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History of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House

Donna Castellano

A house has a history of its own, created and recorded by the people who live within its walls. Over its 115-year history, owners have modified the residence at 506 Franklin numerous times to meet their ever-changing needs. From its present appearance, one would never guess the grand Victorian residence began life in 1887 as a modest, 2-story cottage or suspect the hardship and neglect the house endured before its brilliant 1997 restoration by Joe Watson. While these changes are not visible to most observers, the house provides a historical record of these changes. This article reconstructs the history of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan house by tracing the modifications and alterations made by its owners over these years.¹ The history of the Goldsmith-Donovan house is a rich one that, like the history of its owners, reflects changing economic and social patterns within Huntsville and the South throughout this period.

Built in 1887 by Oscar Goldsmith, the construction of the modest cottage on Franklin Street coincided with the birth of a New South whose fortunes were linked to textile mills and iron factories. Huntsville's economy, along with most of the South's, languished after the Civil War and the depression of 1873. Huntsville began an economic boom with the construction of its first cotton mill in 1881. Oscar Goldsmith emerged as a leading citizen and entrepreneur who invested heavily in real estate and textile mills. Along with other projects, Goldsmith built a housing development around the Dallas Mill village to provide textile workers housing.² A newspaper article from the July 1887 *Democrat* announced that "our enterprising citizen, Mr. Oscar Goldsmith is building a handsome 2-story cottage on Franklin Street."³ Goldsmith's cottage was one of the first houses built on Franklin Street after the Civil War.

The house was a 2-story Victorian cottage with a 2-story L-shaped porch that wrapped around the north side and east side of the house. The first floor contained two rooms: a large parlor with a bay window that faced Franklin Street and a second room that was either a dining room or library. [See 1894 Sanborn map insert, page 4] Both downstairs rooms contained fireplaces with elaborately detailed mantels distinguished by mirror insets and fine wood and tile trim. Gas chandeliers provided light.

The upstairs contained two rooms, with a layout that closely mirrored the downstairs floor plan. All rooms had fireplaces, but the fireplaces in the upstairs rooms did not possess the elaborately carved mantels of the more formal, public rooms downstairs. Instead, the fireplace mantels in these rooms were cast-iron. The Crystal Palace built for London's Great Exhibition in 1851 brought respectability to cast iron as a building material, and Victorians used it for its decorative appeal, durability, and relatively inexpensive cost. The house had no indoor plumbing; a well and privy were located on the property.⁴ The house was roofed with apple wood shingles, provided by a nearby apple orchard.

The house would not remain a simple cottage for long. In 1890, Goldsmith sold the house to William C. Wheeler, a physician and Civil War veteran who relocated his family to Huntsville earlier that year.⁵ A prominent citizen, Wheeler served as the vice-president of the Medical Association of the State of Alabama and was a member of numerous local medical boards. The Wheelers actively participated in several social clubs and were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁶ During their ownership from 1890-1914, the house underwent significant modifications.

Shortly after Wheeler purchased the house, he made extensive renovations that transformed the simple cottage into a grand residence suiting an owner of his wealth and social class. Between 1894-98, the Wheelers added the tower that gives the house its Italianate architectural presence. Next, they enclosed the side portion of the wrap-around porch and used this additional space to build a grand staircase to connect the upper and lower floors. To keep the house proportionally correct, the Wheelers rebuilt the remaining front porch, and extended it forward several feet so that it would be flush with the front wing of the house.⁷

In addition to the modifications to the front of the house, the Wheelers also made changes to the rear of the house.⁸ A 2-story addition added more living space to the rapidly expanding cottage. This addition provided what is believed to be a new dining room containing a fireplace of quarter-sawn white oak with a highly detailed mantel, an additional bedroom upstairs, and a small, 2-story porch on the south side of the house. Like the house's original rooms, the newly added rooms contained fine moldings and wood trim. The new upstairs bedroom had a

simple, cast-iron fireplace mantel similar to the mantels in the original bedrooms.

Along with providing the house its distinctive architectural presence, the Wheelers “modernized” the interior of the house. In the early 1890s, electricity began to be used in residences, and the Wheelers wired the house for electricity. Around 1895 it is believed the Wheelers extended the original dining room to accommodate a “modern” kitchen and added a bay window on the south-facing wall, defined by a niche. It was also in the 1890s that proper sanitation facilities concerned Huntsville’s more progressive citizens, and city government responded with sewage and disposal systems.⁹ Shortly after it became available, the Wheelers added indoor plumbing.¹⁰

In 1914, the Wheelers sold the house to its new owner, William J. Walling, whose family retained ownership until 1955. A planter, Walling lived in the house with his wife Leona and their four children. After William’s death in 1933, the house was occupied by his son Luke, the county tax assessor.¹¹ During the Wheelers and Wallings’ ownership, Huntsville experienced two world wars and a severe economic depression. Automobiles replaced streetcars, and this new form of transportation allowed the growth of new residential developments. The announcement in 1941 that the Federal government planned to build a chemical warfare plant on the outskirts of town created a population boom and continued Huntsville’s population shift from the downtown area to residential developments in outlying areas. This had an immediate impact on the city of Huntsville and the house on Franklin Street.

Up until 1941, the Wallings had made only slight changes to the house. In the early 1920s they had modified an upstairs room to create a sleeping porch on the south side of the house.¹² During their ownership, the house also sustained damage caused by a house fire. A Huntsville paper, the *Community Builder*, reported a fire to the property in July 1925 that did over \$1,500 damage to the rear portion of the house. The purchase price of the house in 1914 was \$4,500, so the damage must have been considerable.

The chemical warfare plant built on what would become Redstone Arsenal in the 1940s brought jobs, new workers, and a severe housing shortage to Huntsville.¹³ The government supplied trailers to house

workers, but many of Huntsville's citizens took in boarders and rented bedrooms to the workers.¹⁴ It is believed that the Goldsmith-Donovan house became a home for many of these new residents, as Harvie Jones indicated that the house was "chopped into plus or minus five apartments after 1941."¹⁵ Undoubtedly the floor plan of the house was modified somewhat to accommodate the renters, but for now the exterior of the house remained unaltered.

Ownership of the house passed in January 1955 from the Walling family to Virginia and William C. Bowling, who sold the house the following month to Vivian Hester Donovan. During the Donovan ownership, the house continued its transition from a single-family residence to a house with multiple apartments.¹⁶ Aside from the sleeping porch modification made by the Wallings in the early 1920s, no changes had been made to the exterior of the house since the Wheeler additions in the 1890s. Mrs. Donovan made extensive additions to the house in the 1960s, adding a back wing, three bathrooms, exterior stairs, and porches to provide direct entry to apartments. (See footprint page 4 for 1960 additions.)

These modifications did not respect either the historical or architectural legacy of the house. The owner encased the new addition as well as the original portion of the house in aluminum siding. Cheap, wood paneling covered the walls of the new den. A futile attempt at historic preservation was made. A pre-Civil War chimney had sat abandoned near the back of the property for decades.¹⁷ Inexplicably, when the owner added on a back room, the builders incorporated this chimney into the exterior wall of the addition.

Along with the Goldsmith-Donovan house, many historical buildings and residences in the downtown area endured a period of neglect during the 1960s and early 1970s. Two organizations dedicated to the preservation of Huntsville's historic architecture helped reverse this trend. Concerned residents formed the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association (THPDA) in 1965 to maintain architectural standards of historic buildings and residences located within the Twickenham District. In 1974, preservationists formed the Historic Huntsville Foundation (HHF) to stop the demolition of Huntsville's historic structures and promote preservation through public education. Guided by these organizations, downtown Huntsville experienced a renaissance as old and new residents embraced historic and architectural preservation.

These developments directly affected the future of the Goldsmith-Donovan house when it was placed on the market for sale in 1997. Both historic preservationists and district residents hoped a new owner would restore the home to its original grandeur. This possibility became a reality when Joe Watson purchased the Goldsmith house and Harvie Jones offered his architectural expertise for the restoration. Before any renovation could begin, Watson uncovered the original house design from the hodgepodge of additions that obscured it. As decades were literally stripped away, the house first built by Goldsmith and enhanced by Wheeler became visible to Watson and Jones. Together, they planned a design that successfully integrated the beauty and charm of the 19th century structure with the function required by 21st century occupants.

Over its 115-year life, the Goldsmith-Donovan house absorbed and reflected the history of its owners and community. Ironically, a period of neglect became the catalyst for its present restoration to the grand residence created by its first owners. Its brilliant restoration offers compelling evidence that a sensitive renovation can rescue a house even after decades of abuse and neglect. Through the efforts of Watson and Jones, a proud Victorian residence once again graces 506 Franklin and enhances the beauty of Franklin Street and the Historic District.

End Notes

¹ The author is deeply indebted to the late Harvie Jones whose meticulous notebook of the Goldsmith-Donovan house is the foundation of this article, to Lynn Jones who shared this notebook with me, and to Joe Watson whose interviews supplemented this information and who patiently (and repeatedly) explained basic architectural and building principles to a novice. Descriptions of the original floor plan and its changes through the years are based on Sanborn Insurance maps, drawings by Harvie Jones and interviews with Joe Watson. Since no original blueprints of the house exist, however, descriptions of the house and its floor plan are conjecture, inferred from evidence uncovered by Joe Watson during the restoration.

² Elise Hopkins Stephens, *Historic Huntsville: A City of New Beginnings* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, 1984), 79.

³ *The Democrat*, July, 20, 1887. Information compiled by Linda Bayer Allen, Huntsville Planning Division.

⁴ Interview with Joe Watson, May 2002. Watson found the old well and privy on the property during his excavations.

⁵ Information relating to the sale and ownership of this property supplied by Linda Bayer Allen.

⁶ Jewel Goldsmith and Helen Fulton, *Medicine Bags and Bumpy Roads: A Heritage of Healing in Madison County, Town and Country* (Huntsville: Valley Publishing Company, 1985), 147-148.

⁷ Harvie Jones, Goldsmith notebook, compiled from Sanborn Insurance Fire Insurance maps, Heritage Room, Huntsville Public Library.

⁸ Joe confirms that these rooms were not original to the house because the moldings and trim in the back rooms were significantly different than those in the original four rooms, and there was a change in the direction of the wood flooring.

⁹ Elizabeth Humes Chapman, *Changing Huntsville, 1890-1899* (Huntsville, Alabama: privately published, 1972), 17.

¹⁰ General chronology related to electricity and plumbing provided by Joe Watson, Interview April 2002.

¹¹ *Huntsville City Directory*, 1936.

¹² Jones, Goldsmith notebook.

¹³ Stephens, *Historic Huntsville*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵ Jones, Goldsmith notebook.

¹⁶ This pattern was repeated in many downtown homes. Apartments were carved into the 507 Franklin residence now owned by Ray and Martha Vandiver. Interview with Martha Vandiver, May, 2002. Mrs. Vandiver recalls renters occupying apartments in the Goldsmith-Donovan home in 1987.

¹⁷ According to Joe Watson, he and Harvie Jones discussed the origins of this chimney. They believed that the site had been the location of an older house, built shortly after Huntsville's founding. They speculated that the original house had been destroyed and the chimney was the only remaining evidence of the older home's previous existence.

Donna Castellano has a Master's degree in history and teaches history at UAH. She is a board member of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association, directing her efforts toward raising funds for the continuing preservation of the Weeden House.