

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 29
Number 3 *Preservation: Progress and Setbacks*

Article 5

9-22-2003

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Recommended Citation

Boccippio, Dennis (2003) "Wells Avenue Restoration Preserves a History-Rich House in Five Points," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 29: No. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol29/iss3/5>

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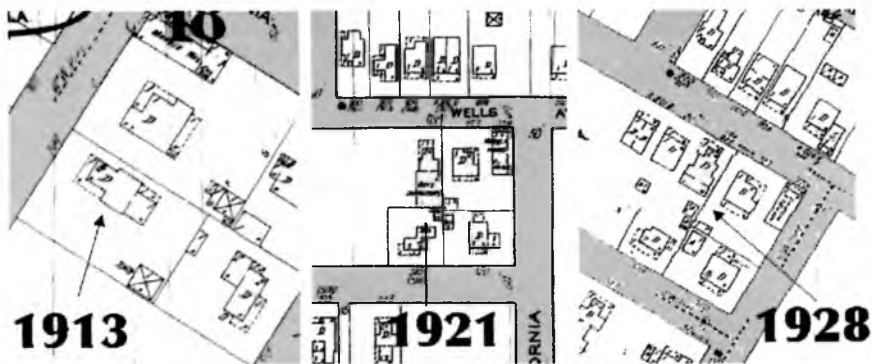
Wells Avenue Restoration Preserves a History-Rich House in Five Points

DENNIS BOCCIPPIO

Nestled between California Street and Maple Hill Cemetery is the 1899 Coombs House at 804 Wells Avenue, one of the oldest surviving dwellings in the Five Points Historic Preservation District. Fondly known to long-time Five Points residents as the “Pig House” (for reasons elaborated below), the house is a local example of the Folk Victorian style common from 1870–1910.* Since 2000, the residence has undergone interior and exterior renovation and restoration. During its lifetime, the house has been used for both public and private purposes, and along with neighboring homes, its history evokes former eras of this corner of the Five Points neighborhood.

In researching the history of the Coombs House and the property’s many owners—beginning with Leroy Pope, who purchased the land parcel in the August 1809 public land sales¹—the writer relied on a variety of public and private records. Publicly documented surveyors’ notes, census records and title abstracts (the latter available in the Madison County Records Room of the Huntsville Madison County Public Library) helped confirm the earliest title history. The Sanborn Fire Insurance Map series was used to establish the history of significant structural changes in the 1910s and 1920s, and to confirm that the earliest recorded dwelling is indeed the currently standing house. Photographic evidence from a “Huntsville Schools History” collection of informal documents at the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library was also helpful.

By 1898, after many changes in ownership and development in the surrounding neighborhood, the parcel had been sold to a Samuel Bennett, for \$350² and in 1899 to A.P. (Arthur) Coombs, for \$1,150.³ By 1899, tax records show two houses assessed to Coombs on one lot bounded on the north by Randolph Avenue (now Wells Avenue) and on the south by Eustis Avenue. Subsequent records and subdivisions confirm that these two houses were on opposite sides of the property, and



Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1913, 1921 and 1928 showing the structural layout of the original Coombs House, the Wills School dormitory/science laboratory addition, and the post-1925-fire layout. Also visible are the next-door marble works. Wills-Taylor/Huntsville College includes all land to the west in the maps.

that the present house is the one on the north side. Interestingly, a Folk Victorian home with a nearly identical exterior can be found at 711 Wells Avenue, just across California. A thorough search of its history might uncover additional information.

Evidence of Arthur Coombs's actual presence in Huntsville is elusive. No Coombs is listed in either the 1896-1897 or the 1911-1912 City Directory. Arthur Coombs does not appear in the 1900 census. No Coombs is listed in probate records or as resting in Maple Hill Cemetery.

In any event, Coombs's heirs seemed to have fallen on difficult times and struggled to keep the property after his death. A six-year legal battle ensued in which a lumber company in Tacoma, Washington sought to seize the house. The title history during this period is a somewhat amusing series of foreclosures, court orders, vacancies, and title transfers aimed at protecting the property. (All these are included in a title abstract package prepared by the firm of G.W. Jones and Sons and recorded at the Madison County Records Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.) In the end, the Coombs heirs prevailed.

In 1909 the Butler School (later Goodrich School) was built on the western edge of the original parcel. The year 1913 marks the first year that the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps show structural details for the area, and reveal the original footprint and construction of the house (frame, composite roof, two-story), including its distinctive front porch. From the plan, it can be confirmed that the front half of the house—including its wraparound porch—is indeed the current structure. The original rear portion of the house was later destroyed by fire (see below), but it was two stories, with the exception of the current kitchen, which was originally a rear porch. The 1913 maps also show the neighboring property on the corner of Wells Avenue and California Street (now Maple Hill Drive), which then housed the marble works for Maple Hill Cemetery.

The most interesting period in the history of the house began in 1919 when it and the Goodrich School were bought by Professor R.P. Wills⁴ and became the Wills School (incorporated that year, later renamed Wills-Taylor, and eventually Huntsville College). The Wills School property encompassed the entire area west of the house to White Street, between Eustis and Wells, and its main building was the

older Butler-Goodrich School.

The most pleasant surprise in researching the Coombs House history came when a collection of old Wills School annuals (“The Wist”) was found at the Huntsville Madison County Public Library. The annuals note that in creation of the Wills School, a number of patrons organized a stock company, and “the facilities of the school were so increased that a number of boarding students came.” The



DORMITORY

Photograph of the Coombs House (with rear dormitory addition) from the 1919 Wills School annual, The Wist. The front half of the house is identical to the current structure.

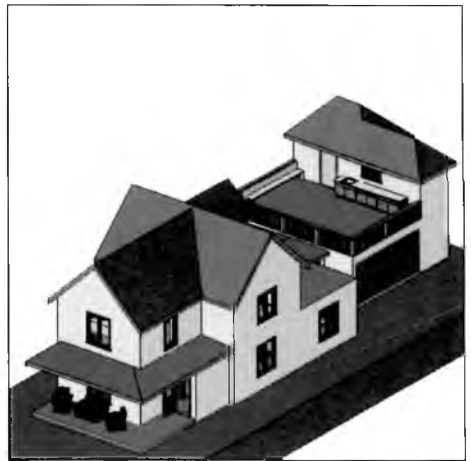
annuals included actual photographs of the house from 1919 to 1925, complete with a rear dormitory addition. In these photographs, the house is listed variously as “Taylor Hall,” “Dormitory” and “Dormitories.” The front façade is clearly identical to the current structure, down to the molding on the front porch. In the 1921 photograph, a portion of the house immediately behind the Coombs House on Eustis Avenue is also visible and clearly resembles its current structure. The 1920 Wist notes that “Taylor Hall is a two-story, well arranged modern dormitory with every convenience, situated on the Northeast corner of campus.” By 1921, the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps reflected the boys’ dormitory.

In 1923, a corporation organized for the purpose of putting on a Junior College course purchased the Wills-Taylor School, and the Huntsville College, Inc., was founded. The 1925 (Third Year) Huntsville College Annual Catalogue again shows a photograph of the Coombs House, then named “Science Hall.” The annual notes that, “... the laboratory [houses] the Physics, Chemistry and Mechanical Drawing Laboratories.... Apparatus sufficient for the carrying on of advanced experimentation is available in the physics and chemistry laboratories, thereby insuring the means for further laboratory work by students far advanced in work.” As the present owner is a scientist by profession, this discovery was a warmly welcomed surprise.

As with many structures during this time period, fire struck the Coombs House, in 1925, specifically the rear (now laboratory) addition. This event was documented by G. W. Jones in a May 1932 affidavit (J. D. Vandiventer et al. to Alabama Home Bldg & Loan Assc) given as part of a minor metes and bounds dispute. (Jones had surveyed the property in 1926 during paving of what is today Maple Hill Drive, and he noted that four of his children themselves graduated from Wills School and Huntsville College). The original front half of the house survived the fire, and the original rear half was partially reconstructed (one story only). During the recent renovation, isolated boards of scorched wood were found under the rear siding, indicating that some had been re-used after the fire. The 1928 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the original building marked as “fire ruins.”

By this time, however, the Huntsville College had hit hard times, and in November 1928 the property was bought at public auction by Jacob E. Pierce, editor and general manager of the *Huntsville Weekly Times* and at one time a trustee of the Wills School and Huntsville College.⁵ Pierce owned many properties in the area, but was apparently not immune to the financial difficulties of the times. The school property was foreclosed by Alabama Home Building and Loan Association in 1931.

Over the next thirty-five years, the house passed through a succession of short-term owners, and family names familiar to many Five Points residents can be recognized in the list: Baker, Ellard, Rolfe, Certain, Fanning, Allison, Dyer and Woods. A garage was added on to the reconstructed rear in the early 1940s. In 1966, the house was purchased by pharmacist G. Rex Walls, who lived there until his death in the mid-1990s. Rex was originally a pig farmer, and he adorned the yard and exterior with a variety of porcine placards and objects that included a large pig sculpture in the front courtyard. The Coombs House thus became known to local residents as the “Pig House.” In honor of this tradition, the current owners have left several pig decorations (discreetly) in place. During his ownership, Rex also attached a rear two-story efficiency apartment behind the garage, and had a front courtyard designed by local Master Gardener Bill Nance. Rex’s surviving friends recount the tradition of the house supporting a ghost, who purportedly appeared at the bottom of the interior stairwell from time to time. The current owners have yet to encounter her.



Architectural layout of the current structure, including post-1925 rear first floor reconstruction and later garage and apartment additions.

In 2000, the house was acquired by the artist Nall Hollis (originally from Arab, Alabama) and his wife Tuscia for use by his mother Mary. Nall oversaw renovation and remodeling of the first floor, which was in disrepair. His treatment of the first floor hardwood in a European style (an ebony stain still allowing the wood grain to show through) coincidentally evokes the house's former (and forgotten) "schoolhouse" usage. The galley kitchen was updated with Indiana slate flooring and marble countertops, and the front two rooms were opened and joined to create a spacious formal area.

In 2002, the house's current residents, Dr. Dennis Boccippio and Alex Godwin, began restoring the exterior, which was in significant disrepair. Much of the siding remaining from the original front half of the house was rotting, while the rear post-fire reconstruction had been sided with a different wood lap, and the garage and apartment additions had been sided with Masonite, which was almost completely decayed. Local carpenter Ray Gambrell handled the exterior siding restoration with artful attention to detail. The entire rear half of the house has now been re-sided with siding specially cut to match the original 1899 siding on the front. Western cedar was chosen for longevity and durability. As much of the original front siding as possible was retained and sanded, and the house was repainted, with assistance in color selection from local decorator Randy Roper. The restoration earned a 2003 Historic Preservation Award from the Historic Huntsville Foundation. Between the interior renovation and exterior restoration, the house was essentially given a new lease on life as its centennial birthday present, complete with a Five Points Historic Preservation District marker.

The author plans to continue restoring and renovating the house over the next few years. An exterior stairwell on the east side of the house leading to the rear deck and apartment is architecturally inconsistent with the Folk Victorian style and will be replaced with a more appropriate solution. Reconstruction of the second story of the rear of the house (rebuilt only as single story after the 1925 fire) is also planned. It will serve to join the main house with the deck area over the rear garage.

This corner of Five Points thus includes the former home of the cemetery's granite works (next door), the former home of the Huntsville College president (on Eustis Avenue), and the former Wells Avenue Grocery (across the street). Together with these houses, the Coombs House is a small but important surviving part of the history of Five Points' "southern" tip.

**The Folk Victorian style was a humbler version of the more elaborate Victorian house styles, including Italianate and the Romanesque. Just plain folks could afford these no-fuss homes thanks to mass production of decorative trimwork and the ability of expanding railroads to transport ready-made wood features to local lumberyards. Houses in the Folk Victorian style were likely to be owner- or carpenter-designed or planned from pattern books rather than done by a professional architect. Folk Victorian features include porches with spindlework detailing, an L-shaped or gable-front plan, and brackets with details often inspired by Queen Anne or Gothic design. Editors.*

Notes

- 1 Tract Book 36, certificate 802.
- 2 Madison County, Ala., Deed book 84,259 (2-27-97).
- 3 Madison County, Ala., Deed book 82,249 (1-10-1890).
- 4 Madison County, Ala., Deed book 121, p. 485.
- 5 Joberta Wasson, *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, vol. XIV, nos. 2 & 3, Winter-Spring 1988: 13.



Redstone recycling from original duplex to single family dwelling.