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The Times of the "Times" Building

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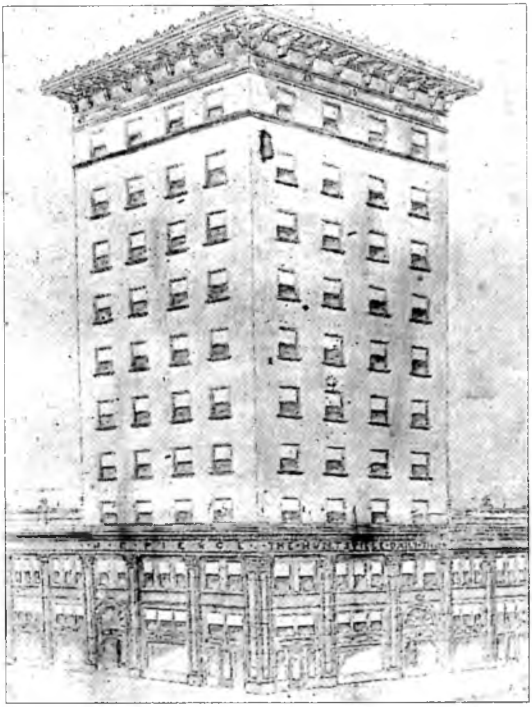
The 1920s were years of prosperity for Huntsville. With the construction of cotton mills at the turn of the century and a proliferation of smaller manufacturing businesses, Huntsville finally succeeded in escaping the stranglehold that the Civil War and Reconstruction years had clamped on the town. The official 1920 population of Huntsville was 8,000, but the effective population swelled to more than 20,000 when the residents of the surrounding mill villages were included; and during the 1920s, the population of Huntsville proper increased by forty-four percent.

This economic stability, complemented by a steady population growth, created a full-fledged building boom as confidence in the future of Huntsville soared. During 1926 and 1927 some $10 million in building permits were issued forcing even the *Birmingham News* to speculate that Huntsville was second only to that city in building activity in the state. The Terry-Hutchens and Huntsville Daily Times buildings, the Russel Erskine Hotel, the Randolph Avenue high school (now the Annie C. Merts Center), and the first building of the Huntsville Hospital were some of the major projects constructed during the second half of the decade. Streets were paved and extended, automobile suburbs were platted, utilities were improved, new houses were erected, and a country club was established.

So certain were local businessmen that Huntsville would continue to prosper and become a major metropolitan center that they deemed it necessary to erect, for the first time, skyscrapers in downtown Huntsville. Both the Times Building and the Russel Erskine Hotel were built to twelve floors, a height that was not exceeded during the city's more extraordinary booms of the 1950s, '60s and '80s.

A set of construction photographs of the Huntsville Daily Times Building documents the stages of construction beginning with the wooden forms for the first floor columns in 1926 and ending with the building's completion at twelve stories



This proposal for the Times Building was published in 1925. The basic scheme is similar to the constructed building, but the built design was greatly refined using terra cotta ornament to emphasize continuous piers; the dated, overhanging cornice was eliminated; and two additional floors increased the height. *Huntsville Daily Times*, 28 June 1925

in 1928. It was a very modern building for its date designed in the latest style by one of the most successful architectural firms in the Southeast to house the offices and printing presses of a Huntsville newspaper.

J. Emory Pierce, founder, editor, and president of the *Huntsville Daily Times*, hired the architectural firm of R. H. Hunt Company of Chattanooga to design the newspaper's new home. A crude drawing of a ten-story building, similar in scheme to the present structure but topped by a traditional bracketed cornice and lacking any definition on the elevations, appeared in the *Times* in 1925; however, this drawing displays none of the elegance of the completed structure, which suggests that the Hunt company might have been commissioned after the basic configuration was set.

The architect Benjamin Hunt was frequently in Huntsville during 1925 and 1926 to oversee the construction of the Terry-Hutchens Building and the new Randolph Avenue and Councill schools for the city board of education. Pierce may have engaged Hunt to design the Times Building because he was impressed with these projects that Hunt already had underway.

The Hunt Company was the premier southern architectural firm of the early 20th

This photograph, circa 1927, shows the concrete framework of the Times Building going up. The piers and floor slabs were poured one story at a time. A pile of brick is ready for the masons to begin infill of the exterior walls. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, Department of Archives, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville

century with literally hundreds of executed commissions spread from Oklahoma to Florida. In Alabama alone, some thirty-five structures have been identified as works of the Hunt office. Reuben Harrison Hunt, Ben's much older brother, began practicing architecture in 1886 in Chattanooga where he founded the firm bearing his name. He made a specialty of church architecture although he also had an extensive practice in institutional buildings and colleges. The number of buildings designed by the firm for Huntsville—nine are known—is representative of its prolific production for cities both large and small across the South. Of these nine local commissions, seven were actually erected; the Van Valkenburg Block at the northeast corner of Jefferson and Clinton streets, the downtown First Baptist Church (demolished), and Temple B'nai Sholom are earlier Hunt designs that date from the 1890s. R. H. Hunt died in 1937 and Benjamin Hunt died in 1961.

The Huntsville Daily Times Building consists of a twelve-story tower set in one corner of a much larger two-story base, which housed the newspaper pressroom and offices and several stores. Between the publication of the 1925 drawing and the start of construction, the building was restyled with the very current Art Deco ornament. The Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925 is generally considered the impetus for Art Deco design in this country. The aim of Art Deco designers was to create a contemporary, non-historically derived body of ornament that would be stylistically appropriate to the burgeoning machine age. The result was that what we now label Art Deco architecture actually consisted of traditional buildings ornamented with Art Deco motifs, because the Art Deco period produced few structural or spatial innovations.

In the case of Art Deco skyscrapers, the form and technology of the building itself was little different from the form that had evolved in the early years of the century in response to the changing conditions of American life. The urbanization of the United States following the Civil War had brought with it a demand for large blocks of office space, a demand that was accompanied by steadily escalating land costs. The obvious solution was to build upward, layer upon layer of identical floors set on

a relatively small plot of land. The necessary technology for such a scheme required elevators, telephones and electric lights, central heating and high pressure water systems, and of course, the steel framework on which to hang the tiers of offices, and secure foundations to support the superstructure. Chicago was the logical site for these elements to merge because the great fire of 1871 had devastated the commercial core and made rebuilding the business district a top priority. The opportunities inherent in the Chicago situation attracted a multitude of architects, contractors, and entrepreneurs who recognized an enormous market for their services. By 1890 Chicago had produced a multi-story building with an all steel frame and curtain walls, which means that the structural frame rather than masonry walls carried the weight of the building. The exterior walls could be hung on the frame and served primarily to exclude weather and define the building's appearance; because the outer walls no longer supported even their own weight, they could, theoretically, be all glass.

Although the structural problems of the high rise building were resolved relatively quickly, the proper exterior appearance for tall structures proved to be a much thornier issue. Architects grappled with the question of façade design: Should the height be minimized by stacking up horizontal floors and various motifs one upon another? What historical periods were most suitable to ransack for stylistic elements to adorn these tall buildings? It was Louis Sullivan, a Chicago architect, who most thoroughly addressed these concerns and pronounced that skyscrapers should express their height honestly by accentuating the vertical components. He went on to proclaim that the base should be ornamental with a well-defined entrance, that the repetitive floors of offices should appear identical because they shared a similar function, and that the top should form a decorative crown with pronounced overhanging cornice to stop the upward movement and declare the building terminated. And while many architects continued to dress skyscrapers in historical garb (Gothic being considered particularly appropriate because of its prominent verticality), Sullivan created a personal style of ornament, based on sensuous plant forms, that could have led away from the recycling of past styles that dominated late

The Times Building concludes with a wide, recessed band of terra cotta, repeating the geometric pattern of the tower spandrels in an expanded design. The brickwork of the piers subtly changes at this level to accentuate a string of three-dimensional terra cotta chevrons. At the extreme top a final row of swags repeats the motif of the base spandrels. Photograph by Scott McLain

19th-century architectural design. However, Sullivan's designs, his executed works, and his writings had little impact on his profession, and most skyscrapers during the first decades of the last century continued to masquerade in various historical garb.

Consequently by 1925 when the ideas of the Paris Exposition were being disseminated in this country through professional and popular journals, the form and structure of the skyscraper had been set, and architects had only to apply the new Art Deco ornamentation to the existing building form in order to be *au courant.* It became fashionable to omit the traditional projecting cornice in favor of a cleanly cut top embellished with panels of low relief or contrasting materials. The emphasis on non-historical forms and ornaments, emphatically vertical compositions, and precise, machined designs were further influenced by the movement towards modernity, an attempt to bring architecture into line with industrial design where streamlining and sleek, aerodynamic forms were gaining ascendancy.

To achieve its effect, Art Deco decoration relied on sumptuous ornament, lush textures incorporating a variety of materials, and color. The ornament itself tended toward rectilinear patterns, such as chevrons, zigzags, frets, fluting and reeding, or geometrical curves, the latter frequently assuming the shape of curvilinear plant forms. In any case, such exterior ornament on skyscrapers appeared predominantly as low relief panels set between windows, along the base and around the entrance, at the tops of the continuous piers, and in fantastically lavish public lobbies.

The Huntsville Daily Times Building displays unbroken vertical piers of brick rising from the base to the attic, and even beyond in the center of each elevation. This

verticality is further accented by the placement of the spandrels—those horizontal panels separating the windows of one floor from the windows of the floor above—which are recessed behind the plane of the piers. The tower itself is faced with a buff-colored brick, while the spandrels, two-story base, and attic level are finished with a cream-colored terra cotta. The repeated spandrel panels of the tower are identical, each having an abstract design of geometric shapes. The spandrels of the base also are identical but are more classical in derivation, featuring a swag over the monogram of HDT, for *Huntsville Daily Times*. The recessed, arched entrances facing Greene and Holmes streets are framed by pairs of magnificent eagles, each gracefully emerging from the terra cotta.

Brick, stone, and glazed architectural terra cotta comprised the most frequent combination of exterior building materials employed for Art Deco skyscrapers. Terra cotta is a versatile material that can be produced to any design, can be colored, and is easier than stonework to install. Basically terra cotta is manufactured from clay much like brick, but is hand-molded, cast into hollow blocks, and fired at temperatures higher than those used for brick (2,000 to 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit). For large designs, it is formed into numerous small components which are assembled on the building itself, much like a jigsaw puzzle. The formed architectural terra cotta pieces were finished with a hard glaze, which created a smooth surface that could easily be cleaned of the grime that accumulated on buildings when coal was the principal heating fuel.

Terra cotta first came into common use in the United States during the 1870s in Chicago. While rebuilding after the 1871 fire, Chicago architects were searching for a material that was cheap, fireproof and non-corrosive. Terra cotta, which had all the requisite properties, first became popular as a substitute for stone ornament because it was much cheaper to produce and install and because a scarcity of qualified stone cutters had made true stonework increasingly impractical. Early terra cotta pieces were produced in a natural red or clay color, which made them ideal replacements for brownstone trim; but after 1890, buff or cream gradually became

the more popular color for terra cotta work. Multicolored terra cotta became fashionable at the turn of the century; an example of this glazed and tinted terra cotta ornament can be seen today in the first story arch of the Law Library on the east side of the Courthouse Square in Huntsville. The lush polychrome effects possible with terra cotta made it a natural for executing Art Deco designs; and the ease of turning out quantities of identical pieces made it perfect for those repeat elements, such as the spandrels on the Times Building. However, terra cotta also functioned as a flat surface material as seen on the two-story base of the Times Building where it appears as simple rectangular cladding tiles. After 1930 the popularity of terra cotta began to wane, and today there are only a few terra cotta companies in operation in the United States.

The construction photographs reveal one other interesting feature of the Times Building; it has a framework of reinforced concrete rather than steel. Serious experiments with concrete construction had begun in the United States in the 1870s, but it was not until engineers discovered how to place steel reinforcing rods within the concrete beams and slabs that it could be safely used for horizontal as well as vertical framing members. The first American skyscraper to be erected of reinforced concrete was in Cincinnati in 1902/03. The photographs of the Times building clearly illustrate the process whereby wooden forms were erected for each of the piers and the floors, one story at a time, then filled with poured cement. To construct the exterior walls, the spaces between the concrete piers and floors were filled with brick, which was finished with thick coats of plaster on the inside. On the exterior, the tower walls were faced with a buff brick while the base received a cladding of flat and molded glazed terra cotta tiles.

In November of 1926 the *Times* reported in a gush of self-promotion that "Hundreds and thousands of people have visited the site of the new ten-story (sic) office building for the *Daily Times*...since the actual work of construction began more than a month ago....It is the wonder of many how the workmen can do the job, but when it is considered that the South's leading firm of architects, R. H.

Ten floors have been poured, and while work on the concrete frame continues at the top, the brick and terra cotta work have been completed on the first five stories. And they did it without a giant crane. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville

Hunt Co., of Chattanooga, are on the job and that Earl Cline, contractor of Birmingham with A. F. Hill of Huntsville as superintendent are manning it, the work is easy and proceeds like clock work." However, it was a year and a half before the concrete framework was completed. Again the *Times* reported, "Finished pouring the 12th floor of our magnificent 12-story office building home today and next week the columns will start up for the completion of the story and the roof...." [1]

This illustration of the Times Building appears in a "Souvenir Folder of Huntsville, Alabama" that was mailed from Huntsville in September 1928, three months before the Times moved into its new home. Courtesy Huntsville Madison County Public Library

The Times Building was opened in December 1928 and served as the newspaper's headquarters until 1956 when the staff moved to a new building on South Memorial Parkway, where the paper remains today. The building had been sold to a private investor in the 1930s who retained possession of it, even as occupancy dwindled, until 1973 when Madison County purchased it for use as the courthouse annex. In May 1984 the structure again changed hands, being purchased at public auction by local businessman Randy Schrimsher. Plans to convert the tower into luxury condominiums, one per floor, were thwarted by the impracticality of bringing the structure into compliance with residential building codes; as a result, the majority of the space has remained empty for twenty years.

The first necessity of historic preservation is to keep an older building standing until it has an opportunity to become historic. This often requires allowing a building to remain vacant, but secured, during those periods when it is unappreciated and out-of-date, even though taxes and maintenance still must be paid. The usual impulse is to demolish it; but left standing and protected, its day will come again. A new generation will discover charm in those historic buildings that their parents considered dated and worn out. Until then, it takes a special person to recognize the value of a building past its first prime, and it also takes a person willing to tie up money that offers no immediate financial return. Downtown Huntsville has lost many of its significant 19th- and 20th-century structures through short-sightedness on the part of both individuals and government agencies. But some buildings have survived. The Huntsville Daily Times Building was fortunate to have found its angel in Randy Schrimsher. Randy sensed its historic significance, its importance in connecting us with our city's past, and was willing to take on the responsibility of becoming its caretaker (although perhaps unintentionally at first). And because of Randy's appreciation for the Times Building, Huntsville will continue to be enhanced by the diversity and history that the Times Building contributes to the character that distinguishes our downtown and makes it a special place.

Notes

1 *Huntsville Weekly Times*, 4 November 1926, p.4; *Huntsville Weekly Times*, 10 May 1928, p.4.

J. Emory Pierce is pictured with his wife Nannie, son William, and younger daughter Nelrose. Daughter Nancy is remembered as a popular piano teacher for many years. Courtesy Patrick McCauley