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What Were They Thinking? The Lost Rison House

PATRICIA H. RYAN

The Gilded Age often refers to the last quarter of the 19th century, when the United States rapidly industrialized and many men of commerce and industry amassed great wealth. Such wealth was often spent building luxurious residences, and one of Huntsville's most refined homes reflected this pattern of affluent spending. The Rison House, situated on West Holmes west of its intersection with Monroe Street, was a striking example of the era's illustrious architectural achievements.

Built in 1889 the two-story dwelling displayed all the requisite characteristics identified with the Queen Anne style, but in a subdued, restrained manner. The building's asymmetrical form; complex rooflines; mixture of wall materials and textures; expansive veranda trimmed with spindle-turned and jigsaw-cut balustrades, brackets, and friezes; and most obviously, its circular corner tower topped by an S-shaped dome and finial, placed this house squarely within the American Queen Anne tradition.

Decorative brick and limestone string-courses delineated and decorated the exterior wall, while patterns of recessed panels were employed to enliven wall planes and add texture, and tall paneled chimneys soared skyward. But the architect, who is unknown, used restraint in the massing, which was a composition of sturdy geometric blocks grouped around a central cube, and in the choice of substantial



Front view of house showing elaborate wrought-iron fence.

brick walls accented with rusticated limestone, two choices that seem to suggest a lingering Italian villa influence on the design. Another Italianate motif is seen in the windows, which, while set in rectangular frames, had double arched panes in the upper sashes. Completing the overall sense of stability and decorum were the moderately pitched hipped roofs with generous eaves resting on solid brackets.

The interior of the Rison House was another matter altogether. The relatively sedate exterior handling was abandoned for an exuberant Victorian treatment within the house. The spacious entry hall, containing two full-sized staircases, erupted in a riot of spindles, spools, woven wooden screens, paneled walls and stair stringers, stained-glass transoms, and massive incised and carved Eastlake newel posts, with the grander newel post surmounted by a free-standing maiden in flowing gown holding aloft her glove of light. The first floor fireplaces, designed for burning coal, were surrounded with raised-pattern ceramic tiles set within ornate wooden mantel surrounds and tall overmantels awash with more spindles, spools, tiny shelves, turned columns, and mirrors. The main doorways featured transoms above, while the public rooms could be separated by closing massive pocket doors. Ornate Victorian ceiling light fixtures hung in many rooms. A wainscot of Lincrusta wall covering was featured in at least one hallway, along with an embossed panel of a classical maiden that was framed between two spoolwork screens. Recessed wooden panels recurred as a frequent decorative motif inside the house, appearing as wall finishes and on stair stringers, doorframes, support posts, and elaborately paneled doors. This impressive home was for many years the architectural legacy of William Richard Rison and his family.



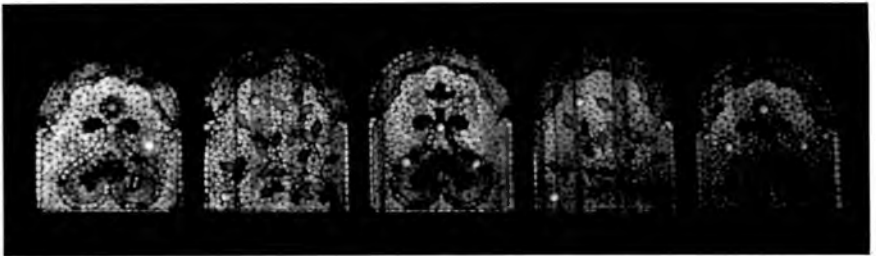
Detail of porch woodwork.

W.R. Rison was born in Huntsville in 1837, the eldest son of Archibald Rison

(1803-1862) and Martha Bibb (1816-1903), who was a distant cousin of Governors William Wyatt Bibb and Thomas Bibb. It is not known when the elder Rison came to Huntsville from his native Tennessee, but he began buying property here in 1826. In the 1840s and 1850s he acquired various tracts on the north side of West Holmes. The 1859-60 City Directory lists both his residence and business (Rison & Hobbs were cotton gin manufacturers) on the north side of Holmes Avenue between Mill Street (roughly the intersection of Holmes and Monroe Streets today) and the railroad tracks. These buildings, shown on the 1861 city map, were replaced by the Rison's Queen Anne residence.¹

William Richard Rison married Maria Louise Jones (1842-1902) in 1858. After serving in the Confederate Army, he began his distinguished banking career in 1866 with Samuel Fordyce in the firm of Fordyce & Rison. When Fordyce retired eleven years later, the name was changed to W.R. Rison & Company. In 1902, W.R. Rison Banking Company was incorporated with a capital stock of \$75,000.² His only child, Archie L. Rison (1859-1925), was cashier.³

With W.R. Rison's death in 1904, the house passed to Archie and his wife Rena Lanier (1862-1935). Archie succeeded his father as both president of the bank and as secretary and treasurer of the Dallas Manufacturing Company. Archie later became general manager of the mill, and under his direction Rison School was



This stained glass was located above one of the windows. A Rison descendant recently purchased the "Rison" transom, also in stained glass, that was located above the front door.

established for the children of mill workers. At his death in 1925, the mill stood idle for a day to honor his memory.⁴

Later that year, Rena Rison sold her home to Robert and Helen Harrison. Robert was associated with Harrison Brothers Hardware Store, along with his brothers James and Daniel. His sister Cora was also involved with the firm.⁵ Robert and Helen lived in the house until his death in 1952. The following year the City Directory listed Mrs. Harrison living on White Street and Mrs. Ruby A. Moore operating the Moore Rest Home at the Rison address. By 1957 the property had been converted into six apartments, most likely because of the housing shortage caused by the growth of Redstone Arsenal.⁶



Pediment above the front door.

Photographs taken in the 1960s show the interior of the house modified but still beautiful. Regrettably, the era's urban renewal plans targeted the 19th-century homes and businesses along Clinton and Holmes Avenues west of downtown, between the business district and Pinhook Creek, for clearance and redevelopment, thereby destroying Huntsville's finest concentration of Victorian dwellings. In 1968 the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville purchased the Rison House and demolished this magnificent home to make way for low-income housing.⁷

Notes

- 1 1850 Census of Madison County, v.2, p. 260; Madison County, Ala., Deed Book K, p.443; *Huntsville Directory, City Guide, and Business Mirror* 1859–60 (Huntsville: Reprinted by Strode Publishers, 1972), p.79.
- 2 Thomas McAdory Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Co., 1978), v.4, p.1443; *Huntsville Weekly Democrat*, 3 August 1904, p.3; John Rison Jones, personal communication, June 2003; Madison County, Ala., Corporation Record 2, p. 31; *Huntsville Daily Times*, 28 June 1925.
- 3 In 1948 the Rison Banking Company on North Side Square and its assets were sold to the First National Bank, which is today Regions Bank. Madison County, Ala., Deed Book 184, p. 175.
- 4 *Weekly Community Builder*, 28 January 1925, p. 1.
- 5 Robert and Helen Harrison had three children: Daniel, John and Margaret (Smallwood). In 1984 Historic Huntsville Foundation purchased Harrison Brothers Hardware from their estates. Madison County, Ala., Deed Book 637, p. 860.
- 6 Madison County, Ala. Deed Book 132, p. 124; Richard Smallwood, personal communication, August 2003; *1953 Huntsville, Alabama City Directory* (Charleston: Nelson Baldwin Directory Co., 1953), p. 535; *1957 Huntsville, Alabama City Directory* (Chillicothe, Ohio: Mullin-Kille and The Huntsville Times, 1957), p.499.
- 7 Madison County, Ala., Deed Book 416, p. 134.



Scholle-Dickson house, 224 West Holmes Avenue. The two most exuberant frame Victorians on West Holmes (this one and 415) appear to have had similar floor plans, but slight variations in detailing make each distinctive. Their most spectacular feature is the upper porch with its oval and circular openings framed with spindlework that repeats on the curved porch. A round bay covered with fish-scale shingles and a delicate iron fence terminating in a row of lotus motifs complete this high style house.