

Special Issue Honoring Robert R. Meyer, Sr.
and Celebrating the Fortieth Anniversary
of the Birmingham Historical Society



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Cover Photograph: Jan Osbun, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Isaac J. Osbun, was photographed while eating a bowl of porridge on the porch of her parents' home at 1100 Forty-first Street South. Her parents' home, designed for the G.T. Robertson family by Birmingham architect William Leslie Welton, is an unusually fine example of the Craftsman-styled residence. The photograph was made on June 27, 1920 and is reproduced on the cover of this issue through the courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Sloan Bashinsky, II.

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Marvin Yeomans Whiting
Editor

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F O R E W O R D

David Kivig and Myron Marty's recently-published *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* is not only a useful guide to increased effectiveness in local history research and writing but also a persuasive argument for the value of such history. "Beyond the serious importance of examining the past of our immediate world to extend memory, understand the contemporary situation, sharpen social, political, and economic generalizations, or facilitate intelligent policy making, nearby history has a further intangible appeal which may be its most notable quality. The emotional rewards of learning about a past which has plainly and directly affected one's own life cannot be duplicated by any other type of historical inquiry."¹

Kivig and Marty are correct in their judgment. There is emotion associated with the experience of local history: in researching it, in writing it, in reading it. Sometimes, the experience is pleasurable; sometimes, it is painful; sometimes, enlightening; sometimes, perplexing. "It can be exciting to understand for the first time why your grandparents treated your parents in a certain way, why your community developed certain traditions, why your corporation adopted specific practices, why your civic organization became involved with particular issues. It can be satisfying to feel oneself part of something larger and more lasting than the moment, something that stretches both backward and forward in time."²

This special issue of *The JOURNAL* of the Birmingham Historical Society invites you, the reader, to experience the history of people and places nearby. You are invited to visualize, with Ellen Erdreich, through words, drawings, and photographs, a philosophy of living, an approach to domestic life which has left its impress on Birmingham residential architecture, both exterior and interior, and

on the persons who have lived or now live in homes or with furnishings influenced by the Craftsman style. With Leah Atkins' introduction and notes to the Melville Coleman Thomas letters as helpful guides, you are invited to see the city of Birmingham as Thomas saw and described it in 1887. With my own article, the invitation is to view Birmingham history, our nearby past, as more than just local in character, as related, both directly and indirectly and in constantly varying degrees, to other histories: state, regional, national, and international. And there is more.

Of particular interest should be the section of this issue entitled "Buildings Reborn." In October 1983, the Birmingham Historical Society sponsored the BUILDINGS REBORN: New Uses, Old Places Exhibition at the Birmingham Museum of Art. The photographic exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) which features the adaptive use of old, often historically important buildings nationwide was supplemented by Birmingham architectural and student competition winners. In Phillip Morris' article,

"Alive Again with Adaptive Reuse," you are invited to consider the impact that current directions in the historic preservation movement can have upon our cities and upon our city, Birmingham. Following this article are the winning entries in the Architecture Design Award Competition and the "Impressions of Downtown Birmingham" Poster Competition. Finally, you are invited to share in the Fortieth Anniversary celebration of the Birmingham Historical Society by tracing, with John Henley, the early history of the organization, and, with Dwight Young, who presently serves as Vice President, Preservation Services, The National Trust for Historic Preservation, to explore the uniqueness and the richness of Birmingham's history and to consider the role of the Society in preserving that history.

Without the generous financial support of the Robert R. Meyer Foundation, this issue of *The JOURNAL* could not have been published. In recognition of this support, the issue is dedicated to the memory of Robert Randolph Meyer, Sr. The generous assistance of Marjorie Longenecker White, who served as photographer for Ellen Erdreich, and of Scout Powers Carr, who designed this *JOURNAL* issue, is gratefully recognized.

Marvin Yeomans Whiting
Editor
The JOURNAL of the
Birmingham Historical Society

1. David E. King and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982), p. 12.
2. *Ibid.*

Robert Randolph Meyer, Sr.: “From Much More than Modest Affluence—A Generosity to Others”

“So often we know men, possessed of much more than modest affluence, who seem not to realize that the mere possession of wealth carries with it a civic responsibility that amounts to stewardship, who appear to use their means solely for their own comfort, pleasure and selfish ends with little regard for the welfare of their fellow man.

“This could never be truthfully said of Robert R. Meyer, Sr. . . .”¹ So spoke William J. Rushton at the Dedication of Southern Research Institute’s Kettering-Meyer Laboratory No. 2 in August of 1958.

Robert Randolph Meyer, Sr. was, as Col. Rushton noted, not a man who placed the interests of self before those of others. He was a citizen of Birmingham who established for himself—but more particularly, for others—a name synonymous with generosity. Among his best known benefactions were “the Children’s Hospital and the Children’s Fresh Air Farm, a summer camp for underprivileged children. This latter organization came into being in 1923 because of an initial gift from him. While he annually paid a preponderant part of its operating expenses, in addition he provided by gift and bequest an endowment of more than \$125,000 to insure its perpetuation. He also provided in his will for a fine addition to the Children’s Hospital Building.”²

Five years before his death, Meyer took action to provide for a continuance of his philanthropy, both during the remaining years of his life and following his death. In 1942—with the First National Bank of Birmingham designated as corporate trustee and provision made for a board of five local citizens to advise bank officials—Meyer created the Robert R. Meyer Foundation. “In



addition to large sums made available to the Foundation during the remaining years of his life, by his will Meyer left a fraction less than a third of his entire estate, which was substantial, to the Foundation.”³ Since his death in 1947—continuing a tradition established by Meyer—the Foundation has annually provided substantial support for institutions in the fields of education, scientific research, health care, and child development.

Meyer’s capacity for philanthropy stemmed not only from the personal pleasure he derived in sharing “his more than modest affluence,” but also from his remarkable successes as a business man. The Meyer Hotel Chain, begun in Birmingham prior to 1920 with one facility, The Metropolitan Hotel, had grown, by 1947, to include the Hotel Hermitage, Nashville, Tennessee; the Hotel Farragut, Knoxville, Tennessee; the Hotels Windsor and Roosevelt, Jacksonville Florida; the Hotel Patrick Henry, Roanoke, Virginia; the Hotel Sir Walter, Raleigh, North Carolina; and the Hotel Emerson, Baltimore, Maryland.⁴

In addition to his position as president of the hotel chain which bore his name, Meyer—by virtue of his recognized business ability and standing—served as a director of the First National Bank of Birmingham, Woodward Iron Company, Birmingham Fire Insurance Company, Seaboard Air Line Railroad Company, and the Hotels Waldorf-Astoria and Governor Clinton in New York City.⁵

1. *Presentation and Dedication of Kettering-Meyer Laboratory No. 2 of the Southern Research Institute, August 12, 1958.* n.p., n.d., p. 13.

2. *Presentation*, p. 14.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Obituary, Robert R. Meyer, Sr., *Birmingham News*, October 31, 1947.

5. *Ibid.*

Remarks about Birmingham and the Origin of the Birmingham Historical Society

by John C. Henley III
Past-President

We live in a remarkable place. Some years ago geographers from all over the world had a once-a-decade meeting in Rome. They determined that the southeastern coastal plain of the United States, where we live, was one of the most favorable places on earth. Not because it excelled in any particular feature—because it does not—but the average of all its characteristics made it one of the most desirable places for man. Evidence to support this conclusion is to be found in the substantial concentration of Indian population in the southeastern United States. The more popularly-remembered American Indians were only scattered in the west in smaller and less permanent groups.

Think about the fascinating history Alabama has, and you wonder why good movies aren't made about it. We've heard about the great Indian battles in the west—with Custer and all the others—but the greatest, largest Indian battle ever fought in the western hemisphere was fought here in Alabama at Mauvilla. We read of the great excitement of the settlers crossing the Cimmaron and rushing into Oklahoma. But Alabama had one of the most sudden surges of settlers of any place in the United States. Because this land was dominated by the Creek Nation, people couldn't come in to settle; there were pioneers packed along the border in north Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, but they could come no further. With defeat of the Creeks at the battle of Horseshoe Bend, however, the situation changed; suddenly the settlers could and did pour into Alabama. Alabama especially has rivers. The rivers are on the Great Seal of Alabama because this meant transportation—by canoe and flatboat and steamers. Today this means heavy barges and

limitless industrial water. We are living in a great State.

Alabama history is fascinating. So is the history of its largest city, Birmingham.

Birmingham was the biggest mining camp in the world, and even though so many mines have been closed, it still is. Birmingham was rough in the early days. There were plenty of fights and goings-on. One of the former famous sporting houses burned up just a few months ago, a three story Mansard-roofed, marble structure on First Avenue South. And the next time you pass behind Adamson Ford, look at the rear. You'll see it has a strange back, because this was the curtain loft built for the stage of a burlesque theatre.

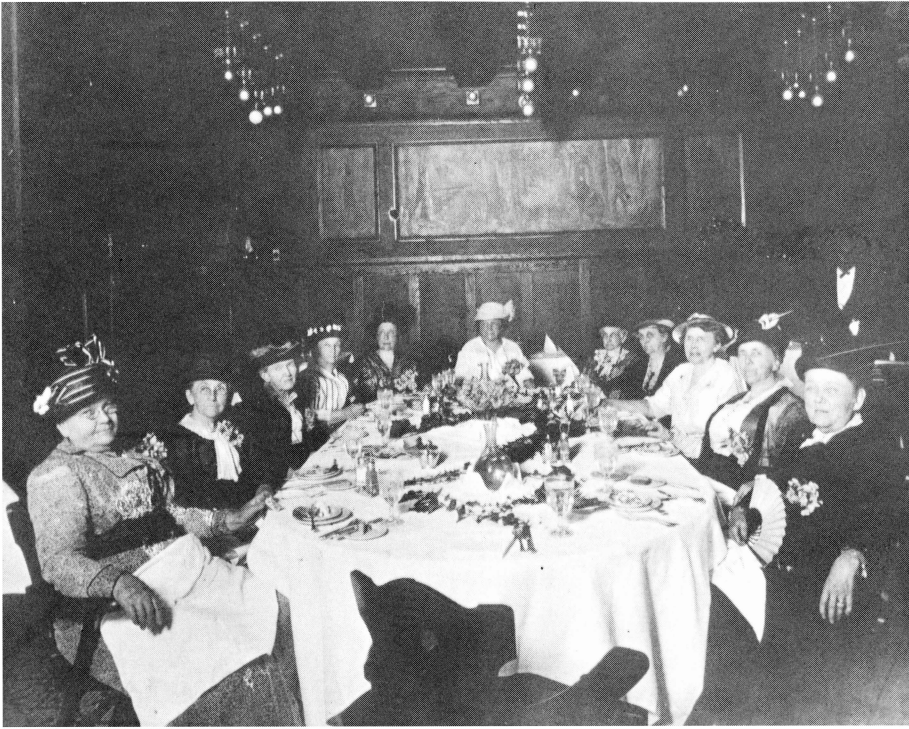
How Birmingham came about was simple—two railroads crossed. A group of people got together and bought land at the existing village of Elyton where the railroads were *supposed* to cross. The Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad had been built through Jones Valley and the South and North Alabama Railroad, which was under construction, was going to cross the A&C at Elyton. But, when the chief engineer for the South and North, John T. Milner, got to the top of Red Mountain, he looked down into the valley and it occurred to him that with the other railroad already in place he could make his railroad cross anywhere he wanted to. He took this plan to Montgomery, and another group bought the land exactly where Birmingham is right now, about 4150 acres. And Milner did change the route of his railroad, making it cross just where it crosses now, smack in the middle of Birmingham. Such was the incunabulum of the Elyton Land Company, now Birmingham Realty.

The second major reason for Birmingham was that here, together in abundance, were the ingredients necessary to the ironmonger: coal, iron and limestone. And when experiments proved Pratt coal could coke (it takes coke to make steel) this foreshadowed Birmingham's emergence as the greatest industrial city of the South.

The third reason for this city's existence is the most significant and the most exciting. Consider the circumstances at the time of its founding. The Civil War was just over. Here was a place with nothing to forget. Young men and women had gone back home to a land covered with the pall of sorrow and destitution. There was nothing there and no opportunity. They all longed for a new, friendly place to go that had no past, where life could start afresh. This is what brought the young people here and it is they who built this city. Among them were some outstanding principals, like Daniel Pratt, Henry F. DeBardeleben, Charles Linn, Col. James R. Powell and others. But, they were not the ones who "built" Birmingham; it was all of the great young men and women who were here then, as they are here today: new people with new dreams, new ideas, the willingness to risk and the will to win.

This mere backdrop sets the stage to tell you a little bit about our Society. The Birmingham Historical Society grew out of the interest of a group of women, the stern Victorians pictured on page 5.

We are a remarkable city, not because we are truly old, but we are well started into the second century. You can see the verve, the drive, the fascination and the interest that these ladies had to actually organize. A membership requirement was that each must have been in Birmingham either in



Pioneer Club ladies met in style, but who were they? Help us identify these early Birmingham women. Photo courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

1872 or 1873. Bear in mind that the Elyton Land Company was not even created until December 1871. Few of these ladies could have been here any sooner. There were 14 to begin with, and 29 by 1920. This, the Pioneer's Club, was the precursor of the Birmingham Historical Society. These Pioneer ladies had their organizational meeting at the home of Annie Linn Henley on June 13, 1914.

In 1939, my father, John C. Henley, Jr., and his brothers, Walter and Courtney, who had the original writings of the Pioneer's Club, published these papers in a beautiful book called *Early Days in Birmingham*. The original edition was exquisite, but only a few copies were printed.* Two years later, in 1941, with a sense of responsibility for having resurrected these papers, my father organized the Birmingham Historical Society. The objectives of the Society (which only recently have been modified) were that it was to be a historical society for Birmingham, Jefferson County and Alabama—so it took in everything. (The Alabama Historical Association was organized in 1947, six years later.)

The Birmingham Historical Society was particularly active under the leader-

ship of Hill Ferguson, Sr. The group met every few months. There were many well-attended meetings in the Church of the Advent, one occasion in the Liberty National auditorium, and other meetings in the Public Library and the auditorium of Alabama Power Company. At each meeting a different paper was presented. Mr. Ferguson presented papers as did Richard Bowron and Joe Farley—and there were others. Mr. Ferguson was really a spark plug for the Society.

In the sixties, the Society was in hibernation. Then, with the help of long-time members Richard Bowron and Jack Monaghan, I undertook reactivation of the Society. The only thing we did was to have the good sense to get out of the way. The women are "due the roses." They have done a fantastic job. So it's back to the ladies again.

I'm afraid to mention names for fear of leaving so many out that have contributed so much. Marjorie White has been a capable and successful influence on the Society. Pat Camp and Lucy Thompson have been the principals in the corporate membership program and Alice Bowsher and Madge Hahn particularly have helped. We have earned a large and excellent

membership and the alliance of distinguished corporations and trusts.

We in Birmingham are always wishing that somebody, somewhere else, in adopting a new plan, would look to an innovation in our home town and say, "Let's do what they are doing in Birmingham!" Well, the Birmingham Historical Society has people in other parts of the country looking to Birmingham. You never appreciate your own group until somebody from somewhere else says you are doing a good job.

There is always a sense of pleasure in the meeting of civilized minds and there is a tendency for people of common tastes and education to hang together. There sometimes may be an undue emphasis on the pioneers and children of the pioneers—they are dead and gone. Everybody who came here—who comes here—comes from somewhere else. We must all recognize that the moment someone else moves to Birmingham (just as if we moved to another place) its history becomes his own. We hope to broaden the interest of the Society for all sections of our community because it took and takes all citizens to make a great city. This city could not have been built alone by the captains of industry. It took a lot of men with anvils and the work and perseverance of women to build it. This spirit, this drive, this dream must continue.

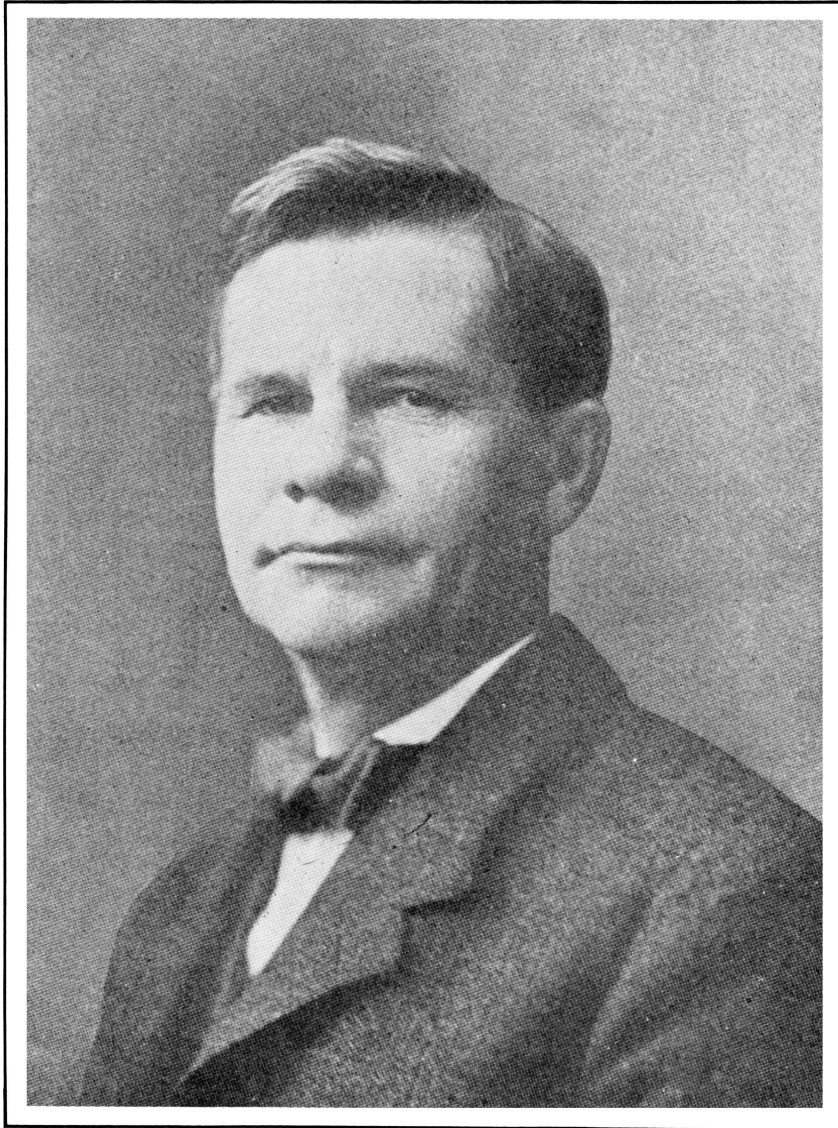
I want to tell you one more thing I remember from a long time ago. We seldom consider the universally respected Robert E. Lee as being a great philosopher. As the Civil War was concluded, he wrote a letter to a colonel. It is pertinent to this Society—and to each soul.

The march of progress is so slow and our desires so impatient. The work of progress is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble. The life of humanity is so long and that of the individual so brief, we oft see only the ebb of the advancing wave, and are thus discouraged.

It is history that teaches us to hope.

*Reprints of this book were presented to the members present at the Society's January 24, 1983 anniversary meeting.

Birmingham Craftsman: An Introduction



By Ellen Cooper Erdreich

I am indebted to those colleagues and institutions who or which have provided help and service: Sandra Pierson Prior, Barbara Schnorrenberg, Marjorie Longenecker White, and Marvin Whiting; the Birmingham Board of Education, the Birmingham Historical Society, the Birmingham Public Library's Department of Archives and Manuscripts, the Avery Library at Columbia University, the Library of Congress, and the Sterne Library at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. I am particularly grateful to Alice Meriwether Bowsher and Ann Burkhardt, who read an early form of this article and made valuable suggestions, and to the unfailingly hospitable inhabitants of the houses used hereafter as examples of Craftsman inspiration.

I also want to thank my husband's grandmother, Mary L. Leader, for her lively interest and for sharing her vivid memories with me. Her ninety-eight years in Birmingham area homes touch almost every phase of local domestic architectural history, and her experiences lend resonance to otherwise general observations.

Gustav Stickley, principal American spokesman for the Arts and Crafts Movement. It was Stickley's belief that the concepts regarding Craftsman architecture and domestic interior design and furnishing encouraged the development of forms for residential living which would best express what he termed "the spirit of the American people." Photograph from *Stickley Craftsman Furniture Catalogs* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 2.

Between 1900 and the beginning of World War I, the Arts and Crafts philosophy articulated in late nineteenth-century England became a powerful influence upon American home builders and home decorators. This philosophy, which encouraged the traditions of the pre-industrialist past and laid heavy stress upon the home as the beginning source of life and character—"its influence is paramount in the shaping of our social and national character"—was, upon its introduction into America, modified to fit the younger nation, but that modification in no way diminished its impact.¹ In Birmingham, Alabama, that impact was particularly strong. A remarkable number of Craftsman homes were built and many of these are still extant, the style having remained locally popular well into the 1920s.

In Birmingham both cottages and larger homes survive from the late Victorian era, with many dating from the city's first boom period in the mid-1880s. These, however, are not, at least in terms of quantity, the most noticeable domestic structures within the city's confines. Those which date from the years following 1900 are the most noticeable, these being the years in which the young industrial city experienced rapid growth and expansion and an increasing need particularly for middle class housing.² Among the larger number of homes built during these years, many are in the Craftsman style or incorporate distinctive Craftsman features.

The Craftsman home is important for several reasons. First, it represents for the architectural historian the last phase of development of an indigenous and unpretentious vernacular, the nineteenth-century "stick style" wood cottage. Firmly rooted in our own architectural past, it provides a link to that which was American before the late nineteenth-century influx of Beaux Arts historicism and the introduction in the twentieth century of modernism largely European in origin. Second, because Arts and Crafts theories became widespread in America, they were associated with a variety of American styles of domestic architecture—not just with the Craftsman home but also with homes in the revival styles such as Tudor and the California Mission. Third, the Craftsman home, in and of itself, provides an especially clear expression

of American anti-industrial and pastoral attitudes prevalent in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Characteristic features reflected the need for a clean, healthy home environment in a safe and peaceful residential neighborhood. To Gustav Stickley, the chief spokesperson for the American Arts and Crafts movement, Americans, in the early years of this century, appeared to be overwrought, "eager about everything except peace," and thus in need of finding restfulness and harmony in nature.³ The Craftsman home attempted to structure homelife so that this peaceful existence became possible. Fourth, the Craftsman home and the Arts and Crafts theories about the role of home environments in the shaping of a physically and morally healthy populace made their appearance in America at a time of heightened nationwide interest in the subject of housing and of an increasing need particularly for the construction of working class homes. In this context, the Craftsman home, offered not only as a structural "model" in keeping with the older American ideal of a detached rural or suburban single family dwelling but also as a philosophical argument for the importance of the home in the development of family and national character, proved most influential. Finally, if, as many planners and architects contend, the man-made environment does indeed shape persons, then these homes are important because so many Birmingham residents still inhabit them and "learn" from them.

The ideal Craftsman home was related to the natural environment in a variety of ways. Natural earth colors and natural materials such as wood, stone, and terra cotta were generally preferred for their rustic effect. A diversity of materials was often employed simultaneously for a rich contrast of textures. Typical "honest" or natural exterior architectural features of the Craftsman home included exposed and extended rafters, brackets and kneebraces. Pitched gable roofs projected to provide shade, and a prominent entrance porch integrated the house with the landscape and provided an essential outdoor living place. Back porches and sleeping porches served the same purposes. The transition from house to garden was often achieved by a pergola or arbor, preferably vine covered.

Natural materials such as wood,

stone and tile were also preferred for the Craftsman interior. Doors, stairways, exposed beams, wainscoting, and floors were of stained wood as were built-in bookshelves, window seats, and cabinets. Since the hearth was considered the center of family life, the principal living space was the large multi-purpose living hall or studio with its prominent fireplace. Where possible, interior partitions were eliminated, as between a living room and dining room where a wooden screen left open at the top might distinguish the two rooms without really separating them. Such openness encouraged circulation and promoted informality, while the addition of an inglenook or cozy niche to the major space permitted a degree of quiet and privacy.

The Craftsman home, based on principles of honesty, simplicity, and usefulness, was both functional and informal. The plan was compact and the interior was meant to have little decoration beyond the structural elements themselves. Free of elaborate mouldings and ornate furniture, such interiors were easy to clean and thus thought to be more wholesome than their Victorian predecessors. Functional built-in furnishings were augmented by occasional wicker pieces and heavy rectilinear oak furniture—from Gustav Stickley's own Craftsman Workshops or from manufacturers inspired by Stickley's austere furniture designs. And finally, because from its inception the Arts and Crafts movement praised and encouraged the craftsman, one who practiced a handicraft, the Craftsman home included suitable crafts objects. Weavings, pottery, hammered metal fixtures and glazed tiles were appropriate additions to the Craftsman home, those made by hand as well as those which merely simulated craft technique.

Through examination of several especially interesting local examples of the Craftsman home and several issues related to Craftsman philosophy regarding homelife, I hope to make it possible for those of you who live in Craftsman homes to recognize and appreciate their unique features. And for those of you who live in homes more recently constructed—also heirs to Craftsman attitudes about how the "good life" could most easily be lived—note, particularly, the many Craftsman innovations and essential features which are routinely incorporated into contemporary American dwellings.

Background

The Arts and Crafts movement began in mid-nineteenth-century England and spread to other countries as they became industrialized. It was based on the teaching of a group of artists and critics, including A.W.N. Pugin, John Ruskin, and William Morris, all of whom admired what they considered the moral purity and "honesty" of medieval religious architecture. They saw the advance of technology as a threat, particularly as it deprived the worker of pride in work and a sense of individual worth, and they decried the "decay of taste" which they associated with the cheaply-made industrial products of the time. Design reforms and the revival of quality handcraftsmanship they sought would, as they were convinced, make the contemporary world a better place in which to live.⁴ With Ruskin, the British Arts and Crafts proponents thought design and architecture expressed a way of life, that a better environment would produce better men.⁵ The Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, founded in London in 1888, especially encouraged a renewal of traditional crafts—metalwork, weaving, and needlework, furniture making, stained glass design and production, potting, bookbinding and printing, textile and wallpaper design, and mural painting.⁶ Several leaders even experimented with "medieval" systems of production, forming guilds in small workshops where quality could be closely controlled.⁷ Architects themselves were often drawn from their craft to an examination of the practice and application of the crafts,⁸ and the links between Arts and Crafts architecture and politics were also strong. William Morris, for example, became increasingly involved in socialist politics after reaching the conclusion that art was not possible under a capitalist system.⁹

Young Gustav Stickley, soon to become American spokesman for the Arts and Crafts movement, saw an example of the arts as an expression of a way of life at the great 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia. There, Stickley viewed the Shaker exhibition which stood in sharp contrast to the cluttered arrangement of heavily ornamented furniture based on European period styles, reflecting the "simple life" of the Shaker community.¹⁰

Trained as a chairmaker, Stickley soon began producing plain but carefully finished pieces which by 1900

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Figure 1. *The Craftsman* magazine was published by Gustav Stickley from 1901 until 1916 and became the chief means of distribution of Arts and Crafts theories in the United States. *The Craftsman* not only offered advice about domestic architecture and interior furnishings and decoration, but also reflected as well as influenced the moral climate of the period. Photograph from *Stickley Craftsman Furniture Catalogs* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 2.

were known as Craftsman or Mission furniture after the heavy, simple colonial furniture of the California Spanish Missions. In October, 1901, Stickley published the first issue of his magazine, called *The Craftsman* (fig. 1). It appeared monthly thereafter, and rapidly became the chief means of distributing Arts and Crafts ideas, until its demise in 1916.¹¹

Stickley's insistence upon simplicity recalled similar English efforts to avoid the unnecessary and the non-functional. He intended that his furniture be "democratic," and his monthly publication served to make his designs available to a broad American public. Readers of *The Craftsman* could either buy pieces of furniture already finished from Stickley's firm, The Craftsman Workshops, or they could order the plans for making particular pieces themselves. *The Craftsman* included articles by and about important craftsmen and architects as well, and the articles on Arts and Crafts philosophy which appeared in the magazine helped spread many of the general assumptions and attitudes of the movement. Although Stickley abandoned William Morris' socialism, he too spoke of himself as a political revolutionary.¹² The simplicity he advocated in all material matters befitted a democracy, he said, "where practically all [persons]

work with either hand or brain, the leisure class being reduced to a minimum."¹³

When Stickley introduced his Craftsman Homes in the 1903 issues of *The Craftsman*, he intended that well-built though small, inexpensive versions would make American working class families homeowners. Specifications and plans complete with advice and suggestions were available free to subscribers, and Craftsman homes were soon being built across the nation—standardized, utilitarian, easily built houses which were the successors of the patternbook or mail order houses of the last half of the preceding century.

Birmingham Craftsman Homes

A great variety of houses built throughout Birmingham during the period between 1900 and 1920 exhibit Craftsman features. Although their exteriors derive from architectural styles as varied as the English Tudor, the Swiss Chalet, the California Mission, and the American Colonial, and their generally irregular profiles do not always guarantee the ideal open, asymmetrical Craftsman plan,¹⁴ unmistakable Craftsman details appear in each of them. Some of these houses are large, grand structures, like

the Frank Nelson house which is preserved as part of the Southeastern Bible College (fig. 2). More typical of Birmingham, however, are modest developers' versions like the modified cottage on Idlewild Park at 1001 Fourteenth Avenue South (fig. 3) or the compact but more carefully drawn architects' models like the Robertson home at 1101 Forty-first Street South in Highland Terrace (fig. 4).

The Frank Nelson house built in 1910 at 2901 Pawnee Avenue incorporates many specifically Craftsman features and even boasts an entire Craftsman room. The exterior brick and uncoursed local rubble stone wall, the projecting eaves on knee braces, and the austere simple woodwork of the entrance and its stairway are Craftsman (fig. 5). The large living hall has exposed dark beams and a fireplace of massive random laid stone. However, it was not unusual in larger homes like the Nelsons' to find Craftsman details next to those identified with revival period styles. In the Nelson house, for example, the Craftsman style living hall is on one side of the ample but severe entrance; on the other is an elegant neo-Classical dining room with a coffered ceiling, a marble mantle, and delicate plaster mouldings.

The home Robert Jemison, Jr., built for his family in 1907 at 4124 Crescent Road is also a combination of Craftsman and period revival styles. (fig. 6). The hipped roof, the cross gables which enclose sections of half-timbering, and the ornate chimney with multiple terra cotta pots are based on English medieval and Tudor styles. But the Craftsman appreciation of varied textures is evident in the exterior use of different materials—rubble stone for porch columns and chimney, frame, shingle, and the Tudor half-timbering. The wonderful fence of untrimmed branches which ran across the front of the property was an unmistakably rustic Craftsman touch.

Craftsman homes could be large or small. In Birmingham, many of the more modest ones take the form of the bungalow, generally a one-story house with a low overhanging roof, broad gables and occasionally an intersecting gable. As early as 1896, the bungalow had been defined as a dwelling having "no more than an absolutely necessary number of rooms."¹⁵ This up-to-date American cottage was commonly called the "California bungalow," since its type flourished first in California where architects felt less tradition-bound than



Figure 2. Frank Nelson House. 2901 Pawnee Avenue. c. 1910. Scott Joy and William Weston, architects. Craftsman inspiration is apparent in this grand home, a reminder of early industrial Birmingham's prosperity. The Craftsman exterior of brick and uncoursed local rubble stone, with deep, projecting eaves and handcrafted details, encloses rooms which are both Craftsman and period revival. An elegant paneled and coffered dining room contrasts with a Craftsman living hall with exposed beams and fireplace of massive, roughhewn stones. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figure 3. Bungalow occupied from 1913 through 1914 by Benjamin and Mary Leader. 1001 Fourteenth Avenue South. c. 1910. Many smaller Craftsman homes in Birmingham take the form of a bungalow. The popular bungalow, which originated in California, was generally an unpretentious, one-story house with only the necessary number of rooms, a large porch, and an overhanging, gently pitched roof. This early speculative example retains the ample scale, high ceilings and divided rooms of an earlier cottage. The local developer merely added some Craftsman features. "Natural" materials in the uncoursed rubble stone foundation and piers, the wooden siding, and the "honest" construction of exposed rafter ends and knee braces attracted the style-conscious tenant or prospective buyer. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

their colleagues in the East and experimented freely with new possibilities like the idea of outdoor living.¹⁶ In fact, most of the numerous catalogues of plans for bungalows, for which specifications were available for as little as five dollars, originated in California. The bungalow was thought to be practical, informal and unpretentious, and, because it could be scaled to meet the needs of the young or others of limited income, it became one of the preferred building types of America's burgeoning early twentieth-century population. In Birmingham, a Craftsman style bungalow usually exhibits most of the following features: a stone or brick foundation in combination with brick or wooden siding or shingles, tapered columns or battered piers on the porch, knee braces supporting the overhanging eaves, exposed rafter ends, and liberal use of wood and built-in conveniences on the interior.

One example of the bungalow, at 1001 Fourteenth Avenue South, near Idlewild Park where Mary Leader and her young husband Ben first "went housekeeping" in 1912, retained the ample scale, high ceilings and divided rooms of the earlier cottage. The developer merely added some Craftsman features. It had only the necessary number of rooms. There was a front porch and small back porch, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, two bedrooms, and one bath. But the bungalow did not cost less than its larger nineteenth-century counterpart. Not only were foundations more expensive for the popular single-story bungalow, but up to 25% of construction cost was now consumed by new household technology.¹⁷ Like other young couples establishing their independence, the Leaders would have preferred to own their own home, but in 1912 the sale price of \$2,500.00 was high. They rented the house for \$35.00 a month, furnished it with the \$100.00 Mary had saved for that purpose, and they made the kind of arrangement that one-quarter-to-one-half of young and working class American households made.¹⁸ Mary and Ben took in boarders, Mary's brother and his wife.¹⁹

A particularly clear example of Craftsman influence in Birmingham is the bungalow at 1100 Forty-first Street South (1100 Glen View). Commissioned by Mrs. G.T. Robertson, the bungalow was completed in 1911 after plans drawn by William Leslie Welton (fig. 7). The Robertson bungalow not only has



Figure 4. G.T. Robertson House. 1100 Forty-first Street South (1100 Glen View). 1911. William Leslie Welton, architect. The Craftsman home attempted to structure family life so that its inhabitants could find restfulness in nature. Americans were overwrought and "eager about everything except peace," Stickley said. This home not only uses natural materials in the form of rustic clinker bricks and local stone laid in uneven courses in the richly textured exterior battered piers and the interior fireplace, but is related to the natural surroundings by the addition of porches, pergola and vines. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figure 5. Frank Nelson House. 2901 Pawnee Avenue. Stairway. The extensive interior woodwork of a Craftsman home is austere and simple, even when the home is gracious and the scale impressive. The balusters and newel posts are free of the ornamental, dust-catching detail and elaborate mouldings of the Victorian era. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

definite California ties, but its basic design and choice of materials are clearly related to those of homes published in *The Craftsman*.

The Robertson's architect was not unique. Other local architects were responsible for Craftsman style homes of high quality and greater originality. But Welton is documented through preservation of his personal scrapbook. In the collection of loose photographs and articles taken from Birmingham newspapers and national architectural journals, researchers have not only a record of Welton's own work, both extant and lost, but also a record of those works he admired and saved for consultation. Furthermore, a wide variety of domestic construction is attributed to Welton, ranging from the neo-classical rotunda with peripteral colonnade built for George Ward and called "Vestavia," to housing for the planned industrial city of Corey, today Fairfield.

The prolific Welton had been academically and properly trained, first at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, then in Paris at the École des Beaux Arts. From 1902 until 1907 he worked in the New York offices of McKim, Meade, and White,²⁰ a firm then engaged in the design of such revival style monuments as the Pennsylvania Terminal Station (fig. 8).

The Robertson residence is, however, evidence that Welton was well aware of current trends in domestic architecture and was capable of responding to a request for a home from a "client who had an extensive acquaintance with bungalow architecture in Southern California."²¹ Moreover, the Birmingham *Ledger* reports on September 16, 1911, that this house, though clearly not the first bungalow, was the "first of its kind in Birmingham."²²

The exterior of the house is unique. . . .

The characteristic features of the bungalow are the enormous piers of clinker brick and field stone laid haphazard to obtain a rustic effect. The walls of the house are enclosed with one inch by twelve inch by twenty inch boards, the joints of which are covered with batten strips, all stained green. The pergola and other rafters are rough, showing the marks of the saw, and the brackets supporting the main eaves are constructed of hickory branches.²³

Several articles in 1907 issues of *The Craftsman* illustrated just such piers of wavy, uneven courses of hard-burned brick into which large stones had been randomly set, and all are associated with the work of California architects Henry and Charles Greene of Pasadena whose "daring" use of natural boulders is generally attributed to Japanese influence.²⁴ Although the irregularity of Birmingham's example is less bold than the Greenes' James W. Neill house of 1906 in Pasadena, Welton's inspiration is obvious. The fireplace, of the same composition as the exterior piers, recalls the heavy cobblestone fireplace in the Greenes' 1903 Auturo Bandini house.²⁵ But Welton draws more precisely upon the Greenes' work of c. 1906. In fact, the exterior of the S. Hazard Halstead house of 90 North Grand Avenue in Pasadena so closely resembles the Robertson home that Birmingham tradition has suggested a California apprenticeship for Welton and even speaks of a lawsuit and litigation over such close "borrowing."²⁶ Welton's admiration of the Greenes' work is, in any event, documented indirectly by an unidentified photograph, taken by Graham Photos of Los Angeles, of a sprawling, terraced home in the hills of California which is related to the Greenes' 1907 Blacker and Freeman houses in Pasadena.

The Robertson house illustrates the importance of the visual effect as well as the function of the suburban Crafts-



Figure 6. Robert Jemison, Jr. House. 4124 Crescent Road. 1907. Miller and Martin, architects. The Craftsman philosophy was based on ideals of utility, comfort, and especially simplicity, which proponents thought appropriate to domestic environments in a democracy. The use of natural materials—rubble stone and multiple forms of wooden siding and half-timbering—and the simple, rustic fence of untrimmed branches mark this a Craftsman-inspired home. The Tudor half-timbering and ornate chimneys are taken from English medieval and Tudor styles, but Craftsman details have easily been assimilated. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

G. J. Robertson's Bungalow at Mountain Terrace

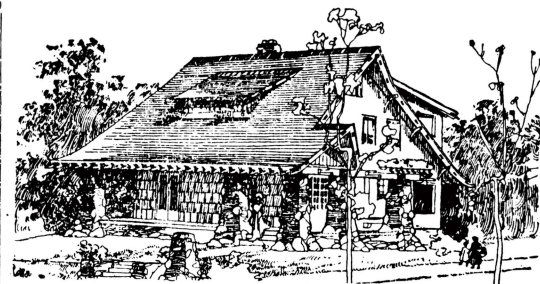
HOUSE OF DISTINCT INDIVIDUALITY DESIGNED BY WM. LESLIE WELTON ON LINES SUGGESTED BY BUNGALOW ARCHITECTURE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

There is under construction at Mountain Terrace a house of distinct individuality. So many houses fail to awaken the faintest flutter of interest in the mind of the visitor, that one which proclaims an idea or an ideal arouses in you a sense of appreciative satisfaction. Frequently one finds the costliest materials used with the worst possible taste, where the least expensive woods given a treatment indicating the fullest appreciation of their particular use would have been much more satisfactory.

The problem before the architect in this instance was to design a bungalow for a client who had an extensive acquaintance with bungalow architecture in Southern California. The desire was to have a large living room or studio, but otherwise to keep the house as small as possible.

The property is practically level, sixty feet by one hundred and eighty-five feet, and is from three to six feet above the level of a sloping street in front; the entrance is, therefore, placed on the north end of the sloping lawn to minimize the steps and at the same time to give a long, uninterrupted expanse of front porch for family use.

The large living room, or studio, which opens off this front porch is very simple in design, with a stair at one end ascending to a gallery, serves as a corridor to reach the bedrooms on the second floor. The ceiling which is about eighteen feet high, is supported on four open timber trusses. The principal feature of this studio is the very large fireplace built of clinker brick and field stone, with sloping sides and stone shelf, which on a winter's night



with half a dozen four foot logs will give a cheer not hard to imagine. At one end of the living room is a row of casement windows, which peep out below a pergola toward an extensive view of green.

The dining room, fifteen feet by twenty feet, with beam ceiling, built in buffet and grilled openings into the studio, has deep French windows leading onto a breakfast porch. The rest of the first floor of the house is given up to a bedroom, kitchen, pantry, store room, back porch, etc. The second floor has three large bedrooms, casements, windows with seats below, closets, bath rooms, sleeping porch, etc.

The woodwork of the studio is stained a warm, dark brown, waxed. The dining room is green. The bedrooms and bathrooms are finished in white enamel. The floors throughout the house are oak except in bathrooms, which are laid in ceramic tile. The plastering of the rooms is left rough to imitate the old work and is painted in water

color. The walls of the studio are lined off to resemble large blocks of gray stone. This wall treatment makes a splendid background for tapestry and other decorations. One will notice particularly the hardware and electric features which are in true keeping with the style of the house.

The exterior of the house is unique, the first of its kind in Birmingham, and was designed by Wm. Leslie Welton, architect, who has the reputation as a leader in his profession. The characteristic features of the bungalow are the enormous piers of clinker brick and field stone laid haphazard to obtain a rustic effect. The walls of the house are enclosed with one inch by twelve inch by twenty inch boards, the joints of which are covered with batten strips, all stained green. The pergola and other rafters are rough, showing the marks of the saw, and the brackets supporting the main eaves are constructed of hickory branches.

Figure 7. G. J. Robertson House. 1100 Forty-first Street South. The Birmingham *Ledger*, September 16, 1911. The loose, freehand drawing technique with which the architect renders the Robertson bungalow is appropriate to the unpretentious informality of the home itself. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

man exterior. The house appears to have been carefully sited on the almost level lot so that its rustic piers seem to rise or "grow" from the land. Its deep, projecting eaves protect the house from the hot summer sun, and, quite dramatically, the rising sun can be seen in a single window piercing the upper eastern facade, regularly greeting those who step into the hall from their bedrooms at just the right moment.²⁷ As Stickley recommended, the Robertson house was covered with a "gracious drapery of vines" which was meant to relate it to the restfulness of its natural surroundings.²⁸ The porches and the pergola served the same purpose and provided healthy outdoor living places. Although we have no photograph of the yard behind the house, it likely conformed to another Stickley recommendation: planting of the small suburban lot so the average homeowner could with a minimum of care satisfy the natural desire to grow things, enjoy flowers whose colors were chosen to harmonize with the house, and benefit from the economy of growing one's own vegetables and fruits.²⁹ In fact, inhabitants of a Craftsman home were even encouraged to think of their suburban dwelling and the lot on which it was placed as a small farm. That they did—at least some Birmingham area residents—is evidenced by the fact that both the Robertson home and Mary Leader's Milner Crescent dwelling had backyard chicken houses. Though the workers' Craftsman style houses at Corey/Fairfield were smaller than either the Robertson or Leader homes, they too had backyard chicken houses.³⁰

The interior of a home built according to the Craftsman idea as summarized in a 1909 publication by Gustav Stickley is also illustrated by the Robertson bungalow (fig. 9). "Simplicity, utility and the creation of an atmosphere of cordial home comfort and welcome" were Stickley's principal goals. The friendly effect he sought was in part achieved in the Robertsons' home by the direct entrance into the general living room or studio and the importance of the staircase which led to more private sections of the house. The enormous fireplace and hearth, Stickley's "center of true home life," dominated the Robertsons' studio, their major living space. Only a partial wooden screen separated the studio from the dining room so that entertainment would not become elaborate or "alien to the regular life of the family."³¹ The studio



Figure 8. William Leslie Welton, Birmingham architect and one principal local exponent of Craftsman design concepts; shown here on the left with unidentified associate. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

was deliberately large, stretching behind the equally ample porch the full width of the house. But the bungalow was to be kept as small as possible. The bedrooms were mere "individual retreats" from the central living area and were thus quite small. The kitchen of the Craftsman home, although conceived as a relatively small space, was particularly important since, by the early decades of this century, more women were having to "depend upon themselves to keep the household machinery running smoothly."³² It was to be fitted with every kind of convenience and comfort, with "everything which tends to save time, strength and worry."³³ Following such maxims, the Robertson home was small enough to be kept without numerous servants. It was also easier to keep than one of its predecessors because it was more efficient. By 1911, when it was built, the City of Birmingham and residential developers were routinely providing paved streets with gutters and sidewalks, water mains, gas lines, sewers, electricity, telephone service and street lights.³⁴ With standard improvements such as these and the application of various contemporary principles of scientific management to the home, Mrs. Robertson and other housekeepers, who lived in and managed Craftsman-styled houses, saved time and, simultaneously, developed greater sanitary awareness.³⁵

During the years in which Craftsman ideas were popular, numerous time-saving devices were introduced to housekeepers by progressive reformers of homemaking, often feminists who hoped women would thus become free to pursue jobs and other non-domestic interests.³⁶ Although the original Robertson kitchen has been completely modernized, it might have contained, for example, so simple an item as the "Fireless Cooker," for sale in Birmingham in 1907 for \$5.00. Installed in Mary Leader's Idlewild bungalow around 1913, this cooker made it possible for Mary to "leave her hen and go off downtown to shop."³⁷ According to an advertisement of 1908, this wonder would "steam, boil, and stew."³⁸ It saved fuel and labor, and it was even possible to build one's own.³⁹ Another kitchen improvement was gas cooking, which was obviously superior to coal. As one local 1910 advertisement noted, coal was just "too dirty, too hot, too troublesome, too long, [and] too objectionable in every way."⁴⁰

So certain was *The Craftsman* that the new American kitchen, full of "good tools," "well-ventilated and full of sunshine," would allow the cook to take pleasure in work, that it claimed the properly arranged kitchen could come near to being the solution to the domestic problem.⁴¹ Floors of linoleum and walls of washable tiles or of false tiles or wooden wainscoting covered in

enamel paint made kitchen-keeping an easier task. Despite thorough kitchen renovation, some original wainscoting remains in an anteroom of the Robertson house. The effect of the original can be seen in the slightly later kitchen which remains basically unchanged in a home across the street⁴² or in the 1921 Hazen home in Fairfield where the waxed wooden cabinetry is untouched.⁴³ Above all, however, the kitchen should be clean and bright, preferably white, with surfaces smooth and easy to wash. By the Craftsman era, the germ theory of disease had become widely accepted; thus, a self-acknowledged "crank on cleanliness," young Mary Leader insisted on a spotless kitchen and though she had help for child care and cleaning, she did all of her own cooking. She may have kept the house perfectly clean, but when she and her husband were able to meet the purchase price of their first bungalow, they moved. Mary had discovered that a tuberculosis patient had lived in the house, and it was in her opinion rendered forever unsuitable for habitation, even after fumigation by the city.⁴⁴

That the well-equipped, well-designed kitchen did not solve everyone's domestic problem is abundantly clear. The Robertson home was built in Mountain Terrace, an area developed by the Jemison Real Estate and Insurance Company as a "Resident Park for country homes." A sales brochure mentions the advantage of being close to the Country Club with its "excellent cafe," and thus suggests one solution to the servant problem for fortunate residents of the development.⁴⁵ Even the very modest speculative bungalow, like the one the Leaders first rented, provided a separate single-room dwelling, without heat or plumbing, to accommodate a servant who lived on the property. The house at 5051 Parkway in Fairfield, built c. 1912, also had servants' quarters, a house in the rear and a cheaper, less substantial version of its own Craftsman interior in the basement living area, presumably for servants or tenants.

Early photographs allow us to judge just how strictly Birmingham homeowners followed Stickley's recommendation to use only what was functional in their homes. The superfluous large house "with many rooms elaborately decorated and furnished," was, he argued, not only one of the burdens of modern life, but a serious menace to American moral and mental

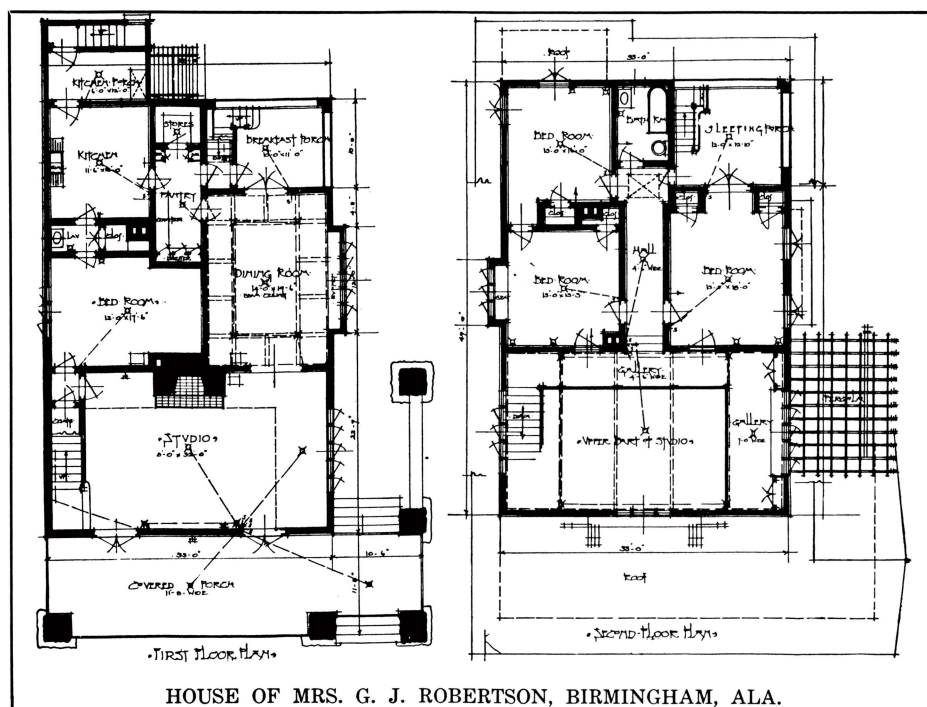


Figure 9. G.T. Robertson House. 1100 Forty-first Street South. First and second floor plans. Architect William Leslie Welton's design incorporates many of the architectural features of a Craftsman-styled home. Note the large first floor porch, the studio with its dominant centrally-located fireplace, the second floor pergola, and the wood-beamed dining room ceiling. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figure 10. G.T. Robertson House. 1100 Forty-first Street South. Interior, studio. The Craftsman interior was simple and meant to be wholesome. Air circulated freely between principal rooms through broad passages and screens left open at the top. A limited selection of useful, sturdy oak or wicker furniture was advised. The Craftsman hearth and fireplace, here made of local stone and clinker brick with a massive wooden mantle on brackets, was to be at the "center of true home life," according to Stickley. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

standards.⁴⁶ Approved furnishing for the Craftsman interior included only the functional unit, a limited selection of movable pieces of Stickley's own severe Craftsman furniture softened by the addition of wicker and crafts items.

The Robertson house was easy to maintain in part because it was meant to have little decoration beyond the structural elements themselves. The prominent staircase, the extensive exposed beams, the wainscoting and built-in furnishings, all of warm, unvarnished wood, were thought beautiful and pleasing as well as essential.⁴⁷ In contrast to earlier Victorian cluttered and closed interiors, this was austere simple, free of the intricate surfaces, elaborate mouldings and turned balusters, the heavy curtains, and the ornate furniture which had collected so much dust (fig. 10). Architect Welton's photograph of the Robertson studio shows that movable furniture was quite limited. There is only a side table, one wicker chair, a Craftsman style table before the hearth, and a large hanging light fixture with multiple lamps that indicates the interest in lighting then current. Small rods still run across the numerous casement windows and the doors. On these, thin curtains were hung so as not to touch a potentially dirty floor, but to provide privacy.⁴⁸ A further sense of privacy and domestic security was obtained by the use of small panes in the windows and doors, so that glazed openings, though they allowed the entrance of light, did not invite entrance. There were no rugs in the Robertson studio, but the floor covering for the Craftsman house was generally limited either to the small easily cleaned oriental or throw rug or the Japanese or heavy China matting Birmingham merchant Louis Pizitz advertised for 25¢ and 30¢ a yard in 1910.⁴⁹

Early photographs show us as well the appropriate means by which the severity of the "honest," utilitarian Craftsman interior was relieved, primarily through the utilization and collection of the handicrafts. The choice of interior fixtures and furniture emphasized the importance of the craftsman. Where on the exterior the desired handcrafted effect often meant the use of certain materials—timbers handhewn or rough-sawn to give that impression, brick textured to appear moulded, and interlocking ceramic tiles for roofing—on the interior actual crafts articles were incorporated. There were decorative glazed tiles for the hearth and quarry



Figure 11. Electrolier. Frank Nelson House. 2901 Pawnee Avenue. Copper and "antique" glass. Hammered brass, copper, or iron light fixtures and furniture trim were designed to harmonize with the Craftsman interior which needed "the mellow glint" of metal here and there. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

tiles for the kitchen and porch floors. Inside and out, light fixtures, where possible, were of hammered copper or iron. The large chandelier in the Nelson entrance, with five deep yellow "antique glass" lanterns hanging from a central globe, is a fine example of a copper fixture (fig. 11). Wrought iron fixtures were often substituted for the more expensive copper ones, and iron was particularly appropriate for extensive railings such as those across the balcony of the Robertson studio. Some of these crafts items could be ordered from Stickley, whose catalogues listed metal work, fabrics and needlework, and rugs as well as oak furniture.⁵⁰ Others were manufactured locally,⁵¹ and some came from manufacturers known for their Arts and Crafts production.

Welton used identical decorative glazed tiles from the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works in Doylestown, Pennsylvania,⁵² in private residences⁵³ and in widely separated public monuments such as the Rhodes Park gates and seating and the Plaza drinking fountain in the Fairfield Civic Center (fig. 12). Local architects not only sought such sources of crafts but sometimes played the craftsman themselves. Harry Wheelock was extremely particular about the materials used in the 1915 construction of Benjamin and Mary Leader's second home, this time a Craftsman Tudor at Milner Crescent. "Harry spent hours selecting every stone" for the long "gallery," the foundations, and the interior fireplace, the owner recalls (fig.

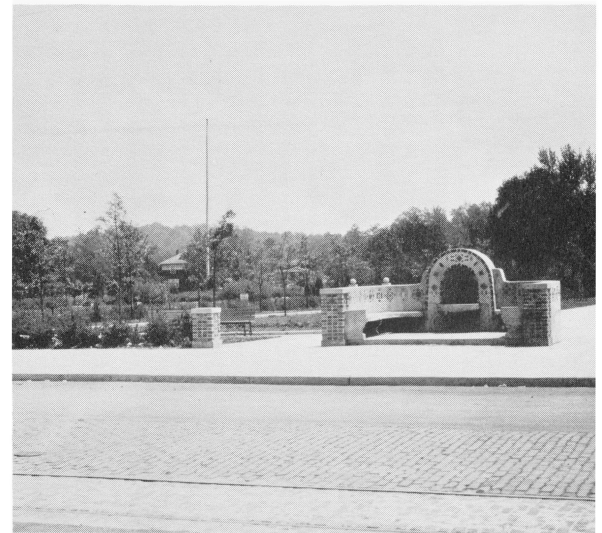


Figure 12. Decorative Tiles. Plaza Fountain, Fairfield; Robertson House, Forty-first Street South; Rhodes Park, Southside. Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, Doyleston, Pennsylvania, c. 1910. Identical relief patterns were chosen for the glazed terra cotta tiles found in local Craftsman residences and contemporary public monuments. Some are purely decorative, others have medieval armored knights, dragons, heraldic lions, and fortified castles. Photographs courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society and Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

13). Current restoration has revealed a willingness on the part of the architect working in the “honest” Craftsman mode to use non-traditional methods where necessary. Twelve inch “I” beams are used every two feet to support the heavy quarry tiles of the porch floor.⁵⁴

Gustav Stickley explained that his concern shifted naturally from the furniture to be arranged in a room to the comprehensive planning of interiors, to the planning of the whole house. For him, as for earlier British Arts and Crafts architects, there was no fixed line between architecture and furniture. Built-in furnishings became an integral and conspicuous part of the Craftsman home. In the Robertson house there are glass-enclosed bookshelves on the gallery, benches and windowseats, cabinets in kitchen and bathroom, closets for clothing and linens. New movable furniture similar to built-in models met needs in the smaller, more efficient homes. Cooper Furniture Company in 1903 advertised, among still ornate and heavy Victorian furniture, a folding bed, for a limited space,⁵⁵ perhaps, as with the davenport advertised by Ben M. Jacobs and Bros. in 1907, appropriate for a “library or reception hall” in case of an “unexpected guest.”⁵⁶ China and kitchen utensil storage was handled by built-in cupboards like that seen in *The Craftsman*, September, 1905,⁵⁷ or by free-standing ones like the Hoosier Kitchen Cabinet so widely touted at the time of Mrs. Armstrong’s Cooking School in Birmingham in 1910.⁵⁸



Figure 13. Benjamin Leader House. 1495 Milner Crescent. 1915. Harry Wheelock, architect, was as particular about the materials which went into the construction of this house as a craftsman would have been. “Harry spent hours selecting every stone,” the owner recalls. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

Movable Craftsman furniture for the Craftsman interior was designed and manufactured between 1900 and 1916 by Gustav Stickley’s own Craftsman workshops. But, soon after the appearance of his first designs, other manufacturers, Stickley’s own brothers among them, introduced similar lines of what was commonly called Mission furniture after the simple pieces found in the Franciscan missions of California. These designs also appeared under the names Arts and Crafts, Crafts-Style, or

Roycroft, after one of the principal producers (fig. 14). In his 1909 *Furniture Catalogue*, Stickley decried the army of imitators, which appeared under various names, and their crude approximations of his product. The resulting confusions and misrepresentation could be avoided, he cautioned, only by buying from listed dealers and by insisting upon the Craftsman label.⁵⁹ Birmingham did not have an authorized dealer, but “Mission” furniture was regularly advertised toward the end of



THE WORK OF L. & J. G. STICKLEY FAYETTEVILLE, NEW YORK

THE numerous pieces that furnish your house—the Chairs, the Tables, the oaken Settles, Sideboards and all the others—are undoubtedly THINGS! Yes, but if you choose each piece with due regard to your individual needs and preferences, if you carefully create an environment of furniture; each piece of it then becomes, not a THING, but an undeniable part of yourself!

Individuality

¶ L. & J. G. Stickley, makers of the simple and entirely American type of furniture that bears their impress, are working for individuals. Each year sees many new designs taking shapes of wood and leather in their shops, built, every one of them, to take an intimate place in some household or to serve someone in a public building; skillfully contrived, that is, to fit an individual need.

Harmony

¶ You demand in your house, in your office or in your public building, a certain well-defined harmony. Wall treatment, floors, furniture, must all harmonize in color and pattern, must bear a subtle relationship to each other. In response to this demand of yours for harmony, the furniture illustrated in this little book is planned and fashioned to fit into your scheme, whatever that may be.

Woods

¶ White oak, the wood chiefly used, is selected not only for strength and durability, but on account of a capacity for taking on various shades and tones of color.

Design

¶ This oak, cut in the forests of Kentucky, is built into furniture strong and durable, though not over heavy, suitable for your office, bank, or for the more formal rooms of your house; or lighter shapes are wrought from the oak, showing in their details graceful curves and variations of surface, perhaps bits of inlay in the same wood; or again the oak is turned into a little masterpiece of downright invention, as for instance the Davenport bed No. 285 on pages 28 and 29, an invention that makes for your comfort.

Figure 14. Leopold and J. George Stickley Catalog, c. 1914. The title page and page of explanatory notes indicate the derivative character of the designs of furniture produced by Gustav Stickley's brothers. Furniture from Gustav's Craftsman Workshops set the style, whether it were called Mission, Arts and Crafts, Crafts-style, or Roycroft; other manufacturers followed the style he set. Photograph from *Stickley Craftsman Furniture Catalogs* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), n. p.

the first decade of the century by numerous local furniture dealers.⁶⁰

Based on principles of honesty and simplicity, Stickley's Craftsman furniture was created in reaction to what he called the "badly constructed, over-ornate, meaningless furniture" turned out by factories. To counteract what he thought was a national tendency toward extravagance which had adverse effects on the development of the character of American youth, Stickley had begun making furniture which was "durable and comfortable and fitted for . . . the work it had to do." "Cut loose from all tradition" and free of needless ornamentation, this furniture was rapidly accepted, a fact Stickley in his 1909 Catalogue attributed to the good common sense of the American people.⁶¹

Made primarily of American white oak finished through exposure for about forty-eight hours to the fumes of ammonia,⁶² Craftsman furniture was trimmed with iron, copper or brass fittings and covered with either leathers prepared in the Craftsman workshops or with cotton, linen and canvas Craftsman fabrics woven and dyed to har-



Figure 15. Dining Room Suite. 1015 Forty-first Street South. Fumed oak furniture from Gustav Stickley's Craftsman Workshops was designed to harmonize with the Craftsman interior. Sold only through authorized dealers, it was not available in Birmingham. It could be ordered from the firm, however, and there were other manufacturers of Craftsman or so-called "Mission" style furniture whose products were regularly advertised in local papers. This cabinet and chair belong to a complete dining room suite purchased before 1910 by Amos Ponder, a superintendent at nearby industrial Thomas, today found in the home of one of Ponder's descendants. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

monize with the "natural" Craftsman interior. Old photographs show Birmingham homes with Craftsman-inspired furniture, much of which has no doubt survived in our area. For example, the complete dining room suite at 1015 Forty-first Street South, originally owned by the family of Amos Ponder, a superintendent at Thomas, has been in Birmingham since about 1905 (fig. 15). Purchased from Grace Ponder by her sister after her marriage in 1910, the dining room furniture—table, chairs, buffet and china cabinet—has an altogether appropriate Craftsman home with one family member, Carolyn Johnson Jefferson; the Ponder's Craftsman-styled secretary and hallrack are in Pleasant Grove with another descendant, Elsie Johnson Crawford.⁶³ Another Craftsman-styled dining room suite at the Addison Hazen's home in Fairfield dates from a decade later⁶⁴ (fig. 16).

The real Craftsman product was carefully-constructed and finished but remained moderately-priced. Although Stickley's 1909 price list advertises chairs for \$6.50 or \$7.75 each and the smallest table for \$35.00,⁶⁵ Mary Leader could buy her "fumed oak" dining room suite for her first bungalow in 1913 for \$35.00. It was second-hand and not necessarily from the Craftsman Workshop, but it was sturdy, serviceable, and, for the time, the style to have.⁶⁶

Craftsman furniture had certainly made its public appearance in Birmingham by 1908 when Blach's announced that "A Novelty for a Clothing Store is our Famous Mission Rest Room for Ladies," a "comfortable cozy little place" to relax while shopping⁶⁷ (fig. 17). Although the *Architectural Record* published several articles in 1908 on Mission rooms in commercial establishments—a restroom in the Edgewater Exchange of the Chicago Telephone Company⁶⁸ and the consultation room of the National Farmers' Bank of Owatonna, Minnesota⁶⁹—others, such as tile-floored smoking rooms with leather-covered and studded chairs in the Mission style, had been publicized considerably earlier. Clearly the durable, sensible Craftsman style was judged as appropriate for areas of heavy use; but also for less heavily-used spaces. For example, Richard Massey chose a Craftsman interior for the billiard room of his Terrace Court Apartment, and even in his own predominantly period revival home,

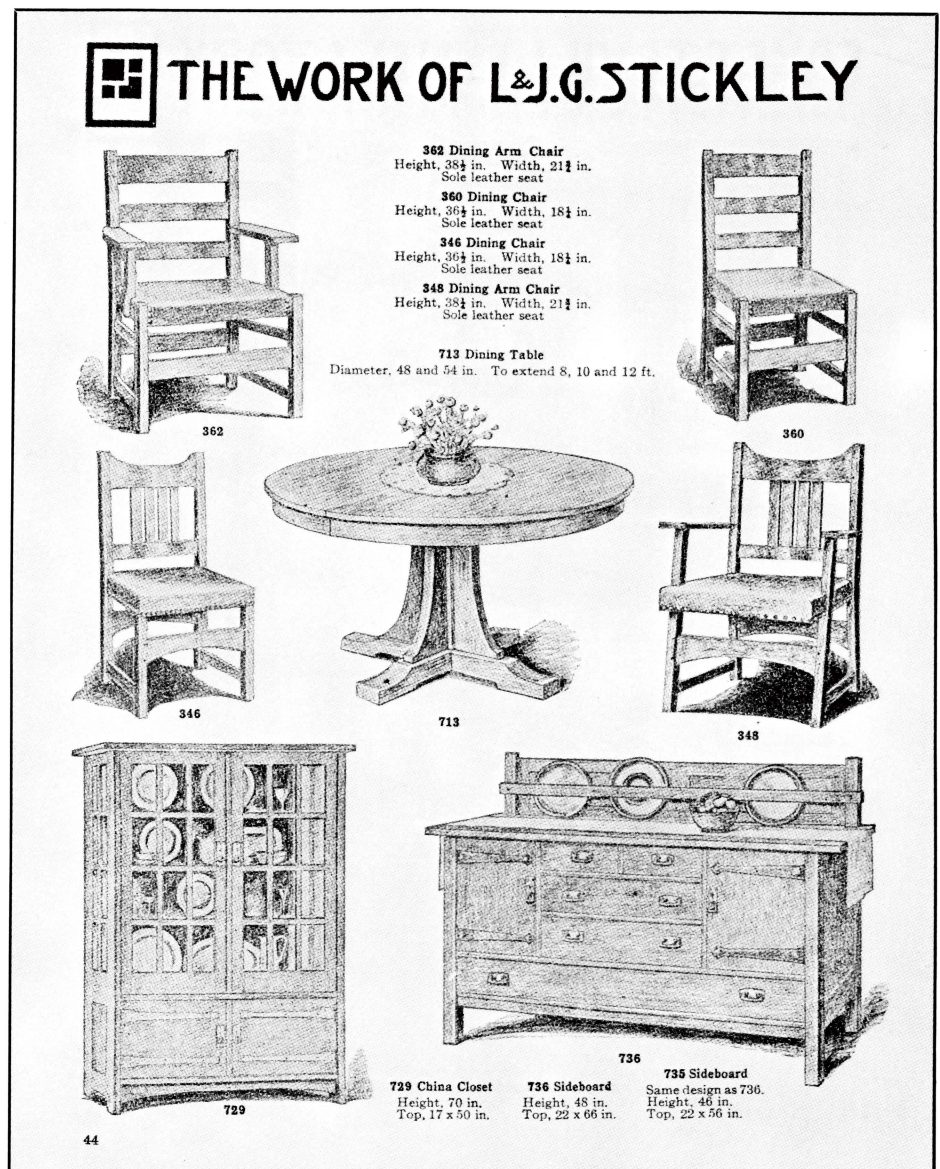


Figure 16. The dining room suite in the Addison Hazen house in Fairfield bears a strong resemblance to the one pictured on this page from the L. & J.G. Stickley catalog, published c. 1914. Photograph from *Stickley Craftsman Furniture Catalogs* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1979), n. p.

there was a Craftsman den or card room downstairs.⁷⁰ Likewise, the style was "suitable for Boarding Houses and Hotels," at least according to Birmingham's Stower's Furniture Company advertisement in 1910. Cabinets, screens, "telephone set" (chair and stand) and various accessories sold for from two to five dollars.⁷¹ For home use there were "correct" Mission rockers, Mission-styled library tables and desks.⁷² A Mission desk and chair advertised by Ben M. Jacobs and Brothers for \$3.65 was not merely suitably sturdy. It was "... most useful, as it will mould the young mind to order and system."⁷³ (fig. 18). These local firms were not in Stickley's 1909 list of associated dealers,⁷⁴ and, although the only genuine Craftsman furniture in Birmingham was possibly ordered from

the firm, Stickley's conviction that the inanimate things of the home environment could affect the development of character colored local advertising.⁷⁵ Buyers were probably less aware of Craftsman philosophy than dealers, however. Craftsman was in style and many no doubt followed the trend without adhering to the philosophy. But most Birmingham furniture dealers throughout the period before World War I continued to advertise derivative European styles.⁷⁶

One acceptable companion for Craftsman furniture was wicker. Photographs in Birmingham architects' collections show this apparently crafted and therefore natural furniture. Traditionally used on porches or terraces, wicker tended to give the impression that the interior was integrated with the

FREE PARCEL CHECK ROOM—CONVENIENT—OBLIGING!!

We're Glad to See You

B.P.O.E.

Our welcome is store wide, and at the main entrance is a modest window in your honor which contains some interesting antlers.



42,000 square feet—largest, most sumptuously equipped, completely stocked Men's and Boys' apparel store in all the South.

U.C.V.

and U. S. C. V., and those who are with them, will find our welcome whole-souled. Blach's is Birmingham's exact convention-reunion center.

A Novelty for a Clothing Store Is Our Famous Mission Rest Room for Ladies.

The women folks will be delighted with this comfortable cozy little place. It is very accessible (right by elevator). Dainty stationery free and abundant. Come in any time—many times.



BLACH'S
7th AVE. AT 19th ST.

Remarkable Special Values for This Week

Figure 17. Blach's Famous Mission Restroom for Ladies. Advertisement, *Birmingham Ledger*, June 8, 1908. Sensible and durable, Craftsman style furnishings were appropriate for areas of heavy use. Richard Massey's predominantly period revival home had Craftsman furniture in the card room downstairs, and he also used a Craftsman interior in his Terrace Court apartments' billiard room. Blach's "cozy little place" to relax while shopping was a pace setter in Birmingham at the time of its appearance in 1908. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library.

wholesome air of out-of-doors. Having done away with a great deal of movable furniture and established the suitability of Craftsman furniture for every room, Stickley admitted that the liberal use of willow settles (benches) and chairs (not rattan because they were patterned after elaborate machine-made goods) afforded a fine contrast to the austere lines, massive forms and sober coloring of the oak.⁷⁷ A photograph of an entry and adjacent living room in the collection of local architects Sallie and Mewhinney⁷⁸ shows a mixture of willow and Craftsman furniture in a spare Craftsman interior which resembles that found in the Welton photographs (fig. 19).

Several other examples of the Craftsman-inspired house which speculative builders and architects produced in Bir-

mingham suburbs, including those in the planned industrial city of Corey/Fairfield, underscored the widespread popularity of Craftsman ideas and indicate the range of architectural styles that could absorb Craftsman detail. The popular English Arts and Crafts cottage inspired the 1910 Craftsman house William Welton designed for Leonard T. Beecher on Emma Street in Graymont,⁷⁹ as well as his own home (figs. 20, 21). A reporter for the *Birmingham Ledger* particularly appreciated the genuine antique appearance of the Beechers' "thatched roof style" home,⁸⁰ a conscious reference by Welton to English Arts and Crafts architects' "return to simplicity" in picturesque houses like the Stonywell Cottage by Ernest W. Grimson.⁸¹ The architect attempted imitation of thatch



\$3.65

This Mission Desk and Chair

Is a gift which is suitable for either boy or girl—and most useful, as it will mould the young mind to order and system.

Our Beds for Dolly Just Sixty Cents—60c

Is the best toy value in town for mothers who have to figure closely in order to "make it go round."

Many of Santa's Best Things Are to Be Found Here. Open Every Night With A Store That's Bright as Day.

Ben M. Jacobs & Bros.
EVERYTHING IN FURNITURE FOR EVERYBODY
1911 Third Ave. Both Phones 855

Figure 18. Mission Desk and Chair. Advertisement, Ben M. Jacob and Bros., *Birmingham News*, December 20, 1910. Inanimate things in the home environment could affect the development of character, according to the Craftsman philosophy. A local merchant here reminded potential buyers that this Craftsman style desk and chair would "mould the young mind to order and system." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library.

with composition shingle by softly moulding the edges of the roofs which swell where eyelid dormers penetrate them.⁸²

The interior of the Beechers' 35-by-40-foot bungalow features another large studio with central fireplace (fig. 22). This time it is in a niche or inglenook and has settees or benches built in on either side.⁸³ The low, dark, beamed ceiling and the built-in bookcases are prominent in the 1916 photograph. Although the photograph shows a room clearly more lived in than the Robertson studio, the furnishings are still limited. There is a large Craftsman style library table, several wicker chairs, and a simple couch. An unidentified Welton photograph adds only a typical Craftsman feature, a stenciled frieze below the cornice⁸⁴ (fig. 23).

The degree to which the Craftsman aesthetic penetrated speculative building in Birmingham is illustrated by a group of two-story contractor's houses on Fourteenth Avenue South



Figure 19. Unidentified interior. Sallie and Meshinney, Architects. The severity of the utilitarian Craftsman interior, furnished with sober, heavy Craftsman oak furniture augmented by built-in furnishings of the same simple, rectilinear design, might be relieved by willow settles and chairs. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figure 20. Leonard T. Beecher House. 408 Emma Avenue, Graymont. 1910. William Leslie Welton, architect. This picturesque bungalow built in the English "thatched roof style" reflects continued American interest in rural, pre-industrial European traditions. The soft-edged, molded composition shingle roof with eyelid dormers is meant to resemble thatch. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

constructed in 1911-1912 (fig. 24). Here the economical form of the American farmhouse or homestead is retained and made attractive to style-conscious buyers by the addition of Craftsman detail. The character of these comfortable homes is established by the usual Craftsman use of natural materials—rubble stone, shingle and frame siding protected by earthcolor stain—and the common features of pitched gable roof, broad porch with tapered columns or battered piers, small-paned casement windows and transoms, exposed rafter ends and knee braces. On the interiors, there is easy connection of the living room and dining room which are separated only by an open wooden screen. The handsome effect of simple rectilinear, dark wood forms against light walls is unchanged in two of the three houses, and the customary built-in Craftsman features like buffet, window seats, linen and medicine cabinets as well as the electric fixtures are for the most part intact in the same two (figs. 25, 26, 27, 28, 29).

In May 1910 local developer Robert Jemison, Jr., assured readers of his company's magazine that he intended that "nothing be left undone that will tend to make [the city of] Corey healthy, happy and pretty."⁸⁵ Jemison engaged George H. Miller of Boston as project landscape architect for this model city conceived in concert with U.S. Steel's plans for new production facilities.⁸⁶ Miller, who had planned similar industrial towns in other parts of the country,⁸⁷ called Corey a "garden city."⁸⁸ In the tradition of Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities, he carefully separated activities, provided easy access to transportation and recreation, and even attempted to educate the Birmingham public to the need for comprehensive site planning.⁸⁹

At the same time, Welton was engaged to design the workers' residences for the broad winding streets of the residential suburb. These were soon available for sale for a minimum of \$1,250.00⁹⁰ or they could be rented for from \$19.00 to \$27.00 per month.⁹¹ The more modest of Welton's designs contained three rooms, the more spacious, eight; and they all bore the mark of Welton's Craftsman inspiration. Welton did not have to convince his client that Craftsman ideas were appropriate for Corey. By 1909 Robert Jemison himself subscribed to *The Craftsman* magazine, a subscription which he maintained until the

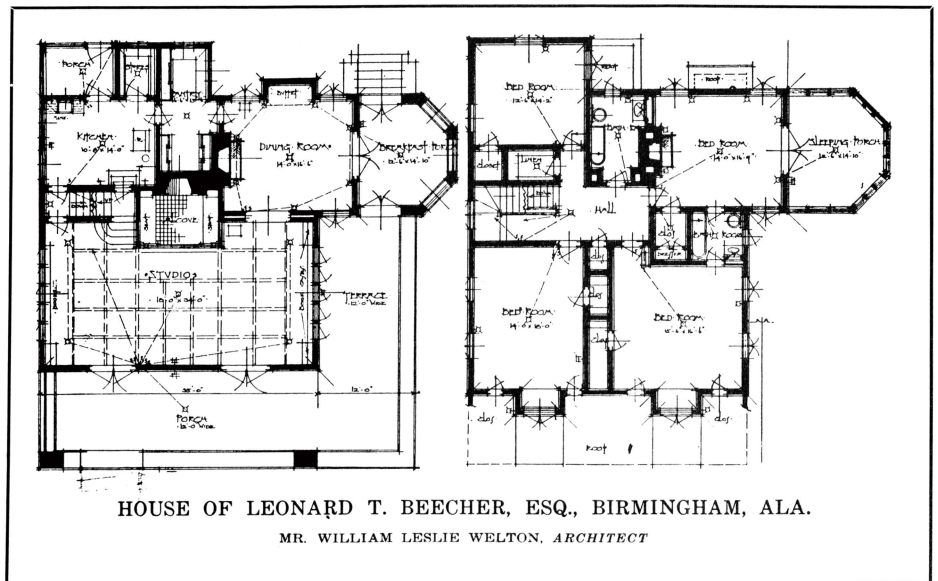


Figure 21. Leonard T. Beecher House. 408 Emma Avenue. First and Second Floor Plans. The May 24, 1910 issue of *The American Architect* carried not only a photograph of the Beecher house but also architect William Leslie Welton's drawings of the room arrangement on both the first and second floors. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figure 22. Leonard T. Beecher House. 408 Emma Avenue. Studio. The cozy, "homelike" atmosphere of the main Craftsman living space is achieved by lowering the ceiling, by the use of warm, dark-stained woods, and by the inclusion of a snug inglenook with built-in settles. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

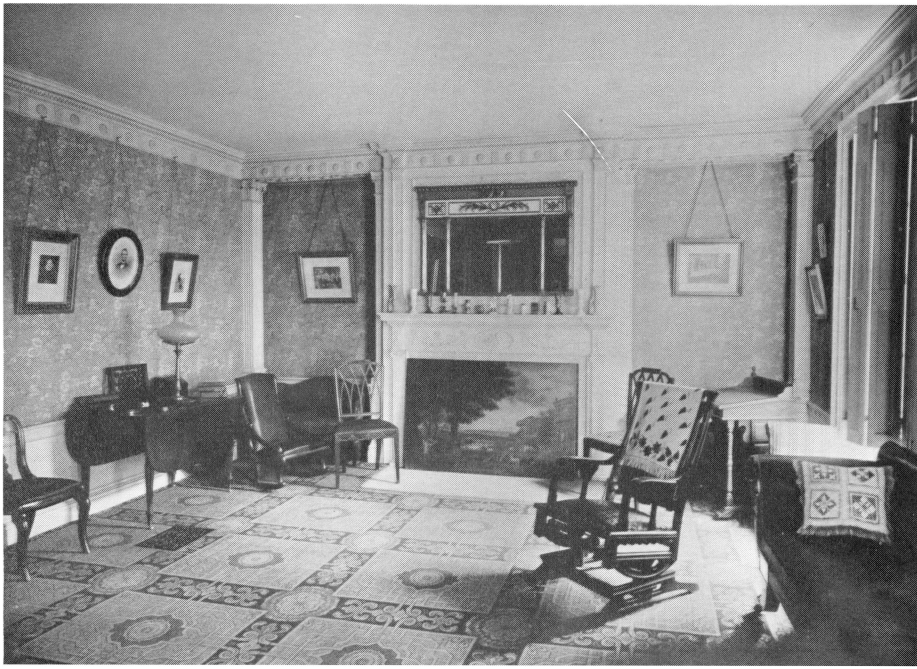


Figure 23. Unidentified Tuscaloosa, Alabama House. Welton Scrapbook. Craftsman interiors were sparsely furnished and depended upon decoration provided by the architectural features themselves and hand-work such as the stenciled frieze. Stencil patterns for the Craftsman interior were regularly published in *The Craftsman* and other magazines for the homemaker. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figure 24. Houses at 1505, 1517, and 1519 Fourteenth Street South. c. 1911-1912. These three developer-built houses have unmistakable Craftsman features although they are based on the two-story "homestead" house. The economical form of the rectangular country farmhouse was not changed, but the varied textures and colors of exterior materials, the elephantine battered piers or tapered columns on broad porches, exposed rafter ends, and knee braces beneath deep eaves brought them up to date. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

magazine's demise in 1916.⁹² Throughout the same period he clipped and saved articles about bungalows from several publications for homeowners and home builders such as *The Ladies Home Journal*.⁹³ By 1914 he had subscribed to the Seattle Bungalow Publishing Company's magazine.⁹⁴ In fact, Corey was called a "bungalow town,"⁹⁵ and the Corey houses Jemison approved followed precisely the description of ideal bungalows in an article clipped by Jemison from the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*.⁹⁶ The homes illustrated in the long article on Corey which appeared in the January 14, 1912 *New Orleans Times Democrat* demonstrate the extremes of the recommended costs—\$1,700.00 to \$6,000.00 (figs. 30, 31). They are generally low with "plenty of roof" (figs. 32, 33) and with principal rooms joined by the same large openings found in Welton's Robertson and Beecher houses. As the article Jemison saved suggested, the smaller ones were particularly economical, as they were for the most part "built for people of limited means who rarely employed more than one servant and often did not employ any at all."⁹⁷

The preserved plans for the houses of Corey indicate that they were more rural in appearance than the white frame cottages of the old type that Jemison's article mocks⁹⁸ (fig. 34). House Type B indicates a variety of natural materials, shingles on the roof and the lower story, cement on metal lath resembling stucco above. The largest model, Type C, had shingle roof and siding which was to weather naturally, and cement on metal lath between old English or Tudor half-timbers for an effect like that seen in the Lusk Home illustrated in the *New Orleans* article. The article makes clear that the use of these natural materials was meant to "fill a family. . . moving into the semi-country, with sentimental illusions about the real country."⁹⁹

Craftsman attitudes and the details of Craftsman design were so popular and so widely distributed across America, that they survived the hiatus of World War I and the bankruptcy and demise of Gustav Stickley's enterprise in 1916. The continued presence of these Craftsman attitudes in the Birmingham area into the third decade of the twentieth century can be seen in later bungalows and larger homes. The Addison C. Hazen home at 458 Valley Road in Fair-



Figure 25. 1519 Fourteenth Street South. Friendly informality and comfort are encouraged by the easy connection of interior spaces. Living room and dining room are separated only by an open, permanent screen. Craftsman appreciation of the warmth of natural woods is seen in the unaltered dark heart of pine beams, wainscoting, cabinets and floors. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

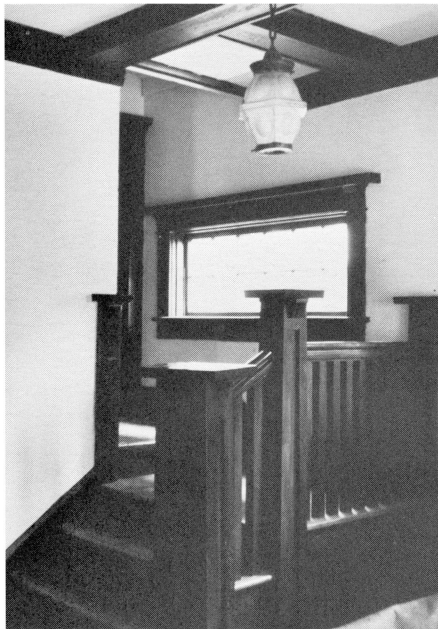


Figure 26. 1517 Fourteenth Street South. Entrance. The original structural elements still provide the only decoration. The simplicity of the rectilinear dark wooden forms against light, the horizontal window which lights the stairwell and landing, and the light fixture are unchanged and harmonious as intended. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

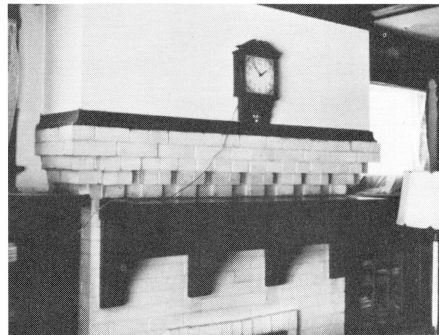


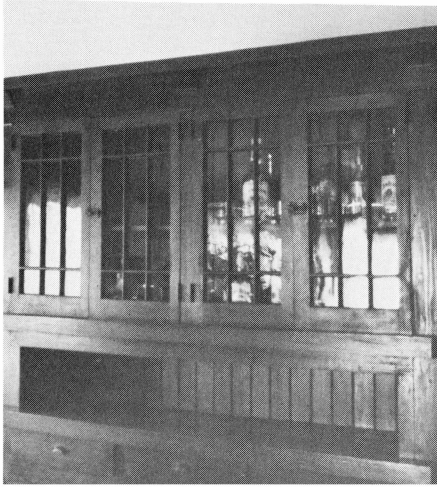
Figure 27. 1519 Fourteenth Street South. Living Room. The fireplace and hearth, Stickley's "center of true home life," is the focal point of this Craftsman living room. Decorative brickwork and a heavy dark mantel of wood supported by sturdy brackets is centered between Craftsman built-in bookcases with windows above. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

field is especially interesting, because it underscores not only the later taste for things Craftsman, but the general interest in domestic architecture which coincided with the American Arts and Crafts movement and encouraged the development of the detached house in the suburb (fig. 35). Mr. Hazen was particularly careful in the choice of the home he would share with his young wife Vera. Having seen an advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post* for a bungalow which was more interesting than those being built in his neighborhood, Mr. Hazen surveyed his own land and corresponded with the Los Angeles firm of W. Stillwell and Company for plans. After having made some changes and additions of his own, Mr. Hazen constructed the home in 1921 with Craftsman built-ins (fig. 36) and conveniences like large walk-in closets and a complete Craftsman kitchen. These are unchanged and still complemented by a Craftsman style dining room suite. Mr. Hazen declares he would build his home again "just like it is," and he has saved the plans "just in case," he says.¹⁰⁰ Better testimony to a home's livability, after a sixty-two year trial, could hardly be found.

What effect did the considerable late nineteenth-century interest in the crafts have on Birmingham home construction and decoration? The exhibitions and published articles of the British Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society emphasized the importance of good design and handcraftsmanship in the production of objects for everyday use, and Gustav Stickley's first issues of *The Craftsman* were devoted almost exclusively to the encouragement of handicrafts in this country. Reflecting British theories, Stickley believed that the crafts had

immense influence for good in the development of character. . . the making of strong men and women begins when the child learns to use its hands for shaping. . . something which is really needed. . .¹⁰¹

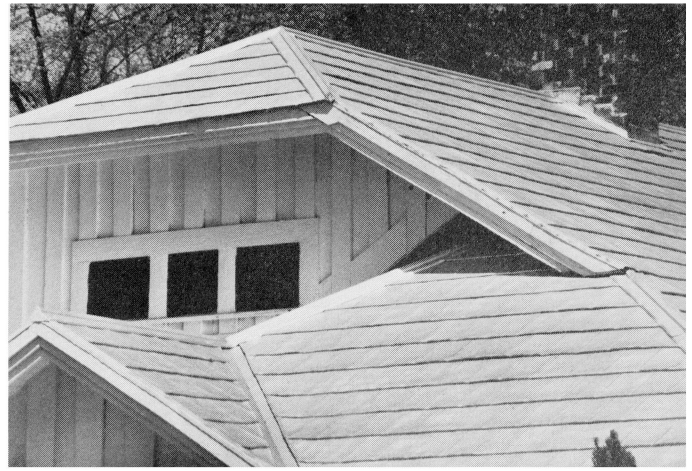
And other popular magazines for the homemaker popularized these ideas and fueled the widespread appreciation of the crafts. *The Craftsman*, for example, contained diverse articles such as "Beautiful Books," demonstrations of Craftsman techniques, "Home Training in Cabinet Work" and even "Pueblo Indian Grinding Songs." The local effect of the regular appearance of articles like the last two on native crafts, a uniquely American expression of the more general appreciation of all handicrafts,



Figures 28 and 29. 1517 Fourteenth Street South. Dining Room. This room contains Craftsman essentials for dining. There is a built-in combination buffet-cabinet and a plate rail at the top of the wainscoting. The "spray" of multiple hanging lanterns was recommended for eating or reading tables, evidence of concern for proper lighting. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.



Figures 30 and 31. Six Room Bungalow and the Lusk home. Corey. Projected homes for Corey, William Leslie Welton, architect. Craftsman features are important in all of Corey's early homes, the modest workers' bungalows as well as the larger houses built for supervisory personnel like Lusk, a vice president of Corey Land Company. Fairfield Binder, Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.



Figures 32 and 33. Corey Roofs. Admiration of things picturesque encouraged the use of plenty of roof. Considered the keynote of the character of the house, an expansive, interesting roof was to give the impression of a generous, protecting shelter. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

Figure 34. Advertisement. Corey Land Company. This broadside, featuring the architectural designs of Birmingham architect William Leslie Welton, illustrates not only the diversity in size and style of the homes planned for Corey/Fairfield, but also Welton's incorporation of Craftsman exterior design elements: broad, overhanging eaves, knee braces, natural exterior construction materials, and others. Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

500 homes needed at Corey as soon as they can be built

8000 people will want homes at Corey as soon as they can be constructed.

A minimum of 500 homes will be needed to accommodate those people.

By the time the houses can be constructed there will be a demand for them.

Contracts will be let within the next few days, for 50 homes, costing from \$1500 to \$6500 each, a total of over \$100,000. This work will be done by the Corey Land company.

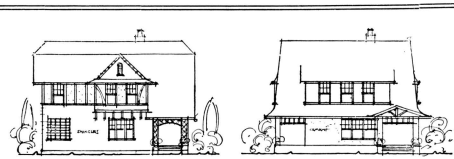
The other 450 homes needed can be constructed by those who buy lots at Corey at the opening sale, which will be about June 10th.

We will try to eliminate the speculator at this sale, and confine the sale of lots to the investment seeker, and the home seeker, who will help us solve this problem of homes by building on the lot purchased.

There is a double benefit to the purchaser if he builds. The investment immediately commences paying interest and does not lie vacant for months eating up interest. Then every home built naturally enhances the value of the property on which it is built and all the adjoining property.

500 homes at Corey should make every Corey lot worth two or three times the price it brings at the opening sale. This is a conservative estimate.

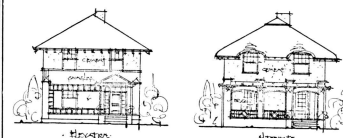
For the convenience of those who contemplate building, we will be glad to furnish sketches of several types of houses which we have found to be best suited to people who will live at Corey. Our information comes



Very attractive types of houses that the Corey Land Co. will build at Corey.



Cottages at Corey—The Corey Land Co. will build a number like these.



Elevations of two of the types of houses the Corey Land Co. will build at Corey



Types of two cottages to be built at Corey by the Corey Land Co.



Types of Model Houses. A number of similar houses will be built at Corey by the Corey Land Co. immediately

from officials who have made a study of the problem of suitable houses for all classes of labor, and these houses are planned according to the best information and after years of practical experience.

Trips were taken by officials and representatives of the Corey Land company to Gary, Indiana, Vandergrift, Pa., and other model industrial cities of the United States Steel Corporation, which are similar to Corey, and where careful study was made of the best types of houses in those industrial centers. Profiting by these visits, the company is able to plan suitable houses for every need.

This company, the railroads, the street railway company—in fact every agency connected with the development and construction of Corey, will lend every assistance to those who contemplate building.

As the nucleus for this big building operation—probably the largest in the history of the south—the Corey Land company will rush its houses to immediate completion.

Corey residence lots will sell for \$400 and up, and the terms will be one-fourth cash and the balance in six, twelve, eighteen and twenty-four months at 6 per cent interest.

The titles to the property will be guaranteed by strong guarantee companies, insuring the purchaser against loss of money through possible defective titles.

We would advise that you immediately get in touch with the office of the Corey Land company and secure plats of the property, price lists and other information.

Corey Land Company

Robert Jemison, Jr., President and Treasurer.

Walker Percy, Vice-Pres.

A. B. Tanner, Sec.

DIRECTORS:

W. P. G. Harding, President First National Bank.
John L. Kaul, President Kaul Lumber Co.

Lee C. Bradley, of Tillman, Bradley & Morrow, Attorneys.
Otto Marx, Banker and Broker.
Robert Jemison, Jr., Pres. Jemison Real Estate & Ins. Co.

Walker Percy, Attorney United States Steel Corporation.
Henry B. Gray, Pres. Peoples Savings Bank & Trust Co.

Jemison Real Estate and Insurance Company

2024 Third Avenue

GENERAL AGENTS

Birmingham, Ala.

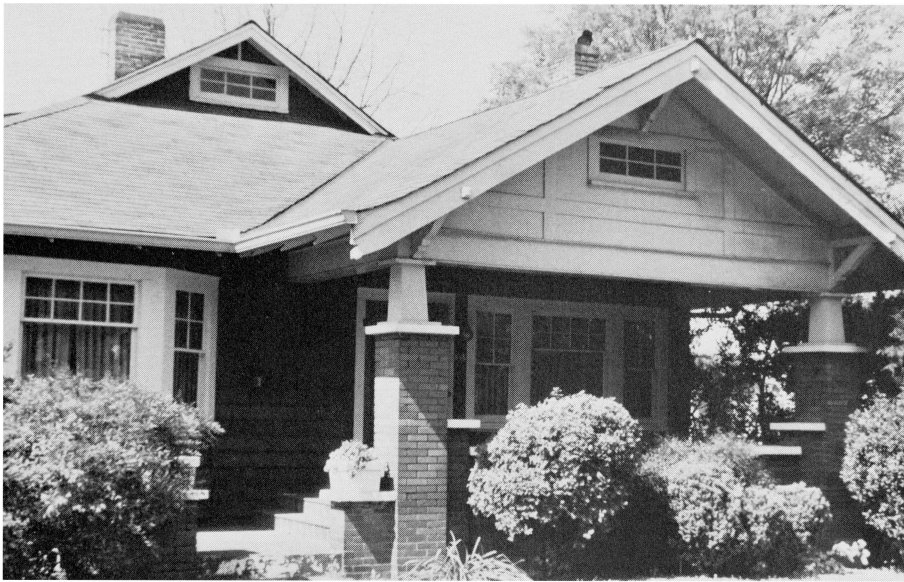


Figure 35. Addison C. Hazen House. 458 Valley Road, Fairfield. 1921. W. Stillwell and Company, Los Angeles, California, architects. Indicative of the general interest in domestic architecture, Mr. Hazen, chief field engineer for U.S. Steel, wanted more than the speculative builder normally provided. He surveyed his own land and ordered plans for his two bedroom bungalow from a California firm whose advertisement he and his wife had seen in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Historical Society.

is recorded in a photograph of the interior of the solarium of the Robert Jemison, Jr., home at 4124 Crescent Drive, designed by Miller and Martin of Birmingham and completed in 1907¹⁰² (fig. 37). The woven wicker furniture borrowed from the open air porch is seen with an "Indian" rug with a simple zig-zag geometric pattern and there is a piece of apparently handmade pottery on the mantle.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Was there a really strong interest in the crafts in Birmingham? There was apparently no arts and crafts society as such, but there were individuals who taught craft skills, practiced them, and exhibited their wares. The Birmingham Art Club, founded in Della Dryer's studio in 1908,¹⁰⁴ included crafts in its 1914 exhibition.¹⁰⁵ A single photograph from the Art Club Catalog of that year shows a number of pieces of painted china, their shapes and designs altogether uninspired and conventional. However, one jar with a drip glaze is evidence of more original "art pottery," and a book (presumably hand bound), a basket, and several very simple, naive pieces of tasseled weaving are evidence of interest, if not extraordinary proficiency, in the crafts.¹⁰⁶ The bulk of the catalogue is given to the "fine arts," especially painting, but the mix is there, just as it



Figure 36. Addison C. Hazen House. Kitchen. The efficient Craftsman home made chores simpler for its inhabitants. The large closets, the built-in cupboards, ironing board, and basement laundry facilities with chute from above were attractive amenities. "I'd build it again just like it," Mr. Hazen says of his livable home after a sixty-two year trial. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

was in *The Craftsman* magazine itself where articles on Rembrandt and Rodin, Japanese prints, Art Nouveau and Millet joined those on crafts from just about everywhere.

Birmingham's children were definitely exposed to the handicrafts at the Margaret Allen School, from 1902 until 1918 a private school for grades one through 12,¹⁰⁷ where, it is said, "culture" was stressed. Besides a dancing teacher and Alice E. Rumph, the art teacher from 1904-1911, the three Allen sisters themselves each practiced and taught a craft as well as

an academic subject—Beth, basketry employing Indian-designs; Willie, batik using patterns based on Art Nouveau designs; and Ruth another, which Mary Eleanor Bridges, a former pupil, cannot remember. All three teachers exhibited their crafts in an art exhibit held at the school while Mrs. Bridges was a student there.¹⁰⁸

The public schools of Birmingham have had an art supervisor since 1900 and have included crafts in their arts programs.¹⁰⁹ A collection of old books in the current supervisor's office indicates the range of early supervisors' interests. Along with Scribner's standard but dry *Construction Drawing* (1912)¹¹⁰ are found *The Priscilla Basketry Book* (1911),¹¹¹ popular stencil guides such as Cizek's colorful *Children's Cut and Pasted Paper Work* (1911),¹¹² and a book on Italian wrought iron.¹¹³ Undoubtedly one of the most interesting in this context, however, is the *Art Instruction Course of Study*,¹¹⁴ an outline for elementary and high school classes. Arranged for the Portland Public Schools, the curriculum guide not only advocates units of study devoted to the separate crafts—metal, jewelry, weaving, leather, bookbinding, pottery and wood carving—it also designates terms where design is taught as it relates to the home.¹¹⁵ The purpose and relation of the different rooms to each other, with special emphasis on simplicity and the unity of the whole, the study of appropriate materials emphasizing "fitness to purpose," the crafts in the home—these are recommended topics of study in the design unit suggested for the last year of high school. The final term is to be devoted to "The Modest Home" as a whole—location, architecture, arrangement, lighting, decoration, materials and furnishing. It is possible, with the tremendous interest in the home, that at least some of Birmingham's high school graduates had been exposed to just such an effort to introduce them to principles of proportion and design as they pertained to the homes which they would presumably soon have. That Craftsman philosophy was propounded in our schools by some teachers is confirmed by the existence, in the same collection of old books in the city art supervisor's office, of a specifically chosen group of articles cut from *The Craftsman*.¹¹⁶ Obviously all dating from before Stickley's 1916 bankruptcy, the articles are largely but not exclusively those of Ernest A. Batchelder on design



Figure 37. Robert Jemison, Jr. House. 4124 Crescent Road. 1907. Solarium. The austere Craftsman interior could be appropriately softened and warmed by the inclusion of wicker furniture and crafts of all kinds. Native American Indian crafts were particularly admired. A rug of Indian geometric design and a piece of simple pottery here join traditional collectors' items, the Three Graces, a small reproduction of the Victory of Samothrace, and an Italianate terra cotta cylinder. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

principles and the purposes of decoration. Diverse articles on stone and wood carving, cabinet work, medieval metalwork; "lessons" on design and theory and practice which drew heavily on American Indian decorative schemes; and even an article on the California bungalow are carefully bound and saved. There is also a copy of Walter Scott Perry's "When Drawing Should Be Taught in Public School,"¹¹⁷ written in 1915 when Perry was the director of Pratt Institute, then one of the largest and best-known art schools in America. The article offers as justification of art training reasons such as the improvement of utilitarian objects of manufacture, a favorite argument of Arts and Crafts proponents since the beginning of the British movement. A Batchelder article entitled "The Medieval Craftsman: The Reasons for his Inspiration and Achievement," one

of those saved by the early Craftsman-inspired Birmingham art supervisor, is precisely the sort of link which relates early Birmingham Arts and Crafts activities to their ultimate origin in the theories of nineteenth-century England.¹¹⁸

But, even if the issues of moral purity and pride in work were considered in certain local quarters, one nonetheless suspects that general acceptance of the outward manifestations of Craftsman ideals was more often a matter of style than conscience.

The livable Craftsman home offered one response to an increasingly industrialized world over three quarters of a century ago. But the dramatic growth of the American residential suburb in which the detached Craftsman house and those of other popular styles found themselves, had a double inspiration in older ideals: the agrarian symbol of

yeoman farmer living in harmony with nature, and the American concept of opportunity bounded only by one's ability. Many who left the city in which they worked and went to live and raise their children "in harmony with nature" in the suburbs, could actually purchase a piece of land and live upon it, even if they were no longer (or indeed had never been) farm people.

Technological development also spurred suburban growth as early forms of rapid mass transportation—the train, the streetcar, and finally the automobile—made it possible to live at some distance from the work site. Young Birmingham, which by 1900 boasted one of America's most extensive streetcar systems, was well equipped for suburban expansion. But in the first decades of the twentieth century there was a new urgency to "return to the land," even among those who had

grown up in cities or who were recent immigrants. The real American frontier was gone, and yet popular aspirations toward nature increased in proportion to its decreasing role in American life.¹¹⁹ A home in the clean air of the suburbs where one could cultivate a garden was only one attempt to live a "simpler life" and regain the freedom a more urban America sensed was now a part of its past. The popularity of conservationist causes as pockets of yet untouched wilderness were defended for the first time, and of outdoor activities—summer camping, hiking boy scouts,¹²⁰ even country clubs—attests to the general concern that life in America had become dangerously separated from that which was natural and therefore good, that it was both over-civilized and artificial. At the same time that country life was sentimentalized and equated with suburban living, that which was rustic or associated with the rural became part of the Craftsman aesthetic. The industry that created young Birmingham met physical needs by providing jobs and security for many who came during the early years of economic expansion. The suburban home, especially the intentionally rustic Craftsman one with its references to the pre-industrial past and its inclusion of the traditional crafts, at least in part answered other needs. Finally, if, as many planners and architects contend, the man-made environment does indeed shape man, then these detached houses in a landscape setting are important because so many Birminghamians still inhabit them and "learn" from them, while others learn similar lessons from later dwellings which routinely incorporate essential features of the Craftsman home.

Notes

- Gustav Stickley, *Catalogue of Craftsman Furniture* (New York: Gustav Stickley [The Craftsman], 1909), p. 114.
- The U.S. census reports the city's rapid population increase: 1890—26,178; 1900—38,415; 1910—132,685; and 1920—179,806. The dramatic jump in population recorded in the 1910 census is in part the result of the annexation to Birmingham of eight contiguous municipalities and additional unincorporated suburbs.
- Gustav Stickley, "Pergolas in American Gardens," in his *The Best of Craftsman Homes* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1979), p. 136. See also "The Treatment of the Pergola," *Architectural Record*, 29 (January-June, 1911), pp. 318-26.
- Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 7-13.
- Ibid.*, p. 94.
- Robert Judson Clark, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 9.
- Lionel Cambourne, *Uptown Craftsmen* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1980), p. 34.
- Ibid.*, p. 22.
- Ibid.*, p. 30.
- Ibid.*, p. 147.
- In 1916, the year of Stickley's bankruptcy (caused in part by his purchase of the Craftsman building on Fifth Avenue in New York in 1913), publication of *The Craftsman* was discontinued.
- Barry Sanders, *The Craftsman, An Anthology* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1978), p. 114.
- Ibid.*, p. 113.
- An excellent summary of these styles with reference to their incorporation of Craftsman features appears in Alice Meriwether Bowsher, "Edward Bok's Attempt to Promote Good Design in the Suburbs: An Analysis of Architecture Illustrated in the *Ladies Home Journal*, 1895-1917," unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1976, pp. 1-26, 34-44, and 56-60.
- Clay Lancaster, "The American Bungalow," *Art Bulletin*, 40 (September, 1948), 240.
- Ibid.*, p. 249.
- Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 168.
- Ibid.*, p. 186.
- Interviews, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary L. Leader, July 30, 1983.
- Albert Burton Moore, "William Leslie Welton," in his *History of Alabama*, 3 vols. (Chicago and New York: American Historical Society, Inc., 1927), III, 470.
- Birmingham Ledger*, September 16, 1911. Article clipped and preserved in William Leslie Welton, Scrapbook, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
- Ibid.*
- Ibid.*
- Gustav Stickley, "The Effective Use of Cobblestones as a Link between House and Landscape," *Craftsman Homes*, Dover reprint of 1909 ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1979), pp. 102-108, esp. fig., p. 106.
- Randell L. Makinson, *Greene and Greene* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1977), p. 73. In the Bandini house the Greens employed identical materials for interior and exterior with the intention of integrating the natural character of the arroyos and the man-made structure. The floor plan, by returning to the Spanish colonial tradition of building around an open court, foreshadows the American patio.
- Telephone interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with James S.M. Singleton, December 18, 1982. Mr. Singleton says that Welton was more than once accused of duplication of another's plans. The correspondence of early Birmingham architect William Welton, now in Singleton's collection, apparently records problems with Welton in relation to the Jefferson Hotel. Mr. Singleton has attempted to trace the history of the Robertson "Greene-Welton" plan, but with little success. He says he has included in a 1928 list of Welton's residential work, a record of another "Greene-Welton" house, apparently the Robertson house duplicated with minor changes in Pittsburg for the same client. A letter from Mr. Singleton to the present owners of the Robertson bungalow, written July 24, 1978, dates the Halstead house c. 1905.
- The present owners, Jane and Sloan Bashinsky, praise the passive solar features of their home.
- Stickley, *The Best of Craftsman Homes*, pp. 151-155.
- Ibid.*
- Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary Leader, July 15, 1982. Mary heard a commotion among her chickens and threatened an intruder she could not see. The terrified man, the same who delivered coal to the neighborhood, was caught red-handed, saving Mary and some of her neighbors who kept chickens further loss.
- Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, p. 115.
- Gustav Stickley, "The Craftsman Idea," in his *Craftsman Homes*, p. 197.
- Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, p. 117.
- "Mountain Terrace," the Jemison Real Estate and Insurance Company brochure, (1907), Hill Ferguson Papers, 25. 24-64, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
- Wright, p. 155.
- Ibid.*, p. 156.
- Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary L. Leader, July 15, 1982.
- Advertisement by Spiro Hardware Company, *Birmingham Ledger*, June 1, 1908, n. p.
- Birmingham Ledger*, June 13, 1908, n. p.
- Advertisement by Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Company, *Birmingham News* October 31, 1910, p. 5.
- Stickley, *Craftsman Homes*, p. 143.
- 1015 Forty-first Street South.
- 458 Valley Road, Fairfield. Addison C. Hazen still lives in the home he and his wife built in 1921 after "plans by a California architect." Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with A.C. Hazen, August 2, 1982.
- Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary L. Leader, July 30, 1982.
- "Mountain Terrace," the Jemison Real Estate and Insurance Company brochure, (1907).
- Stickley, "The Craftsman Idea," p. 195.
- Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, p. 115.
- Wright, pp. 155-176.
- Birmingham News*, October 31, 1910, p. 2. Mary Leader says she had only small rugs in her first home.
- Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, 1909, also offers architectural and decorative iron work

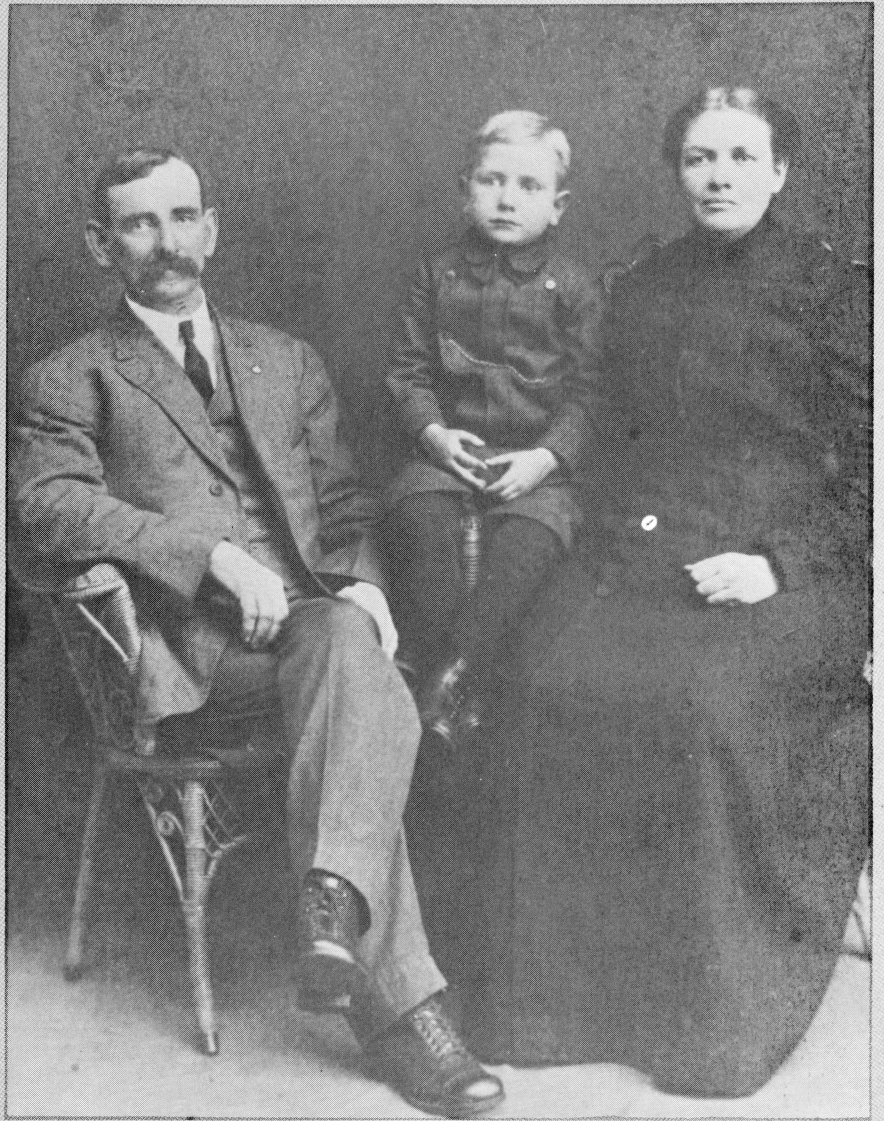
- made to order.
51. Woodward House in Birmingham used the skills of local craftsman for its extensive decorative iron.
 52. Robert Judson Clark, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916*, exhibition catalog ([Princeton]: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 186; figs. 293-295 can be found in local settings.
 53. The fireplaces of the Robertson home "study" and bedrooms.
 54. Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with W.J. Harris, present owner, August 31, 1982.
 55. *Birmingham Ledger*, January 15, 1903, n. p.
 56. *Birmingham Ledger*, June, 1907, n. p.
 57. Stickley, *Craftsman Homes*, p. 142.
 58. *Birmingham Ledger*, October 31, 1910.
 59. Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, p. 4.
 60. Birmingham Craftsman furniture advertisements.
 61. Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, p. 4.
 62. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 63. Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Carolyn J. Jefferson, October 15, 1982.
 64. Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Addison C. Hazen, July, 1982.
 65. Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, pp. 48 and 57.
 66. Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary L. Leader, July 30, 1982. As the local taste for Craftsman "honesty" did not wane until well after World War I, the same suite was sold for \$50.00 only two years later.
 67. *Birmingham Ledger*, June 8, 1908, n. p.
 68. *Architectural Record*, 24 (October, 1908), pp. 259-70, fig., p. 269.
 69. *Architectural Record*, 24 (October, 1908), pp. 249-58. This particularly handsome building by Louis H. Sullivan was furnished with Craftsman pieces.
 70. Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary Eleanor Massey Bridges, July 19, 1982.
 71. *Birmingham News*, November 5, 1910, p. 8.
 72. Advertisement for Strickland-Green Furniture Company, *Birmingham Ledger*, December, 1915; advertisements published weekly.
 73. *Birmingham News*, December 20, 1910, p. 21.
 74. Stickley, *Craftsman Furniture*, p. 127.
 75. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 76. Advertisement for B.H. Cooper Furniture Company, *Birmingham Ledger*, May 11, 1907, n. p.
 77. Gustav Stickley, "Willow Chairs and Settles which Harmonize with the More Severe and Massive Furniture Made of Oak," *Craftsman Homes*, pp. 160-61.
 78. Sallie-Mewhinney Collection, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts. This is clearly not a pure Craftsman interior, for Stickley would not have allowed a table of willow. Tables, he maintained, demanded wood construction. Stickley, "Willow Chairs," *Craftsman Homes*, p. 161.
 79. *The American Architect*, 109 (May 24, 1916), n. p. Leonard T. Beecher, Secretary and Treasurer of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, built the home for \$7,500.00. It has, unfortunately, been demolished.
 80. *Birmingham Ledger*, April 30, 1910, n. p.
 81. Walter Crane, *Ideals in Art*, reprint ed. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1979), p. 154. See also Peter Davey, *Architecture of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), p. 149, figs. 165 and 166.
 82. Crane, p. 152. A "thatched" roof home appears in a photograph from Welton's scrapbook; the palm trees and Los Angeles photographer place it in California. Welton, Scrapbook, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
 83. *Birmingham Ledger*, April 30, 1910, n. p.
 84. *The American Architect*, 109 (May 24, 1916), n. p. See also Welton, Scrapbook.
 85. *The Jemison Magazine*, 1 (May, 1910), p. 7.
 86. Marjorie Longenecker White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide* ([Birmingham]: Birmingham Historical Society, 1981), p. 118.
 87. *Ibid.*
 88. George H. Miller, "Public Value of Planting at Corey," *The Age-Herald*, January 23, 1911, p. 5; a paper prepared for reading before the Alabama State Horticultural Society, Jemison Papers, Fairfield Notebook #2, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
 89. Miller, *op. cit.*, notes that a single treatise on the plant life of Alabama had been published and that only a private donation had made possible a plan for the proper placing of future buildings and arrangement of the grounds at Auburn.
 90. White, p. 82.
 91. White, p. 121.
 92. Jemison Papers, Correspondence, 1909-1915, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
 93. Jemison Papers, Correspondence, 1909-1915, clipping entitled "The New Fresh Air House," *Ladies Home Journal* (October, 1912), p. 51.
 94. Jemison Papers, Correspondence, 1909-1915.
 95. *The Times Democrat* (New Orleans), January 14, 1912, Magazine section, n. p.
 96. William Herbert, "Popular Types of Suburban Houses, No. 1—The Bungalow," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* (February 8, 1913), pp. 288-89.
 97. *Ibid.*
 98. *Ibid.*, p. 289. The "old type" tall, turreted frame dwelling on a stone or brick base, with formal parlor and wrap-around veranda was repeatedly advertised in *The Dixie Manufacturer*, 27:1 (1910), p. 7; 29:10 (1910), p. 7.
 99. Herbert, p. 289.
 100. Interviews, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Addison C. Hazen, August 2, 1981 and April 20, 1983.
 101. Stickley, *The Best of Craftsman Homes*, p. 243.
 102. Photograph, Robert Jemison, Jr., home, 4124 Crescent Drive, James S.M. Singleton Photographic Files, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
 103. Equally visible among the handicrafts are more traditional collector's items: a small copy of the Victory of Samothrace, Three Graces, and an Italianate terra cotta cylinder.
 104. Della Dryer, obituary, in the files of the Birmingham Historical Society.
 105. Carrie Hill, photograph, in the files of the Birmingham Historical Society.
 106. An indistinct box could represent woodworking.
 107. Hill Ferguson, Papers, Cornerstone Box, Vol. 3, "Art and Artists," Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
 108. Interview, Ellen Cooper Erdreich with Mary Eleanor Massey Bridges, July 19, 1982.
 109. "Art Program," Birmingham Public Schools. Before the Great Depression, the Birmingham Art Supervisor had several assistants to help promote the program. Now one person coordinates programs for 93 Birmingham city schools.
 110. Frank H. Collins, *Construction Drawing and Constructive Work* (New York: Scribners, 1912).
 111. Sallie G. Fitzgerald, *The Priscilla Basketry Book* (Boston: The Priscilla Publishing Company, 1911).
 112. Franz Cizek, *Children's Cut and Pasted Paper Work* (Vienna: Anton Schroll and Company, 1911).
 113. *The Art of Hammered Iron in Siena* (Siena: L. Lazzeri, n. d.).
 114. Esther W. Wuest, *Art Instruction, Course of Study for Elementary and High Schools* (Portland, Oregon: Portland Public Schools, 1918-1919).
 115. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
 116. Office of the Art Supervisor, Birmingham Public Schools, Birmingham Board of Education. The Art Supervisor for the Birmingham Public Schools during at least part of the time in which *The Craftsman* articles could have been clipped was Leonore Eldred.
 117. *Ibid.*
 118. Ernest A. Batchelder, "The Medieval Craftsman: The Reasons for his Inspiration and Achievement," *The Craftsman*, 15 (March, 1909), 681-90.
 119. Roderick Nash, ed., *Call of the Wild* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1970), pp. 2-5.
 120. *Birmingham News*, October 31, 1910, p. 5. In an advertisement for Boy Scout uniforms, Porter Clothing Company noted that "100,000 young Americans have taken up the oath. . . . It will build up the boys physically, mentally, and morally."

Melville Coleman Thomas: Letters from the “Magic City” 1887

By Leah Rawls Atkins

Melville Coleman Thomas (known as Mel) was born on the family farm at Cox’s Mill (later named Middlesboro), Indiana on March 29, 1860. His parents, Anna Moon and William Thomas, were active members of the Methodist Church and strong supporters of the Union army during the Civil War. When Mel Thomas was four years old, his father took him to the train station so he might see Abraham Lincoln who was on his way back to Washington following the election of 1864. The president spoke briefly and Thomas always remembered Lincoln as “the tallest man he ever saw.” Mel Thomas had one older brother, Joseph Ellis, who was born in 1857.¹

When William Thomas died in March 1880, Joseph had already married and left home, so young Mel Thomas assumed responsibility for the farm and for his mother who was frail and sickly. Thomas supplemented their small farm income and wages from his part-time job in a local general store. As Mrs. Thomas’ health continued to fail, they decided to sell the farm and subsequently moved to Richmond, Indiana so they might be near Mrs. Thomas’ brother who had agreed to teach his nephew the carpentry trade. Following



Mel Thomas and his wife, Maggie Grahl and their son John William. Leah Rawls Atkins.



Melville Coleman Thomas built this white frame house himself and brought his bride Maggie Grahl here following their wedding in 1903. The house was located at 1308 First Avenue, West End. After West End was annexed to the City of Birmingham, First Avenue was renamed Princeton Avenue. Photograph courtesy of Leah Rawls Atkins.

a long illness, Mrs. Thomas died in 1884 and her youngest son, now twenty-four, was free to travel the country and seek his fortune. The harsh Indiana winters had aggravated Mel's chronic sore throat, and his doctor advised him to move to a warmer climate. Thomas decided to begin his quest for fortune in California. However, the new industrial city of the South, Birmingham, Alabama, which was riding the crest of the great iron boom of the 1880s and was the talk of the nation, beckoned to him; Thomas decided to take the train south before he went west. He arrived in Birmingham early in 1887, and never went to California.²

When Mel Thomas came to the "Magic City," Henry F. DeBardleben's blast furnaces, "Little Alice," "Big Alice," and "Mary Pratt," were in full operation. The James W. Sloss furnaces on First Avenue North, the Williamson Iron Company furnace south of First Avenue North and Fourteenth Street, and the Woodward Iron Company furnaces to the northwest of the city were all in full blast. Coal mines and ore mines were opening all across Jefferson County, and dozens of ovens were producing coke. The Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company had moved into the Birmingham District the previous year and swallowed up the

From the Sunny South

Under date of Birmingham, Alabama, March 3, 1887, Mel Thomas wrote a long letter to his brother Joseph, from which we make the following extracts:

Since arriving here I have been as well as usual, save a little brash Sunday, the natural result of a change of water and from white folks victuals to the cooking of the colored folks. The weather is fair and pleasant. Saturday it rained so we could not work and cleared off during the night turning cold. Sunday they tell me was the coldest day they have had for a month. It froze just a little in the shade, while I expect you had it about zero. I have not heard a word from you since I came here, though I expect it is partly my falt [sic] for I should have ordered my mail sent to my boarding place.¹ Saturday afternoon I went to the post office.² Two lines extended from the delivery window, and I had to take my place at the foot of the procession, half a square from the post office and wait for my turn, which took about an hour. The postmaster is incompetent and there is a lack of help, which has resulted in a petition for his removal.³

Sunday I started for a walk, went south on 20th street to the highlands, and then on over the hills until I climbed a range of mountains and had a splendid view of the city. As the wind was blowing furiously I did not care to stay there long. Returning I struck the M.E. Sunday school just as they were assembling and as a matter of course went in.⁴ The attendance was small, about sixty-five, with an enrollment of 150. The class exercises were interesting and the collection averaged about three cents per scholar in attendance. I attended church in the evening and prayer meeting last night. The pastor's name is Pierce, and is an Indiana man, and is an active, go-ahead fellow, the kind of man needed here. The next Sunday night he turned the pulpit over to a Dr. Mann, who gave us a talk and then changed it to an altar service. It did not take me long to find out the Methodists are the same everywhere. I handed in my letter which was accepted.⁵

I suppose you would like to know how I like Birmingham by this time. So far I like it very much, but can't say as much for my boarding house, but as it is the best in the city I will have to put up with it.⁶ Imagine a valley about three miles wide, and I do not know how long, with the city about midway upon nice rolling streets run northwest and

1. In 1888 Mel Thomas was boarding with Reverend Joseph R. Lloyd and his wife Emma at 1920 Avenue E (Fifth Avenue South), *Birmingham City Directory*, 1888, p. 501.

2. In 1888 the Birmingham Post Office was located on the northwest corner of Nineteenth Street and Third Avenue, and the Postmaster was M.B. Throckmorton. *Birmingham City Directory*, 1888, p. 35.

3. The previous month, 10,000 Birmingham residents signed a petition demanding better postal service. *Birmingham Weekly Iron Age*, February 24, 1887. On the day Thomas wrote his letter, the *Iron Age* noted the many complaints over the "irregular mails." *Birmingham Weekly Iron Age*, March 3, 1887.

4. The Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church, the only northern Methodist church in the city, was located on the southeast corner of Nineteenth Street and Avenue C (Third Avenue South). In 1907 the Simpson Methodist Church sold their church building to the Birmingham Greek Community for \$9,500. See *Birmingham City Directory*, 1903, p. 21; 1904, p. 24; Birmingham, *The New Patria: The Story of Birmingham's Greeks*, ([Birmingham]: Birmingham, n. d.), p. 10; Sofia Lafakis Petrou, *A History of the Greeks in Birmingham, Alabama* ([Birmingham: Privately Printed] 1979), p. 17.

5. The minister was the Reverend J.D. Pierce. *Birmingham City Directory*, 1887, p. 14.

6. There were hundreds of boarding houses in the city, some of them advertised and others simply took in one or two boarders who found their way to their door by word of mouth.

southeast, crossing each other at right angles. And as Randolph said of Washington, it appears a city of magnificent distances. The entire space between the mountains is laid off into lots, but not near one-half of them have been built upon, I'll change it and say not one-fourth, though new buildings are springing up everywhere. As to the moral condition of the city the less said about it the better, for from what I can understand from those who are familiar with it, it is considered one of the hardest places in the south. Saloons flourish wherever they can get a room and they seem to be well patronized. I was down street Monday evening and noticed one with four or five bartenders on the jump, and there were a half a dozen others within a square apparently just as busy. I attribute that a great deal of the immorality and drinking is due to the fact that building has not kept pace with the population, and the larger proportion being men of every vocation, from the miner to the tradesman through every calling. The people seems [sic] to be flocking here as they did to California in '49. Many will doubtless remain here, while others will move on as the boom subsides. Some are like myself, with no body to look after, others have families that it is impossible to bring here at present and being away from all home restraint its effect soon becomes visible.⁷

Much has been told of the material prosperity of this city, of the wonderful opportunity to make a fortune, and of the chance of employment to all comers, and much remains untold. But if you put a daddy dollar over your left eye you will not observe the mudhole on that side of you. The fact is that everything pertaining to real estate is in such a state of excitement that a stranger has hard work to predict the future. But so far I believe no one has lost money by their investments.⁸ The real estate craze put me in mind of the marriage dowry business in Indiana a few years ago. Real estate agents are as thick as bees and have their office on every corner where they can get a foothold. Such a window as the northeast corner of the Odd Fellows building would bring \$150 per month rent and the south window \$125 per month, and the privilege of putting a desk anywhere in the back part of the room would be worth from \$60 to \$80 per month according to the location.⁹ Some of these men are making a nice thing, others nothing. I do not see how real estate can go much higher. For instance the lot opposite

Pratt Coal and Iron Company. The industrial boom of the 1880s set off a dizzy speculation in town lots in Birmingham and mineral lands in the county.³ Every train brought men with bank drafts in their pockets dreaming of overnight fortunes and laborers hoping for steady work and high wages. Hotels and boarding houses were crowded. The wild real estate speculation fueled a construction industry which was always short of skilled carpenters. Mel Thomas walked from the train station, secured a room at a boarding house and found a carpenter's job immediately.⁴

As soon as Thomas settled into his new life, he wrote to his brother Joseph who was then living in Decatur, Indiana. Two of these letters, along with a third letter which Thomas wrote at the request of the editor, were printed in the *Decatur Democrat* in March 1887. These three letters, all of which appear hereafter, give an interesting picture of early Birmingham during the great iron boom.

Mel Thomas remained in Birmingham for a number of years, but when the Panic of 1893 hit the city and the district's economy slumped into depression, he left for Indiana and stayed with his brother. However, in 1897, Thomas returned to Birmingham and remained here the rest of his life.⁵

7. Thomas was correct in describing the numerous saloons. The most famous were Perk's Place, the Dud, the Star, the Peerless, and the Bank Saloon. Some saloons never closed. See Leah Rawls Atkins, *The Valleys and the Hills: An Illustrated History of Birmingham and Jefferson County* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1981), pp. 56-57 and 101, and Marjorie Longenecker White, *Downtown Birmingham* (Birmingham: Birmingham Historical Society and First National Bank, 1977), pp. 17, 23, and 31. The percent of men in Birmingham was not as great as Thomas supposed. The city's 1890 population of 26,178 included 13,815 men or about 54 percent. *Compendium of the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Congressional Series: House, 52nd Cong., 1st sess. Misc. doc. 340, part 6. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1892-1897), part 1, population, p. 540, Table 17.

8. In his autobiography, Willis J. Milner describes the dizzy boom and real estate speculation craze. Lots which had been purchased for \$120 in 1874 were sold in 1886 for \$1300. Just before Thomas arrived, at Christmas 1886, the Elyton Land Company which had founded the city presented its stockholders with a check representing a 340 percent return. On March 2, 1887, the *Birmingham Iron Age* reported that the Elyton Land Company had sold \$100,000 worth of lots." See Willis J. Milner's "Autobiography" edited by Lyn Johns in *The Journal of the Birmingham Historical Society*, (January, 1977), pp. 22-23; the *Birmingham Weekly Iron Age*, March 3, 1887; and Atkins, *Valley and Hills*, pp. 71-72.

9. The Odd Fellows held their meetings in the Masonic Hall in the First National Bank Building on First Avenue North and Twentieth Street. See *Birmingham City Directory*, 1887, p. 250.

where I am stopping 140 foot front, five squares from the center of the city, sold recently for \$300 per foot or \$42,000. The Georgia Central railroad recently purchased 40 acres on the outskirts of the city for \$7,000 per acre. And I find upon inquiry that all other property is held at a corresponding figure according to location. It looks to me as if these prices were speculative and did not represent the actual cash value of the same. It would be a good thing for the prosperity of the city if prices were lower as it would enable men of smaller means to gain a foothold and help build up the city. It looks out of proportion to pay \$5,000 for a lot to put up a \$1,000 building on. Of course rents are high. A three room negro shanty will bring \$15 per month rent, while good houses will rent for \$10 per room, which makes it impossible for most laborers to bring their families here. From the way building is going on it looks as if the scarcity of buildings would soon be remedied to some extent, which I hope may soon occur so that we may get better accommodations for our money. There is about thirty of us in nine rooms, besides the family of five which is crowding us somewhat, and as each of us pay \$5 per week it is a bonanza to the proprietor. I do not think there is a square in the city but has one or more buildings in process of erection, all of them wood, so there is plenty of work for carpenters, but the supply seems equal to the demand. As for clerks, salesmen and book keepers there are about five applicants to every vacancy. For many of the southern people have not yet got over the idea that it is a disgrace to handle a tool, and then they like soft places for themselves.¹⁰

Yours, Mell

In Birmingham, Thomas was an active member of the Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church which was located on the corner of Nineteenth Street South and Avenue C (Third Avenue). The Reverend John L. Brasher was minister of Simpson, the only northern Methodist Church in the city. For a number of years, Thomas boarded first with Reverend and Mrs. Joseph R. Lloyd on Avenue E (Fifth Avenue South), and then with Reverend Brasher and his wife Minnie at the parsonage at 1903 Avenue C, next to the church.⁶

At this time, the Brashers had another boarder, a Miss Margaret Jane Grahl, known to her friends as Maggie, who had come to Birmingham to take a business course and find employment. On May 28, 1903, Mel Thomas and Maggie Grahl were married at Simpson Methodist Church following prayer meeting. The couple had tried to surprise their friends, but the news spread quickly and there was a large crowd there to witness the ceremony.⁷ Before their marriage, Mel was making \$15.00 a week as a carpenter and Maggie was drawing \$5.00 weekly salary at the Dispatch Printing Company. Several months before the wedding, Mel had purchased two lots in West End which

Birmingham, Alabama Letter

Mell Thomas under date of March 3rd, wrote his brother at this place, from which we compile the following:

One has a good time here in getting his mail from the office, especially if a laboring man, as the office opens about 8 o'clock a.m. and closes at 5 p.m. And if one wants his mail he has to take his place, take his turn. The last time I was down it took me just an hour to get to the front and ask for my mail.

I have worked with my coat off every day since I have been here. The thermometer standing between 50 and 75 degrees, which makes warm working in the sun. It has been raining to-day, none of your drizzles but a regular pour down and has made things pretty muddy, as we have no sidewalks except in front of business rooms. The mud is a brick red and sticks as close as our Hoosier mud.

About the first of April I think there will be a general exodus of the married men who cannot get rooms for their families. This with an increased stock of lumber and the boom in building, will, I think advance the wages of carpenters. Of all places for second class shoddy work this place would take the prize. I am boarding at a so-called firstclass

10. The long experience with the institution of slavery left an indelible mark upon Southern society's attitudes toward manual labor. Northerners who visited the South or moved there often commented about this value system.

boarding house. I get coffee for breakfast and as to meats always have to decide between steak, sausage or pork, and eggs if I want them, and in the way of bread have hot corn bread or biscuit to choose from. But corn bread always heads the table three times a day with unfailing regularity. For dinner after soup we get beef and pork with or without gravy, as gravy means second class grease we take it without, and then comes your potatoes sweet and Irish, beans, turnips and cabbage. The cabbage I have not tried, its looks is satisfaction in full. Everything is cooked without seasoning. And the butter I pass every time. And then we have a conglomerate mess which they call dessert, which I will tell you more about after analysis. We finish with a glass of buttermilk, which is the ¹¹ best thing of the feast. For supper we have cold meats, bread and tea. Our host is a corn-fed soldier, and the boarders represent all classes of people. Nearly a dozen states are represented at one boarding house. You can tell a southern man by his speech every time, as it is a modification of the negro dialect. The negroes are wonderful mimics, perfect monkeys. One can see actions on the street every day that would be a credit for the star of a minstrel troupe. About the iron interest I am all at sea as it is not in my line. There are a great many furnaces around us in full blast, but Birmingham is no Pittsburgh as yet, but she may catch up in time. Speculation in real estate is the bane of the country. It is a mania equal to gambling. If a man has enough to make the first payment, he will not hesitate to purchase real estate running into many thousands, relying upon turning himself with a raise before the other payments are due. If he succeeds all right, if he fails then comes the crash for him and he loses all. The chances of winning are much greater than investments in a Louisiana lottery.¹² I have been over the city somewhat since writing you on the subject, and have a more definite idea of this vast skeleton of a city, and everywhere find evidence of its wonderful growth and enterprise. We have more miles of street railways than any city of its size in the world, besides several dummy lines, one of which has a circuit of about six miles around the south side, making a division point at Lakeview, where the city park is located.¹³ I went out on the dummy last Sunday afternoon, for each way is five cents, which took me through the center of the south highlands, destined to become the fashionable portion of the city, and there are some truly lovely locations, but held at fabulous prices that would make the hair stand on a millionaire's head to quote prices to him. The park contains twenty-five to thirty acres and contains a small artificial lake with a few row boats. There was a skating rink which was closed and a restaurant doing business and some fine mineral springs. Altogether it is a nice place to spend a leisure hour.¹⁴

11. Thomas described a very large dinner meal at noon and a light supper meal at night.

12. The real-estate speculation drew many people to Birmingham. The March 2, 1887 Birmingham Weekly Iron Age reported that the city was "filled with sight-seeing strangers" and that "all things seemed characteristic of the 'Magic City' in one of its big booms."

13. The Highland Avenue and Belt Railroad Company operated the first steam dummy line in Birmingham. The South Highlands route began at O'Brien's Opera House on Nineteenth Street and First Avenue North and circled through Lakeview Park and Highland Avenue. See Alvin W. Hudson and Harold E. Cox, *Street Railways of Birmingham*, (Forty fort, Pennsylvania: Harold E. Cox, 1976), pp. 15-17.

14. Thomas had ridden the dummy line to South Highlands and Lakeview Park. A fine hotel was opened in the park in 1887 which became a rendezvous for social leaders of the city. There was a lake with rental boats and a swimming beach, a casino, a bowling alley, and a skating

was then a separate city and not a part of Birmingham. On one of these lots, at 1380 First Avenue, he had built a house, and it was to this home that he brought his bride. Two children were born to the Thomases: a son, John William who was born November 23, 1906 and a daughter Anna Belle, a "blue baby," born in 1909 who lived only one month.⁸

Mel Thomas continued to serve his church and it was the center of his family's life. He was secretary of the Sunday school for thirty-six years and was president of the church's board of trustees. He was also active in the Odd Fellows lodge in the city and was a member of the Carpenters District Council. Like most Birmingham men, Thomas loved baseball and attended games whenever he could. Around town he developed a reputation as a master carpenter and he was responsible for intricate interior woodwork in a number of fine Birmingham homes, churches and buildings. Thomas worked on the old Birmingham Country Club at Lakeview, but it was the beautiful and very detailed interior woodwork in the Independent Presbyterian Church which became his greatest pride. Thomas was general superintendent of this job when he was employed by

Smallman and Brice Construction Company.⁹

In July 1923 Mel Thomas became general secretary of the Birmingham Carpenters Union. Four years later he suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed. Death came on November 25, 1932, following another stroke. His old friend, the Reverend John L. Brasher along with Reverend E.M. Dickerson, W.A. Murphree, and E.E. Cavaleri, Sr., conducted the funeral from the new Simpson Methodist Church located on Seventh Avenue North at Twenty-fifth Street. Burial was in Elmwood Cemetery.¹⁰

The Birmingham which Mel Thomas described in the letters he wrote in 1887 so impressed him that he predicted for it a future that would be "very bright;" in fact, he termed it "a city of the future." Having weathered the difficult earliest years of its history when cholera and economic stagnation had threatened the young city's very existence, Birmingham in 1887 did seem destined to fulfill its founders' dream, to become the South's "Magic City," and thus to prove Thomas' prediction an accurate one. The fact that the prediction proved to be inaccurate in no way, however, diminishes the historical value of the three documents.

On January 1st a law went into effect compelling real estate agents to register and pay license. Up to this time 376 real estate agents have registered besides several land companies who do their own business.¹⁵ Birmingham owes its origins to the Eleyton [sic] Land Company, and they have paid out the value of their stock several times over and have valuable holdings left that at present prices will invoice many times there [sic] original investment. Other companies purchased land in the suburbs, laid it off into lots, built street cars and the boom was on. There is land enough laid out into lots in this valley to accommodate a million of population, and still the good work of enlarging goes on. I think they will call a halt soon. Speculators are getting very anxious, their faces are visibly lengthened in anticipation of the decline. Central business property is considered a good investment at \$1,500 per front foot, but choice residence lots on the south highlands, where location is more than money, will come down one half when the sheriff gets after them with a mortgage.

It is a little hard for some of these old southerners to get used to the new order of things. They love to dwell on the good times before the war but they are yielding gracefully to the inevitable, and say it is the making of the country.

Yours, Mell

Alabama Letter

Birmingham, Ala., March 28, 1887.

Editor Democrat.

As you requested me to write you in regard to this place and its remarkable prosperity which has raised it from nothing fifteen years ago, to a city of 30,000 at the present time, and as I promised to do so I will endeavor to fulfill that promise. My opportunities, however, of seeing the sights of the city and getting reliable data as to its history and manufacturing interests has been very limited, as I have been at work ten hours per day every day it was fit to work and I have been able to do so. I may also, repeat some things which you have already published, taken from private letters to my brother and others.

Those of the "boys" of '61 to '65 who think they have heard of this place during their stay in the south are mistaken, as the place at that time had no existence, even in the minds of those who afterward projected it.¹⁶ The mineral wealth of the adjacent mountains had, however, long been recognized and some steps take to develop it. A railroad had been surveyed through the valley and partly graded when the war coming on brought the enterprise to a sudden halt.¹⁷ It was during this period that some parties (I forgot their names), were engaged in the manufacturing of iron in Mississippi but some yankees who happened

rink. See James F. Sulzby, Jr., *Historic Alabama Hotels and Resorts*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1960), p. 168.

15. The Birmingham *Weekly Iron Age*, March 3, 1887 noted that there were 351 licensed real estate agents in the city. The *Birmingham City Directory*, 1887 gives the number as 386. See p. 248.

16. The "boys" to whom Thomas refers are those who fought in the Union army and those who participated in the military occupation of the South between 1860 and 1870.

17. The old Northeast and Southwest Railroad had surveyed a route through Jones Valley before the Civil War, but by 1865 only grading had been accomplished on the Jefferson County portion. See J.H. Clark, "The History of the Northeast and Southwest Alabama Railroad," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alabama, 1949.

to be traveling that way scared them so bad they left the state and coming in this section of the country opened a charcoal furnace about twelve miles northeast of this place, making the first iron manufactured in this part of the country.¹⁸ The close of the war and the disorder of the country during the reconstruction period put an end to the enterprise and the country lapsed into its former condition of cotton and corn until in 1871 when the Northeast and Southwest railroad (afterward changed to the Alabama and Great Southern), was surveyed and built, followed soon after by the Louisville and Nashville railroad, which crossed the A. & G.S. at what is now the center of the city. Previous to this time the only town near here was Elyton, the then county seat and about two miles west of the present site of the court house. About this time was organized the Elyton Land Co., which organization purchased about four thousand acres, the heart of the present city of Birmingham, and proceeded to lay it off in lots and put it on the market, the first lot 100 x 50 feet selling for \$100, now worth one hundred thousand, and is still in the hands of the original purchaser.¹⁹ The little city progressed rapidly for about three years and the future seemed bright when the cholera broke out and almost swept it out of existence. For awhile everything lagged, real estate dwindled to almost nothing. Elyton Land Co. stock sunk to \$16 and found no purchasers. Everything looked gloomy until 1880 when the first blast furnace was erected, followed soon after by another.²⁰ Everything now improved and soon regained its old place, passed it and went rapidly upward, and its prosperity since that time has been uninterrupted, until now it has a population of from thirty to forty thousand, with real estate commanding prices that would make Wm. B. Astor turn pale.²¹ Elyton Land Co. stock from \$16, a few years ago, now commands \$3,400 offered with no sellers.

The city is well supplied with street railways in every direction, which, with dummy lines in some places, almost blockade the streets. The great success of the Elyton Land Co. has caused about a dozen others to be organized, each of which, has purchased a tract of land from two to five miles of the city, platted it in lots, connected it with city proper by a street railway, or dummy line, and then proceeded to boom it, placing the lots in the market and realizing handsomely from them. For the past year the real estate craze has almost eclipsed everything else and speculators come here from all parts of the country to have a finger in the pie. The rapid increase in value is almost beyond belief. An exchange was instituted and options sold something after the manner of

18. W.S. McElwain operated a foundry at Holly Springs, Mississippi until October 1862, when federal soldiers in a night raid following the evacuation of Corinth destroyed the iron works. McElwain then moved to Jefferson County, Alabama and established the Cahaba Iron Works at Irondale. Ethel Armes, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, (Birmingham: Chamber of Commerce, 1910), pp. 164-167.

19. The Elyton Land Company was incorporated on December 20, 1870 and soon acquired 4,150 acres of land which Josiah Morris had purchased in Jones Valley. The first lot sold in Birmingham was the northeast corner of First Avenue and Nineteenth Street which was purchased by Major A. Marre. See H.M. Caldwell, *History of the Elyton Land Company*, Reprint edition, (Birmingham: Southern University Press, 1972), pp. 4-6.

20. "Little Alice," the first furnace in Birmingham, went into blast on November 30, 1880. Thomas T. Hillman directed the furnace's construction for Henry F. DeBardeleben's Pratt Company. "Big Alice" went into blast three years later. The Alice furnaces were located at Fourteenth Street and First Avenue North. See Atkins, *Valley and the Hills*, pp. 67-68.

21. For the value of Elyton Land Company stock and the real-estate speculation of 1886 see Caldwell, *History of Elyton Land Company*, pp. 22-35.

Chicago grain options and some fortunes made in a short time, some men making a fortune in a day by a lucky turn, and a saying came in use here that the man who could not make money and the woman who could not get married in Birmingham was [sic] no good anywhere, in fact, no especial business talents were needed, for all a man had to do was to invest and the profits were sure to follow. During the last four or five weeks there has been a lull in the market and some think the boom in that line is over. Prices in real estate are, as a matter of course, very high, central business lots selling from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per front foot, with other property the most of it higher in proportion. Ordinary building lots, without regard to location, selling at from \$30 to \$250 per foot and choice south highland, the fashionable part of the city, commanding almost any price.²²

The city is only partially lighted by electric light and gas, but the most of the city is yet dark. There is a new gas company formed with a large capital which will at once proceed to put in a plant sufficient to light the entire city.²³ The water supply is totally inadequate and works are in progress to enlarge the works and bring water from the neighboring mountains and furnish a full supply of good pure water.²⁴ The sewerage is practically nothing. The city has grown so fast that the public improvements could not keep up with it. The building boom is now on and new buildings are going up in every direction, mostly frame, it being almost impossible to obtain brick, but there are sixty filled business buildings in progression, more contemplated, and some architects estimate the number of frame dwellings in progress at from eight hundred to two thousand and others are kept from building on account of scarcity of material and a recent advance in prices.

The industries and manufacturers are all in the iron and coal interests. There are several large blast furnaces in full operation with a capacity of about one thousand tons a day, and more in progress of construction and will be completed within the year, about doubling the present capacity; besides there are several large foundries and machine shops manufacturing the largest and heaviest machinery in use. The surrounding mountains are full of coal and iron of the best quality. The Pratt coal mines, about six miles from the city are the largest of the kind in the south, having several shafts, inclines and drifts.²⁵ One incline about three thousand feet long, another about two

Foot Notes for Biographical Sketch of Melville Coleman Thomas

1. Thomas family records and manuscripts by Thomas's daughter-in-law, Barbera Whitmore Thomas, "The Life of Melville Coleman Thomas," p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See Leah Rawls Atkins, *The Valley and the Hills: An Illustrated History of Birmingham and Jefferson County* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publication, Inc., 1981), pp. 66-72.
4. The *Birmingham Weekly Iron Age*, January 20, 1887 reported that skilled carpenters were "in great demand" in the city.
5. Thomas is not listed in the 1897 *Birmingham City Directory* (see p. 618), but in 1898 was living at 1920 Avenue E. *Birmingham City Directory*, p. 673.
6. *Birmingham City Directory*, 1888, p. 501; *Birmingham City Directory*, 1903, pp. 211, 389, and 799; Thomas, "Life of Melville Coleman Thomas," pp. 2-5; Obituary, M.C. Thomas, *Birmingham News*, November 26, 1932, p. 8.

22. The *Birmingham Weekly Iron Age* on March 2, 1887 commented: "The bray of the mule has been drowned in the roar of the furnaces. . . . Thirty-five thousand busy people with an air of energy never dreamed of in the South keep time with their quiet footstep to the music of progress."
23. Birmingham was lighted by gas supplied by the Birmingham Gas and Illuminating Company organized in 1880. In 1886 electric lights appeared in the city. See John C. Henley, Jr., *This is Birmingham*, ([Birmingham]: Southern University Press, 1969), pp. 68-69, and Caldwell, *History of the Elyton Land Company*, p. 21.
24. The Elyton Land Company organized the Birmingham Water Works in 1872 and 1873 the first water was pumped into the city from Village Creek. By 1887 this was supplemented by water from Five Mile Creek to the north of the city and from the Cahaba River to the South. See Henley, *Birmingham*, pp. 45 and 66-67, and Caldwell, *History of the Elyton Land Company*, pp. 18-21.
25. The Pratt Coal and Coke Company was organized in 1878 by Henry F. DeBardeleben, Colonel James W. Sloss, and Truman H. Aldrich, a New York mining engineer who was the first to assess accurately the Pratt coal seam. The Pratt holdings were acquired by the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company in 1886, the year before Thomas came to Birmingham. See Armes, *Coal and Iron*, pp. 267-274 and 287-307.

thousand with side drifts. The vein of coal being of a uniform thickness of four and one-half feet. The coal is excellent of cokeing [sic], and the mining company have six hundred coke ovens in full blast and the foundations being laid for one thousand more. This mine is owned by the Tennessee Coal and Iron Co., which, also, owns extensive iron mines near the city and also some of the blast furnaces in and near the city, this being one of the largest companies in the south, being capitalized at ten million. The iron mines are on what is called red mountain and are unsurpassed in the world for extent and richness, the vein being twenty-one feet thick, about one mile wide and several miles long. The one is quarried rather than mined it lies so near the surface.²⁶

It will be easily seen from the natural resources of the place that it is here to stay and there is no danger of any retrograde movement, the era of experiment being over and everything on a firm foundation, and is bound to go ahead. New manufacturing concerns are being organized almost daily, and capital coming in from all directions. The banks of the city are now holding over five million of dollars of deposits, mostly, or at least, a great part of the money brought here for investment.

Birmingham is essentially a city of the future and that future is at present very bright. Surrounded, as it is, by the richest coal and iron mines in the world, the iron being the red and brown hematite, the very best known; with as good railway facilities as any city in the south, three roads passing through it and in operation and several more being built. There appears to be nothing to prevent it from becoming one of the principal cities, and let me add, this wonderful improvement is not confined to Birmingham alone, but is all over the south and must be seen to be appreciated.

Nearly all the cities and towns in northern Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee are booming in a manner unknown in the north for years, and are coming to the front rapidly. This is a great era of speculation, but there is something more than that alone becoming this part of the country, it is capital invested in permanent improvements, and manufacturing enterprises, and the man who gets in on the ground floor in these, is, in most cases, pretty sure of a good thing. Farming and cotton lands are low yet as compared with farm land in the north and good property of that kind is a good investment, and taken altogether the south is in a state of development which cannot be realized until it has been seen and studied.

If there is any particular point on which you would want more definite information write me and I will be pleased to answer you to the best of my ability. Hoping these few lines may be acceptable to you I remain,

Yours,
Mell C. Thomas

26. See Armes, *Coal and Iron*, pp. 11, 45, 46, and 66; Marjorie Longenecker White, *The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide*, ([Birmingham]: Birmingham Historical Society, 1981), pp. 1-3.

7. "Thomas-Grahl Wedding," newspaper clipping, no date or identification. Thomas family records.
8. "Annie Bell Thomas Funeral," newspaper clipping, no date or identification, Thomas family records; *Birmingham City Directory*, 1904, p. 942; Thomas, "Life of Melville Coleman Thomas," pp. 3-5.
9. Thomas, "Life of Melville Coleman Thomas," pp. 5-8; Obituary, M.C. Thomas, *Birmingham News*, November 26, 1932, p. 8; Houston A. Brice was president and Ralph A. Smallman was vice president of the Smallman-Brice Construction Company, *Birmingham City Directory*, 1922, p. 1086.
10. Obituary, M.C. Thomas, *Birmingham News*, November 26, 1932, p. 8. When the Southern and Northern Methodist Churches united in the late 1930s, the Simpson Methodist Church became a mission church of the First Methodist Church. In the mid-1940s the Simpson building at Seventh Avenue North and Twenty-fifth Street was sold to the Church of Christ.

James R. Powell and “This Magic Little City of Ours”: A Perspective on Local History

T By Marvin Yeomans Whiting

*his brief essay is no pioneering work of historical interpretation. The ideas which have prompted it are not new. In fact, the bulk of them are now staples—or are rapidly becoming so—of the “new” local history, so meticulously described in David Kyvig and Myron Marty’s recently published **Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You**. The effort here is to offer, in a local publication, one of these ideas, the concept of local history interpretation within the context of regional and national historical trends, and thus provide those in Birmingham who have found the “old” local history intriguing with a foretaste of the intriguing possibilities present in the “new.”*

The year was 1873; the day, the last Thursday in the month of February. Gathered in the offices of the Elyton Land Company were the corporation’s stockholders and officers, there to participate in the “annual convention” and, in particular, to hear the president’s report on the status of the company’s principal enterprise: the development of the new city of Birmingham. After dispensing with the opening amenities and establishing the fact of a quorum, the meeting’s chairman, Alburto Martin, called for the report of the company’s president. James R. Powell responded.¹

The initial paragraph of Powell’s report set the theme for

what would follow. "Since my last report [January 25, 1872] the enterprise, with the conduct of which you have entrusted me, has progressed steadily and surely towards its manifest destiny as the industrial centre of the South." In fact, as Powell noted, Birmingham had not only "passed with safety through the period of transition from infancy, helplessness and ridicule" but also was becoming "known and acknowledged as a 'power in the land.'" ²

For Powell, proof of the young city's success in completing its first "rite of passage" was to be found in a body of evidence regarding population growth and commercial and residential construction in the new city. Early in 1872, as Powell noted, the city's population had stood at about 800, with 125 houses already constructed, "among which were 17 brick and 30 or 40 frame stores." By February of 1873, however, the population had increased to about 4,000 and the number of completed structures to about 500. Of these, he could report, "54 are brick or stone (none less than two stories high), and about 125 [are] frame stores." The remainder included "about 250 neat and substantial brick and frame dwellings, six church edifices. . . , two public halls, four hotels of from 10 to 30 rooms each, several boarding houses and restaurants, a national bank in successful operation, several manufacturing establishments, and all the other concomitants which go to make up a thriving and prosperous city." ³

There was, however, other evidence to cite; and Powell did just that. The two railroads which met near the heart of the new city—the South and North Alabama and the Alabama and Chattanooga—were at least operational, and there were prospects for additional rail service to the area within the not-too-distant future. There was also a flurry of investment in the development of area mineral properties, many contiguous to Elyton Land Company holdings, which if not evidence of the progress which the company's officers desired was at least a token, a foretaste of such. ⁴

Having laid claim to a safe transit of the new city from infancy to young manhood, and having cited an array of evidence to lend credence to that claim, Powell concluded the report to his fellow stockholders with a flight of pure rhetoric, a concatenation of images, at least one of which has remained a durable staple of subsequent local boosterism.

In conclusion, allow me to congratulate you. . . ; this magic little city of ours has no peer in the rapidity of its growth, combined with the character of its population and buildings. While other sections of the state, and of almost the entire South, have been oppressed by calamities, political and financial consequent upon the late war—our section, its healthful climate cheering the invalid—its fertile valleys tempting the agriculturist and its pregnant mountains groaning to be delivered of their wealth, our favored section, the El Dorado of iron-masters, soon to be penetrated by railroads from every point of the compass, invites with open arms and with full capacity to entertain as congenial spirits—skilled labor, capital, and intelligence from every portion

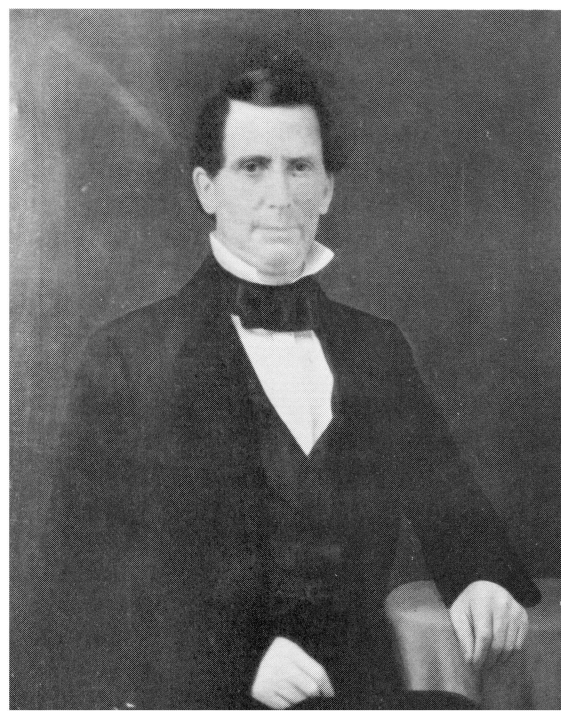
of the globe, affording opportunities and facilities to all to exercise their functions and endowments in their most agreeable vocations. ⁵

One approach to such rhetoric as this is to dismiss it as only the hollow expansiveness of a genuine entrepreneur, bent solely upon selling his wares. Another approach is to take the Powell remarks quite literally and to assume that the description he offered of this "magic little city" is accurate and thus may be trusted as a factual basis for historical interpretation. There are, however, other approaches. Among these, one of relatively recent vintage was first delineated in 1964 in George B. Tindall's essay, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History." ⁶ This approach views rhetoric, even the rhetoric of pure boosterism, as more than hollow expansiveness or sloganeering; in fact, as a principal medium for

the expression of what is conceived as fundamental, if not elemental, to those who produce and offer such rhetoric. In short, it is a conception of rhetoric as a carrier of individual or corporate values, as a means of rendering one's environment, the conditions or circumstances of one's life understandable and explicable, as a way to reconcile the contradictions which inevitably occur between vision and reality, as the instrument "by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves" and to others, as the language of myth. ⁷

What Powell was doing in his second annual report to the Elyton Land Company's stockholders was to offer not only himself but also his audience just such an instrument. The experience Powell sought to make intelligible for himself, his fellow stockholders, and anyone else who would read his report was

the rather daring effort of a group of Southern men to realize a vision they held in common: to create, in a section of the state of Alabama long neglected by the ruling planter aristocracy of the Black Belt, not just a city but rather a metropolitan center whose economic health would stem from the industrial exploitation of North Central Alabama's abundant mineral resources. That there were risks involved in such a venture was obvious. The post-Civil War economy in the South but also in the nation as a whole was a fragile one. No certainty existed that southern efforts to attract outside capital, particularly from the North or the East would prove successful. Further, there was the question of support within the South for the establishment of a city alien in character and purpose to any in the region and certainly in Alabama. Finally, only minimal proof existed as to the practicability of producing, on any large scale, quality pig iron from the Birmingham area's ores, coals, and fluxing agents, and thus of securing and ensuring the economic base upon which the city's development rested. In the presence of such risks, the one pressing need, other than outright success, was a continuing reassurance that success would come. That



James R. Powell, first president of the Elyton Land Company. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

reassurance came in the form of the myth of the "magic city," a conceptualization both at one and the same time true to the visions of the city's founders and yet, throughout the economically-depressed years of the 1870s, more often than not in direct contradiction of the experience of those who struggled to preserve the new city they had helped to create.

When one examines the constituent elements of this myth only in the context of Birmingham's history, from 1873 to the end of the decade, they appear to have no significance other than a purely local one. If, however, these same elements are considered within the context of an emerging mythology about a "New South," they take on a significance which is both regional and national.

In 1867, just five years before Powell delivered his second annual report to the Elyton Land Company stockholders, J.D.B. DeBow, a New Orleans journalist and publisher of the influential *DeBow's Review*, wrote in terms remarkably similar to those of Powell.

WE HAVE GOT TO GO TO MANUFACTURING TO SAVE OURSELVES. We have got to go to it to obtain an increase in population. Workmen go to furnaces, mines, and factories—they go where labor is sought. Every new furnace or factory is the nucleus of a town, to which every needed service is sure to come from the neighborhood and from abroad. Factories and works established establish other factories and works. Population, we repeat, is the one sorest need of the South; immigration only can supply this. We can surely obtain that by providing our labor with diversified employment.

Capital, to the extent that the South shall have occasion to borrow, will, by a law of economy that never fails, flow here to erect, equip, and start every manufacturing establishment as fast as it can profitably be run.⁸

Although the intent of DeBow's writing, as with other "New South" advocates such as William Lee Trenholm, Edwin DeLeon, and Henry Woodfin Grady, was to state the argument for an industrialization of the post-Civil War South and not, as with Powell or other spokesmen from early Birmingham, to sell a city and its industrial potential, the themes which dominate the rhetoric of both are virtually identical. And what is true of themes is also true of the rationales which prompted the creation and use of both the "New South" and "magic city" myths.

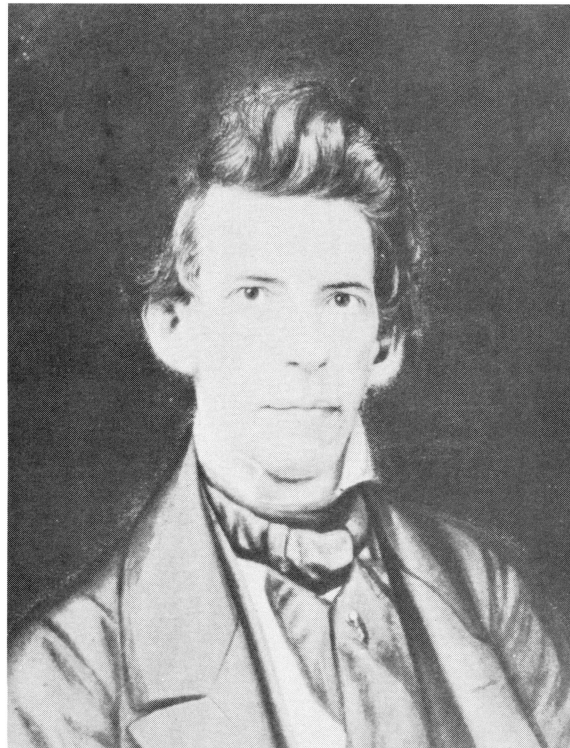
For both DeBow and Powell, industry was the key to economic recovery and financial success, whether on a regional or a local level. For both, the key to successful and profitable industrialization was, as Powell phrased it, "to entertain as congenial spirits—skilled labor, capital and intelligence from every portion of the globe, affording opportunities and facilities to all to exercise their functions and endowments in their most agreeable vocations."⁹ For both, the need was to minimize whatever ethnic or other differences which might exist among potential immigrants and to maximize the functioning, as Powell put it, of "congenial spirits" in

an environment conducive to a personal expression of one's vocational talents and to a collective harmony among the various elements of society. And for both, the rationale for the creation and use of their respective mythologies was, if nothing more, to express the values which they believed were fundamental to the reconstruction of life in the post-Civil War South, and to make bearable an existence in which there existed a troubling incongruity between the visions they held—whether of "New South" or "magic city"—and the reality—substantially less than what was envisioned—which they constantly faced.

The significant fact, at least in terms of this essay, about the coincidence of themes carried by these two myths and of the rationales for their existence and use is not that the coincidence occurred so early on in the development of "New

South" ideology—thirteen years before Henry Grady's "New South" speech of 1886, and only seven years after the publication of DeBow's pioneering article on the future of the "New South"—but, rather, that a recognition of such a coincidence denies the claim so often made by writers of Birmingham history—whether explicitly or implicitly—that the history of the "magic city" is really just local history. On the contrary, Birmingham history has partaken and does now partake of currents of thought which are either regional or national in scope and character; in turn, it has contributed and does now contribute to the development of such currents of thought.

The parallelism which exists between the myths of "New South" and "magic city" as to thematic emphases and rationales for their existence and use does indeed suggest some interplay between local, regional, and na-



J.D.B. DeBow. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library.

tional history. But just as this coincidence prompts a consideration of Birmingham history as something more than just local, so do other coincidences. As has been noted earlier, one characteristic theme of "New South" mythology was a concern for the down-playing of ethnic or racial differences and a parallel concern for the encouragement of harmonious interracial and interethnic relations, the result of both being the creation of an environment in which the full limits of human productivity might be realized. As Henry Grady phrased it in his 1886 "New South" address to the New England Society of New York,

No section shows a more prosperous laboring population than the negroes of the South, none in fuller sympathy with the employing and land-owning class. He shares our school fund, has the fullest protection of our laws and the friendship of our people. Self-interest, as well as honor, demand that he should have this. Our future, our very existence, depend upon our working out this Negro problem in full and exact justice.¹⁹

Although Grady's statement, in tone and content, appears remarkably atypical of what has been traditionally pictured as the Southerner's post-war attitude toward the freed slave, that

statement, if placed in conjunction with segments of other Grady speeches, takes on a totally different color. In October of 1887, Grady delivered an address in Dallas, Texas, at the State Fair, in which he once again directed his attention to what he had, one year earlier, termed the Negro problem. "Those who would put the negro race in supremacy," he noted, "would work against infallible decree, for the white race can never submit to its domination, because the white race is the superior race. The supremacy of the white race of the South must be maintained forever and the domination of the negro race resisted at all points and at all hazards—because the white race is the superior race."¹¹

What Grady made explicit in his Dallas speech of 1887 was an important qualification of one cardinal tenet of "New South" mythology: in Powell's words, the need for "a congeniality of spirits," i.e., the need to diminish interracial and interethnic tensions and to create thereby an environment in which opportunities and facilities were to be afforded to all so that they might "exercise their functions and endowments in their most agreeable vocations." What Grady made explicit in the speech of 1887, Powell had made equally explicit fourteen years earlier in a letter to the editors of the *Birmingham Independent*, the city's major newspaper. Responding to a number of requests that he seek the office of governor of the state of Alabama, he included in his letter rejecting such a candidacy, the following comments on the proper place of blacks in the fabric of state and local politics.

My opinions in regard to the best policy of the white man and the negro in State and municipal government are well known to those who know them at all. Honest and intelligent negroes admit the present disqualification of their uneducated race for making laws for the Government of the State.

Is there a man in the State, who is not a knave or a fool, who doubts the conclusions of the honest and intelligent negro, that a white man's government is the best to secure the passage of and enforce the execution of good laws which operate equally upon all? There are some negroes perhaps now qualified to legislate honestly and intelligently, but they number so few among the massive ignorance of their race, that if they are true to themselves, their families, their race, and their country, they will cooperate with their former masters and friends for good government.¹²

Once again, the conjunction of emphases is apparent, and, once again, the tendency to view local history as simply local is gainsaid. To this conjunction of emphases, there is, however, an added dimension. What both Grady and Powell stressed—the superiority of whites over blacks—was not just an important qualification of one tenet of their "New South" creed but—and perhaps of greater importance—clear evidence of a carryover into "New South" rhetoric of one element so definitively a part of "Old South" rhetoric.

If a coincidence of emphases in Powell and DeBow

regarding industrialization, immigration, and outside capital proves instructive for those who seek to interpret Birmingham history, so does the coincidence of the emphasis upon white supremacy in both "New South" and "Old South" rhetoric. The tendency of historians and journalists to view the history of Birmingham as only peripherally related to that of the pre-Civil War era and more often than not divergent from it is at least partially corrected by an awareness of this commonality of emphasis upon white supremacy.

The design of this brief analysis of "New South" mythmaking is to suggest what C. Vann Woodward noted so pointedly, over twenty years ago, in his influential essay, "The Search for Southern Identity." No history and no mythology can be studied intelligently in a vacuum.¹³ Both the myth of the "magic city" and that of the "New South" reflect a need

common to Southerners in the years immediately following the Civil War: a need to supplant poverty, frustration, and defeat with wealth and success; and both reflect a need common not only to Southerners in the post-Civil War period but in the pre-war years as well: a need for power and dominance, for the supremacy of whites over blacks; and both reflect the inter-relatedness of the experience of persons living in the post-Civil War South, whether on a local or a regional level, and of the language and images which they chose to give expression to that experience.

Notes

1. Elyton Land Company, Minute Book, 1871-1892, pp. 52-53; Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
2. James R. Powell, "Second Annual Report to the Stockholders of the Elyton Land Company," in Robert Barnwell Henckel, *Information about Birmingham, Jefferson County and Alabama*, entry No. 26; typescript, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.
- 3, 4, 5. *Ibid.*
6. George B. Tindall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," in Frank E. Vandiver, ed., *The Idea of the South: Pursuit of a Central Theme* ([Chicago]: Published for William Marsh Rice University by the University of Chicago Press, 1964).
7. Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 6-13.
8. J.D.B. DeBow, "Manufactures, the South's True Remedy," *DeBow's Review*, III (February, 1867), 176-77.
9. Powell, "Second Annual Report."
10. Henry W. Grady, "The New South," in Edwin DuBois Shurter, ed., *The Complete Orations and Speeches of Henry W. Grady* (New York: Hinds, Noble & Eldredge, 1910), p. 16.
11. Henry W. Grady, "The South and Her Problems," in Shurter, ed., *Complete Orations and Speeches*, p. 33.
12. Mary Crane, *The Life of James R. Powell and Early History of Alabama and Birmingham* (Brooklyn: Braunworth & Company, 1930), pp. 269-71. Powell's "Letter to the Editors" appeared in the *Independent* on August 21, 1873, and was reprinted in the *Montgomery Advertiser* on August 31, 1873.
13. C. Vann Woodward, "The Search for Southern Identity," in Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, eds., *Myth and Southern Reality: The New South* (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1974), pp. 137-50; see also Gaston, *New South Creed*, pp. 12-13.



Henry W. Grady. Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library.

ALIVE AGAIN WITH ADAPTIVE REUSE

By Phillip Morris



Ghiardelli Square, San Francisco, California. (SITES)

“Adaptive reuse” it is called, the process of renovating older buildings for various purposes while keeping the essential character intact. This is not breaking news now. In fact, one of the adaptive reuse projects included in “Buildings Reborn: New Uses, Old Places” — Ghiardelli Square in San Francisco — can be considered historic, a model for scores of others over the past decade. But that’s not important. The real news about adaptive reuse is that it is more than a fad, more than a trend; it represents a deeper change in attitude about how we build, about what we value in our cities and towns.

Compare it to furnishing a house. An urban place with buildings of different vintages lining the street is like a room with a rich mixture of antiques and meaningful objects, reflecting the owners’ personality. A street all new is like model condominiums, all bought anonymously at once. Boring.

If this concern for the historic layering of cities, towns, and even rural landscape is truly a revolution in American statement—a more mature, sophisticated frame of mind—we can expect there to be many associated effects. Let’s explore them.

First, of course, came the initial steps toward historic preservation, the protection and full restoration of significant landmarks. In Birmingham, Arlington falls within this category, as does the Sloss Furnace work now underway, two poles on the spectrum of Birmingham and Alabama history. The late, lamented Terminal Station was the greatest loss. Landmark preservation was the first ringing call for the new sensibility, and it remains a vital factor. But realizing that only a small part of our architectural/cultural heritage could be secured with museum status, the preservationist movement looked to a wider net, a way to protect whole streets and districts that otherwise faced neglect and eventual loss. The neighborhood historic district was a major, effective response and has saved residential quarters in virtually all Southern towns. The Forest Park and Rhodes Park National Register Districts are two Birmingham examples. Commercial historic districting and adaptive reuse have been put to use rather more slowly and less comprehensively, but with success. Birmingham’s Five Points South Historic District is a notable recent success.

And a successful commercial building restoration/renovation can have great visual impact. For one thing, these are buildings in the public realm occupying strategic locations along much-traveled streets. For another, most older commercial buildings have been abused and obscured by dirt, signs and inappropriate remodelings. It is a glorious moment, and one not lost on the passing public, when a previously unnoticed structure is brought back to life through cleaning, painting and repair. Even a two- or three-story building stands up dramatically in the streetscape when its original architecture shines again. Sensitive facade restoration is the key. And a completed building in a row of abused ones serves as a compelling model for others to follow. The very cleaning of an early skyscraper to reveal the gleaming white-glazed terra cotta that sheathes its exterior makes it proud again, and the sensitively restored ornament at the top says clearly that it has something the newer towers can’t reproduce.

The facade keeps the building in period. There can be changes, but they should be modest and respectful. Thankfully, the era when architects felt they always had to “leave their mark” on an older building is mostly past. When it comes to facades, research of period is more important than invention. Respect for the work of original architects comes before present ego. For the purpose of adaptive reuse, and just because it’s not so much in the public view, there is more freedom for innovative

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design on the interior. But here, too, the best work respects the essential character of the original; the most successful adaptive design manages to bridge between the spirit of old and new. It becomes a question of taste, which is hard to define; you know when it's at work. Maybe the choice of color: not bright yellow, but a neutral gray. Maybe the design of railings: not dated modern, but a fine new/old hybrid. Maybe the selection of materials: not dark wood paneling against heart pine beams, but a neutral, painted surface to play up the original wood.

The gifts given to the street by vintage architecture—fine details, interesting windows, beautiful materials, intimate scale—are more than reward enough for preservation and reuse. But a city or town gains vitality when old buildings are filled with activity. There is nothing sadder than to see a city (so-called) with some tall office towers surrounded by a bleak sea of surface parking lots. Lucky is the city like Birmingham which still counts a number of downtown neighborhoods like the small town-in-town of Second Avenue North, the Fourth Avenue North black commercial district or the tiny “Park Avenue” piece of Twenty-first Street North when it passes the Ridgley with its curved brick entry court. If the existing uses can be sustained and enhanced by complementary new ones, the dynamic of a diverse urban center will be restored. Is there any better antidote to the separated-use sterility of the modern city than a street full of restored two-, three-, or four-story buildings, each housing shops on the ground floor with offices or apartments above? The best team of urban designers and planners couldn't invent a better model for an energy-saving, mixed-use, pedestrian-serving development than what is already there.

It is the “already there” aspect of our towns and cities which, hopefully, will inspire some imagination and concern when we build new. It is very possible that the whole preservation/adaptive reuse movement has had good effect on our ethic of building new. In a very broad way, respectful treatment of older buildings heightens our expectations of what goes next to them or even down the street or across town. And within the profession of architecture, the issue of designing for context has grown in importance over the past few years—though still not where it should be. The renderings of new buildings that a few years ago showed them always in isolation are not seen as much now; the question of whether the new building fits what is next door or across the street is given at least lip service. The studio problems in architecture schools are less likely to be new towns or megastructures, more likely to be design for “infill” buildings, say, a mix of offices, artists' lofts, and shops fitted between a 1920s skyscraper and a nineteenth century warehouse. Indeed, if all the gaps in Birmingham's downtown were plugged with thoughtfully-designed infill buildings, the total effect might be more like a lively quarter in a great European city than the sadly dimensionless model of a medium-sized American city wondering where all the life went.

It would not happen overnight, and it's best not done so quickly. But the vision and expectation should be developed now—is, in fact, beginning. It is a good time to be building and rebuilding cities. The turnaround in perception developed through preservation and adaptive-use translates into a broad public concern about the quality of the built environment. We can ask questions about what's proposed to be built. Does it have to be that big? Or tall? Or shiny? What uses will be included? Why not let the lower floors pick up the scale and texture of the older block next door? Questions to be raised, a context to be respected, a past to help animate the present and shape the future. And to get these issues into the public realm—exhibitions, awards for work well done, and the fresh vision of children looking at the city that will, in turn, help shape them.

Buildings reborn, an awareness reborn. Facades that tell us where we have been, along streets that help us know who we are, in a city that is someplace.

DESIGN AWARDS COMPETITION

To recognize and reward historic preservation projects by Birmingham architects, the Birmingham Historical Society sponsored a Design Awards Competition. The competition followed standard American Institute of Architecture rules for submission and judging in Design Awards Programs. *Southern Living* Executive Editor Phillip Morris, Montgomery architect Jim Barganier of Barganier, McKee, Sims Architects Associates, and Georgia Institute of Technology Professor Robert Segrest, Jr. served as members of the awards jury. Eleven local architectural firms submitted twenty-five projects in three categories: adaptive reuse, restoration, and context design.¹ Six projects were selected as award winners.

ADAPTIVE REUSE:

Steiner Building

First Avenue North at 21st Street

Architect: Kidd, Plosser and Sprague

Client: Steiner Landmarks Limited,
Hubert Goings, Managing Partner

Collins Building

Morris Avenue at 21st Street

Architect: Kidd, Plosser and Sprague

Client: Linder, Hill and Ballenger. Accountants with Steiner Landmarks Limited

Worns Building

209-211 22nd Street North

Architect: Jim Waters & Associates

Client: Mr. and Mrs. Jim H. Waters, Jr.

RESTORATION:

Birmingham Realty Building

2118 First Avenue North

Architect: Giattina, Kirkwood and Partners

Client: Birmingham Realty Company,
Sidney W. Smyer, Jr., Chairman

Empire Building, exterior

First Avenue North at 20th Street

Architect: Renneker, Tichansky &
Associates, Inc.

Client: Colonial Bank of Alabama, N.A.,
Jack Alexander, Jr., President

NEW CONTEXT DESIGN:

Barrister Hall

2205 Morris Avenue

Architect: Robert Watson

Client: Barrister Hall Company: David
Johnson, Charles Dunn, Richard
Groenendyke and Steve Salter.

1. The following are here defined as an aid to the reader.

Preservation is the process, including maintenance, of treating an existing building to arrest or slow future deterioration, stabilize the structure, and provide structural safety without changing or adversely affecting the fabric or appearance of the structure.

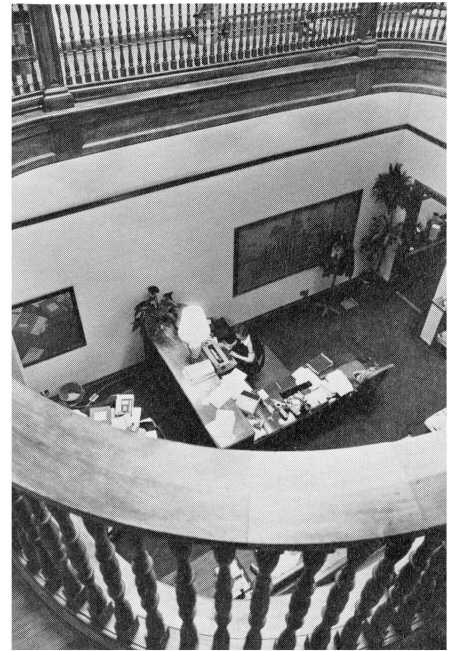
Restoration involves the careful and meticulous return of a building, usually on its original site, to its appearance at a particular period of time by removal of later work or replacement of missing earlier work.

Rehabilitation, a term often used interchangeably with renovation, involves modification or change to an existing building. Rehabilitation extends the useful life or utility of a building through repairs or alterations, sometimes major, while the features of the building that contributed to its architectural, cultural or historical character are preserved.

Adaptive Reuse, a term used interchangeably with recycling implies new functions for older structures that would otherwise be demolished. Adaptive reuse usually involves extensive restoration or rehabilitation, both inside and out.

New Context Design, a new term for preservationists, involves the construction of new buildings respectful of their historic or contemporary neighbors.

BIRMINGHAM REALTY BUILDING



Restored interior with open skylit gallery. (*Birmingham News*)

Front facade with terra cotta Godhead cartouche in keystone arch. (*Birmingham News*)

First Avenue North at Twenty-first Street
Architect: Giattina, Kirkwood and Partners
Client: Birmingham Realty Company, Sidney W. Smyer, Jr., Chairman

In 1905, the Birmingham Realty Company established its corporate headquarters in this office building. William C. Weston, a New Zealand-born architect, designed the two-story Beaux Arts style building in yellow-brown brick with deep brown terra cotta ornament. Continuing in the tradition of its parent company, the Elyton Land Company which founded the City of Birmingham in 1870, Birmingham Realty plays a prominent role in the growth and development of Birmingham's downtown and suburban neighborhoods.

By the 1970s, modifications had totally obscured the original interior design. The entire second floor of the building, originally the location of the board room, open skylit gallery and offices served as attic and storage space, concealed by a drop ceiling. Renovation required removal of the accumulated modifications and restoration of initial finishes. Sensitive recessed lighting was introduced. Teller cages were reinstalled and planters for the entrance and courtyard garden were molded from remaining forms. The original stained glass skylight was rebuilt from remaining fragments; balusters, rails, moulding, decks, tables and mantles were identified, rebuilt and refinished as the interior was reassembled appropriately.

Design Award for Restoration: for making this small building with class, once again, a jewel.

EMPIRE BUILDING



View of Empire Building and Birmingham's "Canyon of Skyscrapers" along 20th Street. (Bill Renneker)

Birmingham's Hall of Fame for Architects, after recent cleaning. (Bill Renneker)



First Avenue North at Twentieth Street

Architect: Renneker, Tichansky & Associates, Inc.

Client: Colonial Bank of Alabama, N.A., Jack Alexander, Jr., President

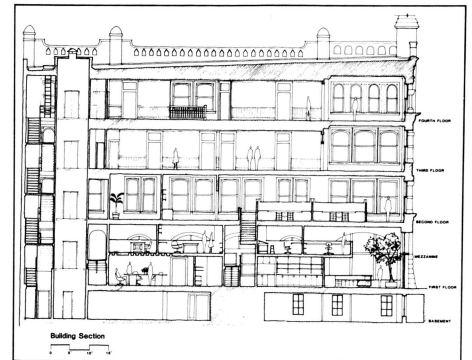
In 1909, the Empire Improvement Company, a group of local developers, arranged one of the city's first major development loans and built this elegant tower, the third of the four skyscrapers at the intersection of First Avenue North and Twentieth Street, then the heart of Birmingham's central business district. Citizens proudly proclaimed the intersection "the heaviest corner on earth." Clothed in a brilliant white dress of ornamental terra cotta, the Empire Building's elaborate facade employed classical motifs and details to give it an air of authority borrowed from Greece and Rome. In the panels above the paired arches on the 16th floor, Roman busts feature the architect, William Weston, and the contractor's representative, Frederick Larkin, depicted as Emperor William and Frederick the Great. Birmingham's only hall of fame for architects is topped by glorious E's along the cornice for the Empire Improvement Company. City National Bank purchased the building in 1965. Colonial Bank of Alabama, N.A., the present owner and principal occupant, is the successor by merger to City National Bank.

In the 1982-1983 renovation, the entire exterior was cleaned and tuck-pointed, double hung windows replaced with thermal insulated glass and aluminum sashes (approved as more energy efficient by the Department of the Interior), paint applied to accent details on rails and canopies, entrance doors replaced and large existing signs replaced with discrete signage. (The Jury did not consider the interior on this project.)

Design Award for Restoration: a wonderful resuscitation of an important early skyscraper.

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STEINER BUILDING



Steiner Building at night. (Timothy Hursley)

Third floor conference room, investment bankers' quarters. (Bud Hunter)

Building section, noting interior design solutions for architect and investment banking firms. (Kidd, Plosser and Sprague)

First Avenue North at Twenty-first Street

Architect: Kidd, Plosser and Sprague

Client: Steiner Landmarks Limited, Hubert Goings, Managing Partner

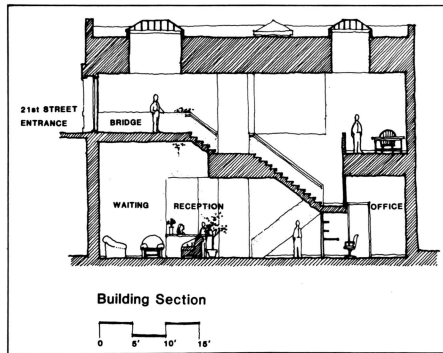
This slender four-story structure was built in 1890 to house the banking offices of Burghard and Sigfried Steiner. The building presents the only remaining commercial example of the Richardsonian Romanesque style in the city. The Steiner Brothers and their descendants operated an important commercial and investment banking concern here from 1890 to 1962.

In 1980, the building was renovated as office space for an architectural and investment banking firm. The exterior masonry, the elaborate red brickwork and contrasting stone was sound, but windows, roofs and interiors were badly deteriorated. During renovation, interior spaces were essentially gutted, a new elevator, plumbing, mechanical and electrical systems were installed and a mezzanine inserted between ground and second floors to provide additional floor space without compromising the large ground-floor windows. The redressing of the interior incorporated salvaged materials such as hand-rails, balusters, skylights and marble floors where appropriate. Renovation employed design features that harmonized with surviving features of the original building and placed offices to take full advantage of window lighting. These solutions and the use of glass to subdivide interior space distinctively solved the problems of carving up a narrow building.

While offices for the architectural firm which occupy the first and second floors and mezzanine employ contemporary solutions to interior design, the third and fourth floor offices of the investment banking firm recreate the spirit of a Victorian gentleman's office suite.

Design Award for Adaptive Reuse of the historic Steiner Building.

COLLINS BUILDING



Morris Avenue facade, after renovation. (Bud Hunter)

Skylit atrium. (Bud Hunter)

Building Section noting successful design solution to problem of linking two street levels. (Kidd, Plosser and Sprague)

Morris Avenue at Twenty-first Street
Architect: Kidd, Plosser and Sprague

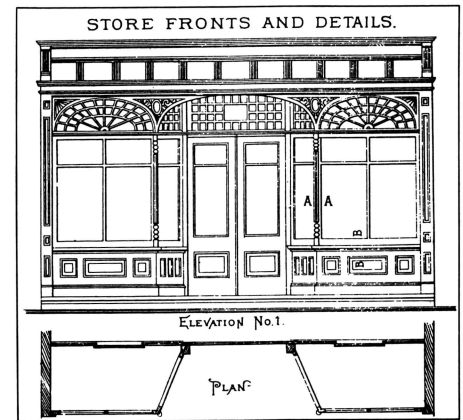
Client: Linder, Hill and Ballenger, Accountants, with Steiner Landmarks Limited

Built in 1900 this two-story warehouse was designed in the commercial Italianate style and occupied a prominent corner in Birmingham's early commercial wholesale district, then concentrated along Morris Avenue. Original tenants were small family enterprises which sold fruits, produce and groceries along Morris Avenue and merchandise and food brokers whose offices had entrances on Morris Avenue and the Twenty-first Street viaduct. Collins and Company wholesale grocers was an early tenant. Over the years, alterations to the exterior of the building resulted in removal of the cornice, blocking in of windows and overlays of artificial stone along the viaduct. A fire in 1920 and a succession of tenants destroyed most of the original interior detailing.

In 1973, Morris Avenue was designated a National Register Historic District. Most of the warehouses no longer retained their original functions and new uses were encouraged. The City relaid the original Belgian blocks and restored gas lights, but substantive renovation awaited the change in federal tax laws which favored renovation of historic buildings. This Collins Building renovation included the replacement of artificial stone, restored window openings, rehabilitated cast iron work and a restored Morris Avenue storefront. A new bracketed wooden cornice compatible with the original design was installed and the entire facade painted "Morris Avenue Brown" (a plum and gray mixture) with cornice and columns a reddish-brown in a skillful handling of the storefront such that it becomes part of the building. Inside, a two-story skylit atrium linked first and second floor entrances with a bridge and stairway, providing an excellent transition between street levels. Offices are oriented toward this interior atrium.

Design Award for Adaptive Reuse: the courage to take a marginal building and transform it into a significant statement.

W O R N S B U I L D I N G



209-211 Twenty-second Street North
 Architect: Jim Waters and Associates
 Client: Mr. and Mrs. Jim H. Waters, Jr.

New storefront, inspired from 1881 design. (Joey Brackner)

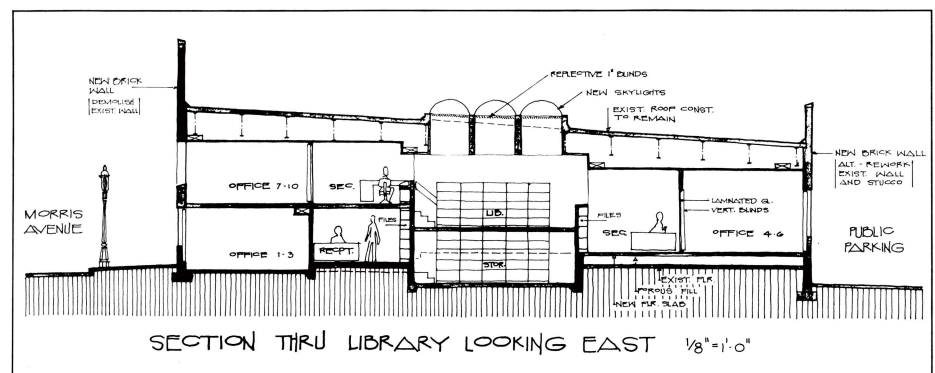
Modern Architectural Designs and Details, William T. Comstock, Store Front Plan, Plate 26, Elevation No. 1, 1881. (Courtesy, Jim Waters)

Built in 1888 to sell "Queen's ware" (English ceramics) on the ground floor and for house boarders above, this building has served plumbers, warehouse owners, confectioners, furniture and auto rental dealers, and loan companies. The Worns plumbing concern was an early long-term tenant. A fine example of Victorian Italianate commercial architecture, the exterior of the building has been altered less than any other downtown business structure of this period. Cast iron columns support the entrance and handsome pressed metal mouldings frame the windows. A finely detailed cornice lines the roof.

In the 1977 renovation of the Victorian structure for office occupancy, the first such renovation in the downtown business district, the building was cleaned, accumulated paint chemically removed, the facade repainted, the cornice was stripped, repaired and painted with a sanded paint appropriate to the period. A new storefront was planned. Design for the storefront was carefully researched and eventually adopted from builders' plans of the Victorian era. The resulting mahogany and glass storefront with its rich wood finishes, attractive recessing and nice shadow lines recreates an appropriate Victorian entrance. (The Jury did not consider the interior on this project.)

Design Award for Adaptive Reuse: for the authentic research and skillful execution of the new storefront.

BARRISTER HALL



New Morris Avenue facade. (Joey Brackner)
 Section through library looking east. (Robert Watson)
 Skylit atrium with library mezzanine. (Birmingham
 Historical Society)

2205 Morris Avenue

Architect: Robert Watson

Client: Barrister Hall Company: David Johnson, Charles Dunn,
 Richard Groenendyke and Steve Salter

In the 1950s, a utilitarian style red brick warehouse and garage replaced an early Morris Avenue warehouse. The one-story structure served a necessary function but was out of character with the turn-of-the-century warehouses on the Avenue.

In the 1982 renovation, the existing Morris Avenue facade was removed and the interior gutted, leaving only the basic form. The Morris Avenue facade was replaced with one more sympathetic to the two- and three-story structures of the Historic District. The new facade with its flattened arch windows provides an excellent bridging of space and effectively ties the building to its historic neighbors, accomplishing the purpose of making it stand up without standing out. The subdued brick color was a fortunate choice.

The garage interior was converted to law offices. The client, three separate law firms, required interior spaces that would allow each firm to maintain an individual identity, while permitting them to share library, conference and reception areas. Individual firm identity was maintained by locating each firm's separate level with private offices facing a continuous vaulted skylit atrium housing library, mezzanine and common areas.

Award for New Context Design: this transformation of a common red brick garage into a design statement.

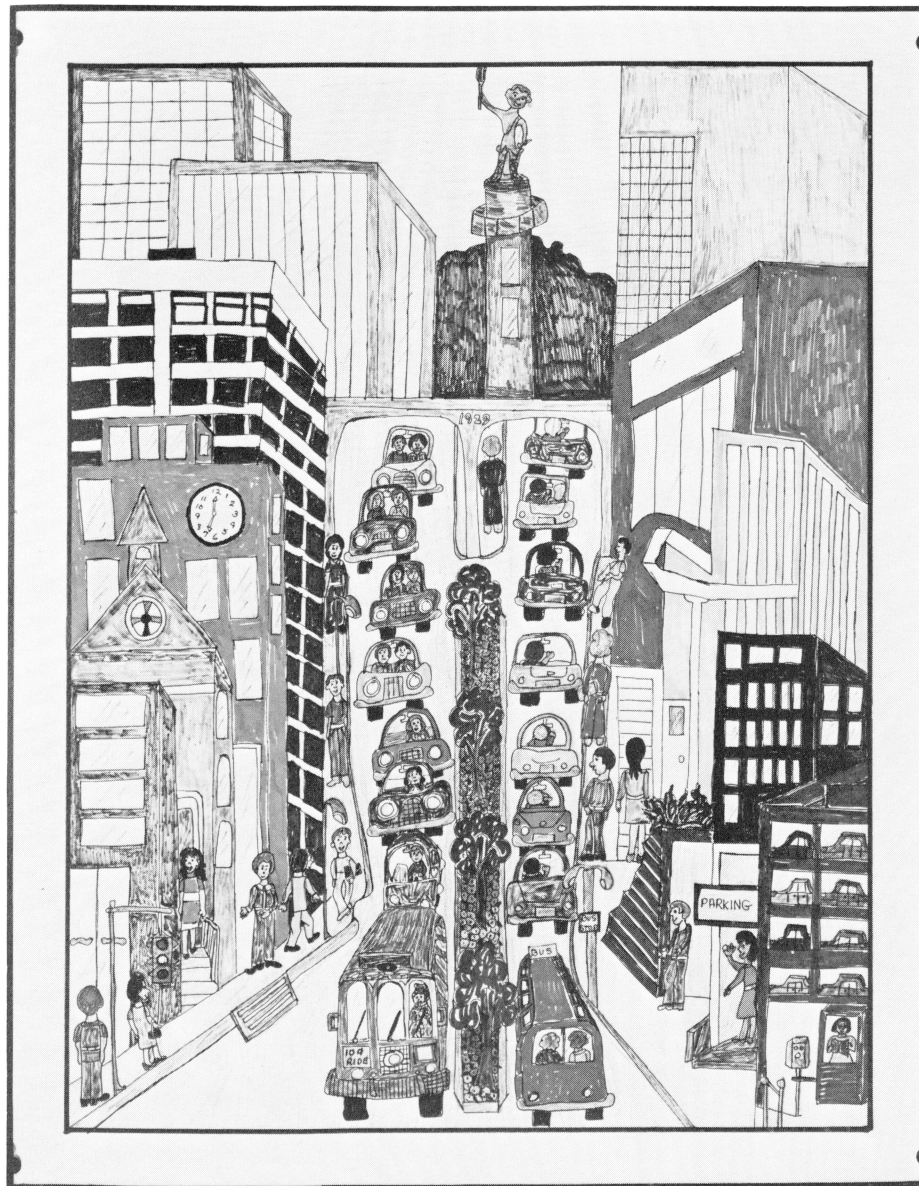
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 Old Places

IMPRESSIONS OF DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM POSTER COMPETITION

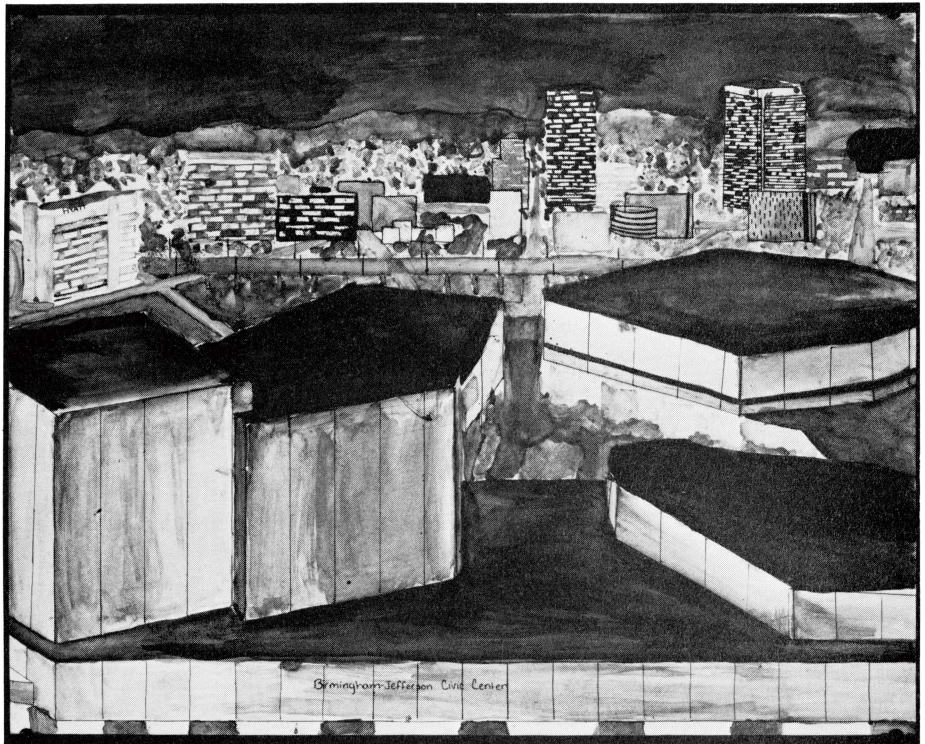
Birmingham Historical Society

To encourage students to explore and interpret the buildings of downtown Birmingham, the Birmingham Historical Society sponsored a poster competition for the area school students. Participants from twelve schools, in the Kindergarten through Eighth Grade levels, entered the competition. Judges included Helen Bass, teacher of art in the Birmingham schools for 40 years; Gail Treschel, Associate Director, Birmingham Museum of Art; Katherine Shannon, architect; Mike Calvert, Director of Downtown Development, Operation New Birmingham; and Claire-Louise Datnow, curriculum specialist. Anne Liles served as competition coordinator.

The "Impressions of Downtown Birmingham" Poster Competition is one part of the Birmingham Historical Society's "Downtown—an Outdoor Classroom" schools program. Initiated in 1978 and generously supported by grants from the Junior League of Birmingham, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Linn-Henley Charitable Trust, this nationally award winning program also offers guided downtown walking tours, heritage hikes, teachers' workshops and handbooks to assist students in the exploration of the history and architecture of downtown Birmingham.

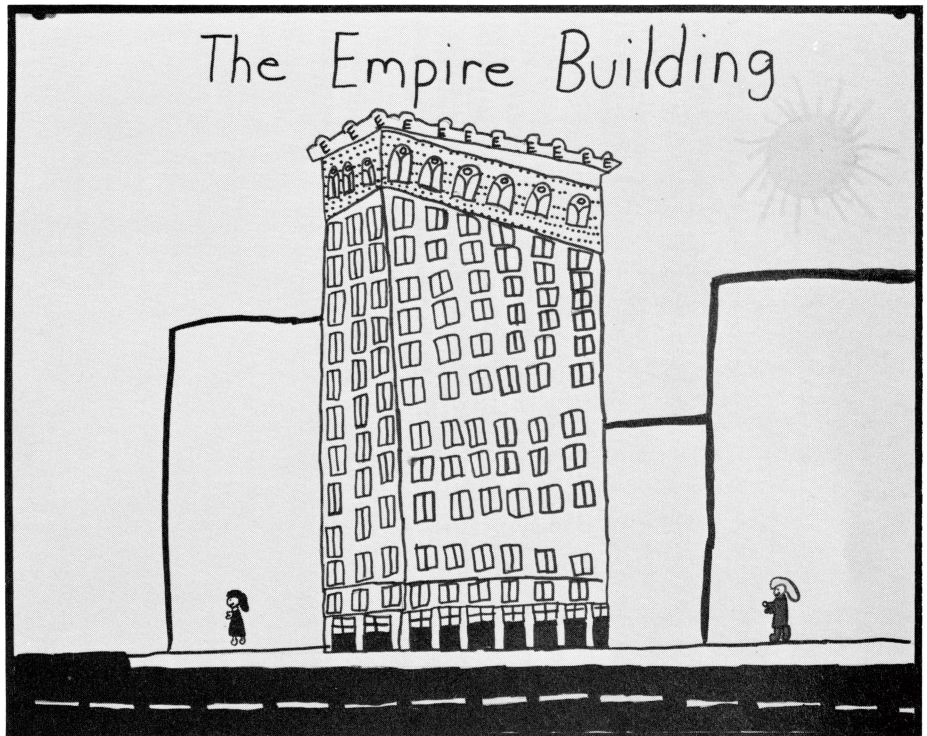


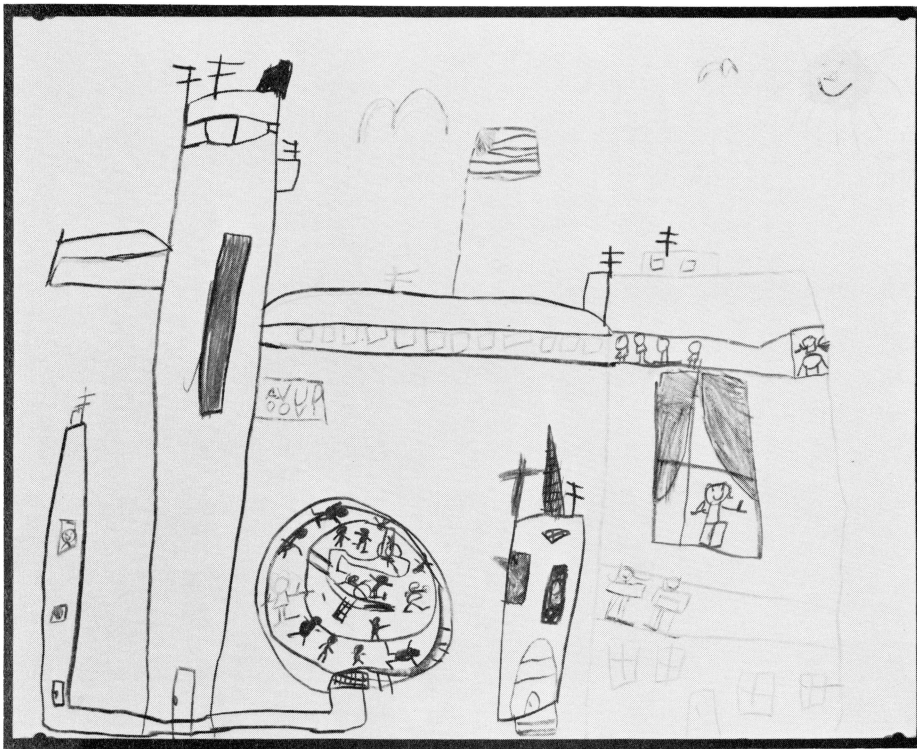
Birmingham Green, Eunice Dungan



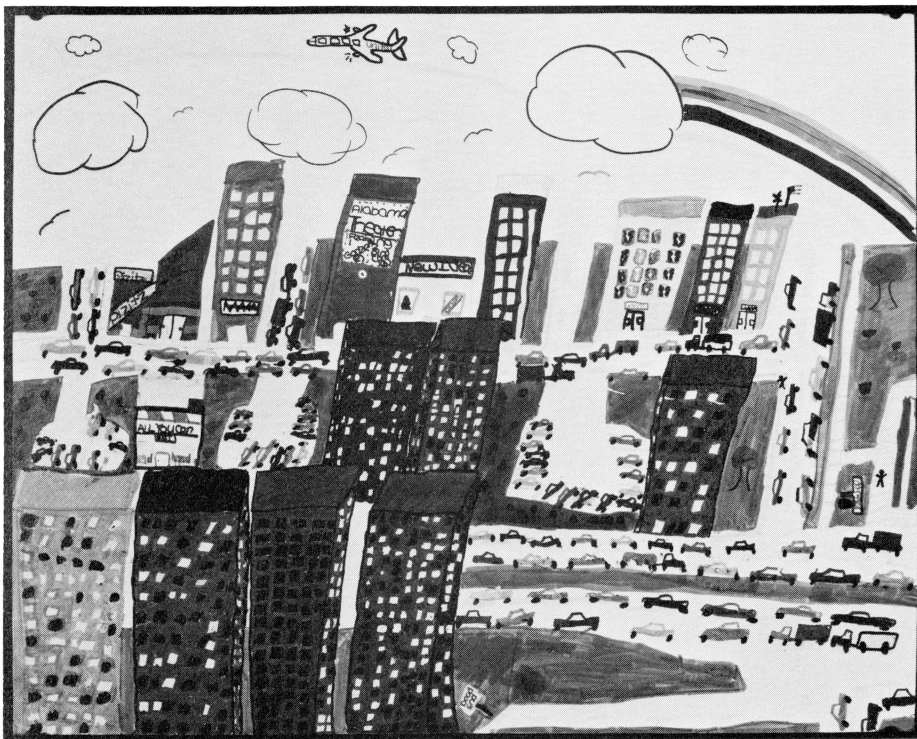
Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center, Brooke Hartzog

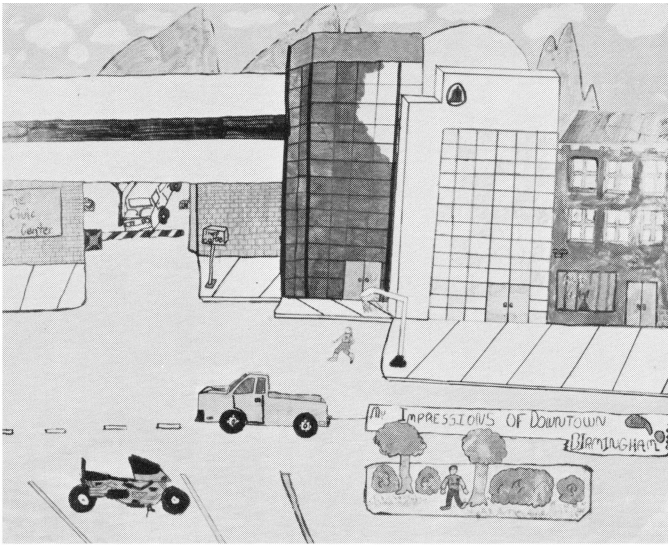
The Empire Building, Renee Lankford





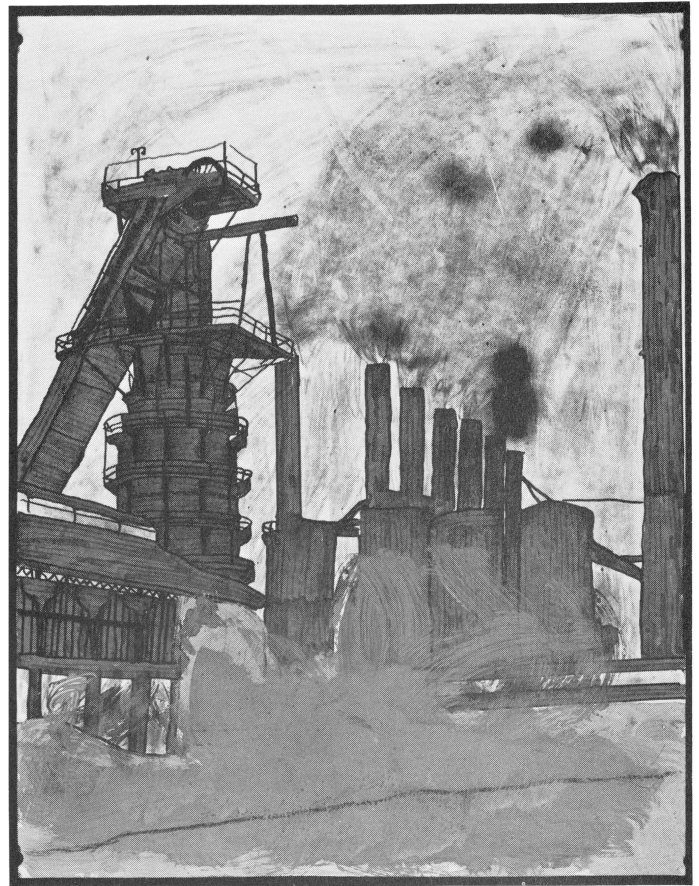
Cathedral of the Advent, Marcella Culver & Cam Johnson
 Birmingham: The Busy City, Jody Hagood





My Impressions of Downtown Birmingham Buildings,
David Abercrombie

Sloss Furnace in Blast, Goodloe White



EXHIBITORS

*Welcome to Downtown
Birmingham*

Rhonda Bigbee

Grade 6B, W.J. Christian School

St. Paul's Cathedral (Old
Version)

Michael Brown

Grade 5, Irondale Jr. High

Urban Renewal

Lance Counts

Grade 5, Irondale Jr. High

*My Impressions of Downtown
Birmingham Buildings*

Brent Cross

Grade 6B, W.J. Christian School

*Birmingham's Old & New
Buildings*

Carol Gann

Grade 2, Grace Christian School

St. Paul's Cathedral

Currie Gates

Grade 5, Highlands Day School

Financial Center

Carrie Graves

Grade 6, Altamont School

Three Sisters

Ashley Gregory

Grade 5, Vestavia East

Alabama Power Company

Michael Hale

Grade 5, W.J. Christian

Birmingham of the Future

Drew Heatherly, Billy

Hopton-Jones & Tommy Russell

Grade 8, Holman School

*Impressions of Downtown
Birmingham Buildings*

Kenneth Houston

Grade 7, Graymont School

AmSouth

Brad Jones

Grade 4, Mountain Brook

Elementary

Peanut Depot

Julia Lee

Grade 5, Vestavia East

Steiner Bank

Tina Munday & Janet Gleason

Grade 8, Holman School

First Presbyterian Church

B.B. Norman

Grade 5B, W.J. Christian School

Old First National Bank

Michael Paige

Grade 8, Holman School

*Impressions of Downtown
Birmingham*

Stegner Patterson

Grade 7, Graymont School

*Impressions of Downtown
Birmingham*

Tarynda L. Samuels

Grade 7, Graymont School

Birmingham Public Library

Manolis Volanakis

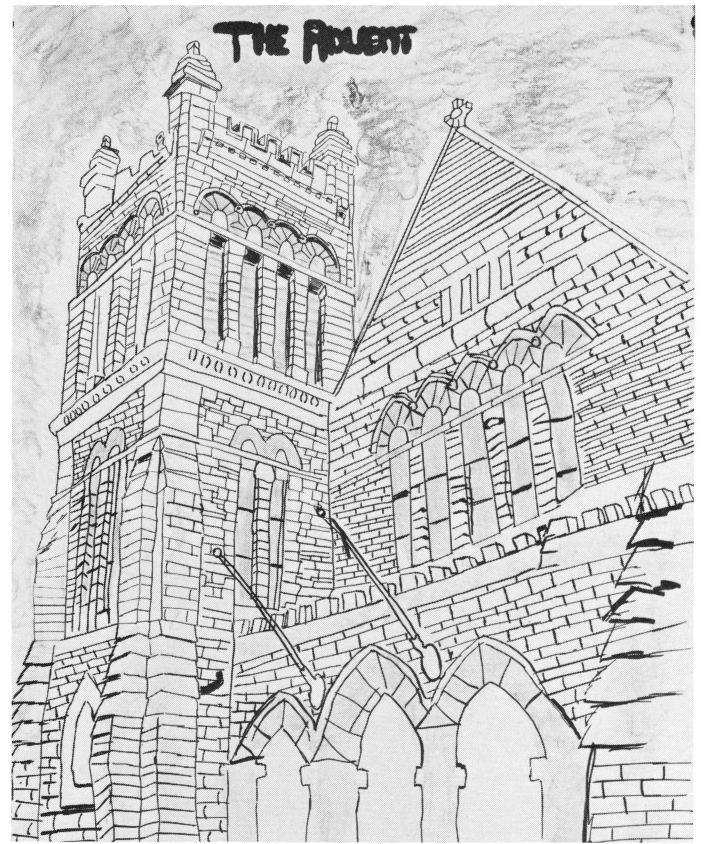
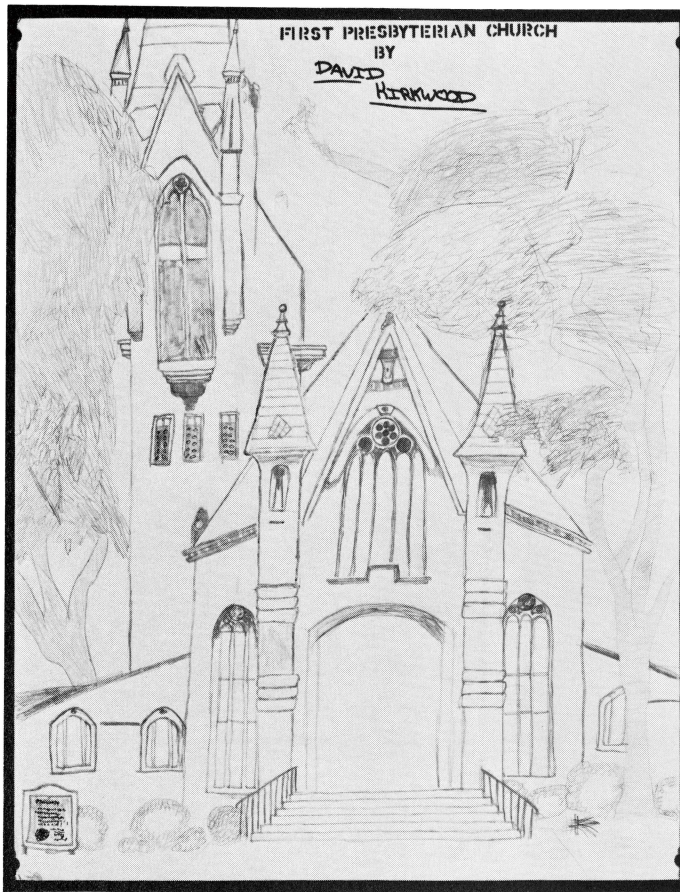
Grade 6, Advent Day School

*Moonlight Magic Over the
Magic City*

Laurel Walker

Grade 2, Grace Christian

Buildings
Reborn
New Uses
Old Places



First Presbyterian Church, David Kirkwood

The Advent, Marjorie Lee White

Welcome to Birmingham
Carey Watts
Grade 6B, W.J. Christian School

Skyscraper and Tree
Nick Wells
Grade 5K, Woodlawn Methodist

Empire Building
James White
Grade 6, Advent Day School

Birmingham the Magic City
Annette Zablotsky
Grade 7B, W.J. Christian

HONOR AWARDS
My Impressions of Downtown
Birmingham Buildings
David Abercrombie
Grade 5B, W.J. Christian School

Birmingham Green
Eunice Dungan
Grade 7, Graymont School

Birmingham-Jefferson
Civic Center
Brooke Hartzog
Grade 8, Altamont School

Welcome to Downtown
Birmingham
Tim Haskew
Grade 6AC, W.J. Christian School

First Presbyterian Church
David Kirkwood
Grade 7, Advent Day School

SPECIAL RECOGNITION
Eye Foundation Hospital
Shelley Barnes
Grade 6B, W.J. Christian School

Cathedral of the Advent
Marcella Culver & Cam Johnson
Grade 5K, Advent Day School

Sunday Afternoon on
Third Avenue
Yen-Deng Ho
Grade 6, Altamont School

Impressions of Birmingham
Brian Garrett
Grade 5AC, W.J. Christian School

Birmingham, the Busy City
Jody Hagood
Grade 2, Grace Christian

Alabama Power
Todd Harris
Grade 8, W.J. Christian School

Vulcan
Lori Key
Grade 4, Grace Christian School

The Empire Building
Renee Lankford
Grade 4, Epic School

This is It—Birmingham
John Maddox
Grade 6AC, W.J. Christian School

First National—Southern Natural
Building
Marcie Phillip
Grade 4, Mountain Brook Elementary

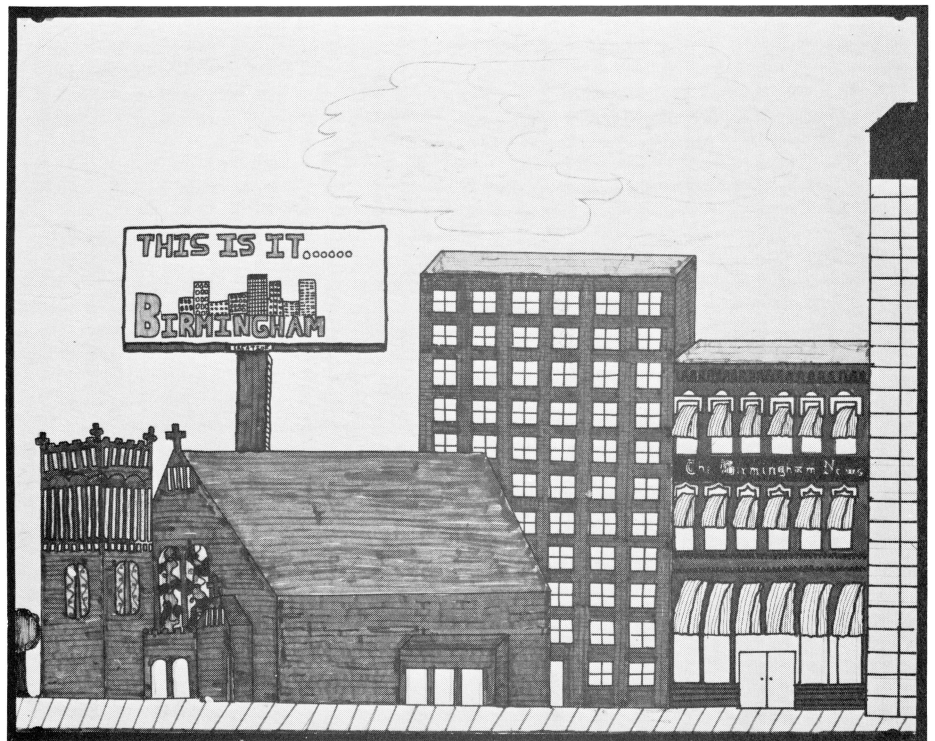
Sloss Furnace in Blast
Goodloe White
Grade 5, Advent Day School

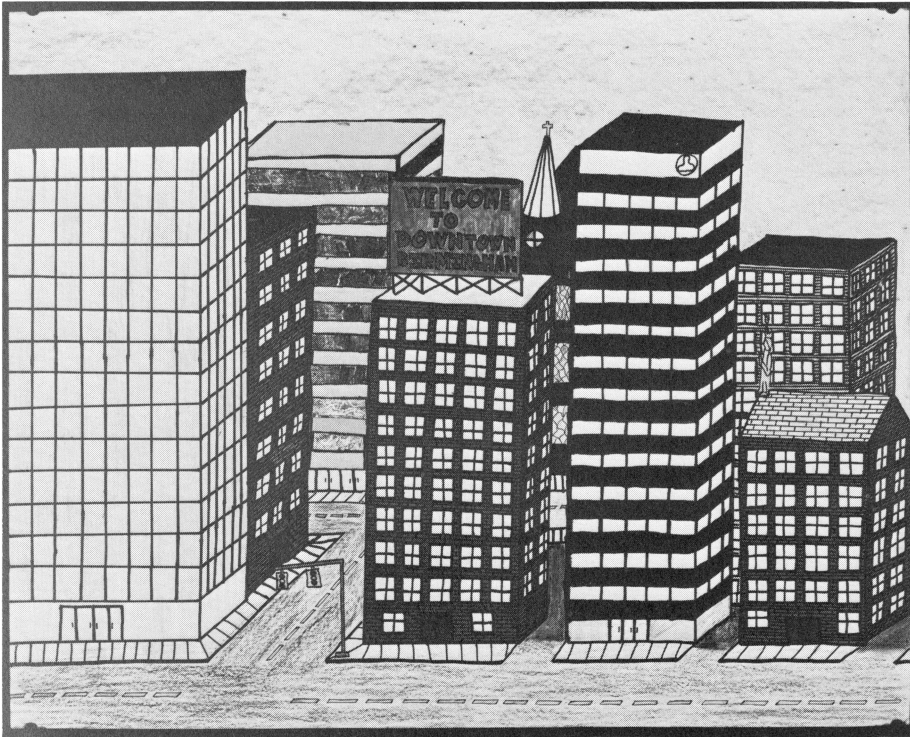
The Advent
Marjorie Lee White
Grade 5, Advent Day School



Welcome to the Magic City, Todd Harris

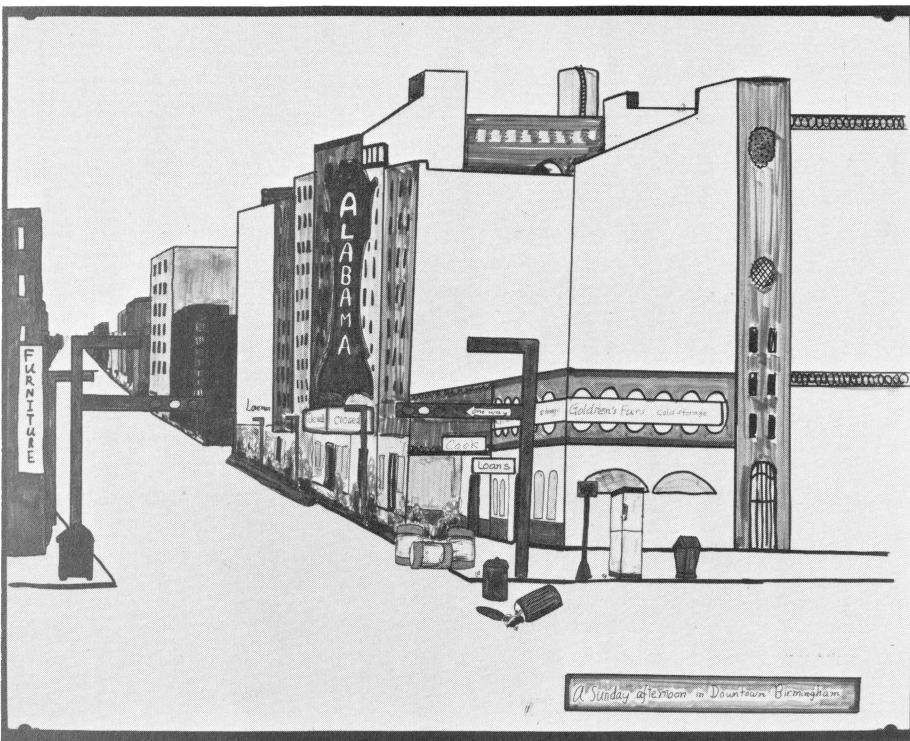
This is it. . . Birmingham, John Maddox





Welcome to Downtown Birmingham, Tim Haskew

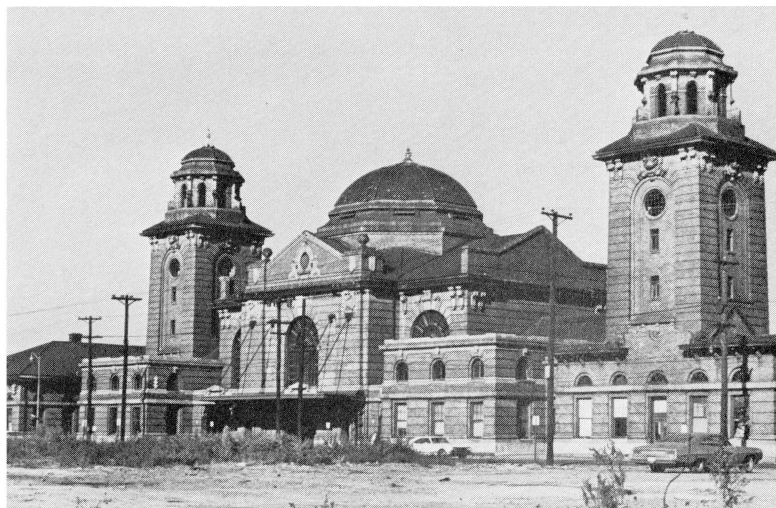
A Sunday Afternoon in Birmingham, Yen-Dong Ho



What's Special About Birmingham's History?

By Dwight Young

Figure 1. The Terminal Station, demolished in 1969. "...and I share your sense of regret." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.



Let me say the most basic and obvious thing first. Birmingham's history is special simply because it exists, because it isn't like anyone else's history, because it's Birmingham's alone. When I went to work for the National Trust [for Historic Preservation] almost five years ago, I was a little concerned by the fact that my office was to be located in Charleston. I knew just enough about the city to realize that it is frequently thought of as an unattainable preservation ideal, the standard by which other communities often measured themselves and their history. My fears have proven well-founded: when I make a field visit to a community, all too often I am met by local preservationists who begin our conversation with a statement like this: "Of course our poor town doesn't have anything really historic to offer—like Charleston." Now I am willing to accept that statement as a simple fact, but I am unwilling to accept it as an apology. When it comes to history, it seems to me that the only place for apology is if one fails to appreciate the validity of that history.

Sometimes I believe that we think of history as a physical attribute like

naturally curly hair: some of us have it and some of us don't, and those who don't have it usually wish they did, and those who do have it sometimes don't know what to do with it. I think that's a bad comparison. History isn't like naturally curly hair, it's like something much more fundamental. It's more like a heart—something that each of us has, something that we should recognize as absolutely essential to our makeup as individuals or as communities. Birmingham's history, it seems to me, is like a heart that's young and vigorous, uniquely Birmingham's and therefore special. The second thing special about Birmingham's history is that there's so much of it still here. Because it is a relatively new city, Birmingham still has as complete a record of its history in place as any community of which I know. I can guess what you're thinking: "Oh, but we've lost so much!"—and you're right. Some splendid buildings are gone—the Fox Building, the Molton and Tutwiler Hotels, the old Jefferson County Courthouse, the Terminal Station—and I share your sense of regret over their loss (fig. 1). But so much remains that I'm willing to bet that every period of Birmingham's history, from founding to boom to bust to boom again and right up to the present, is visibly, tangibly represented in buildings and neighborhoods that still stand all over the city. These are special places, evocative places which have a real power to recreate for us a sense of who their

builders were, how they lived, what they believed, where they thought they were headed.

Let me mention three special places in Birmingham, three places that seem to me particularly evocative of the events and the people—the history, in other words—that make this city different from all others.

The first of these is Red Mountain—most particularly the houses up on the very crest of the mountain (fig. 2). In a purely clinical sense, I suppose you could describe those houses as merely typical of upper-class residential designs of their period—the first few decades of the twentieth century, when architects and their clients found inspiration in the buildings of Europe and Latin America. That description really does scant justice to the visual pleasure of driving the streets of Red Mountain and finding on one corner a scaled-down Renaissance palazzo, on the next a full-blown Spanish hacienda, and then an authentic English Tudor mansion house, and then a decidedly unauthentic something that seems to combine the best and worst features of every architectural style known to man. And there they sit, those houses, perched improbably on the mountaintop, surrounded by splendid trees, manicured lawns and two- and three-car garages, watched over by a towering statue of the god of the forge and the traffic fatality. For me, those houses represent the good life, the good years in Birmingham. Driving those streets, it's easy to

Dwight Young offered these remarks at the Annual Meeting of the Birmingham Historical Society on January 25, 1982. At that time, Young was Director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Southern Regional Office in Charleston, South Carolina. In October of 1983, he became Vice President, Preservation Services, The National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C.



Figure 4. The Florentine Building, Second Avenue North at Twenty-first Street. "This is terra cotta operetta. . . more terra cotta than you can shake a telephoto lens at." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

would make the Sloss a very special place (fig. 6).

Birmingham's history is special because it is uniquely Birmingham's and because so much of it still exists in a very evocative form. One more thing: Birmingham's history is special because there is someone looking out for it. I mean you, the members of the Birmingham Historical Society. I'd like to spend just a few moments talking about what the future holds for you and your counterparts in other communities with special histories of their own.

I think perhaps you'll recognize these lines: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness. . . it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. . . ." That's Charles Dickens, of course describing the mood of France in 1775. The same words might apply easily to the mood of the American preservation community as we settle into the 1980s.

In case you hadn't noticed, it's a whole new day in preservation. Non-profit preservation groups are entering a period of Organizational Darwinism: only the fittest of them will survive, while the weaker ones disappear. It is a sobering prospect. How is a particular preservation organization to be counted among the survivors? I can offer some advice condensed into two words: Be Good. I know that sounds like the sort of admonition that usually comes from your Mom, but it isn't the same. When I advise you to be good, I'm not merely suggesting that you behave yourselves; I'm suggesting that you'd better do what you do very well indeed, and you'd better be prepared to prove that you are good at what you do. If you're to survive the 1980s, you'd better be a good preservation organization.

I could shorten this speech considerably by simply stating that a good preservation organization is good because of what it knows and what it does with what it knows. That's really all there is to it. Let me give you some details.

First of all, a good preservation organization knows preservation. I realize that that sounds pretty absurd, but I am frequently surprised by the number of local groups trying to encourage and participate in preservation activities without any real idea of what preservation really is—and is not.

For much of our history, the attitude of most preservationists might be

summed up in the motto, "Often Wrong But Never In Doubt." This attitude, based on our assumption that we are right and everyone else is wrong, has meant that relations between preservationists and government officials, between preservationists and lenders, between preservationists and developers, have often turned into confrontations, usually with one side chaining itself to something or lying down in front of something or carrying signs and marching around something, while the other side loses its temper, gets red-faced and stubborn, and utters under its breath about how crazy preservationists are. A good preservation organization realizes that those days, heady and dramatic as they were, are probably gone for good. Why? Because preservationists finally got smarter. They finally realized, as any good preservation organization must realize, that we can accomplish much more through rational negotiation than through emotional confrontation. A good organization, one which stands a chance of surviving the 1980s, realizes that preservation is an activity that takes place in an arena of economic and political realities, and it realizes that this fact makes it absolutely essential that preservationists do more than just react.

A good preservation organization is one which is actively, positively, and creatively involved in the processes which plan and shape the future of its community. That is an earned right, and a good preservation organization is one which has earned that right to participate in the up-front planning process through its having established a record of credibility. In other words, a good preservation organization has a sound knowledge of the economic and political realities of preservation, and it uses that knowledge to arrive at public positions and policies which are consistent, trustworthy, and rational.

Having a sound knowledge of preservation doesn't necessarily mean having all the answers, but it does mean knowing where to go to find those answers. A good preservation organization recognizes the value of being part of an extensive network of other organizations with knowledge and experience to share. Knowing what has worked (or not worked) elsewhere is a part of being well-informed—and that, in turn, is part of being credible. The other part is using that knowledge wisely. A good preservation organization

knows that there is no such thing as a final defeat or a final victory. There is always another issue to be addressed, another opportunity to be exploited. Knowing this, a good preservation organization chooses its battlefields carefully; it is not afraid to fight if necessary, but also (and perhaps more important) is not afraid of compromise.

All of that just to make my first point: a good preservation organization knows preservation.

Second: a good preservation organization knows its community. I hope that it goes without saying that such an organization must know the historic and architectural resources of the community it serves, since any effective preservation program must be based on a clear knowledge of what buildings and sites exist in the community, and which of them are worth saving. But beyond that, the organization must know the human resources of the community as well. It must know both those people whose interests make the potential allies and those who, for whatever reason, are potential adversaries. Most important, a good preservation organization knows where the power lies in the community, knows who makes the decisions that really matter, whether it be the mayor, the city council, the planning commission, the bank president, the mill owner, the newspaper publisher, or just the good ol' boys who hang out down at the courthouse.

A knowledge of what the community is should lead to an effort to learn what the community needs. Too often local preservation programs are developed first, in a vacuum, and the community is then expected to develop needs which those programs can address. A good preservation organization recognizes the absurdity of such an approach, and does not push for a local preservation ordinance just because it seems the thing to do, nor establish a revolving fund just because several other towns have done so.

Needs change, of course, and programs must change with them. Perhaps one of the most appropriate synonyms for "good" or "effective" in describing a preservation organization is "flexible"—having the ability and maturity to redirect programmatic energies according to the dictates of community growth and shape, as well as the organization's own increasing confidence and sophistication.

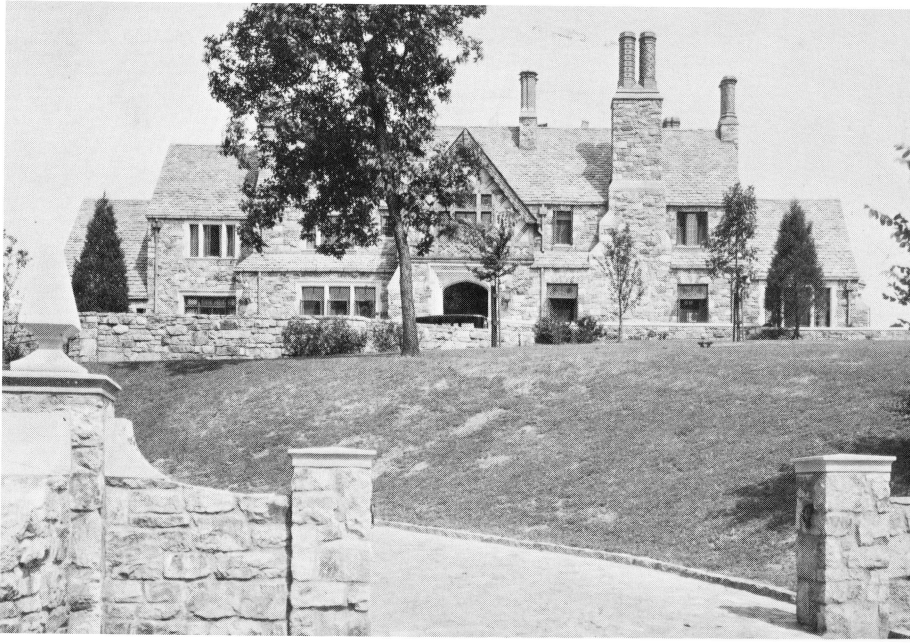


Figure 2. The Swann House, 3536 Redmont Road. "those houses (the ones on Red Mountain) represent the good life, the good years in Birmingham." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

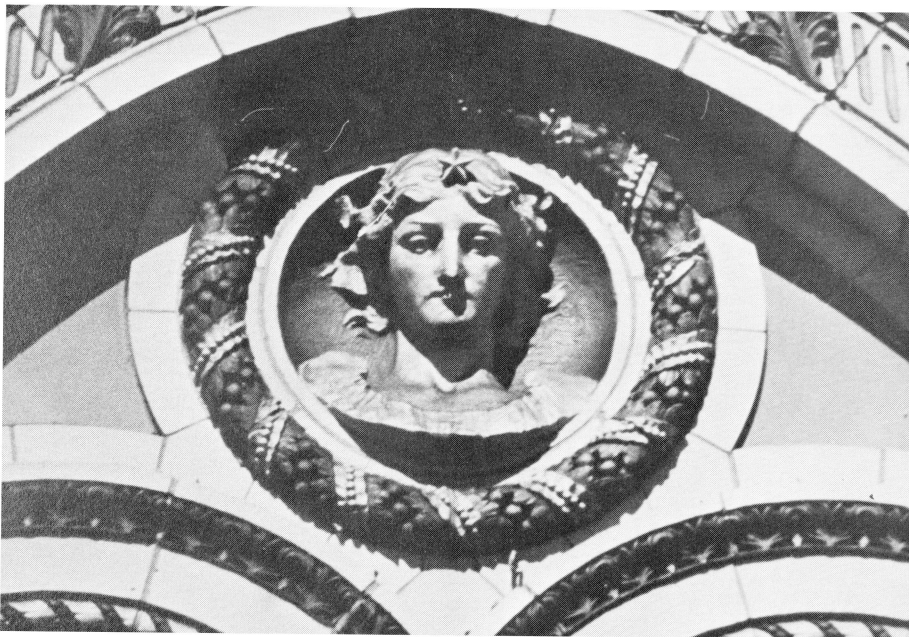


Figure 3. Terra Cotta Bust of Empire Building Architect, William Leslie Welton. "Downtown Birmingham has a lot of the stuff I like to look at." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.

imagine the houses as they were when they were new: peopled with men and women who had come to Birmingham and worked hard and made it, who felt that they deserved houses like these—and probably did. In their spare moments, I think they must have looked out through the leaded panes or the lacy iron grillwork of their windows and found great satisfaction in the view of their valley—their banks, their railyards, their mills, their city. And even when the view was obscured by smoke, I think they must have found equal satisfaction in the notion that the smoke smelled a lot like money. It's a special place, Red Mountain, and in more than just the obvious sense of the word, it's a very rich neighborhood.

The second special place is downtown Birmingham, the heart of the city that those Red Mountain cliff-dwellers built. I like downtown Birmingham for unabashedly selfish reasons. It has a lot of the stuff I like to look at: paneled and molded brick, terra cotta, bronze and marble that architects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries twisted and carved and molded into every conceivable form (fig. 3). Some architectural historians can go on at great length about the serenity, the purity, the perfection of the Federal or Greek Revival styles. Me, I like a building with some pizzazz in it, and the buildings of downtown Birmingham have enough pizzazz in them to make a walk among them a real feast for the unhurried eye. Why, the terra cotta alone is enough to keep you busy for a good while. Go see for yourselves. Go down to Twenty-first Street North sometime and take a look at the entrance to the Massey Building on the corner of Third Avenue: it's all terra cotta, and it's a good example of what "entrance" is supposed to mean. And then go a block south and spend some time looking at the Florentine Building—more terra cotta than you can shake a telephoto lens at. Compare this building with too many of the buildings erected in the last twenty-five years: this is terra cotta operetta, those are glass-and-aluminum Muzak (fig. 4). But there's more to these buildings than just pretty faces. I think they offer us some impressive evidence of the personality of the men who built them and of their expectations for Birmingham. Take the Steiner Building, down on First Avenue North, and consider the qualities it suggests: it's solid, tough, here to stay. And

the boom-years skyscrapers like the City National, First National, and City Federal Buildings: they're proud, elegant, supremely confident buildings (fig. 5). And the department stores, Kress and Woolworth's and Loveman's: they're slick, sophisticated, up-to-the-minute modern. The builders of these monuments had a lot of vision—visions of a new city, a vigorous upstart city, making a place for itself. And their visions—their buildings—are still there downtown for us to see and use and take whatever lesson we care to from them.

And then there's my third special place, the Sloss Furnace. Last November I participated in ceremonies marking the designation of the Sloss as a National Historic Landmark. In preparing for those ceremonies I tried to figure out why I like the Sloss so much, and I finally decided that I like it for the same reasons that Horatio Greenough would have like it.

Do you know about Horatio Greenough? He was the most prominent sculptor of his day; in fact, he was the first American sculptor to gain a true nationwide reputation. Greenough's greatest fame came early in the nineteenth century, when he was commissioned to carve a heroic statue of George Washington to sit at the center of the U.S. Capitol rotunda. When completed, Greenough's statue showed Washington sitting regally in a chair, wearing his eighteenth-century powdered wig, and draped—or half-draped—in a Roman toga. From the moment it was put on public view, the statue was ridiculed. Americans just didn't like the idea of the great man looking like a Roman emperor, and a half-naked one at that. They said the statue looked like the "Father of his Country" getting ready to take a bath, and they may have been right. Poor Horatio Greenough will always be remembered as the creator of that misbegotten statue, which is unfortunate, because Greenough had some very surprising and refreshing things to say about the nature of beauty. Writing in 1843, Greenough said, "The mechanics of America have already outstripped the artists and have . . . entered the true track of beauty." Greenough felt that the most beautiful objects ever produced in America were lighthouses and canals, the New England farmhouses, the trotting-wagon, the clipper ship. Greenough

believed that a beautiful object is one that looks like what it is: it is undecorated, functional, honest.

Greenough died several decades before the first Sloss Furnace was opened, but if he had lived to see it, I think he would have added the Sloss to his list of beautiful objects. "Beauty" is something we have usually equated with style and ornament: a building has been thought beautiful because its columns were nicely fluted, or its paint colors were pleasing to look at, or because it was decorated with intricately-patterned ironwork or marble or terra cotta or stained glass. The Sloss Furnace has none of these; but despite the fact that it is probably not "pretty," it is special for Horatio Greenough's reason: because it looks like what it is—a thing of muscle, sinew and bone; an artless, massive, bold, stripped-down composition of pure functional form. But it's more than that. The tranquil fantasy-land of Red Mountain seems to say, "You may think this is Birmingham, but it's really Eden." And downtown, with its busy streets and soaring towers, seems to say, "This may be Birmingham now, but watch out—someday it could be New York or even Atlanta." Not the Sloss. The Sloss says, "Don't let anyone fool you. This is Birmingham, and I'm what it's all about." Among Birmingham's landmarks, the Sloss is almost unique in its ability to remind us that this city exists because it was here that everything came together: the railroads, the coal, the iron ore, the limestone, and the men with the genius to make it all work for them. Some of those men built their houses on the crest of Red Mountain and turned the intersection of First Avenue North and Twentieth Street into the "Heaviest Corner on Earth," and those houses and those office towers are their monuments. But there were other men too. There were men who sweated and swore and burned their hands in the actual physical labor of making pig iron, and the Sloss is uniquely their monument. To those men the Sloss was just a place to work. And because of that fact, there could be no more fitting symbol of Birmingham than this furnace. For this was never a city where people came to retire or relax; it was always a city where people came to work. And it was here, just a few short years after the Old South died, that a New South began to emerge. If there were no other reasons, that alone

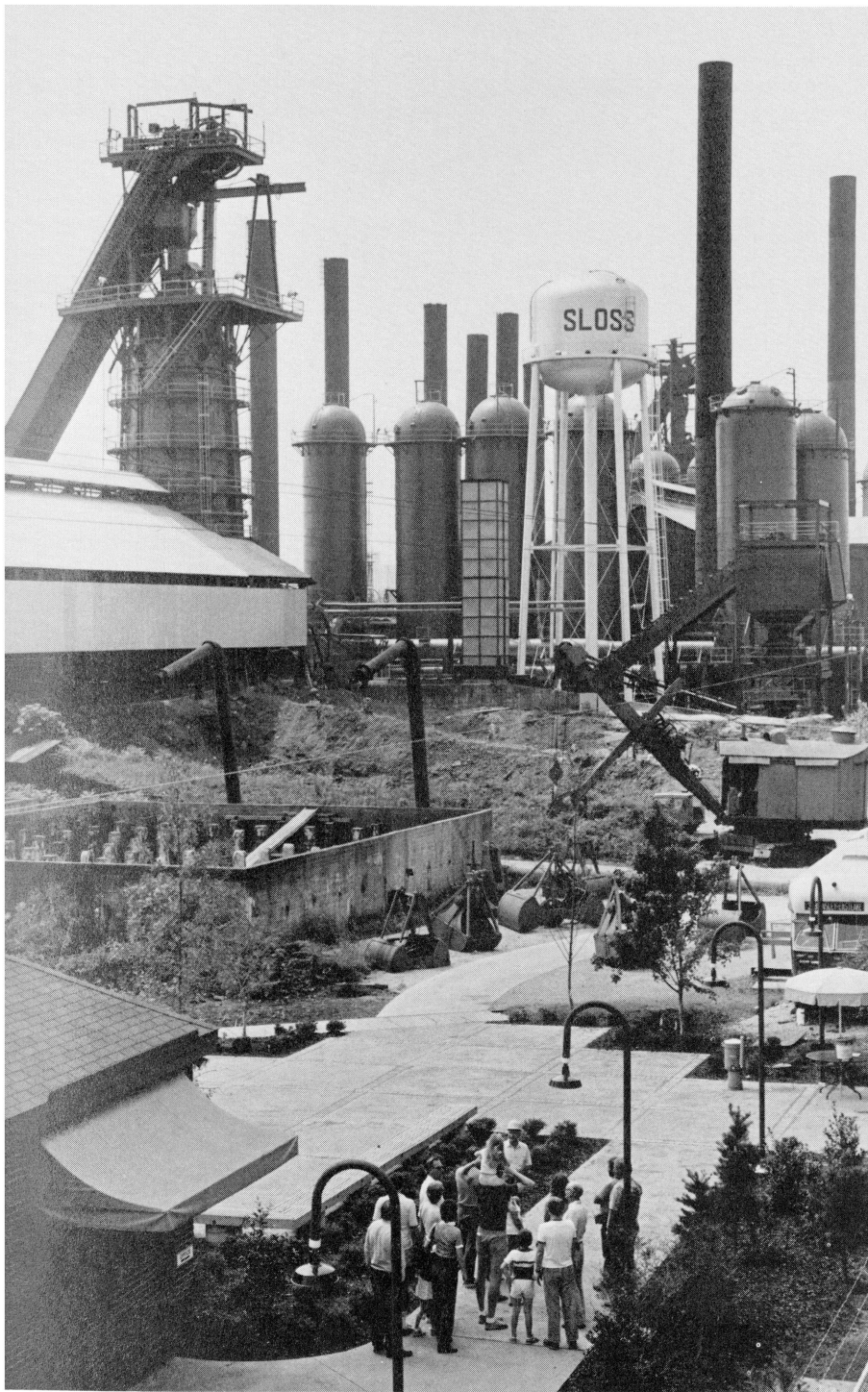


Figure 6. The Sloss Furnace. "Among Birmingham's landmarks, the Sloss is almost unique in its ability to remind us that this city exists because it was here that everything came together: the railroads, the coal, the iron ore, the limestone, and the men with the genius to make it all work for them." Measured drawing by Historic American Engineering Record. Photograph courtesy Sloss Furnace National Historic Landmark.

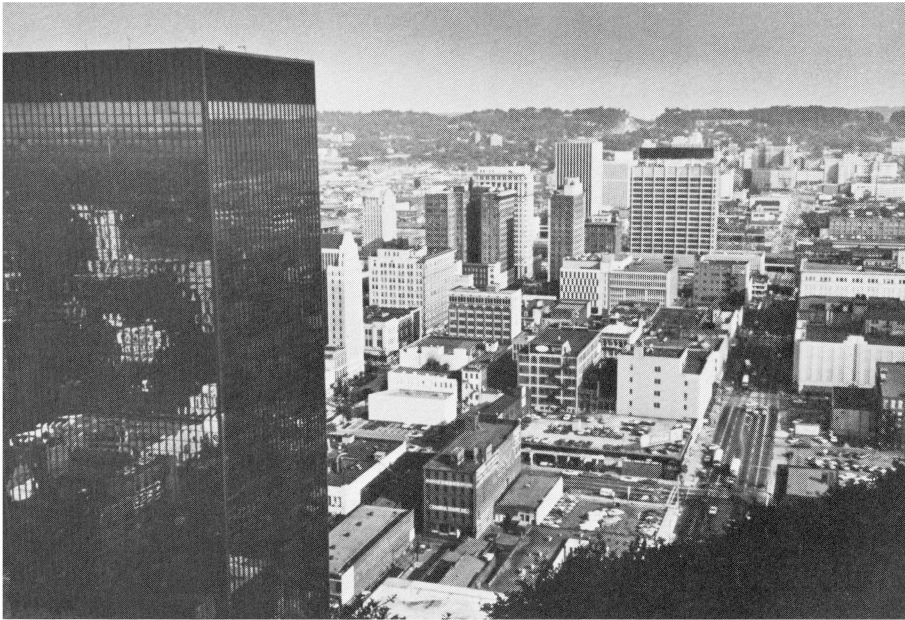


Figure 7. Birmingham skyline, 1970s. A good preservation organization will "transmit this city not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Historical Society.



Figure 5. The "Heaviest Corner on Earth," First Avenue North and Twentieth Street. "proud, elegant, supremely confident buildings. . . . The builders of these monuments had a lot of vision." Photograph courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

If a good preservation organization knows preservation and knows its community, what's left? Perhaps the most important thing of all: a good preservation organization is one which knows itself. I believe that the greatest mistake a local preservation group can make is to spread itself too thin, to try to be all things to all people and wind up being none of them very well. A good preservation organization knows itself well enough to recognize its own strengths and weaknesses. It never stops asking itself two questions: What needs to be done, and are we the logical ones to do it? It knows that introspection and self-evaluation are not luxuries, but absolute essentials. What I mean—and this is the most important thing I've said thus far—is that a good preservation organization, if it is to be a survivor, must operate from a set of clearly-defined goals and objectives.

This, then, is what a good preservation organization knows: it knows preservation, it knows its community, and it knows itself. Knowing these things, what does it do? Well, the whole point of my presentation is that I can't tell you what to do, nor would it make sense for me to try. A good local preservation organization does what needs to be done, based on its own assessment of the community's needs and its own strengths and commitments, and without undue emphasis on what everybody else is doing.

Now, what about the Birmingham Historical Society? Is it a good local preservation organization? Will it be among the survivors when we look back on the 1980s as past history? I can't tell you. But I think there's a fairly easy way to find out (fig. 7). A local preservation organization in Georgia uses as its motto a phrase from ancient Athens: "To transmit this city not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us." If you wonder whether yours is a good preservation organization, I suggest that you ask yourselves, "Are we doing that?" If you can answer affirmatively, you should be able to sail through the 1980s not merely surviving, but prospering in the important work of preserving the history that makes Birmingham a very special place.

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Founded November 5, 1942

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Mason Corporation

Mayer Electric Supply Co.

Molton, Allen & Williams Insurance
Corporation

Molton Realty and Development

Corporation

Bob Moody & Associates, Inc.

Pasquale's

Poole, Pardue and Morrison, Architects

Protective Life Insurance Co.

Rideout's Brown Service, Inc.

Shaw Warehouse Company

Shook & Fletcher Insulation Company

Snow & Stewart, CPA

SONAT Inc.

South Central Bell

Southern Life & Health Insurance
Company

Southern Progress Corporation

Tractor & Equipment Company, Inc.

United States Pipe & Foundry Company

Vulcan Materials Company

John S. Walker D.M.D.

Jim Waters & Associates, Architects

Watts Building Corporation

Wittichen Supply Company

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Alabama Historical Commission

The Junior League of Birmingham

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Kirkman & Elizabeth O'Neal Foundation

The John Alcide and Delia Truss

Robert Charitable Trust

Harold M. Henderson Benevolent Fund

Robert R. Meyer Foundation

The Daniel Foundation of Alabama