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From the Preservation Coordinator

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From the Preservation Coordinator

LESLIE TUCKER

Though I didn't know it at the time, I became a preservationist some twenty years ago in a little town called Grant, about thirty miles southeast of Huntsville. My love of historic buildings and the stories they tell began during my years as a student at Kate Duncan Smith Daughters of the American Revolution School. KDS was built by the Alabama DAR in 1924 to serve the children of rural Gunter Mountain. The school brought educational opportunities to an isolated mountain people and provided a curriculum dedicated to achievement and service to community and country.

During my time as a student at KDS, I knew that it was a special place. It was unique in its founding and its history, its architecture and its rich traditions. And I knew it held a special place in my heart because my father, aunts, uncles and cousins had all been students there before me. But it wasn't until I left KDS that I realized none of these things alone make it special. It's the combination of all of them. Together these things create a sense of place and belonging for the students and residents alike. We are all tied to that school. It has been the anchor of the community since its inception over eighty years ago, and it will forever bind the people of that mountain together. It is in our hearts. It's special. And we are all special because of our connection to it.

No doubt most people can name a place or a building that helped to define them—a place that connects them to their past and helped to shape their future. When we lose these places, we don't just lose buildings, we lose a part of who we are as individuals, as communities and as a nation. And when we preserve these places, we aren't just saving buildings, we are protecting that intangible thing we call a sense of place. That feeling we have that lets us know we belong somewhere—that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

As a preservationist, I was excited to see revitalization efforts underway in downtown Huntsville when I recently moved back to Alabama. These efforts include the rehabilitation of some of the city's finest structures, improving the character and appearance of downtown and attracting residents and visitors to the area. But more important, the preservation of these buildings will protect a vital part of Huntsville's history. Their rebirth will ensure that the stories and memories of old Huntsville will be passed down for generations to come.

The Russel Erskine Hotel holds many such stories and memories. And though its story may have been forgotten by many, it is not lost. An impressive plan to rehabilitate this architectural treasure will uncover its rich history and allow a new chapter in the life of Huntsville's "grand hotel" to begin.



*The Russel Erskine's prime location. Archived photo courtesy
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