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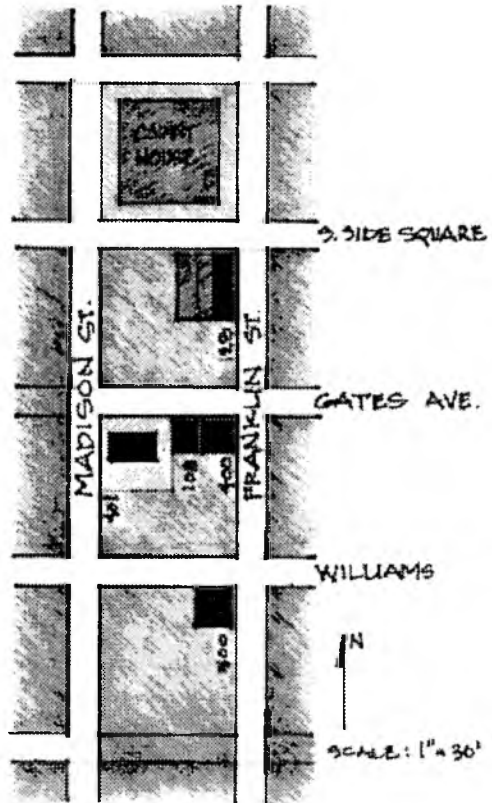
Property and Prestige: Oscar Hundley's Huntsville

Heather A. Cross

In a period when a new building project changes little more than traffic patterns during construction—even in the largest metropolitan areas—it is difficult to imagine the impact one person's building projects could have on a town. And in an era when a single corporation manufactures products as dissimilar as mascara, aerosol cheese, and laundry detergent, the concept of diversified investment hardly raises an eyebrow.

Consider, however, the impact Oscar Hundley made on Huntsville in the late 19th century, when he erected a variety of unique buildings—including commercial, residential, and rental properties—on three downtown city blocks. The local paper ran regular updates on his construction efforts. The city could not help but take notice.

Hundley's was a period of living and working in the same small sphere: homes above storefronts, neighborhoods springing up around centers of commerce. There were no commuters, no bypasses or parkways, no industrial parks. Downtown was still the hub, the nexus—the seat of government, commerce, communication, and power.



Map of downtown Huntsville showing properties owned by Oscar Hundley.

The center of downtown Huntsville was the courthouse.

As a lawyer, Oscar Hundley knew the literal and symbolic power of that traditional structure; as a connected society man, he knew the prestige embodied by Huntsville's Courthouse Square. The corner lot he purchased at 128 South Side Square not only guaranteed a side frontage half a block long, but it gave Hundley a front on the square, a tie to the power base—whether he personally occupied the property or not. He never did, but his place on Commerce Row was assured, and thus his place in Huntsville.

When Hundley decided to build his own home he moved a block south, where the residential properties began. He bought approximately 50 percent of the land between Madison and Franklin Streets—the Gates Street half of the block. He built three homes on this land: his own and two rental properties. To claim a place in the next block south, Hundley purchased 500 Franklin Street, a corner lot that also allowed frontage on Williams.

A glance at the placement of these properties on a map of Huntsville illustrates Hundley's investment savvy: he owned property fronting no fewer than five major downtown streets.

Anyone approaching from the south or east of Courthouse Square would have seen one—if not more—of Hundley's real estate investments. Merchants, bankers and other affluent Huntsvillians would have recognized a new player in their midst. Rural cotton farmers, bringing their bales to buyers on the Square, would have taken measure of the new buildings and commented—some positively, others less so—on the march of progress.

Though the social and economic status implied by the sole, private ownership of these properties might escape a casual modern observer, everyone in Huntsville at the turn of the century was familiar with the man who held the deeds: Oscar Hundley... landlord, resident, and civic leader.

This issue of *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* is intended to explore the Hundley properties, then and now, and provide a glimpse into one enterprising individual's social—and architectural—impact on a burgeoning community.