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Recycling Redstone: Preservation on a Massive Scale

FRANCES ROBB

You might call it one of Huntsville's biggest recycling projects. When it's finished, in a year or so, approximately ninety duplexes will have been relocated from Redstone Arsenal to new sites in Huntsville and many surrounding communities. For more than two years, Jeff Kennedy and employees of his company, Don Kennedy and Sons House Moving Company, have been finding new homes for old homes, houses built in 1959, when the United States military was much larger than it is now, and base housing provided three-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath, 1,200 square foot houses for hundreds of service families. These were not hasty, cheap constructions. Solid brick, with their original three-quarter-inch oak parquet floors intact, yellow poplar baseboards, and kitchens completely renovated in the late 1990s, they were built to detailed government specifications and at a level of quality that would be extremely expensive to duplicate today.¹

With the downsizing of the military in the 1990s, these houses—several dozen single houses, plus the duplexes—were no longer needed. Bulldozing them seemed the only option. Yet moving the debris to a Redstone Arsenal landfill would be an expensive proposition, actually requiring a new landfill.

Enter Jeff Kennedy, who called the base one morning three years ago to inquire about the possibility of moving some of the single-family houses to new sites in the Huntsville area. Too late, he was told. The demolition orders had already been processed and work was about to begin. But across the street were nearly 100 duplexes. Would he like to take a look at those? Sure.

When Kennedy saw the duplexes he was impressed by their solid quality workmanship. Their relatively small size, twenty-nine feet by ninety feet, made them desirable for individuals and families who seemed to Kennedy to have been, as he puts it, "left out of the loop," forgotten in the recent construction trend in which new houses costing \$150,000 and up were the norm. Modest-sized high-quality houses

like those at Redstone would be prohibitively expensive to build in the 21st century. Relocating them would make the houses available at half the cost.

Kennedy's firm had the expertise to move these houses from their concrete pads, shift them onto trucks, haul them on city streets and highways, and deposit them onto new foundations. Kennedy was sure that they could be used in many ways as reasonably priced high-quality residences and offices. He thought it wouldn't be hard to add some modern amenities—garages or carports, additional baths, dining areas. He could see that it would be possible to individualize them with updated rooflines, porches and new foundation treatments so that the casual observer would have to look hard to see the original plain facades behind the revisions.

A year of paperwork later, Kennedy began the largest recycling job of his career: ninety houses, each weighing about 200 tons. That's 36,000,000 pounds of stuff that otherwise would have ended up in a landfill. By any reckoning, that's preservation on an enormous scale.

"I have nothing but good to say about the people at Redstone," commented Kennedy. "They were super-nice to work with from the beginning. This project was a first, the first time a private company had come onto a United States military base to move houses off the base. But they realized right away that this was a win-win situation. It's exciting to think that this project might be the model for others across the country, as we've shown that a project on this scale can succeed."

The scale of the Redstone house-moving project is truly massive. It has required work on an assembly-line scale, with specialists to dig out the houses and shore them up with jacks, shift them onto steel supports, load them onto trucks, and move and relocate them onto new foundations.

Kennedy believes that it takes a special set of conditions for such a large project to be carried out. The city and its surrounding area must be large enough to absorb

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Redstone duplex rounds a corner

so many recycled houses—one or two each week for three years. The county and city officials must be supportive; moving houses along streets and highways is a complicated business. Officials at Redstone have to be alerted when a house is moving off the base. Then, at the entrance to the military facility, city and county authorities

must supervise the move and the restoration of traffic lights, power wires and other obstacles in the house's path.

In Huntsville and in surrounding communities, Kennedy found officials willing to help. Every house that's relocated, he points out, starts to pay its share of taxes. If you were a city official, you'd rather have a house instead of an empty lot. In addition, people must have trust in the moving company. It's not everyone, Kennedy notes, who is completely confident that a relocated house will function just as well as one built on the spot. Jeff is very proud of his family's fifty-plus years in the house moving business. That's long enough, he feels, for trust to develop in the company's experience and know-how.



Don Kennedy, Jeff's grandfather, started the business almost by chance back in the 1940s, when he moved a shed for a neighbor. At the time, he was working as a construction contractor. He used his bulldozers to terrace fields and for other earth-work projects. Earlier, he had worked as a rigger on some of the TVA dams, using cables to hoist materials high into the air.

"It's the rigger's mentality that sums up what you need in this business, planning balance and weights, being always ready to adjust and improvise safely and

efficiently. It's an attitude, a way of thinking. If you look at these houses, you may think they're all alike—cookie-cutter houses. But in fact, there are all sorts of minute differences. You can't know exactly what problems you will face, even when you have the original blueprints and specifications, and a good idea of the underlying terrain. As my father used to say, there is an answer to every problem."

Kennedy's grandfather worked in the days when hefty wooden timbers were placed under buildings, and screw jacks—often with their operators making adjustments beneath buildings on the move. These were potentially hazardous activities, where something could go wrong at any moment, where the rigger's quick intelligence and problem-solving attitude were often put to the test.

Kennedy's father, Joe, took the reins of the family business in the early 1970s and became a familiar figure around Huntsville, moving houses and doing a lot of foundation work and construction. About 1990, Joe sold the business to his sons Terry and Jeff. Five years ago, Jeff bought Terry's portion of the business and he is now sole owner. His talk is peppered with references to the family, the family firm, the jobs they worked on, the accumulated lore of more than fifty years in the business.

Joe Kennedy is now retired. He and his wife, Jan, live in a big Victorian house that they moved sixty miles from Lynnville, Tennessee onto their Limestone County farm. "They set it on one end of the farm," Jeff recalled, "and it was twenty years before they had finished work on it. But now it's a showplace." Joe has a passion for fine woodcraft. When a walnut or cherry tree had to be cut down on the property, he saved the trunk. He scrounged other woods, including yellow poplar, from wherever he could find them. These woods, some from ancient trees, were used to complete the Victorian house.

An appreciation of quality construction is something that comes naturally to Jeff Kennedy. Partly, he thinks, it's in his genes, partly it's the result of a lifetime of experience watching his father shape fine woods into something special.

But it's more than that. "I love to see our heritage saved," he says. He has moved his

share of historic buildings, including the Steamboat Gothic house in Huntsville; the antebellum Figh-Pickett House in Montgomery, the second largest structure ever moved in Alabama; and the 1920s Phi Kappa Phi fraternity house on the campus of the University of Alabama. “Moving historic houses is very exciting. It gets the headlines. But it doesn’t pay the bills.”

One of the moving company’s local attention-getters is the project involving an historic house at the intersection of Whitesburg Drive and Drake Avenue. When the city announced plans for road improvements in the area that would require



Whitesburg Drive house before current highway improvement project

removal of structures in the path of road widening, Don Kennedy and Sons acquired five houses that, like the Redstone duplexes, would otherwise have been consigned to a landfill. Three houses have been relocated, and two remain on their sites, repositioned. The largest house, at 2904 Whitesburg Drive, was built circa 1905 and was one of the first houses to sit right on the roadway. Jeff restored 2904,

adding modern amenities, and placed it on the market. The house is now under sales contract. At its annual awards ceremony in May 2003, Historic Huntsville Foundation honored Jeff Kennedy with a Special Recognition award for repositioning and restoring this historic house, and thus saving it from demolition.

Jeff finds recycling houses from our recent past—the Redstone duplexes—just as enticing. Even so, the idea of selling ninety houses on the open market took some thought. People find out about the houses from television and newspaper advertisements, billboards and word of mouth, all effective marketing tools, Kennedy feels.

All sorts of people have turned up to buy his buildings: people wanting a reasonably priced high-quality house or office, and investors who plan to lease or rent the houses. Kennedy has created small communities of these houses, particularly in the Harvest area, and he plans to lease them himself.

Jeff says the house moving business is largely made up of family firms like his. Its professional association, the International Association of Structure Movers (IASM), strives to keep these firms in the forefront of innovations that make house moving safer, more economical and more efficient. Kennedy has advanced up the ranks in this organization and will soon serve as its president. “I want to make a contribution not just to my region but to my industry,” he commented. To that end, he has invented several devices that make moving a house safer and more predictable. One is a computerized device that shuts down the movement of the hydraulic oil on which a house is supported during the move. If a line should break, it could be real trouble, with the house, the movers and spectators placed in real danger. With his device, the system can be immediately shut down so that nothing can happen.

Another Kennedy device is a hydraulic remote control, which steers the dollies on which the house rests when it makes turns. Kennedy has no intention of making money from the device, which he patented in 1997. “I’ve sent some that I’ve built to friends in the business, and sent the plans to others.” It’s a way,” he notes, “of making our industry safer. You still need someone at the side of the house while it’s



Whitesburg Drive house after modernization and repositioning on new foundation

moving along, checking everything is okay, but you no longer need a person under the house. It makes the work quicker, more efficient and less confusing. It keeps people from having to yell to each other. For emergencies, to get people's attention, we use whistles. This kind of innovation helps us keep our safety record at its best. We're proud that we have never had a major accident."

Hiring the right people is also critical in the house moving business. When Kennedy looks to hire new employees, he looks first at character. "You can't buy it," he notes, "but every employee of this company has to have it. I need people who want to do their best every day, on every job." His foreman, Phillip Griffin, is an exemplary and trusted employee. Thirty years on the job, Griffin "pulled his first house" when he was thirteen. When he gets to a new job site, he has no idea what the job costs. He does his best, whether the job is quick and relatively easy or tedious and difficult. He's not in it, Kennedy explains, to save the company's money but to do the job right.

Kennedy has the same commitment. When he describes the plans for some of his redesigned Redstone houses, he delights in every new amenity he has added, improvements that bring these houses into the 21st century. He is especially proud of the enlarged dining areas, their floors a sweep of the same solid oak parquet as the original living room. When asked where he got the new flooring to match the old, he chuckles. "It's not new," he admits. "Before Redstone bulldozed the single-family houses, I was allowed to take the oak flooring out. It too will be recycled, and the larger dining room will look as if it's always been there."

Architects and architectural photographers are sometimes described as people with a talent for detail. That description obviously extends to some house movers, Jeff Kennedy among them.

Note

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- 1 Author's interview for this article conducted July 4, 2003.



CLAUDE PETTUS

*Born in 1871, he graduated from the
University of Alabama and
received his medical training
at Vanderbilt, graduating in 1896.*

*Photographs courtesy of Bob and Lou Gathany
and Linda Allen (Dr. Pettus's office)*