

Our buildings are not ours. They belong, partly to those who built them, and partly to the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right in them: that which they labored for...we have no right to obliterate.

JOHN RUSKIN, AUTHOR AND SOCIAL CRITIC (1819-1900)

BELOW: **TORRANCE-FORBES HOUSE**, c. 1923, 4219 Crescent Road
Designed by prominent Birmingham architect Hugh Martin for Dr. Gaston Torrance, this Federal Revival residence in Forest Park was also home to the Jelks Cabiness, Governor Frank Dixon and Daniel Pratt families. Mr. and Mrs. W. K. Forbes owned the house for more than 40 years. It is believed that the Cabiness family converted a porch into a library paneled in Honduran mahogany, while maintaining the original roof lines of the home. A "round house" that marked the end of the trolley line to Mountain Terrace stood on this property in the early 1900s.

RIGHT: **Brown-Service Funeral Home-R. C. Green Medical Office-UA Medical Alumni Association**, 1936, 811 South 20th Street
Architect D. O. Whillden designed the current headquarters of the University of Alabama Medical Alumni Association for Brown-Service Funeral Home in 1936. Interim use of the building included the medical offices of Dr. R. C. Green from 1946-1981.



Heralds of History

The story behind those historical markers

BY CATHY ADAMS
PHOTOS BY JEFF WALES

interiors
& exteriors

THE JEFFERSON COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION is an officially appointed body of only 12 members, but they are aided in encouraging historic preservation by a volunteer army of "house detectives."

The Commission, established in 1971 by an act of the Alabama Legislature, promoted the cause of historic preservation and the documentation and protection of the historic resources of the City of Birmingham and Jefferson County. The group's focuses include the Historic Marker program, publications on Jefferson County history and the annual Thomas Jefferson Awards to individuals and groups who contribute to the understanding of local history or preservation.

The distinctive shields designating properties of historic significance to Jefferson County identify more than 1,250 homes, buildings and sites around the county, with scores of others eligible for similar recognition.

"We recognize the 'built history' of Jefferson County, and a marked property does not have to be 'significant' either architecturally or

King-Edwards House, c. 1900, 3709 Sixth Avenue South

Tax appraisals rated 95 percent of Avondale's c. 1900 King-Edwards House as in disrepair when Andrew and Christy Jenkins bought the home in 2006. Mostly vacant since the early 1970s, the late Victorian treasure had been broken up into apartments with a store on the first floor and had eventually deteriorated into a "crack house" before the Jenkins restored it to turn-of-the-century charm. Living down the street in another restored home, the Jenkins currently have the King-Edwards House listed for sale.



Coe Home, c. 1908, 1108 29th Street South
Built by John Coe, an early Birmingham lumber company owner in 1908 the Craftsman-Tudor Revival Coe House features a multi-gabled roof, open porch, and leaded and beveled glass in windows and doors. The house has a multi-faceted history, having been home to the Morningside Commune in the 1970s and later serving over 3,600 children under the auspices of the Alabama United Methodist Children's Home before restoration as a private home in 1999.



historically to qualify for a marker," explains JCHC executive director and historical consultant Linda Nelson. "The markers are intended to indicate integrity of historic appearance and to recognize the people or organizations historically associated with all Jefferson County buildings and sites. Seventy-five percent of the markers are on private homes."

Linda traces the local program's roots to such influences as the 1966 National Preservation Act, which recognized that "historic properties significant to the Nation's heritage are being lost or substantially altered, often inadvertently, with increasing frequency," along with Jacqueline Kennedy's efforts to save landmark New York structures. "The loss of the Terminal Station in downtown Birmingham in the late 1960s alerted the public to the fact that resources long loved and taken for granted could suddenly be taken away," Linda remarks.

A survey of well-known and established buildings of all types was undertaken shortly after the Commission's founding, with public buildings, churches and commercial buildings invited to accept markers. The first dozen included Arlington, a 1908 bungalow built for prominent African American physician A. M. Brown, Sloss Furnace, Powell School and the site of the 1886 Caldwell Hotel, lost to fire in the 1890s.

Over the last three decades, structures and sites, stretching across the county from the 1838 Sadler House in McCalla to the 1883-84 Leeds Depot, have joined the register. The

Woodlawn Infirmary (1896), the Five Mile Creek Bridge (1915), Bessemer's Carnegie Library (1907) and the Alabama Theatre (1927) are examples illustrative of the diversity of register entries.

In naming structures or sites to the register, the JCHC adheres to the National Register of Historic Places criterion that a building must be at least 50 years old. But the commission also extends eligibility to any building or site, regardless of age, if it is associated with major historical events or figures.

JCHC Historic Markers, bearing the likeness of Thomas Jefferson, for whom the county was named, display the historic name and date of a structure's construction. Sites are dated according to the occurrence of a significant historic event, and cemeteries carry the date of the earliest marked grave.

The historic name given to a house or commercial structure

"The loss of the Terminal Station in downtown Birmingham in the late 1960s alerted the public to the fact that resources long loved and taken for granted could suddenly be taken away." LINDA NELSON

is typically that of the first or longest-term occupant, or the name with which a building is most commonly associated historically. In the case of two historic occupancies, a hyphenated name is sometimes assigned. Because the marker is assigned to a structure rather than to an individual or business, the marker remains with the

Moore-Billingsley House, 1925, 1534 Seventh Avenue West

This English Tudor home in the Bush Hills Neighborhood was constructed in 1925 for ACIPCO President W. D. Moore and was later home to Orzell Billingsley, Jr., a prominent African-American attorney and Civil Rights activist. Bush Hills was a popular streetcar suburb developed by Robert Jemison, Jr. in the 1920s.



structure through subsequent owners.

To be eligible, buildings should retain original shape and roofline and enough of the original exterior materials to reflect historic character and appearance. Critical features include masonry or frame wall material, windows, porches and decorative details. Interior changes or additions to the rear and hidden from public view generally do not compromise a structure's eligibility.

The Historic Marker application, available from the JCHC Headquarters at 2100 First Avenue North or at www.jeffersonhistorical.org, requests the property's Tax Parcel Identification Number, source for date of construction, listing and sources of names of original and subsequent long-term owners or occupants, copies of supporting documentation, including Board of Equalization field sheets and photographs. Current photographs, taken if possible from the same angle as any historic pictures, are also requested. Application fee is \$125.

"Completing the application for admission to the register is not overwhelming," stresses Commission member Dr. Meredith Byram. "In most cases a homeowner can do all or most of the research by accessing old city directories and Board of Equalization files at the Downtown Public Library." Field shot photographs of the house taken in the county wide reappraisals of 1938-1941 are crucial. Copies of the pictures must include the date that the historic pictures were taken. "We are interested in any supporting information, including stories from relatives or neighbors who have lived in the community for years," Dr. Byram continues.

Linda Nelson adds that copies of architectural plans or references to a structure in local history books or from neighborhood newspaper clipping files in the library's Southern History Department are valuable documents. She suggests tracking former owners through city directories, starting the search several years before presumed construction of a home, and following an ownership trail through the next several years and about every five or ten years thereafter. Cross-referenced city directories for

Birmingham and Bessemer, going back to the 1880s, are housed in the library's Southern History Department and also provide the names of spouses and occupations of owners. It can be generally assumed that a house was constructed a year prior to the first directory inclusion.

A tip sheet with sources and strategies for researching Birmingham area houses and buildings is available from the BPL Archives. Tax identification numbers, necessary to access Board of Equalization files, can be obtained by street address from the library's Business Department. Additional resources include Birmingham Historical Society publications such as *House Detective: A Guide to Researching Birmingham Buildings* and *A Guide to Architectural Styles in Birmingham Homes*.

"There is a misconception that the historic designation carries restrictions," says Birmingham Public Library archivist James Baggett. "Instead, it is hoped that having a marker will encourage homeowners to understand, respect and maintain the integrity of the historic character of a property."

RealtySouth's Sue Moody, who specializes in marketing historic properties, concurs, "People love to live in a house that represents a piece of history." ☉

For more information, contact the Jefferson County Historical Commission at 205.324.0988 (www.jeffersonhistorical.org), the Birmingham Public Library Archives at 205.226.3630 (www.bplonline.org), or the Birmingham Historical Society at 205.251.1880 (www.bhistorical.org).