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Katherine L. Stamps

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Preserving a Legacy: An Architectural History of the I. Schiffman Building, 1845-2017

By Katie Stamps

The I. Schiffman Building is one of the most familiar and cherished historic structures in Huntsville, Alabama's downtown landscape. Located at 231 East Side Square, this building has been a symbol of Huntsville's entrepreneurial spirit for almost two centuries as one of the few surviving antebellum commercial properties in the city. Lovingly preserved, the I. Schiffman Building has seen many changes over the past 172 years.¹

Constructed ca. 1845, this structure was designed in the Federal style which was the dominant architectural style in the American colonies from 1780 to 1840. The American Revolution ushered in a refinement of the Georgian style, made popular in England. Similar to Georgian style in its use of symmetry and



Figure 1. I. Schiffman Building, west elevation. Photo credit: K. Stamps, May 13, 2017.

¹ Linda Allen, "Schiffman Building, 231 East Side Square, Huntsville, Alabama," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Department of the Interior, September 22, 1980.

classical details, Federal style characteristics are more delicate and finely drawn.²

The I. Schiffman Building's original design consisted of three symmetrical bays divided by pilasters with simple moldings and dentils. Housing the Smith, Herstein & Co. dry goods store ca. 1860, this three-story structure became a bustling component of Huntsville's economy.

In 1895, the Southern Savings and Loan Company purchased the southern-most bay of the original 1845 building and hired Nashville architect George W. Thompson to design a new façade and remodel the interior at a cost of \$18,000.³ D.E. Dinnedy, a contractor from Nashville, constructed the building. The remodeled bay is all that remains of the original structure. Thompson designed the new façade in the Richardsonian



Figure 2. I. Schiffman Building ca. 1860s during Smith, Herstein & Co. ownership. Photo credit: Huntsville Madison County Public Library.



Figure 3. I. Schiffman Building and post-Civil War development in downtown Huntsville. Photo credit: Huntsville Madison County Public Library.

² "Pennsylvania Architectural Field Guide, Architectural Styles: Federal Style 1780-1820," Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/architecture/styles/federal.html>

³ Allen, "Schiffman Building."

Romanesque style making this structure one of the few surviving commercial examples of the style in Alabama.⁴



Figure 5. I. Schiffman Building ca. late-19th century after Southern Savings and Loan 1895 renovation. Photo credit: Huntsville Madison County Public Library.

embrace of Romanesque architecture, made famous by the architect Henry Hobson Richardson. Richardson's designs are distinct to America and came to be known as Richardsonian Romanesque. This style is solid, ornate, and often makes use of thick, rough-cut masonry. Rounded arches, cavernous entryways and window openings, and asymmetrical facades are typical design elements used in this style.⁵

America first saw the use of Romanesque architectural design during the 1840s and 1850s. It was inspired by the European Romanesque style, which was a revival of classical Roman architecture. The building's 1895 renovation was part of America's second

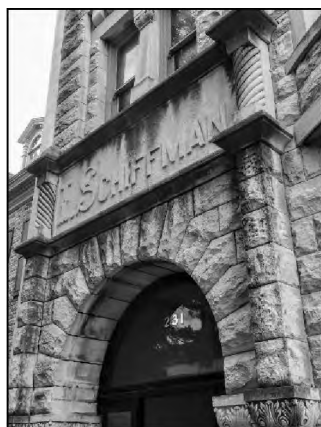


Figure 4. I. Schiffman Building, west elevation details. Photo credit: K. Stamps, May 13, 2017.

⁴ Meg Torbert, "Schiffman Building is latest mystery building," *The Huntsville Times*, November 1, 1987.

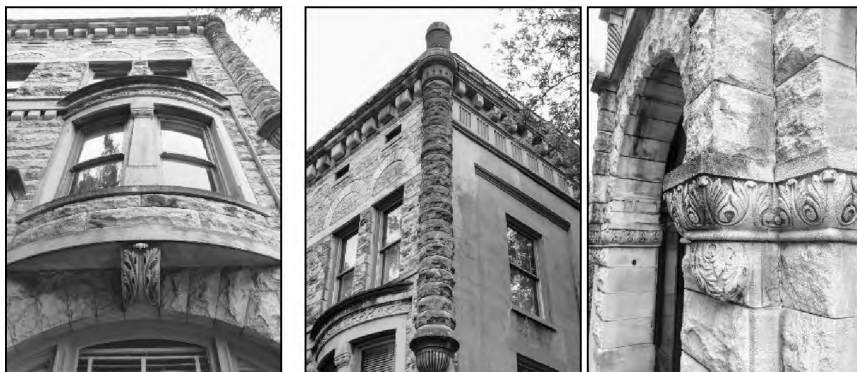
⁵ "Romanesque Revival," *Architectural Styles of American and Europe*, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://architecturestyles.org/romanesque-revival/>.

The building was given a new, quarry-faced limestone façade which was “splendidly arched over the vestibule entrance,” according to the *Weekly Mercury* of March 13, 1895: “The side wall was plastered and scored to resemble masonry. The entrance was shifted to the north side of the façade and a large window opens into the president’s office. Above the entrance is a dressed stone slab bearing the name “I. Schiffman,” and above the window is a heavy keystone carved with a foliate design. The second floor has two narrow windows over the entrance topped by a smooth stone lintel and a small-scale replica of the cornice.

A bowed bay containing two larger windows protrudes over the president’s office.

On the third floor two windows are grouped above the bay while the third is centered over the entrance. A dressed stone lintel extends across the façade and forms the base for stone arches which spring over each window. Each corner is accented by an attenuated turret that extends above the heavy stone cornice. The cornice continues along the side wall of the building which is divided into five recessed bays by plain pilasters and an entablature that were features of the antebellum structures. The windows were enlarged during the 1895 remodeling and an entrance added in the last bay.”⁶

⁶ Allen, “Schiffman Building.”



Figures 6-8. I. Schiffman Building, west elevation details. Photo credit: K. Stamps, May 13, 2017.

The 1895 renovation reconfigured the interior floor plan to side hall and offices on all three floors. The building has retained a significant portion of the character-defining features installed during this renovation including pressed tin ceilings, carved cherry wood on the first floor, oak on the second and third floors, mission style chandeliers that used carbide for lighting, corner fireplaces with carved mantels, and two walk-in vaults located on the first floor and basement.⁷



Figures 9-10. I. Schiffman Building, first floor interior, photos taken by K. Stamps on

⁷ Goldsmith, Margaret Anne, "I. Schiffman Building History," Personal History Collection.

A large fire damaged the basement, third floor and roof of the building in 1900, but left the first and second floors intact.⁸

In 1905, the Southern Savings and Loan Company fell on hard times and had to sell the building. That same year, Isaac Schiffman purchased the property for \$9,000 to house his business headquarters, and the structure became known as the I. Schiffman Building. Schiffman was a German immigrant who had moved to Huntsville as a teenager to work for his uncles. He had a variety of business ventures, including a general store, mule barn, wagon and tractor dealerships, and he bought and sold cotton and real estate, and loaned money. After his death in 1910, his son Robert L. Schiffman and son-in-law, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, continued and expanded the business. The Schiffman and Goldsmith families have owned the building for the past 112 years.⁹

Huntsville experienced major changes during the mid-twentieth century due in large part to the establishment of Redstone Arsenal and Marshall Space Flight Center. Once a predominantly agricultural and textile manufacturing town, Huntsville was inundated with rocket scientists and new business opportunities in the 1950s and 1960s. Like many other cities during this time, Huntsville's push for progress included Urban Renewal. This federal program sought to reverse the suburban flight of the 1950s and encourage populations to return to inner cities. Buildings determined unsuited to the needs of modern city life were demolished in great numbers, with no regard for architectural quality or technical condition.¹⁰

⁸ Torbert, "Schiffman Building is latest mystery building."

⁹ Goldsmith, "I. Schiffman Building History."

¹⁰ Harvie P. Jones, "Two Hundred Years of Architecture in the Twickenham Historic Preservation District of Huntsville, Alabama," Huntsville History Collection, accessed February 25, 2017,

Entire blocks of Huntsville were demolished during the Urban Renewal program. Unfortunately, this included many of Huntsville's most architecturally and historically significant structures. During this time, the Housing Authority demolished the northern two bays of the I. Schiffman Building that were not part of the 1895 Richardsonian Romanesque renovation. This loss reduced the size of the I. Schiffman Building by two-thirds and left a valuable piece of Huntsville's downtown square vulnerable to new construction infill.



Figure 11. I. Schiffman Building, basement interior. Photo credit: K. Stamps, April 13, 2017.

As the negative impact of Urban Renewal became more apparent, citizens joined forces to reverse the tide of demolition in Huntsville's historic neighborhoods. Organizations such as the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society and the Antiquarian Society identified and surveyed historically significant structures, and in 1965, drew up a plan that would become the boundary lines for the Twickenham Historic District.¹¹ In 1966,

Congress caught up with a nation-wide preservation movement

http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Two_Hundred_Years_of_Architecture_in_Twickenham, 1997.

¹¹ Martha S. Rambo, "A Brief History of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District," Huntsville History Collection, accessed February 25, 2017, http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=A_Brief_History_of_the_Twickenham_Historic_Preservation_District, 2007.

that was in direct response to Urban Renewal and passed the National Historic Preservation Act. This act established the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1980, the I. Schiffman Building was listed to the National Register.

In 1998, Margaret Anne Goldsmith, building owner and Isaac Schiffman's great-granddaughter, carefully modernized the I. Schiffman Building with the help of the federal historic tax credit program. She had previously gained tax credit experience by completing a project on her father's house at 206 Gates Avenue, the Bernstein House. By utilizing this program, Goldsmith said "It was like disciplining myself to make sure I did it correctly."¹² She describes each project as being unique with its own challenges.

Stones from the 1845 foundation are still visible in the basement. Support poles and beams have been installed over the years to reinforce settling issues. "Since it was built in 1845, the flooring needed some additional support," said Goldsmith. The walk-in vault and triangular bases of the fireplaces installed during the 1895 renovation can also be seen.

Today, Goldsmith's offices occupy the first floor which has been meticulously preserved. The



Figure 12. I. Schiffman Building, first floor ceiling detail. Photo credit: K. Stamps, April 13, 2017.



Figure 13. I. Schiffman Building, first floor cornice detail. Photo credit: K. Stamps, April 13, 2017.

¹² Margaret Anne Goldsmith, personal conversation, April 13, 2017.

carved cherry woodwork glows warmly from the light of the original Mission-style chandeliers that were moved from the third floor to the first floor during the 1998 renovation. The carbide chandeliers had been replaced over the years with fluorescent lighting. Goldsmith explained the decorative, classical designs on the pressed tin ceiling in the hallway were purposefully more ornate than the simple, rectangular design of the office ceiling. A weather gage and Western Union teletype were installed by Goldsmith's great-grandfather, Isaac Schiffman, to get stock market information from New York City. Goldsmith left a reveal of the original stencil border along the cornice in the rear office to display an intact section of the room's decorative details. The I. Schiffman Building is filled with creative elements such as this that sensitively display the character defining features added to the

structure over time.

Modern lighting was added to illuminate the walls of metal drawers in the large walk-in vault on the first floor used by both the Southern Savings and Loan Company and I. Schiffman & Co. to store client records. Remnants of protective rubber treads can be seen on the wood flooring, installed to keep the bookkeepers' benches from sliding as they stood at the 1895 cherry desk that was built in place because of its large size. Tiny holes from carpet staples are also visible in the wood. Goldsmith's grandfather, Lawrence



Figure 14. I. Schiffman Building, first floor vault detail. Photo credit: K. Stamps, April 13, 2017.

B. Goldsmith, Sr., installed a row of blunted iron spikes along the sill of the arched front window to keep people from sitting on the ledge when they came to town on Saturdays. Although the windows are original to the 1895 renovation, broken panes are replaced as needed. Goldsmith said they are very expensive to replace and have to be specially ordered.



Figures 15-21. I. Schiffman Building, first floor details. Photo credit: K. Stamps, April 13, 2017.

There is no elevator in the building and the interior staircase extends from the basement to the third floor. The first floor rear vestibule was enclosed in the 1920s. Plywood was removed from the stairwell walls and replaced with beadboard during the 1998 renovation. A small area of plaster was left unrepaired in order to reveal a section of brick wall on the first floor of the stairwell. The rear of the building was bricked up during the 1950s to 1960s. A formerly exterior window between the first and second floors has been frosted over in order to conceal the brick wall behind it.

One of the major challenges was to add heating and air conditioning to the second floor. The building does not have a crawl space and Goldsmith wanted to avoid lowering the ceiling to disguise the HVAC system. She had to be creative to incorporate this modern element into a 19th-century structure. After consulting with the Department of the Interior tax credit reviewer, they agreed to use the transoms over each door to funnel the ductwork.

The second floor is still used for rented office space. The 1895 floor plan of side hall and offices have been maintained. More recently, Goldsmith updated the hallway with new paint and



Figures 22-24. I. Schiffman Building, stairwell and second floor details. Photo credit: K. Stamps. April 13, 2017.

removed old carpeting. Due to the second floor being occupied by a tenant at the time, Goldsmith was unable to remove the asbestos tile flooring and restore the original wood. Installing laminate wood flooring on top of the asbestos was a reasonable alternative that offered a traditional appearance and protected the original wood flooring underneath.

While the third floor has also retained the side hall and offices plan, it was renovated as rented apartment space during the early 1900s when the Southern Savings and Loan Company was having financial difficulty. They installed a kitchen and bathroom, converting the offices into bedrooms. During the 1998 renovation, new cabinets, a washer and dryer, hot water heater, and appliances were installed in the kitchen. Because there was no crawl space in the 1845 building, the bathroom floor was raised at that time to accommodate the plumbing. Goldsmith raised the kitchen floor in 1998 to be more compatible with the raised bath flooring and replaced the old plumbing with new PVC pipes.



Figures 25-27. I. Schiffman Building, third floor interior. Photo credit: K. Stamps, April 13, 2017.

Built-in oak cabinetry provides closet space and 1920s furnishings collected by Goldsmith's father and grandfather decorate the rooms. Copies of family portraits adorn the original 1895 plaster walls using the original picture molding also installed in 1895. The original paintings having been donated to museums and replaced with copies. Goldsmith searched for and found period-appropriate Mission-style chandeliers during her time living in New Orleans. She also installed period tiles from New Orleans around the fireplace to replace those that had been broken to match the original 1895 tiles.

The I. Schiffman Building has been a bright beacon of success on Huntsville's historic downtown square for almost two hundred years. It has survived renovations, demolitions, and changes in ownership.



Figure 28. I. Schiffman Building, southwest exterior elevation. Photo credit: K. Stamps, May 13, 2017.

Due to the perseverance and dedication of the Goldsmith and Schiffman families, this structure has thrived and represents a gorgeous, rare example of Richardsonian Romanesque and commercial architecture in Huntsville and in the state of Alabama.

If more of Huntsville's historic structures had advocates as diligent as those who have championed the I. Schiffman Building, the city's built environment would most certainly have fewer losses and more preservation success stories. Margaret Anne Goldsmith has shown that it is possible to preserve old buildings in sensitive and creative ways that allow those structures to be vibrant parts of their community. Her efforts

have poised the I. Schiffman Building to stand tall on East Side Square as a treasured Huntsville landmark for many years to come.

About the Author:

Katie Stamps is a native of Madison, Alabama and holds a B.S. in Secondary Social Science Education and Minor in Vocal Music from Auburn University. She studied for two years in Charleston, South Carolina, earning a M.S. from the Clemson University/College of Charleston Master's Program in Historic Preservation in 2010. For seven years, Ms. Stamps worked as the Architectural Historian for Redstone Arsenal and volunteered with local preservation organizations, including Historic Huntsville Foundation. In 2014, she was appointed to serve on the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission by Mayor Tommy Battle. Ms. Stamps became the Historic Preservation Consultant for the City of Huntsville in October 2017 and is excited about the opportunity to work directly with Huntsville's historic districts and community leaders. She hopes to help shape the future of preservation and positive growth in Huntsville, Alabama for many years to come. In addition to her work in the preservation field, Ms. Stamps is active in her local church, and enjoys living downtown and spending time with her three nephews.

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