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Staying Power

128 South Side Square Withstands the Tests of Time

Diane Ellis

“Hon. O.R. Hundley is having brick hauled to #1 Commercial Row, preparatory to erecting a handsome two-story edifice.”

— *The Weekly Mercury*, April 29, 1896

“The work of razing the walls of the old dilapidated brick building on the corner of the Square and Franklin Street goes barely on, and pretty soon the work of raising the walls of a new and modern building will begin.”

— *The Argus*, May 7, 1896

“The lumber for the new store house of Mr. Hundley on the corner of the Square has arrived and the construction will now proceed.”

— *The Weekly Mercury*, Aug. 12, 1896

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Location, location, location.

The realtor’s mantra is nowhere more to the point than when it refers to a property occupying a prime spot in the middle of a community’s economic and public life. For well over a century, the spot of ground at 128 South Side Square—also known as 15 South Side Square, 101 South Side Square, and #1 Commercial Row—has been just such a place, its buildings and occupants positioned to participate fully in the dynamics of a growing community. A list of the property’s tenants is almost a nursery rhyme of occupations that have met the changing needs of the city’s residents over time: printers and cobblers, photographers, hat-makers, bankers, insurers, realtors, restaurateurs, building designers and sewing-machine sellers.

Our focus on 128 South Side Square begins with the 1884, 1888, and 1894 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, which show structures on the site occupied by a printer and cobbler—essential trades in a growing 19th century community. In 1896, Oscar R. Hundley bought the property at 128 South Side Square from A.J. Bentley, Administrator for the Estate of Mary F. Robinson, for \$2,101. Hundley proceeded to demolish

existing structures on the site in order to build a new commercial building. As the 19th century drew to a close, Hundley undertook an ambitious building program, erecting the commercial structure at 128 South Side Square, a new home for himself and his wife at 401 Madison Street, and three rental houses at 108 Gates Avenue, and 400 and 500 Franklin Street. All the Hundley properties were sold after the family moved to Birmingham in 1909 (Planning Dept.).

In 1979, eight decades after Hundley completed the commercial structure on South Side Square, the city included the property in its submission of sites for the National Register's Downtown Multiple Resources Area status. The nomination described the property as "a two-story, brick structure on a corner lot. Although it has been remodeled several times, it retains the pressed metal cornice of sunburst patterns, the carved lintels, and a small iron balcony on the side street. The first floor facade has been remodeled with a large multi-paned window and a Colonial Revival doorway. It now serves as a bank" (fig. 1).

As to its architectural significance, the planners noted that the building was "typical of the many commercial structures built about the turn of the century; it is of small scale and narrow proportions, constructed of brick, has an applied metal cornice, and decorated windows. [. . .]



Figure 1 — Oscar Hundley's 1896 Italianate commercial building with a 1966 "Williamsburg" treatment. Photo circa 1979, courtesy City of Huntsville Planning Department.

Its design owes more to the Italianate vogue than to the Commercial Brick style which was only just beginning to appear in Huntsville. The cornice is identical to that of the 1904 W. L. Halsey Warehouse" [W.L. Halsey Grocery Company, 300 Jefferson Street]. The nomination listed two remodelings, in 1922 and 1963, the latter being the Colonial Revival alteration mentioned above. The designer and builder are unknown (Planning Dept.).

In March 1899, Oscar Hundley sold one-half interest in the building at 128 South Side Square to his father, Orville M. Hundley, for half the original purchase price plus half of the construction costs. When Orville died in 1903, Oscar inherited his father's interest in the property. In 1919, Oscar sold the building to Farmer's State Bank for \$16,500. In January 1928, Farmer's Bank sold the building to Thomas T. Terry (Ryan). In 1941, Tyler Terry inherited the property from her grandfather's trust (Wood). Historic Huntsville Foundation purchased the building from Terry in January 1998.

In the summer of 2000, the organization named the building after its founding chairman, renowned architect and preservationist Harvie P. Jones, who had researched the building and drafted preliminary plans for its restoration before his death in December 1998.

The 1898, 1901, 1908, and 1913 Sanborn maps and contemporary photographs reveal a millinery shop and photo gallery occupying the premises. Visible in a photograph from the 1904 *Morning Mercury* (Jones) are a device for sun-printing photographs attached to a second floor window of the building, an apparent glass-encased photographic studio atop a lowered roof in the rear, and extended ledges on windows in the second floor front of the building (fig. 2).

Historian Frances Robb has determined the photo gallery to be that of S.W. Judd, "one of Huntsville's most renowned photographers." Born in Tennessee in 1880, Searcy Judd had moved to Huntsville by 1903. Records place him on the southeast corner of the square from about this time until 1920 or so, when he moved to a studio at 208 Eustis Street, where he remained until his death in 1960 (Robb).

"Interestingly," writes Robb, "the notation 'se cor square' was used by photographers in the 1850s and later 1860s-early 1870s in the earlier building on the lot. [. . .] Until modern times, photographers are very



Figure 2 — Photo from the Morning Mercury, December 15, 1904 showing photograph gallery and hat shop in the building. Courtesy Harvie Jones Photo Collection.

much inclined to use former photographers' premises and/or addresses, where the light was okay for taking and sun-printing photographs."

The 1911-12 and 1916-17 city directories list Miss Hattie McClendon & Co., milliners, at 101 South Side Square (Harrison Brothers Hardware Store occupied numbers 103-105). As the 1920s began, photographer and milliner were replaced by the dominant symbol of the era, bankers (Sanborn map). Farmers State Bank occupied the building until 1925 (city directories).

By 1928, the building was home to the Singer Sewing Machine Company, which remained there until 1931 (city directories). The 1936 city directory has Tony and Lena Lanza's Lanza Fruit Company doing business at 128 South Side Square. The 1940 directory lists Fleming & Thornton Real Estate and Insurance and the Equitable Life Assurance Society on the site—which at this point was numbered 15 South Side Square (Harrison Brothers occupied numbers 13-14).

Fleming & Thornton were still in business as of 1947. Four years later, the firm had been renamed Thornton & Thornton, and it continued to

share the building with Equitable Life. Directories place Thornton & Thornton in the building until 1963.

By 1964, American National Bank had arrived, and in 1966 it brought about what Harvie Jones called the “colonialization” of the facade. American National became AmSouth Bank in 1983 (Stephens 189), then vacated the building, which remained unoccupied until 1990, when the Village Inn on the Square restaurant opened. The Village Inn closed in 1994 and Spring City Cyclery briefly set up shop. In 1996, the bikes were gone. The building briefly accommodated a series of enterprises that never quite got off the ground, including a gift shop and Hair on the Square barbers (city directories).

Currently, Bird and Kamback Architects are located in the second floor front of the Jones Building. During renovations of the suite, faded images of oval cameo silhouettes and graffiti in the form of notes relating to the photography business—customer orders, appointments, addresses, prices of supplies—were discovered on one wall. Darryl Bird and Greg Kamback have preserved the graffiti, which Frances Robb believes date from S.W. Judd’s occupancy. On the ground floor, Jennifer Britt manages The Huntsville Inn, a restaurant featuring menus based on historical recipes. In the future, Historic Huntsville Foundation plans to renovate space in the rear of the ground floor for its office.

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“Commercial buildings are forever metamorphic,” notes Stewart Brand in his *How Buildings Learn* (5). In its continuing metamorphosis, the 1896 commercial building at 128 South Side Square has influenced and been influenced by the variety of trades, professions, goods, and services that have come and gone—and sometimes returned—to this prime piece of real estate on the square.

Changing tenancy can in part be considered a reflection of changing economic and social trends in downtown Huntsville. The cobblers and fruit sellers are gone, but a restaurant and a professional firm are back. Physical changes to the building reflect users’ needs and, occasionally, the fashions of the time.

Fortunately, despite changing needs and fashions—and some inappropriate treatment here and there—the architectural integrity of this useful and comely building remains intact.

What we know or speculate about the building's alterations include changes to the exterior and interior. On the exterior, the rear photography studio, sun-printing apparatus, extended ledges, and entry steps

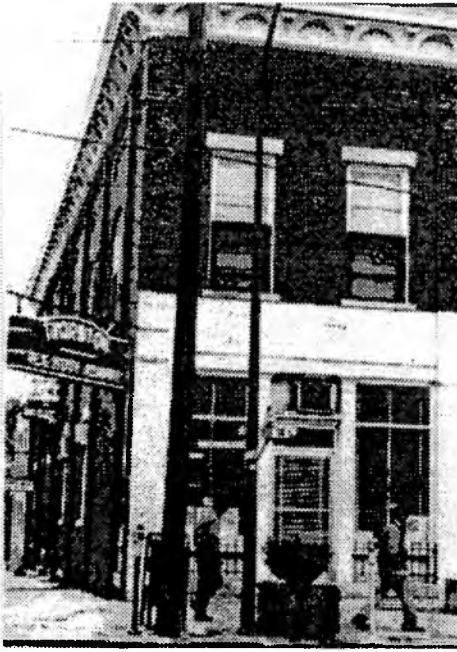


Figure 3 — Storefront as it appeared prior to the 1966 remodeling. Photo courtesy Harvie Jones Photo Collection.

Despite extensive research by architects, remodelers, and other interested parties before and during the 1999-2000 restoration, a clear, unobstructed photograph detailing the front of the building during that period has never turned up. What few photos are known to exist are shot from an angle; obscured by foliage, awnings, or shadows; or are too small to be helpful. Consequently, dates and details of the pre-1966 facade and front entry remain somewhat speculative.

During the 1966 remodeling, the building's main floor was lowered and the two steps to the front entry removed, permitting bank patrons to enter at sidewalk level (Jones). A photograph from the period shows a customer drive-thru in operation at the south end of the building. Some interior remodeling was also done to accommodate the bank's business

seen in the 1904 photograph (fig. 2) were later removed and the rear first floor roofline adroitly raised to the rest of the building's two-story level.

It seems likely these changes occurred in the 1920s, when Searcy Judd moved to Eustis Street; an apartment was created where part of his studio had been and where Bird and Kamback's offices are now. Renovators reconfiguring the space in 1999 encountered 1920s-era bead-board, wallpaper, plumbing and appliance hook-ups, as well as remnants of an early version of Sheetrock.

At some point between 1904 and 1963, the building's facade was altered (fig. 3).

needs. With the arrival of the Village Inn in 1990, the first floor was again remodeled to meet the requirements of a restaurant operation.

Historic Huntsville Foundation's purchase of the building initiated another metamorphosis. The second-floor apartment was remodeled for the architects. The first floor restaurant's kitchen arrangement required a major overhaul to meet building codes and to accommodate new equipment. A huge steel bank vault left over from the building's years as a financial center was cut out and removed.

Other changes were undertaken for aesthetic reasons and to improve the building's long-term usefulness. Both existing staircases were removed; a new one was constructed on the east side to establish a separate entrance to the second floor, through a re-opened entry on Franklin Street. New bathrooms were installed. Finally, the facade was restored to echo the building's original storefront (fig.5).

At the time of Historic Huntsville's purchase of the building, the Franklin Street exterior remained largely unchanged. At some point, a window—now bricked-in—had been added (compare figs. 2 and 4) and other openings had been closed. Not long after the 1979 National Register nomination, the metal cornice on the east side blew off the building during a storm and was replaced by a wooden one (Jones).



Figure 4 — Franklin Street side of Harvie P. Jones Building showing bricked-in opening added after 1904. Courtesy Historic Huntsville Foundation files.

The Historic Huntsville Foundation unbricked three openings on the building's east side, in addition to the one opened for the second-floor entry. Two openings at the rear of the building were also unbricked.

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A Huntsvillian from 1900 strolling down Franklin Street today would have no trouble recognizing the building he or she knew a hundred years ago. Oscar Hundley had a nose for shrewd property acquisitions



Figure 5 — The **Harvie P. Jones Building** at 128 South Side Square, as it appears today. The second-story windows of the offices of Bird and Kamback Architects look out on the Square. Photo courtesy of Diane Ellis.

and an eye for good design. He bought land in the right places and erected buildings with staying power.

The “handsome two-story edifice” Hundley built on Huntsville’s courthouse square in 1896 has served the city for more than a century. Now, restored and reinvigorated, 128 South Side Square is set to participate in the city’s life for the next hundred years.

Diane Ellis is the former executive director of Historic Huntsville Foundation (January 1998 to July 1999). She spent part of that time working out of a makeshift office on the first floor of the Jones Building, before and during the remodeling. Ellis would like to acknowledge the assistance of Linda Allen, Mike Holbrook, and Lynn Jones.

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