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420 Newman Avenue: Revisiting the Pizitz Home

*Information from Harold Pizitz,
Raymond L. Hamilton, Jr., & John Christopher Craddock
Compiled by Heather Cross*

It is rare to find a home that is continually occupied by one family, let alone a family that recalls in detail each change and transformation of the structure. The Pizitz house at 420 Newman Avenue contains the history of the family that built it, and it has recently been renovated by new owners to continue its record-keeping role. Taken as a portrait of other homes on the street, 420 Newman Avenue offers an inside view of the connection of building to family history that many of the homes on Newman share.

I

Perhaps most noteworthy is that Lillian Z. Pizitz purchased a 60' wide lot located at 420 Newman Avenue from William S. and Nellie M. Mims in 1929, for \$550, during the heart of the Depression. In 1935, Lillian and her husband, Abe, built a house on the property, which was already part of a growing and vibrant neighborhood in spite of the economic uncertainty of the time. The family of three boys, mother, and father remained owners of the red brick, sandstone, and wood home until its sale in 1998.

According to one of the sons, Harold Pizitz, his mother worked with the builder to draw up the house plans. There was no architect. Mr. Abe Pizitz paid the wages of the workmen. The original house had three bedrooms, a kitchen with a separate breakfast room, a living room, a dining room, and two baths (Interview). There were 2800 square feet on the main floor. The foundation of the house is made of sandstone from Monte Sano. A detached garage was built behind the



420 Newman today—The Pizitz home, originally of red brick and sandstone (seen around the front door), was painted after exterior renovations to reduce the effect of additions and infill brickwork resulting from restructuring the fenestrations. The home includes English cottage style elements such as the rounded arch entry and peak window, the rusticated stone with keystone over the entry, and the detail of the two front peak fascia boards.

Photo by Carol Roach.

house. The original front porch extended around the east side of the house. When a carport was added later, the porch was enclosed and incorporated into the house. The few closets were small (4' X 5') and additional closet space was added in the 1940s.

The upstairs was unfinished, as was the basement or furnace room. The thick (10"-12") retaining wall was knocked out during the 1940s remodeling of the basement. The workmen dug out the dirt in the enlarged area, throwing it out by shovel through the small existing window into the yard. The finished room was large, contained a bar and was used for entertainment.

In 1939 Abe and Lillian purchased two vacant lots (approximately 45') on the east side of the house. Soon after, the original one-car garage

was torn down and replaced with a two-car garage with a small servants' apartment above. Once again Lillian worked with the builder on the plans, insuring that the new structure blended architecturally with the house (Interview). At the close of World War II when newcomers were pouring into Huntsville and searching desperately for places to live, Mr. and Mrs. Pizitz began renting the apartment.

The neighborhood had “young people [from] all over” the four block area of Newman, Locust, Adams, and Harrison (Interview). On summer days all the boys would get together to have rubber gun battles or play kick-the-can, baseball, and football. They played in the vacant lots on Newman, and as they grew up, they watched many of the houses on the street being built. On Sundays, the fathers and sons would play softball on the vacant lot chosen later by Gene Monroe, Sr. as a house site. On one vacant lot, a farmer grew corn. The boys would fly kites in the cornfield and knock over the old cornstalks.

Neighborhood children walked to school together to the old two-story East Clinton Elementary School, as well as Huntsville Junior High, and Huntsville High School. Harold attended Huntsville High School for one year, finishing his high school education at Castle Heights Military Academy. He played in the original Huntsville School Band, composed of members from several schools (Interview).

The majority of families on Newman had “one car per family” despite the fact that the paving of California Street ended past Newman, so the rest of California was a dirt road. Harold Pizitz recalls that Newman Avenue was home to many prominent Huntsvillians. Ashford Todd, former Probate Judge, lived there, as did Gene Monroe Sr. and Dr. Milton Anderson. Charlie Lyle, long time Huntsville band leader, lived several doors from the Pizitz home, and Harold, who played trumpet, takes credit for introducing Charlie to that instrument and giving him a

few lessons. Other good friends mentioned by Harold Pizitz include Brick Warden, Milton Anderson, Jr. , and Wendal Payne.

Mr. Abe Pizitz, the boys' father, owned Pizitz Clothing Store downtown and worked every day but Sunday. His sons helped him from the time they were ten or twelve years old (Interview), sweeping up and later, waiting on customers. The store never closed until the last customer, mostly farmers and people from the mills, left.

The Pizitz family left its own mark on a growing Huntsville. Abe Pizitz operated several different clothing stores in downtown Huntsville prior to opening Harold's Ladies' and Children's Store on the north side of the Downtown Square in 1951, along with his son Harold. In March of 1957 the family celebrated the grand opening of Harold's Department Store at its new location in Parkway City. That store was closed in 1970.

The house at 420 Newman adapted to the needs of the Pizitz family as did the neighborhood and houses for others. During a time when the future was uncertain and life moved steadily on, Newman Avenue continued to prosper and support quite a few vibrant and prosperous families.

II

Harold L. Pizitz inherited the property upon the death of his mother, Mrs. Lillian Pizitz, in July 1990. He rented



Front Door Restoration of 420 Newman—The front door in its 1998 location shows the broken tile flooring of the original front porch. Photo courtesy Raymond Hamilton, Jr.

the home to several tenants before putting the property up for sale. On June 26, 1998, the property was sold to the current owners, Mr. Raymond L. Hamilton, Jr. and Mr. John Christopher Craddock.

Upon purchase of 420 Newman Avenue, the new owners retained Bill Peters Architectural Firm and Randy Roper Interiors to oversee an extensive renovation. The home entered a new phase as modern improvements and additions would create a vessel for a new generation of family life.

The interior was gutted down to the studs facilitating new plumbing, electrical, heating and air conditioning systems. The floor plan was reconfigured and the living room and dining room ceilings lowered to incorporate structural steel beams to carry the extra load of the new



Restored front entry porch of 420 Newman—The front door was moved back to its original location, opening the small recessed entry porch. The multi-colored tiles line the walk to the street. Photo by Carol Roach.

bedrooms and bath planned for the upper floor, originally one large room.

A double carport on the east side, built by the Pizitz family after the house was completed, was removed and a screened-in porch was added. The front door was moved back to its original location from the front opening of the house to the doorway of the living room, thus regaining an entry porch (see pages 15-16). An arched opening was added to mirror the other side of the porch. The exterior was painted so that the new position of the windows and the addition would match.



420 Newman garage before renovation—The block and stone structure was built by the Pizitz family in the 1940s to match the home and offer a rentable apartment. The renovation retained and expanded the apartment and storage space. Photo courtesy Raymond Hamilton, Jr.

The major changes to the layout of the first floor included turning a third bedroom and bath along with the old kitchen pantry into a den along the back of the house. This provided access to the back yard and a new deck through French doors. The newly configured upstairs is now accessed by a reversal of the direction of the staircase. The basement was waterproofed and the existing bathroom updated and enlarged.

All existing interior and exterior doors, most of which were of oak single panels, were used in the remodeling. Original door handles were also incorporated. Existing doorjambs and baseboard were reused and replicated where needed. All the old hardwood flooring was retained and refinished. Only the den has new hardwood flooring since the hardwood that was there was used to patch other rooms.



Interior of 420 Newman before Hamilton/Craddock renovation—Notice how the arched English cottage style openings of the facade are echoed in the interior. The influence of the bungalow style's flowing spaces can be seen in the half walls of oak single panels, tapering square columns, and French doors linking the spaces and outdoors together. Photo courtesy Raymond Hamilton, Jr.

The detached two-story garage and apartment went through the same extensive renovation as the house and still features the same stonework around the openings as the porch entry. The upper level contains a one-bedroom apartment with a full kitchen and bath, while a second bedroom, laundry room, and half bath were added to the first floor, previously a two-car garage. One side of the garage is used for garden and lawn storage.

III

Since its addition to the Twickenham Historic Preservation District, Newman Avenue hums with the murmurs of families, history, and possibilities. It houses artists, professionals, retirees, and families of a variety of natures. Return to 420 Newman Avenue, the Pizitz house, in another seventy years and see if it isn't still a vessel for families, memories, and time.

Works Cited

Hamilton, Jr., Raymond L., and John Christopher Craddock. Personal interview. Patricia Ryan. January 23, 2002.

Pizitz, Harold. Personal interview. Lynn Jones. January 10, 2002.



Rear elevation of 420 Newman—The incorporation of porches and additions are nicely joined by a new deck and pergola added to the rear of the renovated Pizitz house. Photo courtesy Raymond Hamilton, Jr.