A Very Special Basement: Huntsville’s Post-Civil War Treasure

By Donna Castellano

Ed. Note: The March 12th speaker for the Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table, Donna Castellano, shared this profile in advance of her presentation on Huntsville’s historic homes.

A trip to the Harrison Brothers basement brings you face to face with Huntsville’s early history. Buildings began to line the streets of Southside Square, originally called Commercial Row, as early as 1810. While the original buildings have been altered through renovations, the brick masonry walls of the original building remain. The foundation of our city is clearly visible in the basement of Harrison Brothers.

In 1897, James B. and Daniel T. Harrison opened a tobacco shop at 124 Southside Square. A few years later, a fire swept down this street and heavily damaged most of the buildings, including the one owned by the Harrisons. The brothers doubled down on their investment in downtown Huntsville. They purchased the adjoining bay (the west side of the store), added a third floor, and thoroughly renovated the building’s façade. Then, they settled in to run their family-owned business for decades.

The death of John Harrison in 1983 (a grand nephew of James and Daniel) threatened to bring the legacy of Harrison Brothers to an end, but the Historic Huntsville Foundation negotiated with Harrison heirs to buy the building and operate the store. Today, the Historic Huntsville Foundation continues the Harrison Brothers legacy in Huntsville.
In the early 1980s, the Historic Huntsville Foundation established an architectural warehouse filled with historic salvage materials for folks restoring their historic homes. The items in basement consist of donations from property owners who could no longer use the salvage materials—sinks, doors, windows, even a wooden toilet tank! There are also materials that remain from stocked merchandise and fixtures of the old Harrison Brothers store, including auto parts, massive shelving and a rope-operated freight elevator.

In 2001, the Historic Huntsville Foundation received a Save America’s Treasures grant from the National Park Service, and used these funds to stabilize the building’s foundation. The basement received its concrete floor at this time. The basement at Harrison Brothers Hardware is not a carefully-curated, pristine space. It’s authentically dirty—and wouldn’t be changed for the world.

The Historic Huntsville Foundation is a membership based 501(c)3 nonprofit organization; and welcomes the membership and support of all who care about our historic places. Visit the website at www.historichuntsville.org for more information and membership materials!