

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 28
Number 1 *A Model Restoration: The 1887
Goldsmith-Donovan House*

Article 6

3-20-2002

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation: A Model Restoration: The 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House, Vol.28, No.1, Spring 2002

Historic Huntsville Foundation

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Historic Huntsville Foundation (2002) "The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation: A Model Restoration: The 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House, Vol.28, No.1, Spring 2002," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 28: No. 1, Article 6.

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THREE DOLLARS

VOLUME XXVIII, No. 1
SPRING 2002

THE
HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY
OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION



A MODEL RESTORATION:
THE 1887 GOLDSMITH-DONOVAN HOUSE

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Founded 1974

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Cover: Drawing of 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan house with 1894-98 tower and porch by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA, Jones & Herrin Architects, July 7, 1997. Courtesy Lynn Jones.

ISSN 1074-567X

**The Historic Huntsville Quarterly
of Local Architecture and Preservation**

Volume XXVIII, No. 1

Spring 2002

**A Model Restoration:
The 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House**

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From the Executive Director

The Historic Huntsville Foundation's annual awards banquet, held on May 17, 2002, was a celebration for the Foundation in so many ways. Most important to many, we had enough food. Second, we had enough places for everyone to sit. We usually plan for 80 to 100 attendees at these events.

The award winners are our guests, so we ask our members to bring a little extra. This year, one of our award winners was Kids Architectural Press at Chapman Elementary School. We invited principal, Deborah Baker, and teacher, Amy Smith, to receive the award on behalf of last year's class members for their project "Doors of Historic Huntsville."

A few days before the event, Award Chair Judy Perszyk received a call from Amy Smith with an RSVP for 54 representing Kids Architectural Press. Judy Perszyk and Billie Grosser, Program Chair, worked out a very satisfactory seating arrangement and called on reserves to supplement the buffet. All attendees were seated and amply fed. Everyone even was invited back for seconds.

After many months of evening meetings made more enjoyable by Judy Perszyk's delicious snacks and entertaining cats, after an exhaustive Sunday afternoon drive-by of all nominated properties, after untold hours spent on research and script-writing, after much masterful PowerPoint work by Richard Perszyk, members enjoyed the most balanced, professional awards presentation in the Foundation's history.

It was personally and professionally gratifying to see the wide range of projects, the geographic distribution, and the broad spectrum of individuals represented: from the tiny *Shepherd Cottage* in Old Town to *Poplar Grove*, Alabama's mansion showplace in Twickenham, from a Five Points cottage to Dallas Mill village homes, from builders to craftsmen to a Congressman, from school children to the U.S. Army, from Cindi Record's tears for her friend the late Diane Weston to the New Market Presbyterian Church minister's heartfelt recognition of his members' years of hard work.

The awards committee, Judy and Richard Perszyk, Linda and Ralph Allen, Susan Fambrough, Marc Goldmon, and Lynn Jones, took this event to a new level on May 17. They are to be commended for their selection, their riveting and educational presentation, and their delightful creativity. My heart swells with pride when I remember this night.

Historic Huntsville Foundation

2002 Award Winners

Award for Personal Achievement

Recognition for an individual who has made outstanding contributions to the goals of the Historic Huntsville Foundation. This award is intended to identify leaders and role models.

Mr. & Mrs. George Harsh, Jr.

Mrs. Stephanie Sherman

Ms. Diane Weston

Councilman Dick Hiatt & Councilman Bill Kling

Award for Project Achievement

Recognition for outstanding restoration of a home.

Dr. & Mrs. Don Huber

1828 Shepherd Cottage

505 Holmes Avenue

Mr. & Mrs. William H. Johnston, Jr.

1858 Banister House

702 Adams Street

Mr. & Mrs. Danny Wiginton

1814 Poplar Grove

403 Echols Avenue

Recognition for outstanding restoration, renovation, or adaptive reuse of a building other than a home.

Cedarhurst Homeowners Association

1825 Cedarhurst

10 Northampton

Recognition for visual improvements.

Mr. & Mrs. Mark Clouser

607 Holmes Avenue

Mr. Behrouz Rhamati

1106 Ward Avenue

Award for Continued Preservation

Minimum age of structure, 75 years; minimum preservation effort, 25 years.

Congregation

1888 New Market Presbyterian Church

Award for Professional Achievement

Recognition for outstanding achievement by a builder, craftsman, or other design professional.

*Mr. Rusty George
Builder
Mr. Peter Jenke
The Coppersmith
Craftsman
Mr. Robbie Robinson
Craftsman
Mr. Earl Burkett
New Market Ironworks
Craftsman*

Carol Kamback Award for Education

Recognition for outstanding projects, programs, publications, or activities designed to promote awareness and appreciation of our area's architectural heritage.

*Kids Architectural Press
Chapman Elementary School
Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society
Mr. Frank Alex Luttrell III, Chairman
Editor
Historical Markers of Madison County, Alabama
U.S. Army
Redstone Arsenal, Alabama
Werhner von Braun and Major General Medaris Offices*

Pioneer Award

Recognition of courage, insight, and enhancing the value of the community:

*Joan Atkins and Chris Atkins
Mr. Bill Peters*

Distinguished Member Award

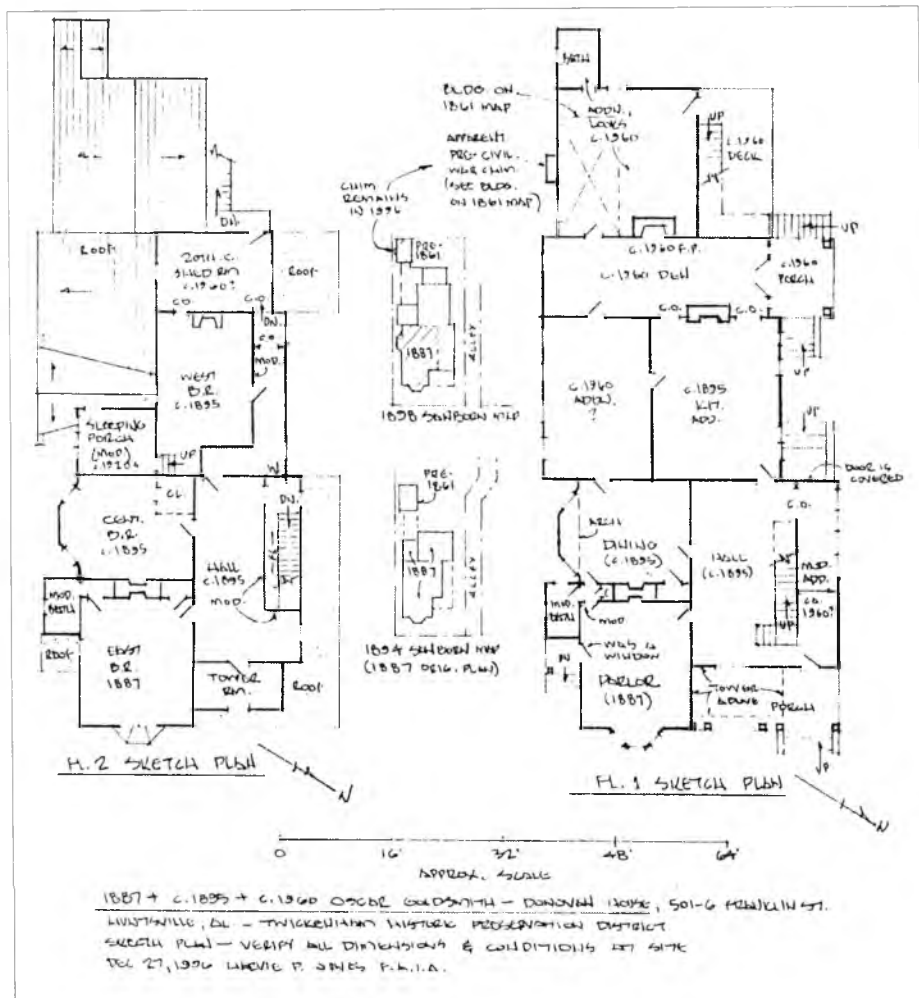
Recognition and appreciation of continuing support, dedication, and accomplishment toward the goals of the Historic Huntsville Foundation.

Mrs. Sarah W. Hereford

Special Recognition.

*Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association
Congressman Bud Cramer
Fountain, Parker, Harbarger and Associates*

Sketch of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House



*This sketch shows the footprint of 1887 + circa 1895 + circa 1960 Goldsmith-Donovan House drawn by the late Harvie P. Jones, FAIA, December 27, 1996. Note inserts in the center from 1894 and 1898 Sanborn maps.
 Courtesy Lynn Jones.*

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.

Joe Watson's Restoration of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House

Frances Osborn Robb

For two and a half years, friends of Huntsville contractor Joe Watson came by to help or watch. "They're looking at me," he recalls, "and saying you're crazy." Joe thought, "I'm going to prove them wrong."

Joe was restoring the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan house (See fig. 1, page 13), at 506 Franklin Street in the Twickenham Historic District. He planned to restore the house, then sell it to finance long trips to South America and Bhutan, Tibet, and other remote areas of Asia.

The Goldsmith-Donovan house was Joe's second house restoration. In the early 1990s, he had spent several years building new houses and remodeling others, but he had begun to tire of the "cookie cutter" look and had been looking for a new challenge.

He found his first new challenge by chance in 1994 when he bought the 110 Steele Street property. On it stands the small 1881 Bernstein house (now the residence of Anna Warren). At the time, Joe was a complete novice; he did not understand the term "historic district." Believing that the little old house was "too far gone," he wanted to tear the house down and build a new one on the site. [For a complete history of the Steele Street House restoration, see *Quarterly* issues, Spring 1998 and Fall/Winter 1999.]

At that point Harvie Jones, Huntsville's late premier restoration architect, entered the picture. Where historic buildings are concerned, Jones was a strong-minded combination of irresistible force and immovable object. He objected vehemently to Joe's plan to tear the house down. Then Jones, a key member of the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission, persuaded Joe that preserving the old house was not only the legal thing to do, but it also was the right thing. He convinced Joe that the restored house, even if enlarged to meet modern needs, would be appropriate for its historic district and present some new challenges.

Jones promised Joe that he would help him with the restoration work, providing Joe with drawings of architectural details and basic plans for the addition. These would be a *pro bono* contribution by Jones to the community and to historic preservation.

Joe committed himself wholeheartedly to the restoration. He took his time, and a year and a half later, he sold the house to Mr. and Mrs. Jack Charlton, who lived in the house a few years, then sold it to Anna Warren.

When, on February 24, 1997, Joe brought a proposal for restoring the Goldsmith-Donovan house to the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission, Jones annotated the official paperwork with what was, for him, high praise. “Joe Watson restored the derelict 1881 Bernstein House at 110 Steele Street in circa 1994-5. Did excellent job.”

Realtor Buster Frank first brought the Goldsmith-Donovan house to Joe’s attention. It would become Joe’s second restoration challenge. The house, more than a century old, had aged along with its owners. From the street, Joe could see that the 2-story, late nineteenth-century house had been covered with vinyl siding. A corner finial was missing from the metalwork atop the tower (See fig.2, page 13). The main gable featured fancy gingerbread woodwork, in poor condition and in strong contrast to the plain front porch.

Joe consulted with Harvie Jones about his new project. “I really miss Harvie,” he says. “His experience made him a great person to talk to.” (Harvie died in December 1998.) Jones had, with his usual meticulousness, researched the house history, discovering that most of the house dates from 1887 and 1894. (An account of the house history can be found in Donna Castellano’s article “History of the 1887 Goldsmith-Donovan House” in this issue.)

After looking at the house inside and out, Joe decided that the house would make a good project, and he purchased it. With Jones as an advisor, Joe knew he had the skills and resources needed to restore the house and adapt it to modern living.

Structure and Exterior

When Joe began to work on the house, he made a close inspection of the exterior. He prised open the vinyl siding here and there. In his estimation, about 98 percent of the wood beneath was in excellent condition, though it had lost its protective paint covering, in Joe’s estimation, about sixty years before. The vinyl had clearly been added to avoid preparing and painting the old wooden siding, not to conceal rot, missing boards or other problems. To Joe, that was a plus.



*Note: All photographs are by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA. Courtesy of Lynn Jones.
Figure 1: East front, Goldsmith-Donovan House, as it looked in 1996.*



Figure 2: Metal cresting, tower. Goldsmith-Donovan House in 1996. Behind the finial at the right, a finial is missing.

The house was in good structural shape, except for one major, but remediable problem: over the years, insufficient drainage from the corbelled brick footing of the house had caused it to sink into the ground. At the corners, and beneath the tower, where the weight of the house was greatest, the house had sunk considerably. Joe noted that the corner beneath the tower had sunk about three inches.

Joe used hydraulic jacks to raise the house. Then he stabilized it, until its windows and doors worked as they should (in a house that has sunk at the corners, the windows and doors may not close properly).

The next step was to repair the roof, making the house watertight: a necessary step before interior work was done. Then he started removing the siding (See fig.3, page 14) and assessing the house's exterior ornamentation.



Figure 3: East front, Goldsmith-Donovan House, during restoration, December 1997. Joe Watson is atop the ladder:

The gable's gingerbread ornament was rotten, held together only by the paint. It would have been prohibitively expensive to restore it, so Joe contented himself with a plain gable. The ironwork cresting at the top of the tower was in good condition. It was removed and bead-blasted to remove old paint, then repainted. Only one finial was missing. Joe had it duplicated and replaced.

With the gable restored, the house has a definite Italianate feel (such houses should be at least as tall as they are wide). However, the boxy mass of the porch tended to diminish the coherence of the Italianate design.

The porch had been added about 1900 (in the 1900s and 1910s, Huntsvillians added such plain boxy porches to buildings of all sizes, periods, and styles). Replacing it with a Victorian-style porch would strengthen the house's late nineteenth-century character, so Joe tore off the existing porch.

Architect Harvie Jones contributed pro bono work to this project, just as he had for Joe's first restoration. Among his contributions was a design for the porch, based on its appearance in two old photographs and the porch's footprint, as depicted in two 1890s Sanborn insurance maps. The reconstructed porch would be as close to the original as the surviving documentation could make it. (See porch detail, page 30.)

At some time, the front door had been shifted a few feet to the north, and two windows on the south side of the house had been walled in. Joe returned the front door to its original position. He restored the windows, copying size, proportions and casing from the windows above.

When Joe acquired the property, a later addition jutted west from the back of the house. It was in poor shape and made of poor materials (in his notes on the Goldsmith house restoration, Harvie Jones noted it as a "makeshift addition"). The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission approved a request to remove it (See fig.4, page 16). It was replaced with an addition, based on a sketch by Harvie Jones, that provided more living space on the ground floor.

As Joe worked on the house, it was also slowly revealing its history to him. By the time he was finished with his restoration, Joe had figured out what the house had looked like originally, and what had been added to meet the needs of later residents. He knew every joist and every stud. Shadows of molding on the woodwork showed him where a wall or window had once been located.

While he was working on slow repetitive tasks, such as removing the siding, Joe had time to imagine what the house had been like, to fit pieces of the puzzle together, to think of solutions to problems he was encountering. Most important, these times gave him the opportunity to figure out what the original plan had been, and how that plan might be changed to make the house a better “machine for living” for new residents, more than a century after the house had been built. Joe did not intend to create a house museum, restoring exterior and interior exactly to their time periods. He says that he would never have found a buyer if he had followed that route.



Figure 4: West rear during 1997 restoration, after removal of “makeshift addition.”

Interior

After the structure had been stabilized and the roof sealed tight, restoration of the interior could begin. The interior was rather daunting. Here the house showed its age.

The plaster had completely failed. It came away in powdery chunks when the wallpaper was pulled from it. On the positive side, Joe notes

that it was impossible to preserve the old plaster. This made it easier to rewire, replumb and insulate the house. Once the decision was made not to try to save the old plaster, another positive consequence followed: interior walls could be relocated. Although the exterior would reflect its late nineteenth-century origin, the house could become a functional modern “machine for living” on the interior.

If an old wall is to be kept, however, removing the plaster has a negative aspect. Plaster is laid directly onto lath. A smooth coat of plaster evens out irregularities in the lath placement and conceals the frequently irregular intervals of the studs. In modern dry wall construction, evenly spaced studs are a must-have. Joe spent a lot of time removing lath and restudding, to get the support true for the dry wall.

The house’s hardwood floors and woodwork (mostly walnut and oak) were in good condition. However, much of the woodwork had been overpainted, as seen on the molding of the stained glass window (See fig.5, page 18) at the top of the elaborate staircase. The staircase itself had been overpainted in black and white (See figs.6-7, pages 19, 20). The floors were redone by a friend, but Joe himself stripped “acres of paint” from the old hardwood staircase, mantels and trim (See fig.8, page 21.)

Joe soon learned to use exactly the right amount of heat from a heat gun so that he could strip the old paint in long sheets from the wooden surfaces. Under the white-painted mantels was fine walnut and oak, originally surfaced with shellac to give a sheen and make cleaning easy. The shellac layer was a bit of luck, for it was resistant to paint removers and the heat gun, so that Joe had a useful stopping point for his removal efforts.

Once the old paint was gone, Joe removed the shellac with denatured alcohol. When all surfaces were clean, he oiled the wood, using his own mixture. The staircase was particularly responsive to his procedures and is now, in Joe’s view, “the most spectacular staircase in Huntsville.” In all, Joe estimates that he spent about seventy hours a week, for two and one-half years, restoring the Goldsmith house. “All the people who worked on the house were my friends, from the guy who did the floors to the friend who helped me put up the dry wall.” In addition Joe spent many hours talking with Harvie Jones about the project, its progress and its challenges.



Figure 5: Original stained glass window at top of staircase, December 1996.

But long before he and Jones got together, Joe had developed his ideas for the eventual house plan. “I took so long getting the interior of the house ready to work on it, and did so many slow repetitive tasks, that I had time to think about the house: every inch, every board. As I walked through the rooms, I looked hard, and stored up things to think about later. When you know a house very well, ideas come in, and some of those ideas will work.”

It was Joe who figured out where the new rooms and traffic flow should be. From the beginning, he says, “I knew I needed a master bedroom on the first floor. In Twickenham, people often stay in their houses for a long time, for decades. Some grow old in these houses. A master bedroom on the main floor makes it easier for this to happen. And, of course, a master bedroom with ample closets and a big bathroom.”

Joe had his ideas in hand. He knew that he would need to build an addition on the back of the house (replacing the one that had been torn down) to give him the ample downstairs space he needed for a small front parlor, a large library and big den. He wanted a big foyer to show off the spectacular staircase. And he wanted a kitchen convenient to the den and dining room, and, of course, the master bedroom suite. Two other bedrooms and a workroom or office would be located upstairs.

When Joe and Harvie Jones conferred, Jones was able to point out (“from his vast amount of information and experience,” Joe notes) details and architectural requirements that Joe had not thought of. But Joe’s ideas



Figure 6: Entry hall before renovation. Note black and white paint on staricase.



Figure 7: Detail of staircase, December 1996, before removal of black and white paint.

were solid, practical and highly functional. It was not difficult for Jones to turn out preliminary designs for the plans of the first and second floors.

Then, as Joe did the work, he created more accurate plans, carefully remeasuring and adapting Jones' preliminary plans (Joe calls them "Harvie's sketches") to actual site requirements. One of the most important things, Joe notes, about restoring an old house is making careful measurements and remeasuring ("checking the dimensions," as he puts it). Another is being flexible, willing to adjust to specific circumstances.



Figure 8: Staircase during cleaning, December 1997. Some of the black paint remains.

Joe sold the house to Mr. and Mrs. Kermit Moore when it was not yet finished. "It was time," he comments. "When it's time to start choosing colors, bathroom and kitchen fixtures, that was the time to put it on the market." It was only on the market a week or two before Mrs. Moore saw the "for sale" sign in the yard. Joe recalls that she had been looking for years, likes Victorian, and likes the light airy effect of this particular house. She was willing, he remembers, to finish the house on her own. The Moores promptly bought the house.

Joe "took the money and ran," first to South America for several months and then to remote Asian regions for about a year. Between trips, he worked on the house for the Moores for a month or so. But that time, he recalls, he just worked on little things. "I was glad to do them," he recalls. "They are truly nice people, extremely appreciative of everything I did for the house."

Joe could have restored the house to selling point in a year and a half if he had pushed and skimped. Why, then, did he spend another year working on the house? "You have to understand," he said, "I knew I would make a profit on this house. It was my job. I am a businessman. But also," he continued, "I live in zip 01. I drive down Franklin Street every day, and I don't want to have to turn my head away every time I pass this house. I want to be able to see it and know I did a good job."

Frances Osborn Robb is a regular contributor to the Quarterly and a lecturer with Alabama Humanites Foundation. Frances lives in Huntsville with her husband David who shares her love of preservation, art, and gardening.

Interview with Gerry and Kermit Moore

Carol Ashburn Roach

As she opened the door and saw the magnificent staircase and the mantels in the living room and dining room, she knew: “This is it!” Gerry Williams Moore grew up in Huntsville, and she has “always wanted an historic home.” Although Kermit Moore did not initially share Gerry’s feeling of “love at first sight,” he did like the bright and cheerful rooms Joe Watson had created with the help of the late Harvie Jones. By the time the Moores saw the house, all the “build-up of dreary wallpaper and paint had been removed.”

Gerry Williams had been in the house as a young adult, and she knew Vivian Donovan and her daughter Jane. According to a local 1942 newspaper article, Jane attended Gerry’s 3-year-old birthday party. Jane was a year older than Gerry, and the two girls were acquaintances rather than close friends. Gerry remembers skating and riding bikes with her friends in the neighborhood that included Franklin Street. She and her friends would walk to the movies at the Lyric, and they often walked past the Donovan home. At that time, Gerry and her family lived on McClung Street.

After their first visit in the fall of 1999, the Moores returned several times to view the home and talk with Joe Watson. Joe had been working on the home since 1997, and the house still was in “rough shape.” As Gerry had seen the house when it belonged to the Donovans, she could appreciate Joe’s ability to restore the historic home and make it work for life in the 21st century.

The Moores purchased the house in December 1999 and moved into the house in November 2000. Joe continued working on the restoration, completing the house in June 2001. Currently, the Moores are remodeling the cottage in the back of the house and adding a carport.

The most spectacular architectural detail in the house is the massive oak staircase located in the front foyer. (See fig.1, page 24.) The detail on the mantels and the original tiles are other features that drew Gerry and Kermit to the house. (See figs.2 and 3, page 25.) Gerry and Kermit still think of their home as “Joe’s House,” and they discuss their ideas with him.



*Note: All photographs are by Carol Ashburn Roach.
Figure 1: Refinished staircase as seen from foyer showing fine details. (See fig. 6,
page 20 for before picture.)*



Figure 2: Fireplace showing tile detail.



Figure 3: Fireplace showing tile detail.



Figure 4: Restored fireplace and mantel in dining room.



Figure 5: Stepback cupboard designed and built for kitchen using old glass.



Figure 6: Back view showing garden and fountain.

The wall between the living room and dining room has been removed creating an open room that is appropriate for today's lifestyle. The original fireplaces have been restored and remain in the rooms. (See fig. 4, page 26.) Joe restored all the woodwork on the walls in the foyer, dining room, the mantels, and, of course, the staircase. The downstairs includes the new addition of a family room with a fireplace, a screened porch, master suite, half bath, laundry room, and basement. In this new family room, Gerry and Kermit have a player piano. The old kitchen is now a den, and a new kitchen was created from a bedroom off the dining room. The kitchen adjoins the new family room, creating a "keeping room."

There are six rooms downstairs and one and one-half bathrooms. The house has five original fireplaces with an added fireplace in the new addition. All the mantels downstairs are original. Joe used old glass in the windows throughout the original structure when possible. He also used old glass in a stepback cupboard designed and built for the kitchen. (See fig.5, page 26.)

The upstairs is now completely restored to the original design that it had before it was divided into apartments by previous owners. The Moores have pictures of the rooms as they existed before Joe remodeled them. The upstairs now has three bedrooms and two full baths. Only one of the original fireplaces was removed from a bedroom to create more wall space. One of the bedroom mantels has been replaced, but all others have been restored.

Since they moved into the house, the Moores have added a garden with a fountain in the back of the house. (See fig.6, page 27.) With the restoration of the cottage and the carport addition, this area will add to the beauty of the home. They plan no other additions. Gerry and Kermit find the home fits their lifestyle. Joe Watson and Harvie Jones had a vision of an exterior that reflects the house's late nineteenth-century origin with an interior that is functional and modern. Their vision is now a reality. 506 Franklin is again a home.

Personal:

Gerry Williams Moore, a Huntsville native, retired as Associate Vice President, Human Resources, the University of Alabama in Huntsville, in June 2001 with 29 years of service.

Kermit Moore, a native Alabamian from Nanafalia in Southwest Alabama, had been Director of Information Technology with the City of Huntsville for 10 years before he retired in May 2001.

Resources:

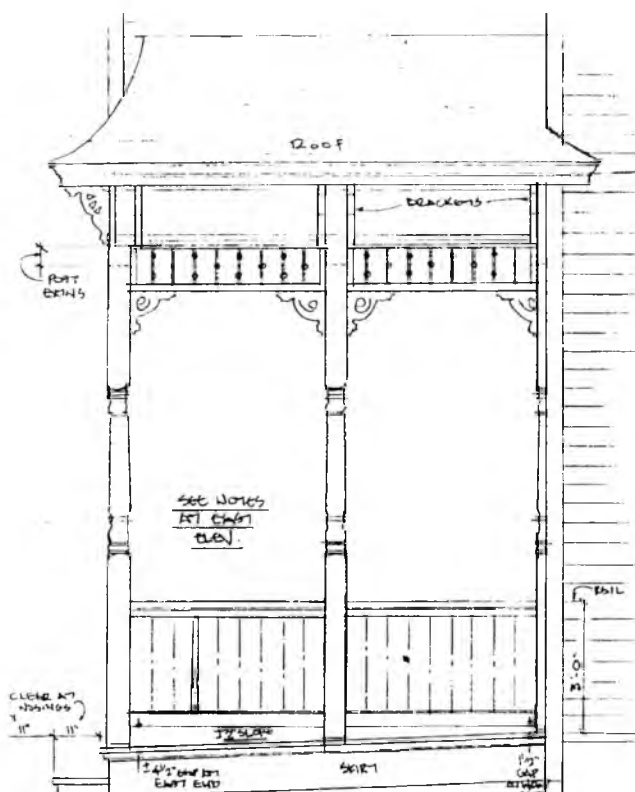
Gerry and Kermit Moore. Personal Interview. March 21, 2002.

Carol Ashburn Roach is a member of the HHF Publications Committee. She and Gerry worked together at UAH for 21 years.



The stained glass window above is the work of local glass artist Wayne Lumpkin, currently a member of the Historic Huntsville Foundation Board of Directors. In collaboration with Jane Wyatt Howell, a local artist, designer, and longtime friend of the Moore's, the window was designed to be compatible with the original stained glass window at the top of the stairs. (See fig. 5, page 19.) Wayne created a total of five new windows for the house in keeping with its Victorian style.

The Historic Huntsville Foundation thanks Margaret Jones Vann for filling in as guest editor of this *Quarterly*. Margaret, a past editor of the *Quarterly*, is an adjunct instructor of English at Calhoun Community College. She loves to garden and write poetry in her spare time.



Porch detail by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA, drawn September 2, 1998 .
Courtesy Lynn Jones.

Historic Huntsville Foundation
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The mission of the HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION is the preservation of historically or architecturally significant sites and structures in Huntsville and Madison County. The Foundation also works to increase public awareness of the value of these sites and structures.

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation, a scholarly journal, and *Foundation Forum*, a quarterly newsletter, are published by the Foundation. The Foundation owns and operates Harrison Brothers Hardware and has partially renovated the Harvie P. Jones Building next door. Tenants occupy the finished space-Bird and Kamback Architects and The Huntsville Inn, a tea room. A warehouse of architectural artifacts and materials for reuse in historic preservation projects with Madison County also is operated by the Foundation.

The Foundation is actively involved in efforts to establish a formal revitalization of downtown Huntsville and sponsors functions to draw attention to businesses that locate in historic properties. In association with the Von Braun Lions Club, the Foundation co-sponsors "Trade Day on the Square" each September. Other events include public briefings, covered dish suppers, and an annual awards dinner honoring notable contributors to historic preservation.

Foundation membership includes a subscription to the Quarterly and the Forum, notification of special sales at Harrison Brothers Hardware, invitations to members-only events at historic private homes and buildings, and advance notice and discounts on Foundation-sponsored tours, workshops, lectures, and programs. If you would like membership information, please contact the Foundation by telephone at 256.539.0097 or by e-mail at preserve@hiwaay.net.

Printing
Insty-Prints

Graphic Design
Margaret Jones Vann

Historic Huntsville Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 786
Huntsville, Alabama 35804

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