



*The Historic Huntsville
Foundation is committed
to building a vibrant future
for
Huntsville-Madison County
by preserving our past.
Since 1974, we have
promoted the protection
and preservation of
Huntsville-Madison County's
historically, architecturally
and culturally significant
structures and sites
through education, advocacy
and public policy.*

Foundation Forum

Foundation Forum and Historic Huntsville Foundation Newsletter

Winter 2017



Photo/JENNIFER TARKINGTON

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Harrison Brothers Hardware volunteer Richard Broughton shows the ropes to future stores volunteers Haleigh and Ashleigh Rowe, daughters of HHF board member Patrice Bishop.

Donna Castellano

HARRISON BROTHERS HARDWARE FAMILY VALUES

Anniversaries are important; they are a time to celebrate, to reflect, and encourage us to put a pin on the calendar and remind us of a day that matters.

On September 14, 1984 the Historic Huntsville Foundation hosted a street fair, street dance and box supper to raise money for their purchase of Harrison Brothers Hardware. A sell-out crowd of six hundred people attended the party and dined on box suppers of fried chicken, ham rolls and cole slaw at tables set up in the Madison County courthouse. As newspapers reported at the time, "The Historic Huntsville Foundation was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support it received from the Huntsville community for its project to purchase and maintain Harrison Brothers Hardware."

It's thirty-three years later, and we are still overwhelmed. Overwhelmed that Harrison Brothers is the place where residents bring visitors to show them something uniquely Huntsville; overwhelmed that Harrison Brothers is the place where loyal customers begin their shopping expeditions; overwhelmed at the dedication of volunteers who give their time and talents to Harrison Brothers, and overwhelmed when

new generations of Huntsvillans discover the magic of Harrison Brothers and make the store their own.

How did the improbabilities become the possibilities that paved the way for a nonprofit historic preservation organization to buy a hardware store that no longer sells hardware? It began in the spring of 1984, when the doors of Harrison Brothers closed after the death of John Harrison. HHF members Lynn Jones, Freeda Darnell and Sweetie Easlick reached out to the Harrison family to see if there was a way to keep the store in operation. Wanting to keep the store and its legacy intact, the Harrison heirs agreed to sell the store for less than its value. Wanting to preserve a vital piece of Huntsville history, Historic Huntsville Foundation members dug deep and found the money needed to buy the property. And then the magic of Harrison Brothers happened and things just fell into place.

So, when summer fades and fall is just around the corner, we are reminded of the time when a group of folks came together and did the right thing for the right reasons because they believed it mattered. And then follow their example.

Often times when you hear a good idea, you wonder if it will ever even get off of the ground. Maybe the scale of the project is too large or the cost to implement is too great. Details may be scarce or aspects not well fleshed out. Other times, full steam ahead meets the impasse of an unforeseen administrative roadblock. Luckily none of these were the case when Abby Owen of Chapman Sisson Architects approached Historic Huntsville Foundation with an idea that called out for collaboration.

Earlier in the Spring, Abby asked if she could have an audience with the Executive Committee of HHF to share her idea for a curated, maker's market that would come to be known as Hunt + Gather. After about five minutes it was clear to us that Abby didn't have any idea, she had a vision. All of those cracks that can derail a good idea had already been solidified. A location had been procured, corporate sponsorship with Regions Bank was in place, and Abby was already working with Downtown Huntsville Inc. to ensure the collaborative environment needed for a successful event. With all of the pieces in place, "What could she possibly need from HHF?"

Fortunately for us, HHF had made a good impression on Abby when she was asked to join our Young Professional Roundtable Luncheon in 2016. Sheree Holland, a co-worker and a HHF Board Member, first introduced Abby to HHF. During that luncheon, many of those in attendance first learned about the treasure trove of items hiding in HHF's Architectural Warehouse located in the basement of Harrison Brother's Hardware. Doors, windows, shutters and mantles line the walls of the basement and serve as markers of an architectural salvage treasure map that leads shoppers through the history of Huntsville and Madison County.

I have had the privilege of volunteering on select Saturday mornings, when the basement is open to the public, alongside HHF Board Member and Warehouse Supervisor, Barry Carden. And every time I tell someone about the basement, I'm sure to include the two pieces of sagely wisdom that Barry imparted on me the first time I volunteered. "You never know what you are

gonna find down here, "and" be sure to watch your step...or your head...whichever applies." I'm still not sure if that was a warning or challenge. But Abby and her team at Hunt + Gather saw it as an opportunity to shed new light (figuratively and literally) on the relics of our architectural past.

That brings us back to the first time Abby shared her vision for Hunt + Gather. She asked if HHF would be a supporting

sponsor of the event and in turn HHF would have a new audience and venue to display and sell these wonderful pieces of history. She also wanted items from the basement to feature heavily in her design of the space. The space, an out-of-use Regions Bank drive thru, would soon be transformed in a way that only someone with true design gifts could.



HHF is proud of our partnership with Hunt+Gather, an innovative marketplace that celebrates artists, artisans, and other makers.

After months of reviewing artist applications, working with the City of Huntsville, coordinating food trucks and working with their collaborative partners, Hunt + Gather became a reality on the brisk Saturday morning of October 28. Potters, painters, furniture makers, leather craftsmen and even T-shirt printers all displayed and sold their handy work. Shoppers poured into that concrete tunnel of commerce all seeking that special, one-of-a-kind item to take home with them. And just as Abby had envisioned, attendees were welcomed by a handmade sign made of salvaged wood that was "rescued" from the basement of Harrison Brothers and given new life alongside the crafts of numerous talented artists.

As part of our package as a supporting sponsor, HHF was also given booth space to display many of those same items that I had once navigated through in the basement. The familiar sights of fall helped us accent our merchandise. Pumpkins rested on mantles, gourds spilled from a vintage hatbox and corn stalks jutted out of a hand carved newel post. Many great pieces found new homes that day and those that didn't are still very much alive in the basement of Harrison Brothers; all of them waiting for the right person to come along with a vision for what they might become.


The Huntsville Jewish Heritage Center Hosts a Grand Tour

Margaret Anne Goldsmith

On Thursday night, September 14 at 6 P.M., members of the Historic Huntsville Foundation – about seventy in all – filled the sanctuary of Temple B'nai Sholom for an evening celebrating the Temple's new Huntsville Jewish Heritage Center. The agenda included a brief program, a "Grand Temple Tour," hosted by Pam Rhodes, Ann van Leeuwen and myself and a reception in the social hall. HHF Executive Director Donna Castellano and HHF board members graciously provided the invitations, the programs, flowers and refreshments for the guests.

The evening began in the sanctuary with a welcome by HHF Chairman Jason Vandiver, who thanked Ann and the Temple for hosting the event. In appreciation for the Temple's hospitality, Jason gave the Temple a complimentary Benefactor level membership in the Huntsville Historic Foundation. Temple B'nai Sholom will be recognized as a Preservation Partner on HHF's Community Preservation Partners Board displayed in Harrison Brothers Hardware, which is owned and operated by HHF.

Donna Castellano introduced Pam, Ann and me and gave the group an outline of the evening's program. Pam then provided a warm welcome to our Temple and an opening prayer, and I gave a short history of our Jewish community, a description of our Temple, and the Heritage Center. Our guests then broke into three groups. For about an hour the groups traveled in rotation – viewing "The Huntsville Alabama Jewish Community" video with Mary Dougherty and Ann, listening to a discussion of the Torah and Jewish beliefs with Pam, and touring the Heritage Center with me. After an hour, our guests met in the social hall for a demonstration of our Sabbath rituals with Pam, followed by a light Israeli meal, drink and kibitzing.

The group had a grand time, judging by their responses heard through the grapevine. Everyone left with a much better understanding of Judaism and Huntsville's Jewish community. As always, The Heritage Center and the Temple did an outstanding job! 

Don't Forget
RENEW
your HHF membership dues
& support our mission!



Carols & **COCKTAILS** **HOLIDAY CHEER**

HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION

BIBB-BRADLEY-BEIRNE HOUSE

300 WILLIAMS AVENUE

WEDNESDAY, THE SIXTH OF DECEMBER

FIVE UNTIL SEVEN O'CLOCK

IN THE EVENING

CELEBRATE THE SEASON

AT OUR HOLIDAY

COCKTAIL RECEPTION

AT THE 1836 HOME OF

GOVERNOR THOMAS BIBB HOUSE

RSVP donna@historichuntsville.org

The Bibb-Bradley-Beirne House – *Where History Calls H*



Photo/DIANE STRICKLAND

There are times when a house is more than a home. The residence built by Alabama Governor Thomas Bibb for his family became an indelible part of Alabama history with its completion in 1836. Recognized as one of Alabama's earliest and finest examples of Greek revival-style domestic architecture, the home is virtually unchanged from the days of the Bibbs.

The Bibb Bradley Beirne House was first documented as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), a program that hired unemployed architects during the Depression to photograph and document America's historic properties. The Historic Huntsville Foundation and Jose Betancourt, Associate Professor of Photography at the University of Alabama-Huntsville, partnered to document and photograph the Bibb house. We are grateful to the heirs of Eleanor Newman Hutchens and Dana and Scott Averbuch for allowing us to document the Bibb property for the modern historical record.

For most of its almost 200 year history, the Bibb house has been owned by descendants of Parmelia and Thomas Bibb. Thomas Bibb sold the house to James Bradley in 1836. Bradley was the husband of Bibb's daughter Adeline. The Panic of 1837 and the resulting financial chaos led Bradley to sell the house to Andrew Beirne in 1844, whose descendants occupied the house until the 1920s. The house returned to the Bibb family in 1927, with its purchase by Ellen White

Newman and her daughter Susie Newman Hutchens. Eleanor Newman Hutchens,¹ Susie's daughter, lived there until her death in 2016.

The house holds important memories for the four current owners—grandchildren of Susie Newman Hutchens. As children they remember the house as a lively center of engagement for what is now the Twickenham district. Every afternoon in the summer, for example, friends of their grandparents gathered on the back porch for drinks and debate of the defining issues of the day. Most days, the dining room table was full of family and friends for breakfast and lunch. Now, for the first time since the mid-nineteenth century, the Bibb House is for sale.

The Bibb House is one of Huntsville's most distinctive historic properties, befitting a man of Thomas Bibb's great wealth, social status and political influence. Thomas Bibb and his brother William Wyatt Bibb were members of Alabama's first political dynasty; President James Monroe appointed William Wyatt Bibb governor of the Alabama Territory in 1817, and Bibb was elected Alabama's first governor in 1819. Thomas Bibb was chosen as president of the state senate. When William died in office, Thomas succeeded him as governor as prescribed by the Alabama constitution.

The Bibbs were born to a prominent Virginia family who migrated to Georgia in the 1780s along with other wealthy Virginians who settled in the area of the Broad and Savannah Rivers

in northeastern Georgia. Thomas Bibb, along with cousins LeRoy Pope and John W. Walker, purchased lands in the Tennessee Valley in 1809 and soon moved to their new home on the southwest frontier.²

Bibb settled in the town of Huntsville and also purchased land in Limestone County where he established his plantation, Belle Mina in 1826. Bibb purchased his property on Williams Avenue in 1821, which included a federal-style house built by James M. Taylor in 1817 or 1818.³ Bibb demolished the original house in 1826 to build the grand house that sits on the property today.

Bibb's fondness for Greek revival-style architecture was an outgrowth of his Virginia roots, where neoclassical architecture expressed the ideals of the new American republic. The design of Bibb's Huntsville house was adapted from Chester Hill's *The Builder's Guide* published in Hartford, Connecticut in 1834. Bibb retained Huntsville architect and builder George Steele to construct the house.⁴ Slaves made bricks for the massive structure on the property; a clear indentation in the back lawn marks the spot where they dug the clay for the bricks.

With original, classical interiors, the house today is a remarkable piece of Alabama's architectural history, virtually untouched from the days of Parmelia and Thomas Bibb. The house layout is a four over four with a central hall that is divided into a front and back hall. Recessed folding doors between front hall and library, and front hall and dining room allow these rooms to be closed off. A graceful staircase is located in the back hall. Upstairs and down the rooms are 20' x 22', with 14 foot ceilings and tall windows that flood the rooms with light and provide cross ventilation in the summers.

An innovative feature of the house is the use of the Town lattice truss system in the attic to support the weight of the home's roof. Architect Ithiel Town created his system in the 1820s for bridges. Town's design placed beams in a crisscrossing pattern secured by

bands. This technique required shorter beams than other methods, and the Town design required less labor to build. George Steele adapted the Town design for use in the Bibb House, which is believed to be the sole use of the Town Truss in a residential property.

The basement holds evidence that the 1836 Bibb house is built over the remains and foundation of the earlier federal style house. The brick walls show the outline of two mantels that have been removed. Flanking the outline of these mantels are windows that have been bricked over. The floor is laid in a brick herringbone pattern. It is believed the Bibbs used the basement as a workspace for slaves.

Over the years, the house has received a few updates. In the 1850s, the Beirnes replaced the original wood Greek revival mantels in the drawing room and library with carved marble mantels. It is believed the Beirnes moved the original wood mantels to an upstairs bedroom. The kitchen was initially separated from the main house, but was raised a few feet and connected to the main house in the early twentieth century, about the time that bathrooms were added to the house. The original slave quarters are intact and have been converted to a garage and storage room.

The Thomas Bibb house has a storied past and a future that's yet to be written. Lovingly preserved by its former owners, the house is a testament to the refined taste of Huntsville's early settlers, who transplanted the classical style from Virginia as a conscious expression of their political ideals.

Hopefully, the next chapter in this home's life includes an owner who can respect the home's nineteenth century origins while adapting it for life in the twenty-first century.

In some places, this might be an impossible task. But this is Huntsville, and in Huntsville we do six impossible things before breakfast.



Photo/JOSE BETANCOURT

The front parlor/library with 1850's mantel added by the Beirne family.



Photo/JOSE BETANCOURT

The dining room with original black marble mantel.

Our preservation mission begins with you.

*From the site of Alabama's constitutional convention to the birthplace of the space program,
Huntsville-Madison County has a history like no other.*

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THE BIBB-BRADLEY-BEIRNE HOUSE FOOTNOTES

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