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405 Newman Avenue: A House, a Home, a History

Jacquelyn Proctor Gray

When Lee and Julia Harless moved to Huntsville from Gadsden in 1929, there were only two homes on the market that appealed to them. The two houses, on Eustis and Clinton, were wood frame structures; however, Lee insisted on a brick home for comfort and ease of maintenance.

They built a house that was practically on the outskirts of town and one of the earliest built on Newman Avenue. Cotton was farmed in the lush fields across the street from the \$1500 lot. The house was built for an additional \$1500, thanks to a loan from First National Bank and president Beirne Spragins.

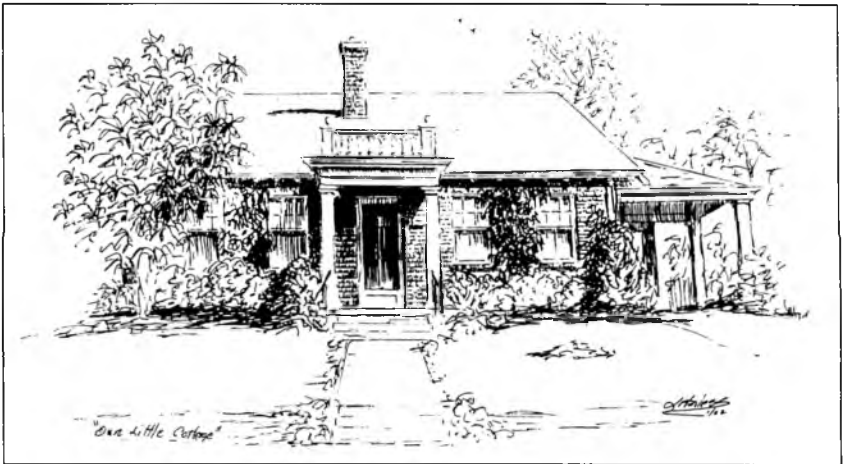
Julia was pregnant with their first child, Jane, when they came to Huntsville, and the young couple rented an apartment on the corner of Franklin and Williams Street while waiting for the completion of their new home. Julia lovingly referred to the family home as “our little cottage.” Julia gave birth to second daughter Virginia and then their son, Lee, Jr.

Virginia Harless Cook and her brother Lee have many fond memories of the home and their childhood at 405 Newman Avenue. The doorknobs were crystal, and their mother insisted on having transoms installed over the doors. Lee recalls thinking transoms seemed so backwards and old-fashioned for a modern home. The home originally had two bedrooms and one bathroom, but when Lee was born the combination kitchen and breakfast room was converted into kitchen and Lee’s bedroom. In its 73-year existence, the kitchen has been remodeled three times.

Virginia remembers that the living room could be closed off with French doors, and during the Depression especially, it was kept closed to conserve heat. There was a fireplace in the living room that was lit only once a year, on Christmas Day. The fireplace had a brass cover and a hearth of glazed green tile, a perfect surface for Virginia's tap dancing practice.

The family relied on a cast iron, coal-burning "Warm Morning" stove for their heat. Smoke from the stove covered and darkened the walls and ceiling around it. At first they would paint over the smudges, but finally decided it was futile and accepted the perpetually blackened walls.

The home has changed relatively little in its history. Besides having an additional bedroom, it now has one and a half bathrooms. The screened porch, where Mr. and Mrs. Harless sometimes slept in the summertime, was converted to a carport.



405 Newman Avenue—The simple brick cottage embellished with balustrade topped porch and side porte cochere. Pen and ink sketch by Lee Harless.



Garden structures—The eclectic shed and walls constructed for Mrs. Harless. Sketch by Lee Harless.

Lee Harless owned and operated Gift Linen Mart for many years before his death in the early 1980s. Julia Harless remained in the home she had lived in

since coming to Huntsville. Her son Lee, who cared for his ailing mother, wanted to ensure that she could look out into her backyard and see some of the things of beauty she had admired her whole life. He built a stone gothic greenhouse and an Italianate shed and added sculptures to transform the garden into a welcoming escape. Mrs. Harless stayed in the home until she was nearly 102. She passed away in April 2001 at the age of 103.

Lee Harless, Jr. and his wife Carol, who grew up three blocks away on Echols Street, are in the process of restoring and renovating the family home. They hope to preserve a bit of Huntsville's past—small homes sitting on the edge of a small cotton town—in a way to complement Huntsville's future.

Jacque Gray is the Associate Editor of Old Tennessee Valley magazine and co-chairperson of the Maple Hill Cemetery Stroll. She is currently working with Fred Simpson on two new books about Huntsville's history.