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Five Points Reminiscences

Diane Ellis

Dorothy Love Adair and McKinney “Mack” Thomas share a birth year—1917—as well as decades of memories as childhood playmates in the close-knit Five Points neighborhood on Huntsville’s east side. Dorothy’s recollections actually span a longer period of time because she lived in Five Points much of her life. Mack moved to the area from New Hope when he was four or five years old and left the neighborhood some nine or ten years later.



Mack Thomas’s Five Points home is gone, but he recalls that it was next door to the 1916 DeYoung house located at 201

801 East Holmes Avenue—*The 1905 Adair home as it appears today. Photo Diane Ellis.*

Dement Street (then called 2nd Avenue) and was built in the same style. Dorothy’s home was the two-story house at 801 East Holmes Avenue that anchors the leafy triangle of land bounded by Pratt and East Holmes Avenues, Dement Street, and Andrew Jackson Way. In the front yard is an Old Town Historic District Marker with the words “Adair 1905.” Dorothy was born in this house and lived here off and on until December 1999, when she moved to Somerby at Jones Farm. The Adair house had been built by the Wellman family who owned much of the property nearby on Holmes and Pratt. Dorothy’s family moved into the house in 1912, the fourth family to live there. Dorothy

and Mack's Five Points recollections differ sometimes in the details, but certain images are strong in the memories of both former residents: the few neighborhood businesses; a ditch that was a watercourse for Monte Sano run-off which snaked through the neighborhood, providing myriad play opportunities for kids; the streetcar; and "The Pierce Place."

The Pierce place was the home of J. Emory Pierce, publisher of *The Huntsville Daily Times*, and his family. Their property occupied the Five Points triangle bordered by Dement Street, East Holmes Avenue, and Andrew Jackson Way (5th Avenue then, Mack remembers). It consisted of an architecturally eccentric limestone rock house, plus, Mack recalls, a barn, a garage, and a buggy house. There was a mural painted by Mrs. Pierce inside the house and an "observatory," which was also a playroom for the Pierce's baby girl, Melrose. A stone wall surrounded the property, and Dorothy remembers that the children of the neighborhood played on it all the time.

A portion of that wall can still be found, preserved between the two gas stations now located on the triangle. A plaque on this remnant reads, "This rock wall is the last remaining of a beautiful wall around Mr. J. Emory Pierce's 'CASTLE' on Holmes Street that distinguished this



The Pierce Place—The J. Emory Pierce home at East Holmes Avenue at Five Points, 1925. Now demolished, the home was also known as the Wedding Cake House due to its eccentric architectural style. Photo courtesy McKinney Thomas & Huntsville/Madison County Public Library (H/MCPL).

neighborhood in east Huntsville. The wall matched the structure of the home.” The plaque notes that the work on this bit of preservation was done by the Coca-Cola Company.

Dorothy recalls Mr. Pierce as being a good writer and Mrs. Pierce as also writing, working at home on social items for the newspaper. She clearly remembers Mr. Pierce walking downtown to work each morning, wearing a hat and dangling a walking cane from his arm. Mack recalls that “Mr. Pierce was tall and very erect and dressed very nicely all the time and wore a big hat.” Mack says that it was sometimes Mr. Pierce’s habit to walk down the middle of the streetcar track on his way to work, not giving way to an oncoming train until the last possible moment. With its idiosyncratic house and outbuildings, the rock wall, a pony, and a horse or two, the Pierce’s property was a magnet for children.

The streetcar was also popular with the area’s residents. “Really interesting to everybody,” Dorothy remembers, “The neighborhood boys would hitch rides by hanging onto the outside of the train.” Because her family had a car and she lived close enough to walk or ride her bike to town, Dorothy didn’t ride the streetcar very often, but she remembers that it went from Holmes up one block on Pratt Avenue to what is now Russell Street, turned left, and went out to Oakwood Avenue and on to Dallas Mill. She says the trainman would go to the other end of the train, reverse course, and travel on to the courthouse.

The streetcar was useful transportation for residents of the expanding mill villages, and it served the textile mills in west Huntsville. Mack remembers that there were five cars, and he believes the fare was a nickel or a dime. A passenger could ride downtown, then get a transfer for a nickel to continue on from there. Ticket books were available for frequent riders. Mack had a friend whose father was a motorman.

The ditch was a favorite play place for the neighborhood children—more for boys than girls, as Dorothy recalls, because boys were allowed to engage in more rough-and-tumble activities than young ladies. The dirt trench carried mountain run-off down Wellman, across Andrew Jackson, and under the Pierce property to the opposite side of Dement Street. It went down Dement to East Holmes and Pratt, all the

way to Dallas Avenue, and on under Goldsmith-Schiffman field. Mack remembers playing in the ditch near Wellman Avenue and a hump in the sidewalk where the ditch passed under the Pierce property. As development increased in the area, the city lined the ditch with cement and boxed in the culvert.

Dorothy remembers East Holmes and Pratt Avenues as dirt roads and the presence of fields on Pratt when real estate development was still in the future. Both remember the early business enterprises in the neighborhood, such as the McKissack family's grocery store on East Clinton Avenue and the John Scott Florist and Greenhouse on Wellman, later taken over by the Pearsall family (in 1999 a Pearsall relative, Kirk Carlisle, bought Dorothy's Holmes Avenue house to use for his art business). Dorothy's grandmother and aunt traded at McKissack's, but her immediate family bought their groceries at T.T. Terry's on South Side Square. Mack's family met their grocery needs through their own business. His father and two uncles owned the Lowe Mill store, Chaney and Thomas, until the mill shut down and the family moved to a farm east of New Hope in 1931. Mack helped on the Chaney and Thomas grocery wagon during his Five Points years.

Dorothy also remembers a kind of farmer's market downtown in the Big Spring area as well as the occasional vegetable peddlers with wagons. And "the goat man." The goat man was the legendary Dr. William H. Burritt, who delivered goat's milk in his "square, funny car." Mack recalls that there was "a little bitty one-horse Texaco Station" on Andrew Jackson run by a Mr. Osborn, and a large two-story house on the spot where Star Market is today. The demolition of that house quickened the pace of commercial development in the area according to Dorothy.

Dorothy's recollections of her early years include memories of occasional Sunday afternoon visits to Big Spring Park to witness members of St. Bartley Primitive Baptist Church undergo baptism in the spring. She found this to be an unusual and interesting event, and she remembers being told the difference between sprinkling and immersion. Dorothy's father owned an insurance business and many of his clients were participants in the baptisms. The development of the Meadow Gold dairy business occasioned another Sunday pastime

that is part of her childhood memories. After church her father would drive the family to the dairy where he knew which door would be open for him to buy a quart of ice cream to go with the Sunday cake her mother had made the day before.

The years have been kinder to Dorothy's Five Points triangle than to the Pierce family's triangle across the street. Some time after the Adairs moved to 801 East Holmes they remodeled the 1905 house to add a bedroom and a bathroom on the first floor, so the house we see today doesn't look like the original, but it's a very handsome house in its "newer" configuration. Dorothy recalls that in the summer her parents would forsake their downstairs bedroom for a more comfortable night with Dorothy and her brothers upstairs on the sleeping porch. When Dorothy decided to sell the home place, a friend of hers with family and business ties to the neighborhood was able to carry out a sensitive adaptive re-use of the house to suit his business needs. That sleeping porch, with newly insulated windows, is now Kirk Carlisle's office.

The tip of the Adair triangle was a popular playground for kids when Dorothy was a child. She remembers that her mother always wanted to plant grass there but her father said to let the children play, there would be time to plant grass later. The Wellmans had decided that tip of land to the city, with the stipulation that nothing be built on it. Thanks to the Wellmans, Adairs, and Carlisles this little oasis in the middle of Five Points should be as pleasing to future generations as it has been to those in the past.



Home of J.E. Pierce—Photo from a local newspaper, date unknown. Note the fairly consistent size of the bays between the pilasters and the varying symmetry of the facade. Courtesy McKinney Thomas & H/MCPL.



J. Emory Pierce Home—The structures and property at East Holmes Avenue at Five Points were surrounded by a filled stone wall which incorporated electric light fixtures. Photo date unknown, courtesy McKinney Thomas and HMCPL.

Bios

Dorothy Adair attended East Clinton School and Huntsville High School. She earned a B.S. degree from Shorter College in Rome, Georgia and an M.A. in Music Education from Peabody in Nashville. She taught for four years in Dalton, Georgia and spent four years teaching in schools in Germany. Her musical specialties are piano and organ.

McKinney Thomas attended East Clinton School. He graduated from Auburn University and worked in vocational agriculture in Princeton, Alabama. He served in the army in Europe during World War II. He was in the furniture business for years in Huntsville and Birmingham before moving back to Huntsville in 1977.

Diane Ellis is a member of the Historic Huntsville Foundation. She is an occasional writer for the Quarterly and enjoyed this opportunity to interview Five Points "historians," Ms. Adair and Mr. Thomas. Ms. Ellis thanks them for sharing their memories.