

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 29
Number 1 *Preservation Primer*

Article 4

3-20-2003

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Recommended Citation

Nuttall, David (2003) "Old Town Historic Preservation District," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 29: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol29/iss1/4>

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DAVID NUTTALL

Old Town Historic Preservation District

The major portion of what is now Old Town was incorporated into the city in 1828. By 1861, approximately twenty-five houses, located mainly along Holmes Avenue, were present in the almost 100 acres that make up Old Town. In 1866, the east part of Old Town was incorporated into the City of Huntsville, and Walker Avenue was opened to development about 1890. Growth was encouraged because the area was within walking distance of downtown Huntsville, the Memphis and Charleston Railroad depot and the city's first cotton mill, near the depot. By 1892, Dallas Mill was located just north of Old Town, further stimulating development. The Old Town area was settled by merchants and professional people. The structures built during this time were predominately Victorian in style, of one- and two-story frame construction. Old Town is the only complete section of Huntsville that displays a true Victorian character.



127 Walker Avenue, Italianate, ca. 1889

Old Town continued to grow during the early years of the 20th century, though the Victorian building style gave way to Colonial Revivals and bungalows. The bungalow style was particularly prevalent during the 1920s and 30s. New construc-

tion declined after World War II and the area began to deteriorate as homes were converted into apartments and boarding houses. This conversion came about partly in response to the population boom Huntsville witnessed as a result of the creation of Redstone Arsenal and NASA. The development of the city's new suburbs pushed growing residential areas farther from the downtown area.

The Revival of Old Town

On September 24, 1974, the Huntsville Planning Commission sent a recommendation to the city council to create Old Town as the city's second historic district. Creation of the new district depended upon 60 percent of property owners signing a petition requesting historic district status. More than this required percentage of property owners signed the petition, and on December 12, 1974, the city adopted an ordinance formally creating the Old Town Historic Preservation District.

Exterior alterations to properties in the new historic district were now governed by the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission. The commission did not, however, govern use, which was a zoning issue, and some areas were still not zoned for single family use. The Old Town Historic Preservation District Association adopted bylaws and became the neighborhood association organizing events, as it still does, for the community. It also serves as a voice for the community, addressing issues such as traffic speed and layout, preservation of trees and beautification, education relating to living in the district, and any concerns of district residents.



122 Walker Avenue, Victorian, ca. 1900

Expansion of Old Town

In January 1977, a portion of the 100 block of Walker Avenue was added to the Old Town Historic Preservation District and then re-zoned from commercial to residential that April, mainly in an attempt to block the construction of the Downtown Rescue Mission at the corner of Walker and Dallas. The 100 block was zoned commercial at the time and the owners had not wanted to be included in the original district. Interest in becoming part of the district ultimately prevailed,

and the Rescue Mission construction was blocked. By April 1977, the current Old Town Historic District boundaries were set.



615 Holmes Avenue, Queen Anne, ca. 1894

were residential, with only a few buildings listed as not historically or architecturally significant.

On March 28, 1980, the final legal change occurred when the city passed an ordinance changing the zoning of most of Old Town to Residence 1B, which permits only single-family dwellings.

Since that time, the Old Town Historic Preservation District has continued to see change, but mainly of restorations and renovations of the houses. Several empty

On January 31, 1978, the Old Town Historic Preservation District was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places and listed on July 18, 1978. Of the 264 structures in the district at the time of the listing, most were considered architecturally significant, and many were listed as having been built before 1910.

Of these, approximately 93 percent

lots have been built on to fill in the gaps, and a large percentage of the buildings have been improved. These improvements have led to a great sense of pride and community in the area and proved Old Town once again to be a very desirable place to live, both in terms of the feel of the place and the financial investment offered by owning a home within the district.

DAVID NUTTALL

Historic preservation and certainly historic appreciation have been issues that I have been keen on for many years. I seem to have always had a strange liking for old structures, particularly British ruins. Having moved to Huntsville about six years ago from Windsor, England, my wife and I looked to buy a house here. Jodi is from Huntsville originally. We preferred the look and feel of the historic communities, whether that was because they had a more “European” feel to them with older homes, old trees, pavements (sidewalks) and something to walk to, or because they felt like genuine America. Probably both. We found, fell for and bought an approximately 85-year-old house on Walker Avenue in the Old Town Historic Preservation District. Though it needed quite a bit of work, we both felt that the quality of the materials used in construction of older homes is superior to new homes. Friends of ours questioned the decision to buy “such an old house,” but I did not consider it “old,” as that is a relative term. The house I grew up in, in England, was built in 1860 and was not considered remotely old.

We love the area we live in and are so glad that we made that choice (even though Jodi still sometimes longs for perfectly straight walls or windows without ten coats of paint). I also like the fact that by living in an established “old-fashioned” community we are not contributing to more urban sprawl, which seems to continue spreading without what I consider as having a sense of place. One of the things that living in Old Town has helped me do is become a lot more active with regards to

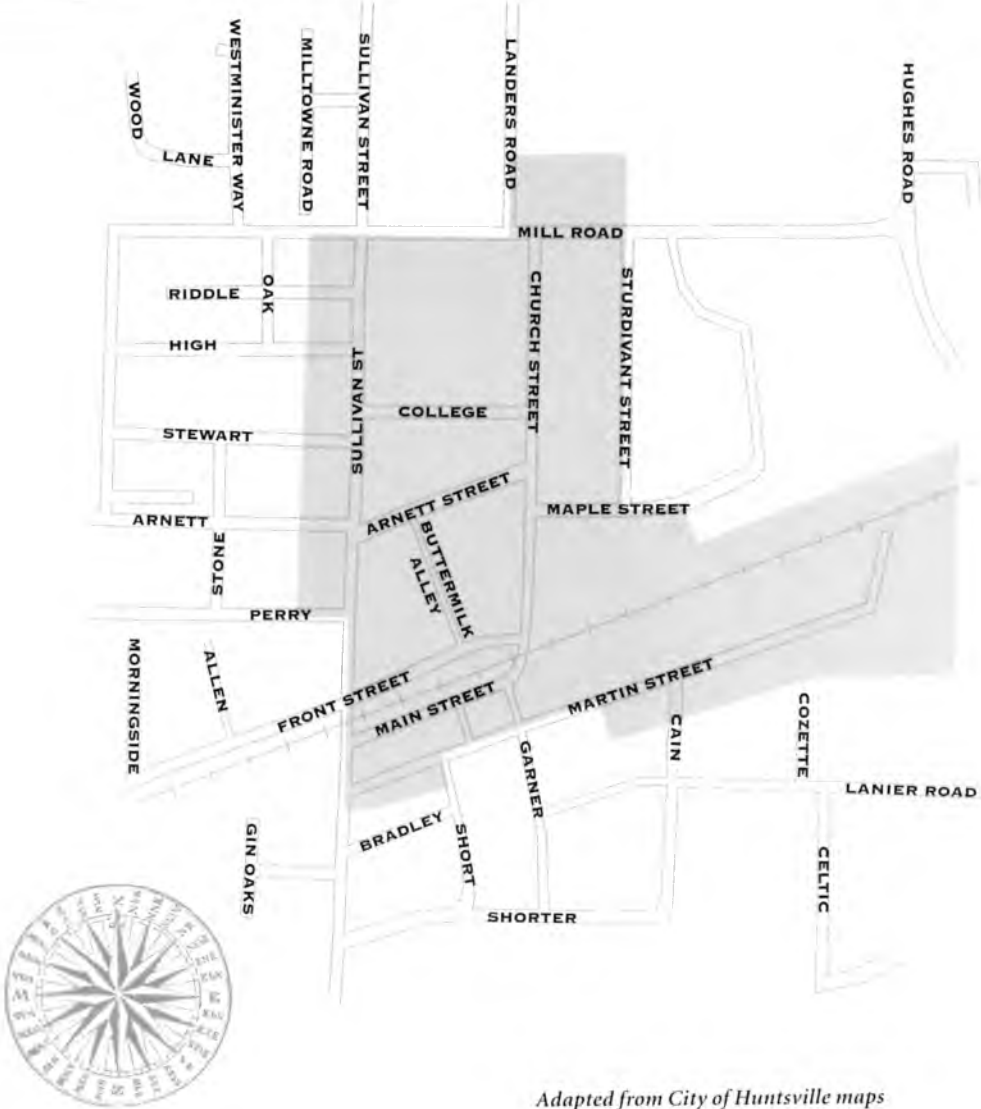
historic preservation in America, and Huntsville in particular. Through my current job I have been fortunate to travel all over the United States and see lots of towns and cities. I always try to find their old or historic downtown areas in whatever spare time I get. This has proven to me how well-preserved Huntsville's downtown is. It has also shown how much has been lost, not just here but all over America. At least Huntsville's downtown area is a safe place with a lot of the fabric intact.

On the economic side, the house has been our best investment over the last five years. We recently refinanced to take advantage of the lower rates and to get some capital to continue our renovations and changes. We have done quite a bit of the work ourselves, mixed in with contracting the parts we did not want to do or did not have the time or skill to do. Even with this extra investment in the house it is still worth more than we have in it. This is partly due to the continued improvement of the properties on Walker Avenue and the continued popularity of historic districts and the consequent rise in house values.

There is a feeling of community that permeates the Old Town Historic District that is very comforting in our modern world. It is wonderful to be able to walk through the neighborhood and see so many buildings being restored and cared for so well. Many people have invested a lot of time and money in their homes, and the rewards are more than visual improvements or a modern kitchen. The year 2003 marks the 25th anniversary of Old Town's listing on the National Register of Historic Places and there have been many changes since that time, mostly for the better. This past year I was voted President of the Old Town Historic Preservation District Association. This gives me the opportunity to work with other residents in our neighborhood to improve our community.



Madison Station Historic District



Adapted from City of Huntsville maps