

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

March 2009

A Time to Celebrate Local Landmarks

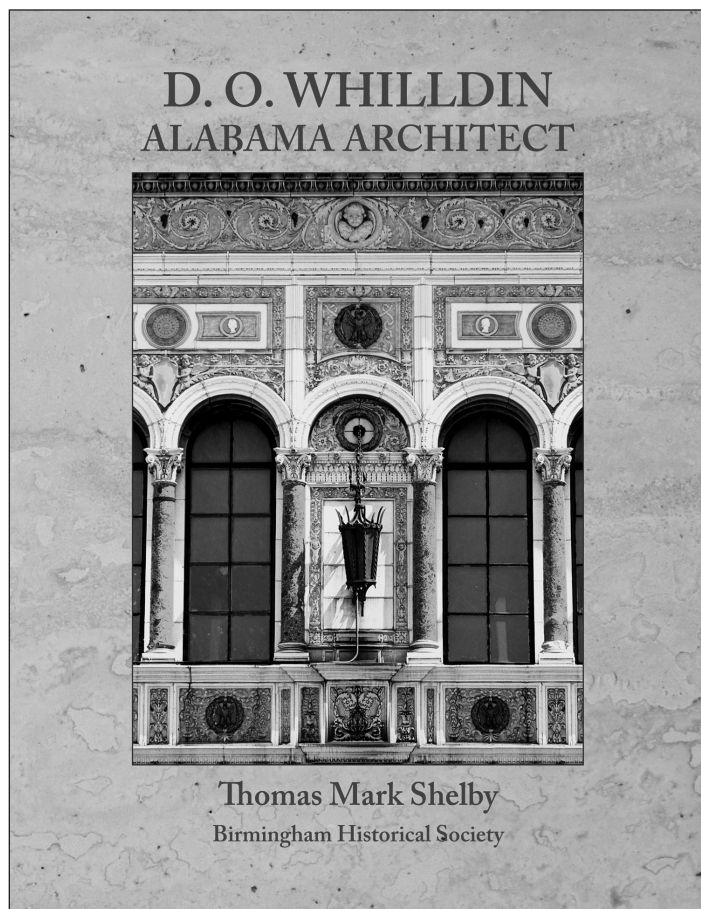
Two events unfold on March 29, filling both the upstairs and downstairs of the Medical Alumni Building, 811 20th Street on Southside. The common theme: celebrating the preservation of Birmingham's architectural treasures.

Downstairs: Author/architectural historian **T. Mark Shelby** signs his *D.O. Whilldin—Alabama Architect*. The volume, with 262 illustrations, chronicles the work of Whilldin, whose career extended from 1904 to 1962. Structures still standing regionally include Legion Field, the Florentine Building, Phillips High School, Tuscaloosa High School, the Dr. Pepper Building, and a large number of civic structures, theaters, and fine residences. "We are indebted to Mr. Shelby for his keen interest in this important chapter of our history," says Marjorie White, director of the Birmingham Historical Society, the book's publisher. "Mr. Whilldin was indeed a pioneer in his field. His vision reached beyond his time and projected into the landmarks we enjoy yet today." The author will conduct his signing in the Carmichael Library; the building itself was designed in 1936 by Whilldin in limestone with Art Deco detail. The public is invited to the event from 3-5 p.m.; books are available for \$29.95. BHS members may pick up their complimentary volume.

Upstairs: The annual **Preservation Awards** recognize significant people who have adapted historic buildings to new and contemporary uses. "These individuals and organizations have literally saved the structures and given them new purpose," says White. "Where the original need ceased to be, the preserved building rings with activity and a reason for being. This is why we preserve in the first place—to save the physical structure, but also to give it relevance."

The award ceremony at 3:30 p.m. will honor:

- The Jimmie Hale Mission Shepura Men's Center (2nd Avenue North at 33rd Street).
- CraneWorks-LoaderWorks-RentalWorks (2728 8th Avenue North).
- Innovation Depot (1500 1st Avenue North).



Election of Officers and Trustees

At the March 29 Meeting, Members will be presented the following candidates for election as New Trustees and Officers for 2009: As Vice President: Dr. Julius Linn, Jr.; as Trustees: Dr. Cleveland Kinney, Katherine Owens, Paula Stanton.

PRESERVATION AWARDS 2009

A neighborhood school; a site for compressing cotton and transferring gasoline; a big box retailer gone bust. These once abandoned large city center sites have vibrant new uses. We salute those who have put them to work for future needs.

For recreating a new city center landmark

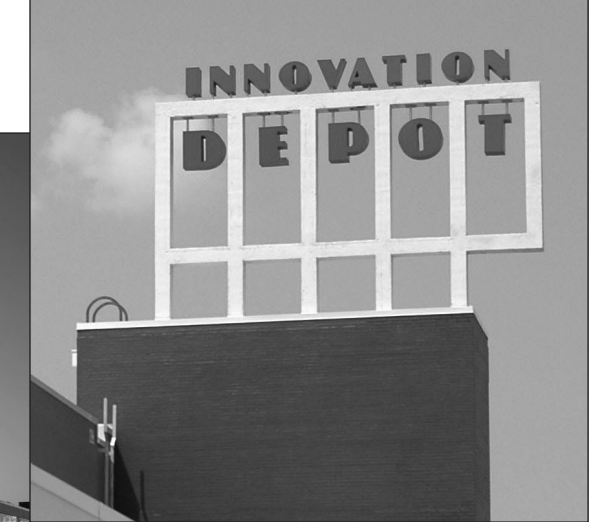
Sears, Roebuck and Co.—Innovation Depot

Client/Developer: Entrepreneurial Center, Susan Matlock, Director
1500 First Avenue North

Architect: Williams-Blackstock Architects, Joel Blackstock, Alan Tichansky, Jennifer Ashley

Contractor: Brice Building Company, Inc., Felix Drennen, Bobby DeHaye

Project Management: Brantley Visioneering Inc., H. B. Brantley



TOP: Second Avenue View, Sears, Roebuck and Co., 1941. Birmingham News Collection, BPL Archives.

ABOVE: Innovation Depot Sign. Charles Horn, 2007.

LEFT: Former Sears Display Window now a conference room, 2nd Ave. at 16th St. John O'Hagan, 2008.

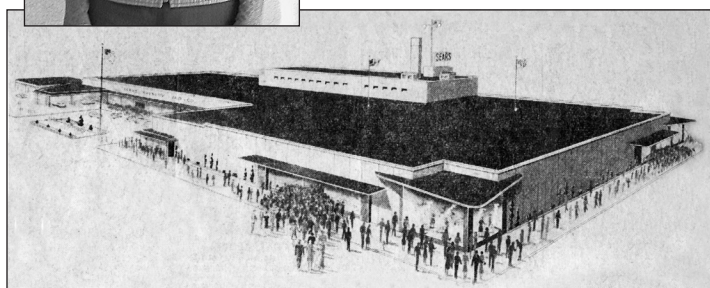
This Sears, Roebuck and Co. Department Store opened in October 1941. The entire first floor of the big (nearly 1½ football field long and 1 field wide) brick and concrete box was used as display space; the smaller second floor as offices. The new Sears had four times the selling area of its former store and 26 new departments, all on one floor.

Opened in Birmingham in 1927, Sears had moved into the downtown shopping area in the 1930s. The 1941 single-story design was said to save Sears shoppers 35% of their time, by not climbing stairs or riding escalators. Sears also offered auto repair and a service station with an adjacent patio-like court parking, as well as a 3-acre parking lot. However, the 12 spacious display windows and well-marked corner entrances assumed shoppers would arrive from the street on foot and “window shop” as they did in traditional urban retail settings. Sears provided the plans for the store; the contractor and construction materials were local. Hence, the store's large canopied display windows resemble other U. S. and Latin American stores built at this time.



The exterior was of brick veneer on tile with reinforced concrete slabs. The interior ceilings were 18 feet tall, the columned and open display floors of terrazzo on a concrete base. Daniel Construction Co. built the store which employed

.600 persons in 1941. Longtime and beloved Sears executive, Roper Dial, is said to have been able to look out over his entire sales operation and know what each employee, of what is described by Dial's longtime secretary Polly Chambers as “the great Sears family”, was doing.



TOP: Susan Matlock. Marjorie White, 2009.

ABOVE: First Avenue View, Sears, Roebuck and Co. Store, Rendering by the firm architect, published in the Birmingham News, October 12, 1941.

The store closed at this location in 1990 and became a home to thieves and the homeless. Susan Matlock passed the building each day enroute to the Entrepreneurial Center, then in the former Tillman-Levenson building. The condition of the surrounding area, just three blocks from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, worsened as the years passed. Optimistically, the City of Birmingham declared it an enterprise zone. When the Entrepreneurial Center joined forces with UAB's Office for the Advancement of Developing Industries, then located in Oxmoor, a critical mass of companies and wherewithall came together. It took five years to develop the funding (\$18 million of city, county, UAB, and private funds, plus a loan) and begin construction of what has now emerged as the highly successful business incubator, Innovation Depot, Inc. This 501(c)(3) program, which encourages the development of companies in the biotech/life science and other technology businesses, is today housed in facilities as vibrant as its mission.

Architects redesigned the huge Sears retail store to provide office and support spaces and laboratories for Innovation Depot. Removal of the exterior brick along the first floor walls opened inside to outside, linked the new activity within the structure to its surrounding neighborhood, and also provided 120,000 sq. ft. of light-filled office and support spaces. Existing exterior concrete support columns and fin-shaped canopies remain exposed and were coated with bright, smooth stucco.

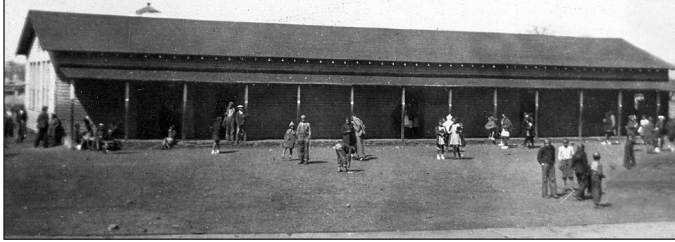
The interior redesign retains the concrete frame, terrazzo floors, and 18' ceilings, adds new and exposed mechanical systems, and provides a “Main Street” corridor. Main Street extends from the parking lot entry through “Town Center” to offices and conference rooms along 16th Street. Centralized offices, training rooms, break rooms, a copy center, and a bakery sandwich shop surround the two-story, sky-lit Town Center. A steel stair and open elevator shaft provide access to the 200 sq.ft. second-floor research laboratories and a roof top deck. There are no cookie cutter units for the growing businesses that can stay at Innovation Depot for five years, moving about the structure as their capacity and space needs increase.

For rescuing and reusing the historic school

East End-Thomas School-Jimmie Hale Mission
Shepura Men's Center

Second Avenue North at 33rd Street

Client: Jimmie Hale Mission, Tony Cooper, Director.



TOP: Children and faculty at the entrance to Thomas School, c.1910. Birmingham Collection, Birmingham Public Library (BPL) Archives.

ABOVE: Thomas School, Views Along Second Avenue, 1939. Tax Appraisal Photographs, BPL Archives. Note the classically styled, columned front entrance with second story balustrade above the entry. Second Avenue North is tree-lined with a sidewalk running in front of the school.

Thomas School closed and sat vacant and deteriorating for many years before the Jimmie Hale Mission acquired it in 2002 to serve as its new Shepura Men's Center. Renovation and reworking of the site to accommodate new educational programs for men began in April 2004 and is almost complete. The school now houses counseling services and classrooms. The second and third floors serve as a 160-bed dormitory. A new chapel, named in honor of Jessie Hale, now 92, sits on the site of the former schoolhouse annex. To its rear are a new kitchen and dining area and an administrative and educational facility.

Jimmie and Jessie Hale established the Mission in 1944 to provide a place where homeless men could come and receive help and hope. Jessie Hale directed the mission for the next 46 years, with Leo Shepura co-directing for decades. The current facility offers a 160-bed shelter, men's clothing distribution, nightly



Shoe Repairing at Thomas School, May 1930. Photograph by Birmingham View Co., Birmingham Board of Education Collection, BPL Archives.

chapel service, and a two-phase, residential, addiction recovery program. The center serves nearly 9,000 meals per month. For more information, see *Doing Unto the Least of These: The Story of Birmingham's Jimmie Hale Mission* (1998) by John Hayman.



ABOVE, LEFT: Thomas School, Abandoned and Deteriorating. Photograph courtesy the Jimmie Hale Mission.

ABOVE, RIGHT: Shepura Men's Center, View Along Second Avenue North, Looking East, 2008. Marjorie L. White, BHS.

LEFT: Jessie and Jimmie Hale, 1944. Photograph courtesy the Jimmie Hale Mission.

For sensitive reuse of the historic Shell Oil Plant

Shell Oil Co. Bulk Plant—CraneWorks, LoaderWorks,
RentalWorks

Between 8th and 10th Avenues North, to east of 28th Street North
2728 8th Avenue North

Owners/Developers: Steve and David Upton

This two-block property east of the Central of Georgia Railway (today's Norfolk Southern) in Block 598 of Birmingham lies along a former 270' railroad spur that extends to Hardie Tynes Manufacturing plant further east. The site served throughout the early 20th century as a place where cotton was compressed into bales and stored, where autos were wrecked and spare parts stored, where fuel was transferred from rail to truck for transport to the four Shell Oil filling stations across the city, and where Elmer Thuston's Birmingham SawWorks and many other activities were located. This property may be best known as the place where the American flag and "Big Dog" loom large over US280/31 as it curves east to its intersection with I-59/20. The site now contains seven buildings, two of which date to the 1910s and 1920s but have been enlarged through years of adaptive reuse.

In 2001, CraneWorks built a new building on the south end of the site, where the cotton compressing and baling once took place. When CraneWorks formed two new divisions, LoaderWorks and RentalWorks, its owners decided to renovate and reuse existing buildings on the north end of the site including a truck storage and repair building and a warehouse from Shell Oil's Bulk Plant, which closed in 1941. The RentalWorks showroom and headquarters are now in the former storage and repair building, its gabled clearstory roof providing ample natural light for the display of the heavy equipment available for rental. The slag reinforced concrete floor has been ground smooth and polished.



TOP: Shell Oil Co. Truck Storage and Repair Building, 1938. Tax File Photograph, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

ABOVE: Showroom for RentalWorks, the former Shell Oil Co. Truck Storage and Repair Building, 2009. Marjorie White



David and Steve Upton with President George W. Bush upon the President's visit to CraneWorks, Photograph courtesy www.craneworks.com

The warehouse, located alongside the site of the railway spur, serves as a warehouse and repair facility with its wood timbered roof ceiling, brick walls, and concrete floor exposed. A handsome shrubbery-lined fence as well as freshly laid concrete drives link together the buildings, operations, and equipment on the large site.

CraneWorks and its subsidiaries, established in 1996 by David and Steve Upton following sale of a similar venture Reliable Rentals, sell, lease, and service heavy industrial equipment including tower cranes, fork lifts, loaders, and bucket trucks.

Signing: 3-5 p.m. • Awards: 3:30 p.m.
March 29

Book-Signing • Preservation Awards
Join us for

One Sloss Quarters
Birmingham, Alabama 35222
www.bhistorical.org

