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The Addition of Newman Avenue

Nancy Munson

When the Twickenham Historic Preservation District (THPD) was formed in 1972, Newman Avenue was part of at least one version of the proposed district. At that time, however, a majority of the residents of the avenue had decided not to be a part of THPD. The street was accordingly left out.

In the spring of 1998, then President of the Historic Huntsville Foundation, Ben Walker, and then Director Diane Ellis asked me if I would initiate a project to see what the present attitude of Newman Avenue residents might be toward becoming part of a historic district. The Twickenham area had recently lost a historic home near Newman Avenue. This had alerted many of us, including Newman residents, to the fact that Newman Avenue was in a very vulnerable position, and might easily lose historic homes to redevelopment. I said that I would be glad to do it, and so began a project of two years until Newman Avenue's inclusion in THPD in 2000.

I knew a few residents of the street to begin with: Renee Katz was a longtime volunteer for Friends of the Library and Martha Musgrove the mother of good friend Tom Musgrove, who lived nearby. Mrs. Julia Harless was the mother of artist Lee Harless who had contributed so much to THPD by sketching historic houses. In addition, Newman resident Jennifer Hopkins had contacted the City Planning Department with a view toward exploring the possibility of Newman Avenue joining the district. The signs were very encouraging!

Linda Allen of the City Planning Department supplied me with a list of homeowners, and I began to contact people by visits and by telephone.

Newman resident Cyrial James Breece was a wonderful help identifying residents (especially those who lived in rental property).

By the fall of 1998, Donna Castellano had agreed to serve as the contact person on Newman for the project. She and Cyrial worked hard keeping a dialogue alive on the street. We got out a questionnaire in January 1999 and it seemed that many were interested—at least in finding more information.

At this point I visited a board meeting of THPD Association (THDPA) on the invitation of then President Melanie Murray, and presented the idea to them. The board reacted positively to the idea and said that they would give consideration to the request for admission to the district if Newman residents voted for inclusion. My role as a member of the Historic Huntsville Foundation was really to function as a liaison between Newman residents and THDPA and to provide organizational and other support.

Responses to our questionnaire showed that some people did not have strong feelings either way and that others were disinterested absentee landlords. Most were interested, but others had concerns about living in a historic district.

In order to answer these concerns, we organized a panel discussion in February 1999 for Newman (and Twickenham) residents. Diane Ellis authored, duplicated, and mailed an announcement to all residents. On the panel were Wayland Cooley, then head of the Madison County Tax Assessors Office; Linda Allen of the City Planning Department; and David Ely, an architect and member of the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission. I served as moderator. Mr. Cooley allayed fears about instant city property tax increases, saying that property tax rates were the same for Huntsville residents whether in a historic

district or not, and that property values were reviewed systematically every three years. Mr. Ely explained the role of the Historic Commission in approving projected alterations to the exterior of district residences. He explained that homeowners were not restricted as to interior modifications but needed to make any exterior changes compatible with the period in which their home was built. He also explained that no one ever *had* to make improvements simply because of inclusion in a historic district. Ms. Allen explained that inclusion in a city-designated historic district would protect the residential designation of the street and would, as experience in other districts showed, increase the value of residents' property.

Following the meeting, residents discussed the matter amongst themselves. We distributed forms petitioning the City of Huntsville to include Newman Avenue in the Twickenham Historic Preservation District at the meeting (and by mail to those who had not attended). Residents were to approve or disapprove the idea. Donna Castellano, Diane Ellis and I had many tense telephone conversations as the petitions Donna and I collected inched their way up to the 60% total of street residents required for success. That number was finally reached (and exceeded) by mid-March 1999 after obtaining all petitions, including those mailed to non-resident owners. Donna visited a THPDA Board meeting to deliver the news.

Petitions were then turned over to Linda Allen who had the crucial job of deciding the boundaries of the district and evaluating the area for inclusion (e.g., homes on Lowe Avenue were not a part of the original Twickenham proposal and therefore did not receive petitions at first but were included in the re-drawing because Lowe Avenue made a natural boundary for the district to the south). At this point, the Newman Avenue project had to wait until the whole Five Points Historic District boundaries were drawn and approved by the City Council because their

petitions had been received before ours. In addition, flooding in Southeast Huntsville also demanded City Planning's attention. We all felt the tension: what was going to happen to our petitions? After several meetings called by Ms. Allen with Newman and Lowe residents, the new boundaries of THPDA were finally drawn. On February 24, 2000, the Huntsville City Council approved Newman Avenue's petitions and it became a part of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District.

The whole project was a revealing exercise in the democratic process. I enjoyed doing it and felt privileged to share in the ideas and concerns of the residents.

Nancy Munson has served on the Historic Huntsville Foundation Board of Directors and lives in an old house in a historic district with her husband Bill. She remains interested in historic preservation.