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# **Transformations: 401 Madison (1976-2000)**

*Jacquelyn Procter Gray*

Recently, Huntsville attorney Doug Fees sat in a comfortable leather chair in his office and reflected on the old home that now serves as offices for his growing law firm. When asked if he had any regrets during the lengthy and extensive renovation process of the house that sat vacant for nearly twenty-five years, he laughed.

“Some days I congratulated myself for being a genius,” Fees said. “The next day I wanted to kick myself for being the biggest fool in the world.”

Fees’ law office at 401 Madison Street is the home built by attorney Oscar Hundley. Considered an ugly duckling for a time, it now shines as a swan. Hundley bought the half-acre lot for \$2,200 at an auction in 1890. In 1898 and 1900, he bought two adjoining sections for another \$2,200. The original building on the site was torn down for the construction of his new home near his office building on the square.

While the exterior may not be as ornate as other homes in Huntsville, the inside reveals that Oscar spared no expense in details and craftsmanship. When the house was finished in June 1900, it was described as one of the most elegant homes in Huntsville, with many fixtures and one of the town’s first examples of indoor plumbing. After Oscar failed to receive Senate confirmation as Federal judge, he resigned, sold his home for \$11,000 in December 1909, and moved to Birmingham.

For years, descendants of the Hundley family expected the building to fall victim to the march of progress and the wrecking ball. In fact, over the years there had been several plans to revive the structure, but all were cost-prohibitive. Meetings were held to discuss its usefulness as a visitors’ center, a private club, and even to house the collection of books and items found today in the Huntville Library’s Heritage Room.

From 1930 to 1958, 401 Madison was the funeral home of Laughlin, Wood and Company. John Purdy, president and co-owner of Laughlin Funeral Home, remembers when his father was sent to Huntsville to

manage the business. The embalming room was on the first floor towards the back. The deceased were dressed in pajamas and placed in a bed for the viewings, then dressed again and removed to coffins for the actual funeral service.

Jimmy Blackburn, a teacher at Lee High School, was often hired to play piano at the funeral services. One Christmas, Purdy's father made a generous gesture to the neighborhood and placed loudspeakers out on the front porch while Blackburn played the finest Christmas carols the season had to offer. The neighbors complained.

Purdy's father bought the business in 1948, but eventually needed to relocate to a larger, more modern facility and in 1958 moved the funeral home to Bob Wallace Avenue, where it remains today. Although Purdy doesn't know specifically what happened to the furniture after the relocation, he was surprised when he walked into the Twickenham Station restaurant one day and recognized an antique combination mirror, umbrella stand, and hat rack—the same one that had been in the funeral home on Madison Street.

In 1959, the city of Huntsville bought the house and used the building as a police station and various other municipal offices until 1976. In the late 1970s, scenes from the motion picture *The Ravagers* were filmed there, causing the property to be further defaced.

At some point—likely prior to the ravages of the film crew—the stained glass window on display in what has become Fees' office was removed for safekeeping and replaced with a duplicate of the original, which now is on display at the Huntsville Museum of Art.

Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy St. Clair bought the house in the early 1980s with the hope of turning it into a bed and breakfast. The couple lived on the third floor while collecting architectural salvage material and beginning to update the home. However, Mr. St. Clair's health soon brought the project to a halt.

In the meantime, Doug Fees passed the house nearly every day on his way to and from his law office on the square.

In 1994, Fees settled a lengthy case in Tennessee and finally had the time and financial stability to establish his own practice. Doug wanted his new law office to meet several criteria: it had to be near the court-

house, have space for parking, be zoned for commercial use, and provide enough room to allow his practice to grow. He felt it was important that the office have a comfortable atmosphere for clients.

With these criteria in mind, Fees looked at several properties near the square, but kept coming back to the Hundley house. He asked an architect, a realtor, and a bank president to tour the house and give him their professional advice. Unanimously, they advised against purchasing the property, which had been on the market for several years.

“You would have to be half crazy to take on a project like this,” Fees acknowledged.

Nevertheless, he felt the house had potential, and with his wife’s encouragement, he bought it.



*401 Madison — Gambrel roof line of west front facing Madison St. before Fees renovation.  
Photo courtesy Harvie Jones Photo Collection.*

Luckily, behind the beautifully carved window frames, the hand-blown curved glass, and the stained glass windows, the house proved to be structurally sound. The parquet floors and wood paneling had surprisingly little damage from termites or water.

Souvenir hunters had taken all of the light fixtures and whatever else could be easily removed, but some of the marble and wood mantles remained.

Other surprises waited. During installation of new plumbing and wiring, it was revealed that a smoldering fire had occurred at some point. A hydraulic elevator was installed that required drilling a hole 27 feet below the house. Twenty-six feet down, workers hit solid limestone. It took three weeks and considerable expense to drill the last

foot, but the elevator's installation brought the building up to code and ADA compliance.

Today the first floor contains restored parlors and an entry hall that serve as reception, waiting space, and Fees' office. A restored second-floor family dining room, now used as a meeting room, boasts a fireplace—as do most of the rooms, including bathrooms—rich wood paneling and beams, adding to the refined atmosphere. Other renovated rooms and former bedrooms on the first and second floors hold the offices of the firm's partners, lawyers, and support staff.

The third floor has been sculpted into a series of connected spaces that nestle under the contours of the varied roofline. The library and study area feature original pine wood floors and the exposed structural elements that support the various projections of the house's exterior massing below.

Probably the most memorable item in the house has a rather unusual history of its own. In the 1960s, a local dentist offered to restore the stained glass window in the main staircase's landing, depicting a maiden, mythical Circe. Instead of returning the window, he installed it in his office in Chattanooga. When threatened with a lawsuit, he returned the window, but the artist's signature pane was missing. Some believe the name on the pane was that of Louis Tiffany.

Walking through the restored rooms of the old Hundley home, Fees recalls with some amusement those early years of ownership, when he regretted his decision to buy the property on almost a daily basis.

Fortunately, for our historic city and the people who work so hard to maintain its heritage, that regret is no longer the case.

*The author and editor would like to thank Doug Fees for allowing access to his offices and offering tours and interviews to interested parties.*