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From Addition to District: An Overview of Five Points

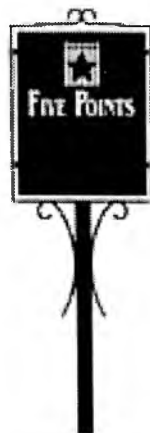
Linda Allen

The first historic district established in Huntsville was Twickenham in 1972; the idea for it began in the early 1960s, but there was considerable opposition to such a move. Also, before it could be established, the state legislature had to adopt enabling legislation giving the city council authority to designate historic districts and set up a review commission with oversight of the district. In 1974 Old Town was designated. Not until 1992 did the next district—the oldest portion of the Alabama A&M University campus—come into being. This makes the Five Points Historic District Huntsville's fourth historic preservation district.

Process

The creation of a district requires that petitions requesting historic status be signed by at least sixty percent of the property owners in a defined area and be submitted to the city. A public hearing before the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission follows receipt and verification of the petitions. The commission's recommendation is forwarded to the city council, which considers the request and votes on the ordinance to establish the district.

A possible Five Points historic district was seriously considered in 1982 when the Historic Huntsville Foundation sponsored a meeting with area residents to assess whether there was sufficient interest on the part of owners to pursue the process. The area targeted extended from Oakwood Avenue to Maple Hill cemetery and from Maysville



The Five Points Historic District marker—Homes in the FPHD display this marker with the name and date of the original owner. The logo is also used on the FPHD Association's newsletter and other items such as flags.

Road to Andrew Jackson Way. Petitions were circulated, but the scope was too large and was unworkable—in part due to large numbers of absentee landowners. Later the target area was reduced to south of McCullough, and work began again. The requisite number of petitions was still unobtainable. The quest lay dormant until 1994 when the city again received inquiries about the procedure from several homeowners. This time they succeeded in securing the necessary support, but only by restricting the boundaries to a smaller area where interest was concentrated. The hope was that if a smaller district could be established, then adjoining blocks might later be encouraged to join the district by following the same procedure.



1115 Ward Ave.—The Livingston home was built in 1929. The bungalow elements include large overhangs, a front dormer, a deep front porch, and a porte-cochere. Photo Susan Bridges.

It took five years for a small group of dedicated neighbors to secure the necessary petitions for a district that runs from Ward Avenue to Wells and Eustis Avenues and from Russell Street to Minor Street. The district encompasses approximately 260 houses and 243 owners of which sixty-eight percent participated in the district request (see map on page 3).



808 Ward Ave.—Simple Victorian wood-frame homes retain the varied massing and L-shapes of more elaborate Victorians. The exterior details are simpler and restricted to the use of shingles or siding. This updated version is aluminum sided. Photo Susan Bridges.

Architecture

The Five Points District began as the East Huntsville Addition and grew slowly over the course of a century. For this reason it illustrates the change in style and building type for both commercial and residential structures. Neighborhood housing began with types popular at the turn of the 19th century and spanned the



1205 Clinton—*A brick home of Cape Cod massing but detailed around the door and chimney with English Cottage stone work and a slight Tudor influence on the peaks. Photo Susan Bridges.*

quiet roofline, stick brackets under the eaves, broad front porches, and one- or one-and-a-half stories with front dormers. Some bungalows demonstrated Arts and Crafts details while a few homes revived the English Cottage tradition with a few distinctive details centered around entryways and chimneys.

Mid-century housing for the masses tended toward simple and plain designs based on the Cape Cod house and was constructed of wood. By the 1950s Huntsville experienced tremendous growth, and houses were built wherever there were vacant lots. These houses of the 50s and 60s illustrate the popularity of the ranch style. In a neighborhood of forty feet wide lots, these long low brick homes required a minimum of two lots to stretch across. Even today, new houses appear or older homes are remodeled in a neo-style that freely mixes historic and modern elements and materials to create new designs.

entire 20th century stylistic range as infill development occurred.

Rather than a museum-like concentration of one period, the area illustrates the evolution of middle-class housing in 20th century Huntsville. These range from modest one- and two-story vernacular Victorian homes displaying a minimum of decorative woodwork to an endless variety of bungalows that experienced great popularity in the 1920s. The bungalow is primarily identified by a low,



1122 Wellman—*Apartments provided landlords with suburban income. The German Bauhaus influence can be seen on this 1930s building in the large casement windows, simple box shape, and smooth exterior. The shutters and slope to the entry overhang are probably later additions. Photo Susan Bridges.*

Significance

The collection of buildings in the Five Points neighborhood is significant because of what it can tell us of our city's historic and architectural past as well as illustrate the continuing need for housing and a sense of place over time. More specifically:

- The East Huntsville Addition was created as part of the effort of local businessmen to revitalize Huntsville and attract industry and jobs following the destruction brought by the Civil War. The subdivision's beginnings are tied to 19th century events, but they also contributed to the initial effort to shape the city's future through active recruitment of jobs and businesses rather than a continued reliance on agriculture.
- The Five Points neighborhood retains its 19th century grid layout of broad, parallel streets, narrow but deep lots, and rear service alleys which permit pedestrian-oriented streets since cars can be parked and garbage picked up in the rear. It is in fact the prototype of the New Urbanism that shows up in planned communities like Seaside, Florida where architects try to recreate the neighborhood feeling of the past.
- East Huntsville was the first suburb in Huntsville made feasible by the construction of a streetcar line which allowed working people to live farther than walking distance from jobs and shopping without owning an automobile.



Trolley Car—The convenience of the trolley made it possible for workers to live farther from their place of employment, and the sides of cars provided advertising space. Courtesy Old Huntsville Photo Album CD.



1018 Ward Ave.—The Toney-Uptain home is a two-story Colonial style that was built in 1941. This was the start of adaptations of many historical styles to incorporate modern use. Homes also no longer needed to respond to climate, thus a New England type Colonial in the South. Photo Susan Bridges.

- As the first—and second—tract of land to be annexed into 20th century Huntsville, the area broke the regular, compact plan of 19th century Huntsville and set a pattern for future annexations as the city grew and prospered.
- At over 100-years-old, the mature subdivision features large trees and substantial plantings, sidewalks, front porches, a comfortable scale, a unity of street line, and a variety of housing styles, materials, sizes, and massing—features which are not possible when a neighborhood is developed over a relatively short time span.
- The Five Points area stands as an example of 20th century, middle-class, vernacular housing because of its incremental construction. When walking its streets, one can see how tastes have changed and evolved over time while still fitting into the Victorian framework that initially formed its boundaries. Overall, its interest and charm come from the continued sense of neighborhood and a history of place.



1315 Ward Ave.—Modern infill housing combines some historic elements and a general massing of the district. Photo Susan Bridges.

Linda Allen works for the Huntsville Planning Department. This article was adapted from a presentation she gave on the East Huntsville Addition to the Historic Huntsville Foundation in 2000.