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The Burritt House



This undated photograph shows the Burritt house with its Federal-style porch and original 9/9 window sashes. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

The Burritt house, an early example of Federal architecture, stood on the south side of Eustis Avenue, the site later occupied by the Madison County Health Department for more than 50 years until its recent relocation. The frame house was identified from its long ownership by the Burritt family, first by Dr. Amatus Robbins Burritt (1833-1876) and his wife Mary King Robinson (c.1848-1920) and subsequently by their son Dr. William Henry Burritt (1869-1955), whose Monte Sano retirement home is today the city-owned Burritt on the Mountain—A Living Museum and historic park.

The construction date of the Eustis Avenue house is problematic because early

deeds conveyed two houses. Block 47, a half-acre tract fronting 150 feet on Eustis Avenue and 150 feet on the east side of Greene Street, contained the Burritt house on the eastern half. By 1829 this tract contained a “two-story frame house now occupied by John Read [the Burritt house] and also one small brick house now occupied by John Martin.” It is not known which house was constructed first; thus the purchase price, often an indicator of construction, could apply to either or both houses. In 1815, while Alabama was still part of the Mississippi Territory, LeRoy and Judith Pope sold 30 acres to the commissioners of Huntsville for \$750. This tract, which included Block 47, was bounded roughly by a line halfway between Eustis and Randolph avenues on the north, Church Street on the west, Williams Avenue on the south and Lincoln Street on the east. The following year the commissioners sold Block 47 to Holden (Holdin) W. Prout for \$150. In 1817 Prout



After its 1908-1913 conversion to a boarding house, the dwelling gained a new porch that extended the width of the façade. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

resold the property for \$1,500, indicating some construction to explain this tenfold increase. In 1819, the year of Alabama's statehood, the block again sold for \$1,500. Two years later it sold for \$4,000, but to further complicate matters, this deed also conveyed about 20 acres on the eastern side of Meridian Street. Thus it is difficult to attribute the increase in price, but it is tempting to date the house from this period. In the early 1830s the property changed hands several times, each deed stating the lot remained occupied by John Read and John Martin. Apparently Read retained possession of the eastern part until he took title to the Burritt property about 1835. His firm of Read & Read sold staple and fancy goods until its dissolution in the late 1850s. Read resided in the house until his death in 1861. In that year the Hartley & Drayton Map of Huntsville shows a modest two-story frame dwelling with a long two-story brick outbuilding extending in an "ell" along the eastern side. This housed the kitchen as well as living quarters for the house servants. ¹

Probate court records of the Read estate track the home during the Civil War and the ensuing lean years. An 1863 policy from the Lynchburg Hose & Fire Insurance Company protected the house "against loss or damage by fire to the amount of \$4,000 for one year, viz \$2,500 on the two-story building...\$1,500 on the two-story



Detail of the Federal doorway with fanlight. The sign advertises, "Furnished Room For Rent." Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935



Fan detail on staircase. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

kitchen, servants rooms adjoining, all covered with shingles.” The annual premium was \$60. ² At this time Read’s daughter Mary and her husband Jeremiah Clemens occupied the home. Clemens, a lawyer, novelist, and U.S. senator from 1849 to 1853, is best remembered for his wartime politics. A member of the state secession convention in January 1861, he opposed the dissolution ordinance, favoring instead certain slavery concessions from the federal government. A local diary relates numerous occasions of his hobnobbing with federal officials during the Union occupations of Huntsville. ³

Read’s estate, like many others from this period, amassed large debts and was declared insolvent in late 1866. To satisfy creditors the probate court ordered the assets sold and in 1867 the home was advertised in the *Huntsville Democrat* as: “a two-story frame building in good repair, containing seven rooms, a kitchen, servants rooms, stable, and all necessary outbuildings.” Mary K. Burritt bought the



Federal mantel in northwest room. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

property for \$5,200 at auction in 1868 but did not receive title until the purchase price was paid in full in 1877. The lot now fronted about 84 feet on Eustis Avenue and extended to Gates Avenue on the south, and it remained in Burritt family ownership for over 70 years.⁴

Dr. Amatus R. Burritt was born in Springfield, Illinois, educated in Cleveland and came to Huntsville in 1853 or 1856, depending on the source. Like his son, he practiced homeopathic medicine, based on the belief that illnesses could be cured by drugs that would induce symptoms like those of the disease. This in turn would reinforce the body's ability to cure itself. In 1866 he married Mary King Robinson and the couple had two children, Carrie Boardman and William Henry, before his death of cancer in 1876. Little is known about Carrie as neither marriage nor probate records for Madison County could be found, but apparently she married Albert E. Matthews and had one son, A. Burritt Matthews (1885-1941). Dr. William



A rear view of the house in 1935 showing part of the brick addition. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS

Burritt graduated from Vanderbilt Medical College and by 1896 he established a homeopathic medical practice in Huntsville. After the death of his first wife, he married Mrs. Josephine Drummond of St. Louis and, according to the 1900 census, he continued practicing medicine in Huntsville. Before 1910 they moved to her hometown where he was remunerated as a manufacturer of rubber goods. It is believed he received numerous patents for automotive tires in the United States and Europe. By 1920, according to the decennial Missouri census, he was retired.⁵

In 1891 Mary Burritt was found to be of unsound mind and confined in the Alabama Insane Hospital (Bryce Hospital) until her death. Her son, daughter, and son-in-law were appointed guardians to manage her affairs. It appears that Carrie died sometime after 1896 and Albert Matthews before 1913. Their son Burritt Matthews was declared of unsound mind before 1913. With no member of the Burritt family living in Huntsville, the house was no longer needed as a residence.⁶

According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, the property was remodeled between 1908 and 1913. The small front porch with four columns centered over the front door was replaced by one extending the length of the façade, its gently sloping roof supported by five columns. The windows, originally 9/9, were replaced with a large single pane per sash. Perhaps interior modifications were made at this time for the 1913 map indicates the property was a “boarding house.” City directories from the 1930s and 1940s list multiple tenants.

After Mary Burritt’s death in 1920, the property passed to her son William and grandson Burritt as joint tenants in common. On order of the circuit court in 1923 the estate was divided into two equal parts with Burritt Matthews, by guardian, receiving the Eustis Avenue house. He died in Tuscaloosa in 1941 and his uncle, as only surviving heir, inherited the property.⁷

After Josephine’s death in 1933 Dr. Burritt returned to Huntsville to build his retirement home on Round Top Mountain. This local landmark was constructed in the shape of a Maltese cross to afford optimum views. The current mansion, completed in 1938, is the second on the site, the first having burned upon completion. Both homes were unique in that over 2,000 bales of straw were used to insulate the walls. Upon his death in 1955, he willed the home and furnishings to the City of Huntsville as a park and museum with an annual stipend of \$10,000 included for maintenance.⁸

In 1949 Dr. Burritt deeded the Eustis Avenue property jointly to the City of Huntsville and Madison County for a new health department to bear the name of his father. The building was designed at the height of the Modern movement by architect Wilmot C. Douglas of Birmingham and opened to the public in late 1952, constructed at a cost of \$166,808. The health department has long since outgrown the spatial constraints of a building designed to serve a smaller community. While its architectural style is unusual in Huntsville and deserving of preservation, the property is being conveyed to two adjacent churches for expansion plans, and like the Burritt house before it, apparently faces a date with the wrecking ball.⁹

Notes

- 1 Deed Book M, 253; Deed Book F, 307; Deed Book H, 766; Deed Book E, 151; Deed Book F, 44; Deed Book G, 334; Deed Book P, 547, Madison County, Alabama; Probate Case #2429, Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Probate Case #2429, Madison County, Alabama.
- 3 Lucille Griffith, *Alabama, A Documentary History to 1900* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1972), 381; Nancy M. Rohr, *Incidents of the War, the Civil War Journal of Mary Jane Chadick* (Huntsville: Silver Threads Publishing, 2005), 69, 87, 111, 134, and 148.
- 4 Probate Case #2429; Deed Book BBB, 523, Madison County, Alabama.
- 5 “Health Center Opening Result of Big Program,” *Huntsville Times*, 21 December 1952, 30; “Death of Dr. Burritt,” *Huntsville Weekly Independent*, 24 August 1876, 3; Probate Case #4097, Madison County, Alabama; “Dr. W. H. Burritt Passes At Age 86,” *Huntsville Times*, 18 April 1955, 1; 1900 United States Federal Census, Huntsville, Alabama, Roll T623-28, 8A; 1910 United States Federal Census, St. Louis, Missouri, Roll T624-821, 9A; 1920 United States Federal Census, St. Louis, Missouri, Roll T625-959, 4B.
- 6 Probate Case #4097; Probate Case #6773, Madison County, Alabama.
- 7 Deed Book 130, 111; Probate Case #9285, Madison County, Alabama.
- 8 “Burritt Museum and Park Guide Book”; Will Book 7, 205, Madison County, Alabama.
- 9 Deed Book 201, 101, Madison County, Alabama; “Health Center Opening Result of Big Program,” *Huntsville Times*, 21 December 1952, 30.