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Carol Codori

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## **Huntsville's 19th Century: Revealing a Treasure Downtown**

By Carol Codori



*What is under this old box?*

The top was cloudy. The frame was crumbling. Bent nails were gathering inside. Since 1974 it sat in front of the public law library at 205 East Side Square. How could one predict the challenges to revealing the treasure below?

The answers would harken to Huntsville's architectural roots. Our project involved researching the old box and what it covered, then creating a new sentry. Now a local historic site will be guarded for many years to come. Our small group of citizens hereby offers its renewal in celebration of Alabama's Bicentennial, 1819-2019.



*What is under the new frame?*

At left, designer-fabricator-installer Berry Baugh Allen inspects the new railing that surrounds an old herringbone-pattern sidewalk. The red clay bricks form a rectangle two feet wide by five feet long. They rest approximately 18 inches below the present pavement. We'll show the bricks clearly at the end of the article. But first, let's learn about the side-

walk's history.

## **Old Sidewalk, Part 1**

What follows is not only the sidewalk's story; it's also the story of how a 21<sup>st</sup> century team preserved this bit of 19<sup>th</sup> century Huntsville. We scanned scores of photos of downtown from the 1800s, found in books and prints. We read newspaper citations and spoke to knowledgeable citizens. We opened the old box and pulled up a brick. Each source helped us learn more about the sidewalk's age.

Our research suggests that the sidewalk could date about 1869, making it 150 years old. Digging the clay and firing the bricks could have been done even earlier. By our estimate, laying them could have occurred 50 years after the State's founding in 1819. The sidewalk could be marking its own sesquicentennial during Alabama's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2019.

Photos of the East Side Square vicinity before the mid-1800s show dirt streets and what appear to be either gravel or brick walkways bounded by wooden frames. Subsequent paving probably covered the gravel and then the bricks by the late 1890s, when the advent of street cars called for improving downtown. The original street level rose steadily; the original sidewalk became hidden under layers of fill. (1)

## **The Architect's Role**

Our team studied signage on the old box, which was designed by the architectural firm Jones and Herrin. The firm's late partner was Huntsville's renowned architect-preservationist, Harvie Jones. He spearheaded the placement of our antebellum railroad depot on Church Street on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. His prolific career included the development of Alabama Constitution Hall Park, known locally as Huntsville's Constitution Village, on Gates Avenue—our open-air historical museum that shows life in 1819. He would have reached a very solid estimate when he wrote that “early to mid-1800s” marked the sidewalk's era.

He took photos of numerous brick walks in front of pre-1840s homes in the Twickenham and Old Towne neighborhoods. These may have been laid at the time of construction in the early 1800s, or removed and re-laid later. Some old bricks had buckled from roots in the ground under-neath, and some modern bricks had replaced them. Mr. Jones would have seen a difference in the consistency of their shapes.

Mr. Jones' archives, now housed at University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH), also contain architectural drawings. We were excited to locate those for a

“Sidewalk Well” dated 1974. His drawings gave measurements and materials for the interior and exterior of the old J.C. Penney Company department store had occupied the white tile-front building from 1931 until 1966 (2), directly behind where the box was located.

The Madison County Commission purchased the building after Penney’s closed. Mr. Jones’s firm was hired to create a design for renovations that took place in 1973. The building then served as the Elbert G. Parsons Law Library until it was sold in late 2017 to Mitchell and Melanie Howie. This background helped explain how the sidewalk was uncovered.

Mr. Jones had designed a cityscape plan for downtown. It included new sidewalks and several brick gazebos, one of which still stands near the steps leading to Big Spring, on West Side Square. During the law library’s renovation, he had the resources to dig up the slab pavement, locate the old sidewalk, and block out a supporting well. He based the time span of the bricks’ age on his photos and on the depth of the bricks below the present concrete walk.

## **The Archeologist’s Role**



*Ben Hoksbergen  
lifting a brick  
from the old  
sidewalk.*

Mr. Jones also wrote text for signage noting the sidewalk was “laid directly on the earth.” This seemed totally reasonable, because early photos show a packed dirt street on East Side Square. In early 2018, Ben Hoksbergen, Archeologist of Redstone Arsenal, opened the box’s bent frame, jumped in with the cobwebs, and carefully pried up a brick.

He quickly confirmed the bricks were handmade. They were shaped from area clay, probably from a local farm or possibly even from the banks of Ditto Landing, then fired in a local kiln. They're not uniform and have no imprint. This indicated they were hand packed in simple molds. A raw edge would have faced the fire in the kiln.

Ben explained that the "...most thoroughly-fired bricks were usually selected for paver bricks for their hardness, but the interiors of the bricks still tend to be softer, so even through the surface is worn...avoid damaging the surface patina, as this could cause more rapid deterioration." He noted that more uniform factory bricks, stamped with the name of the maker, did not appear until the end of the 1800s.

In March, Ben returned to make soil probes. The little plugs were about the size of a ring finger. They showed distinct layers of red Stet—clearly the clay composition of our geographic area. (3) It did seem then that we'd hit bare earth, which supported Mr. Jones's statement that the bricks were laid directly there.

However, several months after his initial probes Ben had an opportunity to explore the basement of the I. Schiffman building, at 231 East Side Square. It sits at the head of the now-built up street, directly above the old sidewalk at 205. He noted that in comparison to our earlier direct access to the dirt under the bricks, "...There weren't any nice soil profile exposures, but the depth of the basement and the dirt floor made me suspect that bedrock was deeper than our probes indicated. I wonder if the red clay below the brick was in fact fill, and the impermeable rock we hit was a layer of gravel or rubble in the fill, instead of bedrock. Impossible to tell at this point without a thorough

excavation, but I would avoid saying that the bricks were placed directly on natural ground.”

Or might the bricks have been laid directly on an earlier gravel walk, one that seems to appear in pre-1860s photos? We’d been asked by passers-by if a longer portion of the same old sidewalk continued as far as the corner of Randolph Street, under the full length of East Side Square. As Ben says, impossible to tell.

## **The Archives’ Role**

As a new covering structure for the old sidewalk took shape in 2017-2018, the team’s historical research continued. In archival sources, we looked for general items on bricks from the 1820s forward. We saw scores of advertisements for businesses of all kinds—candlemakers, shoemakers, watchmakers, music makers—as well as requests for proposals to build roads. (4) But no ads directly mentioned masons or brick laying. Ben had similar lack of luck when he searched old deeds for any word of downtown sidewalk improvements.

This doesn’t reflect the numerous sources of bricks dating from Huntsville’s earliest days. We know that local plantations made their own bricks, for example at the McCrary Farm in nearby New Market. It’s dated as the oldest continuously-operating Alabama farm, owned in the same family for over 200 years. The house was built “using bricks which were made on the farm by slaves. The art of homemade brick production, of course, had been well known and practiced for many centuries. It was not high tech; unskilled labor could easily master most of the steps, but it was laborious to the extreme. It was the firing of the bricks in a

homemade, wood-fired kiln, following an earlier air-drying process, that required skill. ..." (5)

Many of our finest antebellum homes date after the arrival of the brothers Thomas and William Brandon in 1810, "...with no property except their trowels and great skill in their trade," (6) and designer-builder George Steele in 1818. They would have established yards and other sources to meet their brick demands. Steele himself held a deed dated 1822 for his "George Steele's brick yard." (7) Resident Adam Hall of Washington Street obtained permission in 1828 "to make and burn a brick kiln" on property now occupied by him "as a Wagon Yarn" (sic). (8)

## **Dating the Old Sidewalk, Part 2**

Consider also the need for bricks in the decades before and after a new sidewalk could have appeared. (9) The years preceding the Civil War were a time of church building downtown. The first Church of the Nativity building at 208 Eustis Avenue was of brick, and the first service in its present main sanctuary, also of brick, was held on Easter Eve 1859. A year later the First Presbyterian Church at 307 Gates Avenue dedicated its new brick structure in May 1860.

The Union Army occupied the city for most of the war years, 1861-1865. Due to Huntsville's value as a railroad center, homes and commercial buildings avoided major destruction. Nonetheless residents experienced many privations and indignities. Homes were commandeered for headquarters. Troops were encamped around town, and some were quartered in churches.

After 1865, bricks played an important role in reclaiming at least two houses of worship. The First



Methodist Church on 120 Green Street was rebuilt and dedicated in August 1867. This was necessary after January 1864, when Federal troops quartered in the basement set fires on the wooden floor to cook their food.

In 1872 St. Bartley's Primitive Baptist Church was constructed on the South Side of Williams Street. The building was erected to replace the church's first building, burned by Union troops. (10) The current church is located at 3020 Belafonte Avenue. St. Bartley's is recognized as the oldest African American congregation in Alabama, as well as one of the oldest African American congregations in the United States.

A proper sidewalk would have been welcome among churchgoers, merchants, and school children who would be walking there in the late 1850s through the early 1870s. Sunday strollers recently had learned from the *Alabama Republican* newspaper of September 3, 1869, that "Brick-laying commenced on the Holding, Hundley-Fletcher Blocks on the East Side of the Courthouse Square." (11)

After finding this item, our team felt that the bricks could rest in good company. We had validated the era of the old walkway, if not its exact age. We had learned how the bricks were made. We had discovered how the bricks were revealed. We therefore declared victory on 1869 as the sidewalk's birth date and moved on.

## **Teamwork Supports a New Frame**

The broken covering box at 205 East Side Square clearly needed help. But how to go about preserving and displaying the old sidewalk beneath? Fortunately, our team already knew citizen-historians who could guide us. Members of the Huntsville-Madison Historical

Society wrote extensively on local history. The Historic Huntsville Foundation (HHF) promoted the protection of historically significant sites. John Allen, past president of the Society, introduced us to Donna Castellano, executive director of HHF. At her suggestion, we reached out to selected city staff. In short order, the right energy began to merge.

When our team got together in 2018, we decided we wanted to create a new structure in time for Huntsville's celebrations of the Alabama Bicentennial in 2019. First the old box definitely had to be removed. It was not only a sad sight; it was also a safety hazard, with jagged edges and rusty rails. We'd need the city's permission to tear it down and rebuild. That given, they asked us mirror the city's black benches, with their matching rosettes and scrolls. That's where artist Berry Allen would add his creative touch. We'd need sponsors and researchers. We'd need communicators.

For the City, several departments rallied to the cause. Joy McKee, of Operation Green Team, brought Richard Wilkinson of Public Works and Jeff Taylor of Facilities to the site. With their teams, they supported in-kind costs for design meetings, scheduling, fencing, and labor for the tear-down and removal. With Berry, they determined that a course of three bricks outside the well should remain in place, to support a new structure. These modern bricks were now well-seasoned since their placement in 1974. The same type of brick had been laid inside the well, and they too would remain. The handmade bricks farther below would not be disturbed.

As key partners, the Society and HHF shared the main funding. Citizens donated too. With David Hitt as president, the Society served as administrative umbrella. Deane Dayton, John Rankin, Jacque Reeves,

and Nancy Rohr pointed us to key sources. Shalis Worthy, Archivist of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, gave us access to special files. As noted above, Ben Hoksbergen served as our archeologist.

Vaughn Bocchino, graduate of the UAH master's program in public history and Salmon Library archivist, created historically accurate wording for the sidewalk's new signage. It would now read "In the mid-1800s, masons sculpted local clay into these bricks and created this sidewalk. It sits approximately 18 inches below the present walk, level with the original street. What once served as a humble walkway for farmers, merchants and pedestrians now links you to Huntsville's past and to all those who trod where you are currently standing."

Vaughn also had located the original design drawings for the old box, the sidewalk well described above. Later, while helping us digitize old photos at the main library, Shalis suggested an important lead to David Ely of KPS Group, the successor firm to Jones and Herrin. He confirmed Mr. Jones's excavation work. He also offered solutions to some condensation and lighting challenges we were having after the initial installation.

To generate community awareness, we used social media and print, and the personal touch. Vaughn created an early Facebook page for the project, which we dubbed "SOS: saving our sidewalk." Beth Thames of AL.com edited the new signage. Cathey Carney of Old Huntsville Magazine published a two-page article in September 2018. David Hitt tweeted about the sidewalk on Twitter, @HistoryHsv and published updates in the Society's quarterly newsletter. Jennifer Purser of Wolfhart Creative took photos for print outreach, including this article. She also updated social media

with photos of our progress on Instagram, @publichistoryplaceoldhuntsville.



*Berry Allen fits a rosette into metal scroll.*

Sally Warden, local bicentennial committee executive director, shared sidewalk progress, among other events, at a well-attended press conference in December 2018. The sidewalk was approved as a state Bicentennial activity and listed on the official website Alabama200.org. By press time, we were planning a community “reveal” as part of Huntsville’s annual This Place Matters campaign in May 2019.

## **The Artist’s Role**

As it’s been described so far, the project may sound linear. But as with all creative work, it definitely was not. The team faced road blocks, then worked busy weeks to catch up. In summer 2018, Berry while on our “critical path,” seriously sprained his hand. He caught it lifting the new frame’s heavy steel cage, while welding it at his metal and ceramic studio, Baugh Art in Huntsville’s Old Towne.

Berry came to our attention through his work in the lobby of Belk-Hudson Lofts at 110 Washington St. His enormous coffee table top is made of a glass-inlaid cement slab from the former Huntsville Times Building, at the corner of Holmes and Green Streets. The glass circles, called vault lights, allowed light into the basement. Given his active client list, we were pleased

when he agreed to help reveal the old sidewalk as a new creative challenge.

Berry donated scores of his skilled labor hours, in addition to holding technical meetings with city staff. He re-measured and special-ordered materials to meet new specifications, including those of the Americans with Disabilities Act. That law passed in 1990, sixteen years after the old box was designed, and much had changed. The new frame would allow viewing from wheel chairs. Its railings would be closely spaced. Its top would include padding under half-inch thick tempered glass. The glass is nearly 60 inches long by 35 inches wide, weighing almost 40 pounds. It would require seven lengths of aluminum frame, totaling almost 90 feet.



*The old sidewalk's herringbone pattern emerges during construction of its new aluminum frame.*

Berry remembered sitting on the old sidewalk box as a kid in the early 1980s, watching downtown parades. He recalls it with an initial beehive-curved plastic top, later with successive flat lids inside an added-on rectangular frame. As a boy he rode by on his bike many times; he sadly watched it decay over the years.

He returned to Huntsville from his earlier career years to continue his commitments to both art and public history. You

can see his sculpture at the Huntsville Botanical Garden and in commissions around town. It ranges from ornate garden gates through elegant dinnerware in private homes.

Berry told me that the new sidewalk structure was not his largest nor most lucrative contract. But he considers it his most important work to date. Fittingly, it is Berry who created this functional and elegant form. What a complement to our city and to our team. What a complement to state in its Bicentennial year. And what a fitting way to end our tale of revealing downtown's 19<sup>th</sup> century treasure--the humble brick walkway that links us to Huntsville's past.

### **Next Steps: You Can Help**

At press time, Berry was designing additional venting of the well's frame, to solve the problems of interior condensation. The current hidden grates are not yet sufficient: the old bricks and ground naturally release moisture. The temperatures of the warmer air in the interior and the colder air above the glass combine to create water droplets. In summer, these usually dispel by noon to give a clear view. But in the less-sunny winter, the sidewalk can be harder to see.

We have ordered the final metal signage and scheduled its installation during a first quarterly maintenance in spring 2019. We'll unlock the frame and lift the heavy top. Then we'll clean the glass and wipe on a rain repellant so the condensation can drain better. We're also considering a solar fan with additional photocells. And we're still hoping to wire a spotlight through the lamp post, with a timer that turns on at dark.

The project is costing over \$5,000—with generous contributions so far by the Society and HHF. Thanks also for generous in-kind labor and resources from the city's Green Team, Public Works, and Facilities departments. You too can help maintain the sidewalk and create materials to share its legacy. Volunteers to our team are most welcome.

Thank you for supporting our work, so that a new generation of citizens can continue to enjoy the old sidewalk. To make a tax-deductible contribution, send a check made out to Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, and marked "sidewalk," to HMCHS, Box 666, Huntsville, AL 35804.



## Notes

1. Fred B. Simpson, *Huntsville: Then and Now: A Walk Through Downtown* (Huntsville: Triangle Publishing Company, 2002), 75-76, 64.
2. Simpson, *Huntsville: Then and Now*, 72.
3. Gwen Heeney, *Brickworks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 16.
4. Sarah Huff Fisk Collection, Special Collections Department, Downtown Huntsville Library, Huntsville, Alabama.
5. Joseph M. Jones, *The Wondrous McCrarys: Alabama Pioneers: Same Family, Same Farm, 200 Years* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 19.
6. Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, *A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama, 1732-1840* (University: Confederate Publishing Company, 1976), 41.



7. F. Charles Vaughn, Jr., "George Steele: Architect and Builder of the Nineteenth Century" in *The Huntsville Historical Review* (Huntsville: The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, January-April 1983, vol.13, nos.1-2), 3-4.
8. Huntsville City Meeting Minutes, May 24, 1828, 2018-102, Box 4, Folder 44, Sarah Huff Fisk Collection, Special Collections Department, Downtown Huntsville Library, Huntsville, Alabama.
9. Huntsville/Madison County Convention & Visitors Bureau, *Foundations of Faith: Houses of Worship over 100 Years Old* (Huntsville: H-MCC&VB, 2017).
10. Rane' G. Pruitt, ed., *Eden of the South: A Chronology of Huntsville, Alabama, 1805-2005* (Huntsville: Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, 2005), 70.
11. Pruitt, *Eden*, 66.

### **Author note:**

Many of our city's oldest brick sidewalks are starting to wear and bulge. Take a stroll down Franklin, Adams, or Holmes to see them before they might go away. You can study the homes in Old Towne to see differences in handmade and modern bricks. Or just learn more about our local and Madison County history in brick by walking the Downtown Huntsville and Twickenham Trail at [www.hmchs.info/mkrs](http://www.hmchs.info/mkrs).

You also might drive to nearby sites, such as the old beehive kiln at Brickyard Landing Marina in Decatur. Look inside to see the heat marks on the walls and ceiling. On the way, stop at the Old Church in Mooresville to notice how symmetrical handmade bricks



can be. Or pay your respects at the Athens cemetery grave of General Hiram H. Higgins, a brick mason who organized a company that fought in the War for Southern Independence known as the Confederate Brick.

For much more about historic brick manufacturing, go to the website: [www.brickcollecting.com/history](http://www.brickcollecting.com/history).

### **Meet the author:**

Dr. Carol Codori turned her attention to local history after retiring from the Missile Defense Agency in 2008. She currently serves on the boards of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, the Historic Huntsville Foundation and is a former president of the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table.

A native of Gettysburg, PA, she is a Friend of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and during the annual Athens Cemetery Stroll, Dr. Codori portrays the granddaughter of Nick Davis and daughter of Judge George Washington Lane, Kate Lane Towns, who lived in Huntsville during the Union Occupation. Dr. Codori holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University.