick storehouse stood on Commercial Row, advertised: Irish Linens, Pink Italian and White French Crepe, Elegant Fancy Head Dresses, Lace Ball Dresses, Leghorn Hats and Umbrellas, Ladies Beaver Gloves and Hats, Cologne Water, and Flasks and Tumblers for the convenience of hunters. On June 12, this merchant offered: a few elegant dress silk hats and bonnets of the very first quality and latest fashion superior to any ever offered to the Ladies of Huntsville and vicinity, direct from New York. On June 30, the same merchant had for sale: Citron, Liquorice, Soft Shelled Almonds, Cream Nuts and a general assortment of Stoneware.
Henry Cook, whose store was located at number G2, on the northeast corner of the Square, offered: Feathers, Shoes, and Rye Whiskey, Kentucky Linsey Socks, a few barrels of "new" flour, and a choice lot of Foreign Spirits, in trade for cotton during the season at its value. He reminded his creditors as follows: "Those in arrearages for last year will recollect my best efforts were requisite to indulge them, now in return theirs is looked for." William and Samuel Cruse, also on Commercial Row, advertised: Elegant half handkerchiefs, Patent School and Desk Locks, Weeding Hoes, Sheet Iron, Window Glass, and Prime Chewing Tobacco. Phelan and Dillon, on Lot 28, candlemakers, paid the highest market prices for "tallow" in cash, and offered new candles, old whiskey, and Draught Porter, which is neither old or new, just in its prime.

A. D. Veitch's Book Store and Auction House, at number O3 on the map, had for sale on October 30, 1819, a valuable collection of Books and Stationery; "fresh" garden seeds, various utensils used in husbandry, together with the Kalender; a neat assortment of drugs and medicines, among which are many of the most celebrated Patents. There were at least six silversmiths and watchmakers in Huntsville in 1819. Thomas Cain, whose stand was on the northwest side of the Square, had for sale: Gentlemen’s Gold and Patent Lever Watches, fine gold chains, Ladies Ear and Finger Rings, Breast Pins, and first rate Apple Vinegar. Cain warned those indebted to him to "pay up in ten or fifteen days, or they would find their accounts in the hands of an officer for collection."

There were Coach and Harness Makers, Wagon Makers, Blacksmiths and Saddlers. Mudd & Long, on Washington Street, advertised on July 21, 1819, "Patent Elastic Saddles, which for easy riding and safety to the horse are far superior (as will be found upon trial) to the common Saddles generally used." They also offered Saddle-bags, Bridles, and Velices.

James Lynch, cabinet maker, had for sale "elegant Cherry Bedsteads," on accommodating terms for cash, corn, and cotton. W. T. Crenshaw advertised: Elegant Cabinet Furniture, Ladies Sewing and Dressing tables, Curtain and Low Post Bedsteads, China Presses, Sideboards of First Quality, Book-cases, and cherry and mahogany Secretary’s desks.

While this is only a brief listing of some of the items for sale in Huntsville one hundred fifty years ago, it seems to bear out the claim often made by local merchants of that day, when they advertised "the most elaborate assortment of merchandise offered anywhere in the western country."

From a talk by Sarah Huff Fisk to the Alabama Historical Association, May 2, 1969.