

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 32
Number 3 *Our Vanishing Heritage*

Article 4

9-22-2006

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Recommended Citation

Allen, Linda Bayer (2006) "Our Vanishing Heritage," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 32: No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol32/iss3/4>

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Our Vanishing Heritage

The Teardown

A frightening trend is sweeping across our country, threatening many older and historic neighborhoods—it is the “teardown.” Also referred to as “bash-and-build” or “scrape-off,” teardown is shorthand for the practice of buying a small, older house in an attractive, settled neighborhood, demolishing or moving it, and building a new, oversized house on the site. The problems are that the new house has



This house has been occupied by only one family, but it is being moved out to make way for more expensive housing. A frustrated Baltimore preservationist, Douglas Gordon, postulated the Gordon Curve to explain why we lose so many houses: According to his equation, if a newly built house is worth 100 percent, it must deteriorate at a rate of 1.5 percent a year, so that when it is seventy years old, its real estate value is low enough to warrant demolition [or removal]; if it survives this low point, its value rises rapidly and in thirty years when the house is 100 years old, it is worth 100 percent again. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006



A late 20th-century teardown was this extraordinary house on the west side of Meridian Street. Known as Abingdon Place, it was constructed in the Italian villa style and was renown for its formal gardens, vineyard, hedge-lined winding drive, conservatory, and European paintings and sculpture. It had been the home of Milton Humes and later served as the home of the general superintendent for Lincoln Mills of Alabama. More recently it was occupied by the Boys' Club prior to its demolition. Collection of Linda and Ralph Allen

at least three times the square footage of the original, is usually one or two stories taller, covers the lot to the extent allowed by zoning or variance, features multiple garages and driveways on the street façade, and does not relate to the existing streetscape by style, scale, or massing. In short, it destroys the rhythm and continuity of the block into which it has been shoehorned—much like the proverbial 500-pound gorilla.

But these are just the most obvious objections to the teardown vogue. When one such example appears in a neighborhood, others will soon follow, which quickly destroys the character of the whole development, not just one block. The mature trees must be removed to allow the new mini-mansion to fill the lot, thereby eliminating

one of the prime features that made the area attractive. The out-of-scale new house frequently looms over its smaller neighbors in an unfriendly manner and blocks their sunlight. Frequent targets of the teardown purchaser are smaller houses constructed on generous lots, including ranch houses of the 1950s and '60s; these are the starter houses that young people can afford to enter the housing market or that empty-nesters might find attractive. As the teardown trend gains momentum, the supply of such houses diminishes, and developers have no interest in constructing new market-entry housing. As the existing houses are replaced by faux mansions, a city's ability to provide an economic diversity of housing choices becomes seriously impaired.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has recognized the seriousness of this trend, and as early as 2002, it listed "Teardowns in Historic Neighborhoods" as one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Richard Moe, president of the National Trust, has bluntly stated that "teardowns wreck neighborhoods," and further elaborated that "teardowns represent the biggest threat to America's older neighborhoods since the heyday of urban renewal and interstate highway construction." He is not referring just to designated historic districts, where some restraints are usually in place to blunt the practice; he is concerned about all our older, particularly, in-town neighborhoods that are populated by Victorians, bungalows, and, yes, even ranch houses. As he pointed out, these are irreplaceable legacies from the past that define a city's character and aspirations.¹

Sadly, Huntsville is not immune from this attack on its more desirable *older neighborhoods*. Already houses are being moved off attractive lots in subdivisions located near downtown. Especially sought after are those houses with lots sufficiently large to accommodate the monstrous suburban style houses popular today in new, outlying subdivisions. While it's easy to think of these mid-20th-century houses as insignificant because of their modest scale and relatively recent date of construction—they are, after all, the ones that many of us grew up in—many have already reached the magic age of 50 years, which makes them, theoretically, eligible for the

“...the survey shall cover structures of all types from the smallest utilitarian structures to the largest and most monumental. Buildings of every description are to be included so that a complete picture of the culture of the times as reflected in the buildings of the period may be put on record.”

— *excerpt from original HABS mission statement*

National Register of Historic Places, and many more will soon qualify. While it is difficult (perhaps even insulting) to consider as historic a structure that one grew up in, it should be recognized that Huntsville’s most significant historic period, the one that distinguishes Huntsville from all the other small, southern county seats, began with the arrival of the German rocket scientists in 1950 and the subsequent transformation of Huntsville into the Rocket City. The population boom of the 1950s and ‘60s spurred the development of thousands of new houses—predominantly some variation of the popular ranch house. No one is suggesting that all of these should be preserved; but, it would be extremely shortsighted of our generation to relegate the most significant collections of these houses to the garbage heap of history when only fifty years old. Not everyone can afford a new mansion, indeed, not everyone wants a new mansion.

HABS: The Historical Record

Unfortunately, the teardown is not a new problem. Huntsville has already lost many of its neoclassical and Victorian buildings, which fell to the wrecking ball for new residential and commercial development as Huntsville prospered and grew. The only mitigating factor is the federal program that documented a few of our antebellum structures before they were demolished. The Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) was established in 1933 with the short-term goal of employing out-of-work architects, draftsmen, and photographers during the Depression and with the long-term goal of creating an archive of early American architecture so that these buildings “should not pass into unrecorded oblivion.”



The Gus Mastin house was constructed on Meridian Street, probably in the 1840s or '50s, when the road was known as the Meridianville Pike. The Pike once was lined with impressive plantation houses, most of which have now been demolished. HABS photographed this house in 1934 and '35 but made no drawings nor included any information on its history. Demolished. HABS photograph by W. N. Manning, 1934

The working procedure was to prepare measured drawings, photographs, and written data pages documenting sites, buildings, and objects of exceptional value in the country's history, primarily those constructed prior to 1860. Begun as a temporary measure, HABS operated for approximately four years before World War II brought it to a temporary halt. In Alabama, the program operated until 1937 under the leadership of E. Walter Burkhardt, who appointed an advisory committee consisting of three state architects, one of whom was Edgar Love of Huntsville. Emphasis was placed on recording those major structures that were considered to be most endangered, but (in the words of Burkhardt), "also types of typical buildings from the beginning of settlement in Alabama. . . ." In 1935-36 the state program employed 44 people including the three photographers, Alex Bush, W. N. Manning, and E. W. Russell, who traveled the state with their photographic equipment. In a little over

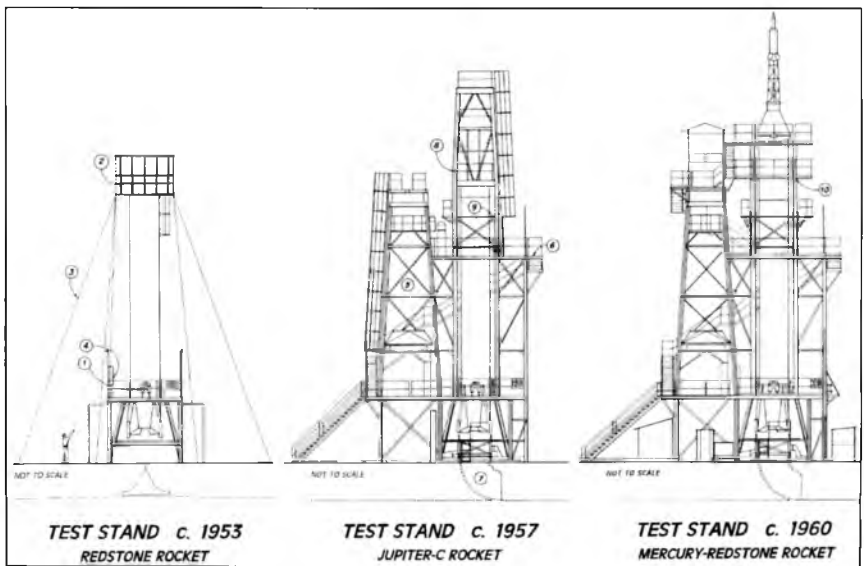


Huntsville's Carnegie Library was built on Madison Street in 1916 to a design by local architect Edgar Love. It was part of the small municipal complex located at the corner of Madison Street and Gates Avenue, which was razed in 1966 to clear land for the city hall parking garage. Collection of Linda and Ralph Allen

three years, the Alabama crews produced over 5,000 photographs and 750 sheets of measured drawings. Alabama is particularly fortunate in having so many of its structures recorded and has one of the largest collections of any state, numbering over 700 documented sites.²

In Huntsville, 22 structures were documented during the first three years of the program, of which four have been demolished. One, the second Madison County Courthouse, was added to the collection from drawings and photographs made in 1913 by local architect Edgar Love prior to its demolition. Twenty of the structures chosen were substantial city or plantation houses, with the only utilitarian structures documented being some of the dependencies belonging to these houses. The George Steele designed bank on West Side Square (Regions Bank) was the one commercial structure included.

HABS was reactivated in 1957, but under a new operating procedure: recording of structures is now conducted by summer field crews of college students working under the direction of a professional from the National Park Service, which administers the program. Additional listings from Alabama have been deterred by the necessity to pay the expenses of this work with local funds. But, the success of HABS spurred the 1969 creation of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) to document significant engineering and industrial sites. These two programs, HABS and HAER, which are archived at the Library of Congress, are compiling an impressive collection of America's architectural and engineering



In 1995 a HAER survey team documented the Redstone Interim Test Stand at Marshall Space Flight Center, producing 52 photographs, 7 drawings with extensive explanatory text, and 80 data pages. The importance of recording changes in structure and use over time is illustrated in this drawing which shows how the test stand was adapted to function with redesigned missile and rocket systems. It was erected to static test fire Redstone propulsion systems and has been used for this purpose 362 times. Drawing by Amy E. Vona for HAER, 1995

“From 19th-century Victorians to 1920s bungalows and 1950s Eichlers, the older houses that grace our communities are valuable historical documents in brick and wood, steel and glass. They trace the changes in taste, technology and lifestyle that have shaped the community over the centuries—and with their varied styles and details, they are a visual banquet for residents and visitors alike. America’s older neighborhoods are important chapters in the story of who we are as a nation and a people.”

—Richard Moe, 2006

history. As of 2001, the HABS collection contained material on over 30,000 structures documented in 51,000 measured drawings and 150,000 photographs. The HAER collection consisted of 3,500 drawings and 68,500 photographs of 7,600 sites.

The advent of HAER has been especially beneficial for Huntsville. Forty-three engineering-related sites have been listed, including 14 sites located at Marshall Space Flight Center and Redstone Arsenal. And this work is continuing. The summer of 2006 brought a team of three historic preservation interns to Marshall to measure and draw the Neutral Buoyancy Simulator tank and research its history. Next summer another team of interns will be back to document the Saturn V Dynamic Test Stand. The documentation being carried out by HAER includes not just the current condition of these structures but recreates their histories and previous physical configurations, an important consideration because of the necessity to adapt these facilities to serve slightly differing purposes for each new space initiative undertaken at Marshall. Both the tank and the test stand were designated National Historic Landmarks in 1985 as were the Redstone Interim Test Stand, and the Propulsion and Structural Test Facility.

The focus of these federal programs has been expanded again; in October 2000 the National Park Service permanently established the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS) for the system-

atic documentation of historic spaces to include designed and vernacular, rural and urban, agricultural and industrial landscapes. Vegetable patches, estate gardens, cemeteries, farms, quarries, nuclear test sites, suburbs, and abandoned settlements all may be considered historic landscapes under this program.

The fourth partner of the above three programs is the Cultural Resources Geographic Information Systems (CRGIS) facility. Its mission is to institutionalize the use of geographic information systems (GIS), global positioning systems (GPS), and remote sensing technologies in historic preservation within the national park system as well as with state historic preservation offices and tribal historic preservation offices.

All four of these programs now are administered under the Heritage Documentation Programs (HDP) division of the National Park Service. HDP conducts nationwide documentation programs in partnership with state and local governments, private industry, professional societies, universities, preservation groups, and other federal agencies. The program assigns highest priority to sites of national significance that are in danger of demolition or loss by neglect, and to National Park Service properties.³

The vast time span, change of focus, and advances in technology separating Huntsville's HABS-documented antebellum houses and its HAER-documented NASA facilities illustrate the tremendous changes that have occurred in Huntsville's character between 1860 and 1960. One viewing these two extremes may well wish for similar examples of the built environment from the intervening years—but that material does not exist. Even more distressing is that funding has not been available to undertake HABS surveys of representative specimens of the city's surviving Victorian, bungalow, and ranch houses, as well as of its evolving commercial and religious buildings.

When HABS buildings are restored, the archives provide valuable information concerning original layouts, materials, and appearances to guide the work of a

serious restoration. And when a HABS building has been lost, the photographs and drawings help fill the gaps in our architectural history and demonstrate the variety that once defined the community.

Three of Huntsville's lost HABS houses and the second county courthouse are remembered here through photographs taken in the 1930s. These early teardowns must stand for all the other teardowns for which visual information has not been collected—for those pieces of our history only dimly remembered, if at all.

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 Richard Moe in a speech at the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA, June 28, 2006.
- 2 Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalog, Historic American Buildings Survey, A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 177-187.
- 3 www.cr.nps.gov/hdp