

# True to Small Town Roots

A CASE STUDY OF ADAPTIVE REUSE IN PRATTVILLE, ALABAMA

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For Jeanelle Windham, who sparked and fostered my love of both history and historic buildings. Miss you always.

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis, *True to Small Town Roots: A Case Study of Adaptive Reuse in Prattville, Alabama*, focuses on the preservation journey of a small town in Alabama. I examine the motivations for adaptive reuse, as well as the processes that are involved and try to understand how the community perceived and reacted to these changes. I attempt to answer the questions of who is adaptively reusing these buildings and for what purpose, what the motivations were or are for keeping these buildings, how public/private partnerships have played into the preservation of these buildings, as well as why the local government has adaptively reused several of the historic downtown buildings rather than constructing modern buildings for their needs.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The historic preservation movement in the United States began with upper-class women who wished to preserve the homes and structures that highlighted the “great men” of history.<sup>1</sup> These movements were carried out on a local stage, with groups formed solely for the purpose of preserving and maintaining one building or a complex of buildings. The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association is an early example of this type of group. Other groups formed on the local community level and fashioned themselves to preserve the historic character of entire neighborhoods and cities, such as Susan Pringle Frost’s Preservation Society of Charleston.<sup>2</sup>

These late nineteenth and early twentieth century groups served as foundations for later government programs and legislation focused on preservation and conservation. The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 allowed for programs to be enacted at the federal level to ensure the preservation and protection of the country’s heritage and sites important to that heritage. This legislation was crucial in the formation of historic preservation as a profession. The National Historic Preservation Act established the National Register of Historic Places, began State Historic Preservation

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Tomlan, *Historic Preservation* (New York: Springer, 2014), 7–10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 – 32.

Offices, and created other important funds and mechanisms that contribute to the preservation of the country's heritage. The NHPA put preservation offices in every state of the union, providing a more localized form of preservation to be performed throughout the country.<sup>3</sup>

Historic preservation in the state of Alabama has experienced a unique and varied path. Most of Alabama's preservation initiatives began after the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Calls for preservation can be traced all the way back to a *Mobile Weekly Advertiser* article from 1858.<sup>4</sup> This article laments the loss of an "old landmark," and claims that "the landmarks that serve to connect the past generation with the present, and to remind us of the manners, customs and styles of architecture of the original settlers, are being obliterated, and but a short time will elapse before there will not be left a single trace, and the history of the past will be obscured and merely traditional."<sup>5</sup>

Mobile's early focus on preservation did not wane as the years passed. The Historic Mobile Preservation Society claims to be "the oldest grassroots preservation organization in Alabama."<sup>6</sup> Mobile was Alabama's first major city to truly adopt historic

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<sup>3</sup> "Federal Historic Preservation Laws, Regulations, and Orders," n.d., <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/historicpreservation/laws.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Jack D.L. Holmes, "An 1858 View on Historical Preservation in Mobile," *The Alabama Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 & 2 (Spring & Summer 1982): 123–24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>6</sup> "Historicmobile | HISTORY and STAFF," accessed July 3, 2016, <http://www.historicmobile.org/#!/history-and-staff/k394w>.

preservation. National Register of Historic Places nominations for the city of Mobile, Alabama date back to 1969 – showing that Mobile officials and property owners very quickly began to take advantage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.<sup>7</sup> The city began to nominate districts soon after, with its first three districts listed in 1971 and 1972.<sup>8</sup> After Mobile, Alabama’s other large cities began to join the preservation movement, as did some of the small Alabama towns with large swathes of built history still intact.

Residents in the capitol city of Montgomery, Alabama began their preservation efforts in earnest in 1967, with the creation of the Landmarks Foundation and its Old Alabama Town project.<sup>9</sup> Officials and citizens created the Landmarks Foundation was created “to foster, encourage and lead the historic preservation movement in

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<sup>7</sup> W. Warner Floyd, “Mobile City Hall National Register of Historic Places Form” (National Parks Service, December 3, 1969), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp/AssetDetail?assetID=632bd194-d7c2-4966-9ded-fa99830da28d>; W. Warner Floyd, “Fort Conde-Charlotte National Register of Historic Places Form” (National Parks Service, May 21, 1969), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp/AssetDetail?assetID=a556816e-d27b-49fc-92e0-cf8cc676b2c4>.

<sup>8</sup> W. Warner Floyd and John Coleman, “Oakleigh Garden District National Register of Historic Places Form” (National Parks Service, December 29, 1971), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/72000171.pdf>; W. Warner Floyd and Thomas St. John, “De Tonti Square District National Register of Historic Places Form” (National Parks Service, December 29, 1971), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp/GetAsset?assetID=657254ca-93d1-45ae-81b9-e064b7da5666>; W. Warner Floyd and Victor Glazner, “Church Street East District National Register of Historic Places Form” (National Parks Service, November 2, 1971), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp/GetAsset?assetID=2870a0f3-35ff-4ec7-90bb-de64fdd6fa66>.

<sup>9</sup> “Landmarks Foundation - About Us,” *Landmarks Foundation*, n.d., <http://www.landmarksfoundation.com/about-us/landmarks-foundation/>; “Old Alabama Town - About Us,” *Landmarks Foundation*, n.d., <http://www.landmarksfoundation.com/about-us/>.

Montgomery, Alabama.”<sup>10</sup> The early effort of the Landmarks Foundation was the creation of Old Alabama Town. This endeavor to recreate an historic village in Montgomery resulted in the rescue and restoration of twelve historic buildings dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> While this is not a truly historic village, rather it was more along the lines of a building zoo, it was the impetus for the Montgomery preservation movement and it represents the city’s first attempt at saving its surviving built history. The capitol city of Montgomery also became home to the headquarters of the Alabama Historical Commission – the state’s version of a State Historic Preservation Office. This office, in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, serves “to protect, preserve, and interpret Alabama’s Historic Places.”<sup>12</sup> Montgomery’s preservation efforts are twofold, as the city is locally concerned with its own history and as the capitol city is concerned with preservation efforts throughout the state. At the same time Montgomery was concerned with Old Alabama Town and Mobile residents were nominating buildings and districts seemingly as fast as they could, smaller towns like Selma began their own preservation journey, typically focusing on properties that dated before the Civil War.

Selma, Alabama began its preservation efforts after realizing the loss of their built history was a very real possibility. In 1969, the owners demolished Selma’s Hotel

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<sup>10</sup> “Landmarks Foundation - About Us.”

<sup>11</sup> “Old Alabama Town - About Us.”

<sup>12</sup> “Mission,” *Alabama Historical Commission*, n.d., [http://preserveala.org/mission.plans.goals.aspx?sm=a\\_k](http://preserveala.org/mission.plans.goals.aspx?sm=a_k).

Albert. After this loss, the people of Selma began to realize they must protect their historic buildings and districts if they wished to keep their town's historic character.<sup>13</sup> In order to begin protecting this heritage, members of the Selma-Dallas County Historic Preservation Society began to push for a district nomination for Water Avenue. This push led to a National Register of Historic Places nomination and listing for the district in 1972, and then another updated nomination in 2005.<sup>14</sup> Selma, however, did not follow the state's lead in preservation trends. Smaller towns in Alabama did not immediately begin to use the Historic Preservation Act to help preserve their built history. It is highly likely that Selma's beginnings as a cotton town, coupled with its later large role in the Civil Rights Movement, spurred on their preservation initiatives. While the fifty-year rule would prevent them from including Civil Rights districts for some decades, they began to realize the importance of their built history earlier than other small towns who did not experience the same level of nationwide attention as Selma.

The nationwide narrative of deindustrialization next shaped Alabama's preservation story. Alabama's steel industry, which was largely concentrated in Birmingham, experienced an accelerated rate of decline after the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> By the end of

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<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Straiton and Catherine Marcinko, "How Preservation Snowballed in Selma," *Design Alabama* 1, no. 1 (1988): 22–23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Susan A. Besser, "Water Avenue Historic District National Register of Historic Places Registration Form," 2005, National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/nrhp/GetAsset?assetID=2141048e-8e3c-452c-8070-d0f8eb50dfd5>.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 146 – 147.

the century, many of the once bustling iron and steel mill buildings were left as looming, vacant reminders of the city's past. As Birmingham was confronted with these now seemingly useless hulking buildings and structures, they began to turn toward preservation and adaptive reuse as ways to convert their industrial past into new opportunities. The nomination of the Sloss Blast Furnace site to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, along with the later nominations of the industrial neighborhoods and communities, points to this turn in the city.<sup>16</sup>

As these larger stories were developing within the state, many small towns throughout Alabama began to realize that their heritage also needed and deserved preserving, even if no one was paying attention yet. The state of Alabama largely followed the broader national patterns in historic preservation, typically preserving the houses of historic figures first, then beginning to expand into the preservation of commercial districts and vernacular architecture. However, as is true with the rest of the country, the broad trends typically do not account for what initiatives are taken in rural communities and small towns. Smaller towns and more rural areas have largely been left out of preservation histories, to the detriment of the field of preservation as a whole. These small, rural towns often most value their history and their historic properties. Their preservation efforts are typically more grassroots than those of cities and major metropolitan areas, often championed by local groups who see the

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<sup>16</sup> George Adams, "Sloss Furnaces National Register of Historic Places Form" (National Parks Service, June 22, 1972), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/72000162.pdf>.

community and economic benefits of historic preservation. The inclusion of the small town preservation narrative can provide insight into grassroots preservation and adaptive reuse, as well as provide an outline for other smaller towns and cities to follow.

The once rural mill village of Prattville, Alabama, provides an insightful case study for this type of small town preservation. New Hampshire-born Daniel Pratt established Prattville in 1839. Pratt came to Alabama from Georgia to start a cotton gin manufactory, and chose the falls of the Autauga Creek for his new industrial enterprise.<sup>17</sup> During this time, several other antebellum manufactories were begun across the South. However, the sheer size and output of the Pratt complex, along with Pratt's position as a northern industrialist who chose the south for investment, allows for it to be separated and examined on its own as well as within the context of southern antebellum manufacturing history.

Pratt planned and created a town in the vein of a traditional New England mill village. Drawing inspiration from his hometown of Temple, New Hampshire, Pratt centered the town around his manufactory complex, which would eventually expand to include a cotton gin factory, sash, door, and blind factory, grist mill, saw mill, machine shop, textile company, and foundry.<sup>18</sup> Pratt had lofty goals in his creation of Prattville, as it is reported that his mission was "to build up a village for the purpose of dignifying

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel S. Gray, *Autauga County: The First Hundred Years 1818 - 1918*, 1972, 44 – 45.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Bailey and Robert Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form" (National Parks Service, July 3, 1984), National Parks Service Online Database, <http://npgallery.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/84000596.pdf>.

labor in the South, and to give the laboring class an opportunity of not only making an independent living, but to train up workmen who could give dignity to labor, and thereby add to the respectability and wealth of his adopted state.”<sup>19</sup> Pratt felt this an important distinction because many white southerners at the time felt that labor and industry in particular, was only the job of enslaved individuals or the northern poor. Many southern whites felt that industrial labor was beneath them and that industry should be something that did not play a large role in the southern economy.<sup>20</sup> Pratt’s vision of an industrial village as a testament to the virtues and triumph of free labor was realized in the mid-nineteenth century, spurred on post-Civil War by a shift in thinking about labor and who was included in the laboring class, and the town of Prattville eventually grew large enough to become the county seat of Autauga county in 1870 – a title it has held ever since.<sup>21</sup>

The factory Pratt built in 1839 is not the structure that is standing today. Rather, the extant complex of buildings dates from 1848, but is still valuable since so few pre-Civil War industrial buildings remain in the South.<sup>22</sup> The complex Pratt built illustrates the pattern in the antebellum south of northern industrialists running the largest southern gin factories. These northern industrialists flourishing in the south also “owned

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<sup>19</sup> Gray, *Autauga County: The First Hundred Years 1818 - 1918*, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Shore, *Southern Capitalists: The Ideological Leadership of an Elite, 1832-1885*. (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form.”

the largest number of enslaved Africans of gin makers in their respective states and reported the greatest holdings of personal property and real estate.”<sup>23</sup> Northern industrialists who started their businesses in the south, like Daniel Pratt and Samuel Griswold, worked within the slave and cotton economies of the south.<sup>24</sup>

Pratt built a large Greek-Revival home on a 400-acre plantation just northwest of his manufactory and the heart of Prattville. Between his plantation and his “other manufacturing interests,” Pratt utilized the labor of several enslaved individuals, especially in the capacity of “gin maker.”<sup>25</sup> Many of the larger southern industrial outfits used enslaved labor as well as free labor within their factories. The use of enslaved labor caused southern industrialists some trouble with white working-class laborers while also strangely serving as a proslavery argument. Angela Lakwete argues that many enslaved gin makers were highly skilled, which in turn made them more valuable to their owners.<sup>26</sup> This value led many proslavery leaders to point out that these skilled enslaved craftsmen made the argument that “slavery degrades the slave” invalid because they were bettering themselves through learning the skill of gin-making. However, this argument clearly lacks any concept of what degradation actually means, as the slaves

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<sup>23</sup> Angela Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America*, Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 101–102.

<sup>24</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South*, 2nd ed., 1st Wesleyan ed, Wesleyan Paperback (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin*; Tom Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants, and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin*, 103, 107.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 101 – 103.

themselves did not benefit from these skills other than the fact that it possibly made them too valuable to badly injure with whippings and other abuse doled out by the overseer of the factory or of their home plantation, if they were rented by the industrialist rather than owned.

Some white southerners also resented enslaved laborers learning skilled labor positions as these were typically reserved for white working-class laborers in order to uphold a white supremacist racial hierarchy. Also prevalent in southern manufactories was the preference to purchase or rent the labor of enslaved women and children, as they were cheaper than men, and their hands were typically smaller and nimbler and allowed them to perform certain tasks that men of both races could not. White women and children also worked in many of these factories, but it was a sort of last resort for them, as wage labor for white women and children in the antebellum south typically meant the person or family was in a most desperate situation.<sup>27</sup>

The use of enslaved and free labor within the same factories led to conflicting messages of racism and sharpened race and gender roles paired with a blurring of both racial and class distinctions. The diaries of two employees at the Daniel Pratt factory illuminate this strange facet of antebellum industry. The men refer to the enslaved workers the same way they do other workers, and the only way to determine the race of those being discussed is to look at census records for some, but for one laborer in

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<sup>27</sup> For more on child and women's labor in the South, see Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Neither Lady nor Slave: Working Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Sally Gregory McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, 2nd ed, The American History Series (Wheeling, Ill: Harland Davidson, 2002).

particular, the indication of race came with the recounting of the laborer receiving lashings while at work and eventually running away within the pages of the white employees' diaries.<sup>28</sup>

After the Civil War, Pratt heavily utilized the company town method of industry. Prattville's mill houses and the still extant structure that housed the Prattville Mercantile Company store are evidence of Pratt's belief in and endeavors to make Prattville a company town. Daniel Pratt's structural legacy in Prattville has become an important discussion in recent years. In the 1960s, owners tore down the home of Daniel Pratt in order to allow for the building of an administrative building for Continental Moss-Gordin, the company that owned the Pratt manufacturing facilities at the time. Over the last decade, city officials in Prattville have been in the process of deciding what should be done with what remains of the Pratt industrial complex. The community's priorities have changed since the 1960s, and as of 2016, it appears that the industrial complex will be preserved and adaptively reused through a public-private partnership between the City of Prattville government, the Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority, and private development firms who plan to turn the complex into a multi-family residential space that will benefit the community and the downtown economy. The community also has a history of attempting to keep its downtown intact and the city government works closely with the Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority and local downtown initiatives to keep people coming downtown and

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<sup>28</sup> Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin*, 106 – 111.

therefore, help the remaining historic structures have a better chance for continued survival. In the case of the Pratt industrial complex, Prattville embarked upon a grassroots journey to preserve and reuse its built history, utilizing public-private partnerships. The city also maintains several buildings within the confines of city government to ensure their continued existence.

Adaptive reuse of buildings has become much trendier in recent years; however, it is not a new concept. The old Autauga County Courthouse in Prattville was built in 1870 and when it was vacated for the new county courthouse in 1906, the old courthouse building was not torn down. Rather, a series of different businesses have occupied the structure since 1906. Prattville has been unwittingly adaptively reusing buildings since 1906. The ways in which the Prattville community has adaptively reused buildings is for the most part typical of adaptive reuse across the country. Plans to reuse the Daniel Pratt Gin complex as loft apartments are comparable to adaptive reuses projects at the Eagle Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York, the Danbury Mill in Danbury, Connecticut, and Cobbler Square in Chicago, Illinois.<sup>29</sup> The reuse of the former downtown post-office as the City Hall Annex for the City of Prattville fits with the reuse of Washington, D. C.'s Old Post Office as offices, and the reuse of the Works Progress Administration-built Armory as the local community center is similar to several other WPA armories, as this was partially their role before being reused.<sup>30</sup> The only true

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<sup>29</sup> Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, *Remaking America: New Uses, Old Places*, 1st ed (New York: Crown, 1986).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

outlier in adaptive reuse is the old Autauga County Courthouse. That particular building has been used as a gas station and auto-repair shop, warehouse, and is currently used as a dance studio and theatre space.<sup>31</sup>

Prattville provides an important example as both a formerly rural town that is now considered a suburb of its larger neighboring city, as well as an historical outlier of southern industry. Most large-scale industry in the South, particularly cotton manufactories, did not begin or thrive until after the Civil War.<sup>32</sup> Prattville was already an important site of cotton gin manufacture by the time most other southern factories were just beginning. The owners of these antebellum manufactories were considered outsiders in location as well as in profession and behavior.<sup>33</sup> The success of antebellum industrialists like Daniel Pratt was highly dependent upon maintaining productive relationships with the slaveholding planters of the South, as the planters held the majority of the capital as well as the market for the goods manufactured. However, these same planters were also the very individuals who were responsible for stifling antebellum industrial growth.<sup>34</sup> Often, northern industrialists needed the investments of the planter class in order to continue operations in southern communities. These

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<sup>31</sup> Bailey and Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form."

<sup>32</sup> Broadus Mitchell, *The Rise of Cotton Mills in the South*, Southern Classics (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*; Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South*.

<sup>34</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, 180 – 208.

industrialists, Daniel Pratt included, were largely both pro-slavery and pro-industry, which put them in a peculiar situation as the Civil War approached. Southern slaveholders had no desire to help industrialize the South, largely because they could acquire all the manufactured goods needed from northern outfits. The South could not compete with the north because wealthy southern planters feared that allowing industry to flourish in the South would allow for the development of an urban environment that they could not control. However, many northern industrialists who began southern industrial outfits, like Daniel Pratt, used slave labor in their manufactories, and they also produced materials that planters would purchase for their enslaved laborers rather than materials aimed at infiltrating the northern markets. They also often benefitted from the capital investments of slaveholding planters and saw a break with these planters as an extreme financial downfall.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, many southern industrialists backed the Confederacy during the Civil War. Daniel Pratt himself even outfitted the Prattville Dragoons, the locally formed cavalry company, with uniforms before they went off to war.<sup>36</sup> After the Civil War, the economy of the South began to shift to a more traditionally capitalist model, which eventually benefitted industrialists and industrial towns like Daniel Pratt and Prattville.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*.

<sup>36</sup> S. F. H. Tarrant, *Hon. Daniel Pratt: A Biography, with Eulogies on His Life and Character* (Leopold Classic Library, n.d.), 83.

<sup>37</sup> Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South*; Jonathan M Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War*, Louisiana pbk. ed (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

After the Civil War, Daniel Pratt extended his business empire, investing in lands in north Alabama and expanding his coal and iron interests. Pratt died in 1873 and his interests in both Prattville and north Alabama were passed on to his ward and nephew, Merrill Pratt and his daughter and son-in-law, Ellen and Henry DeBardeleben. The legacy Pratt left is evident in both Prattville and Pratt City.

These cities exist because of industrial endeavors and the architectural influence of industry and New England design is incredibly clear in Prattville, particularly illustrated by the town being built around the manufacturing complex – a pattern atypical in the South. Daniel Pratt and the Pratt family’s influence is evident throughout much of the downtown, however, the architectural history of Prattville does not end with Daniel Pratt. The community he founded continued and continues to expand, build, and adapt throughout the decades, but in recent years the community learned to add layers to the landscape rather than demolish and rebuild.

Whether or not the residents of Prattville embarked on a preservation mission consciously or not is up for debate, but the town has utilized adaptive reuse throughout its recent history, which has been to the great benefit of the city and its people. Prattville has also experienced a shift in perception over the last century. It began the twentieth century as a rural but financially important Alabama town founded on the banks of the Autauga Creek for the purpose of creating cotton gins. It ended the twentieth century and began the twenty-first as a suburb of the much larger capital city

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of Montgomery, Alabama. This shift led many to forget that Prattville has a rich past, that it was founded long before it was thought of as a suburb, and that it has its own unique history separate from Montgomery. Prattville's history as an antebellum southern industrial community sets it apart from the rest of the state and much of the rest of the southeast as well. In fact, one of the few fitting comparisons of Prattville is to William Gregg's Graniteville, South Carolina.<sup>38</sup>

The history of Prattville's forays into preservation and adaptive reuse shine a light on this unique history, as well as the efforts by the city and private interests to incorporate the built history of the town into the present day. Because of these efforts, one can still see evidence of Prattville's origins as a southern industrial village built and fostered by an ambitious New Englander, as well as the evolutions Prattville has undergone since 1839. The Prattville community also recognizes that historic preservation is an important avenue for fostering and maintaining a sense of community.<sup>39</sup> Prattville's history and continued efforts at historic preservation and adaptive reuse can and should be used as a case study that other small towns can look to for preservation insights and learning experiences.

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<sup>38</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*; Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South*.

<sup>39</sup> For more information on preservation as a community building tool, see Bill Schmickle, *Preservation Politics: Keeping Historic Districts Vital*, American Association for State and Local History Book Series (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

## CHAPTER TWO: PRATTVILLE'S PRESERVATION GROUPS

Prattville's deep antebellum roots as a southern industrial village led many individuals and groups to be uniquely concerned with the preservation and continued economic viability of the historic downtown. This section contains the land that Pratt originally purchased from Joseph May in 1838, and illustrates Pratt's vision for a southern industrial village modeled after New England mill towns, but with its own unique additions.<sup>1</sup> When the city's downtown began to fall victim to neglect and abandonment in the 1970s and 1980s, citizens formed groups and organizations to keep the heart of historic Prattville functioning.

Prattville's rapid expansion beginning in the 1970s led the city to sprawl, mostly eastward towards Interstate 65, which connects the city directly with Montgomery (See Figures 1 – 3). This sprawl of homes led to many new businesses within the city, but they tended to establish their stores and offices where new growth was happening rather than in the traditional downtown business district. This trend led to a concerned faction of citizens who realized the importance of the downtown business district in maintaining a sense of community as towns grow larger. The Autauga County Heritage Association (ACHA) played a large role in pushing for the Main Street designation as well

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey and Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form"; Curtis J. Evans, *The Conquest of Labor: Daniel Pratt and Southern Industrialization*, Southern Biography Series (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

as for more emphasis on preservation and community history as a whole. The impetus for the formation of the ACHA group was the demolition of the Daniel Pratt home in 1961.<sup>2</sup> With encouragement from Mayor Gray Price, the ACHA and other concerned citizens and organizations began to work with the Alabama Historical Commission to create a Main Street Program for Prattville.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 1 - 1950 aerial image of Prattville. Body of water at far left is the mill pond that begins the downtown. Source: University of Alabama maps collection*

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<sup>2</sup> "About Us," *Autauga County Heritage Association*, n.d., <http://www.autaugahistory.org/about-us.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Autauga County Heritage Book Committee (Autauga County, Ala.), ed., *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama*, Limited 1st ed, Heritage of Alabama Series, v. 1 (Clanton, AL: Heritage Pub. Consultants, 2001).



Figure 2 - 1974 aerial image of Prattville, showing same area as in Figure 1. Source: University of Alabama Maps Collection.

That National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) began the Main Street Program in 1977 as an experiment in three different cities in the Midwest.<sup>4</sup> The program proved to be successful, and after three years, the NTHP created the National Main Street Center in 1980. The Main Street approach has four parts focused on the preservation and economic revitalization of downtowns in smaller cities. The Alabama

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<sup>4</sup> Kent A. Robertson, "The Main Street Approach to Downtown Development: An Examination of the Four-Point Program," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 21, no. 1 (2004): 57.

Historical Commission implements its own Main Street Alabama program using the National Main Street Center approach.<sup>5</sup>

The first step for becoming a Main Street community was getting the downtown district listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The citizens of Prattville accomplished this designation on August 30, 1984.<sup>6</sup> After this listing, Prattville officials applied for and received status as an Alabama Main Street town and the group began to push for preservation of the downtown district as well as getting businesses and citizens back into downtown.

Towards the end of the 1980s funds for the Main Street Program were beginning to tighten – in order to ensure the continued efforts at downtown preservation, a new group was formed. In 1989 officials created the Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority (HPRA), “to provide and assist in planning, implementation and administration of a comprehensive revitalization strategy for the preservation and economic redevelopment of the historic downtown.”<sup>7</sup> The group is considered a municipal board and was created by an act of the state legislature.<sup>8</sup> Since this creation the city of Prattville moved away from the official Main Street program, and began to craft its own

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<sup>5</sup> “Alabama Main Street Program,” *Alabama Historical Commission Website*, n.d., [http://preserveala.org/mainstreetprogram.aspx?sm=f\\_d](http://preserveala.org/mainstreetprogram.aspx?sm=f_d).

<sup>6</sup> Autauga County Heritage Book Committee (Autauga County, Ala.), *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “About,” *Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority Website*, n.d., [historicprattville.com](http://historicprattville.com).

group and methods of preserving the historic fabric of Prattville. The HPRA organized workshops open to the public that focused on the future of the historic district. These workshops were basically brainstorming and crowdsourcing endeavors for HPRA to understand what citizens wanted from their downtown experience.<sup>9</sup> HPRA's efforts drew on the tenets of the Main Street program, but added its own local elements that draw on the understanding of the community and what the community wants out of their downtown. Prattville is no longer considered a Main Street community, but its involvement with the organization early on is an important chapter in the preservation story of the community and provides insight into the preservation roots of Prattville.

Despite the efforts of the HPRA and the Main Street Program, the downtown district lost "more than two dozen buildings to neglect or fire" between 1984 and 2004.<sup>10</sup> East Prattville developed quickly after the 1960s, and businesses established this new area as the center of commerce in the city. The downtown post office followed the trends of other businesses and moved east in 1996, and this move was met with heavy backlash from citizens. The city's historic district was suffering from these losses and in the process of forming a planning committee for the further preservation of the downtown district when officials at Continental Eagle Corporation that inhabited the Daniel Pratt Gin Company industrial complex announced the Prattville offices would be

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<sup>9</sup> Marty Roney, "Monday Meeting to Focus on Future of Historic District," *The News Record*, January 14, 1998, Prattaugan Museum Archives; Marty Roney, "Eatery, Convention Center Discussed for Downtown," *The News Record*, January 21, 1998, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Marty Roney, "City Works to Save History," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, September 6, 2007, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

closing.<sup>11</sup> This major blow to downtown came just before the economic crisis of 2008, which further dimmed the hopes of those who wished to see a thriving downtown historic district.

The future of Prattville's historic fabric was uncertain. The HPRA and the Autauga County Heritage Association have both played and continue to play huge roles in the efforts of Prattville to preserve and protect their historic sites. Along with the city government of Prattville itself, the HPRA and the ACHA have all worked to preserve Prattville's past through creating museums, adaptively reusing buildings, and encouraging the community to invest in downtown. The above groups are mentioned several times in the following chapters, particularly in the next chapter regarding the preservation story and process of the Daniel Pratt industrial complex.

The HPRA, the city government, and private citizens worked together through the years to both save and adaptively reuse several buildings across the downtown landscape. These buildings, as well as their geospatial relationships to one another can be seen below (See Figures 3 through 6). Figure 3 shows the old county courthouse – the white building on the left – and the picker house left from the Prattville Cotton Mill buildings on the east side of the creek, with the Daniel Pratt gin factory complex buildings on the right side of the image, on the west side of the creek.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3 - View of Court Street looking west towards factory complex.

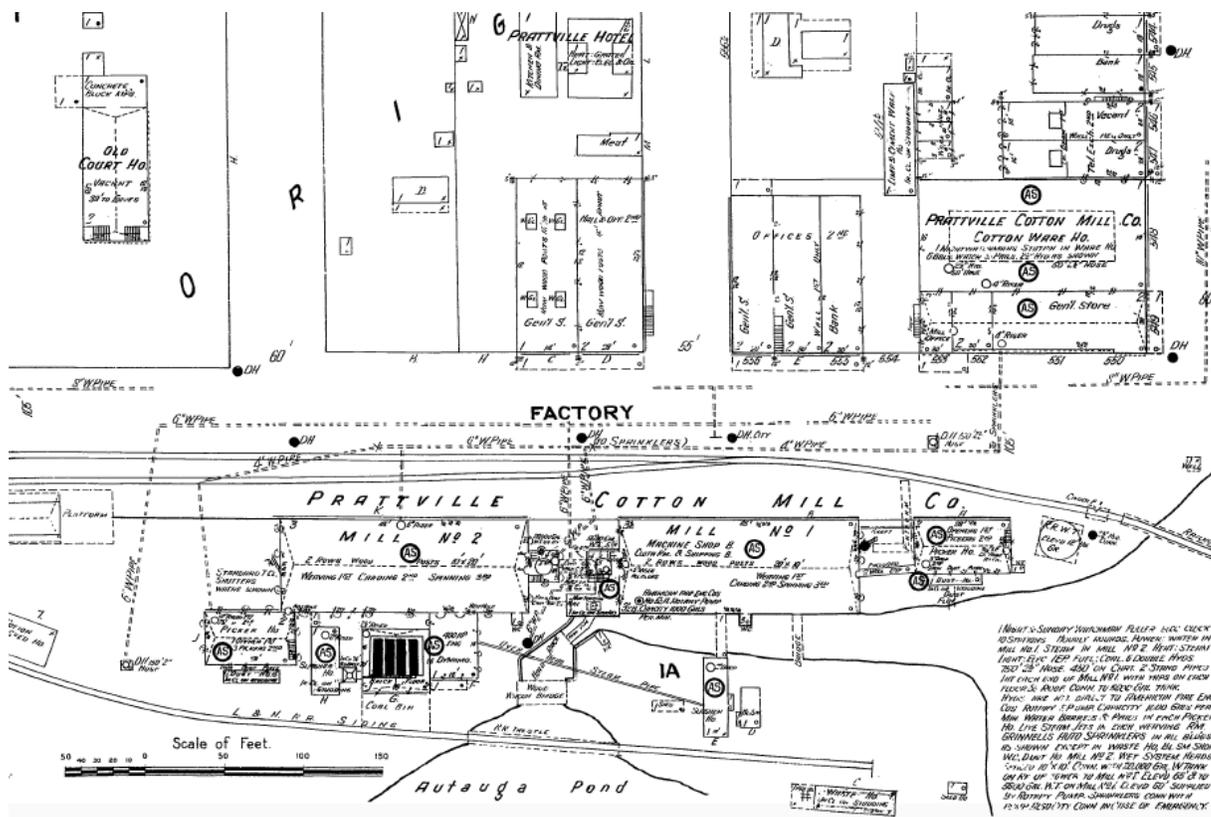


Figure 4 - Detail of 1911 Sanborn Map of Prattville showing the old county courthouse and the Prattville Cotton Mill buildings. Source: Birmingham Public Library Sanborn Maps Collection.

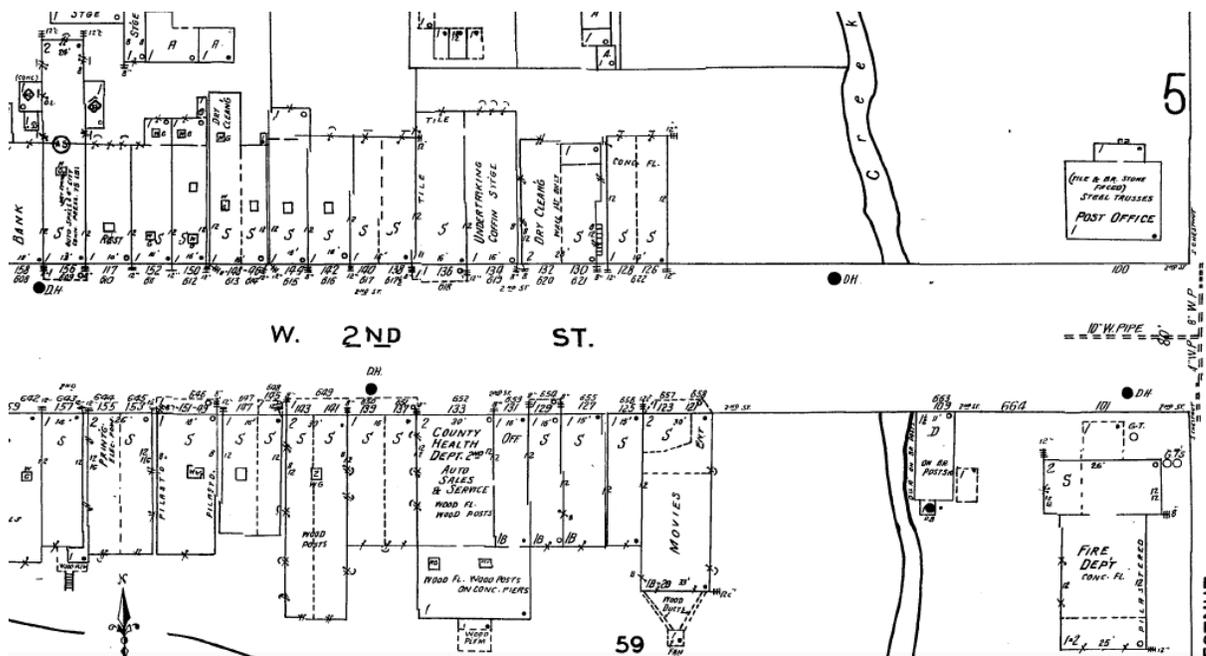


Figure 5 - Detail of 1942 Sanborn Map of Prattville showing the post office building. Source: Birmingham Public Library Sanborn Maps Collection.

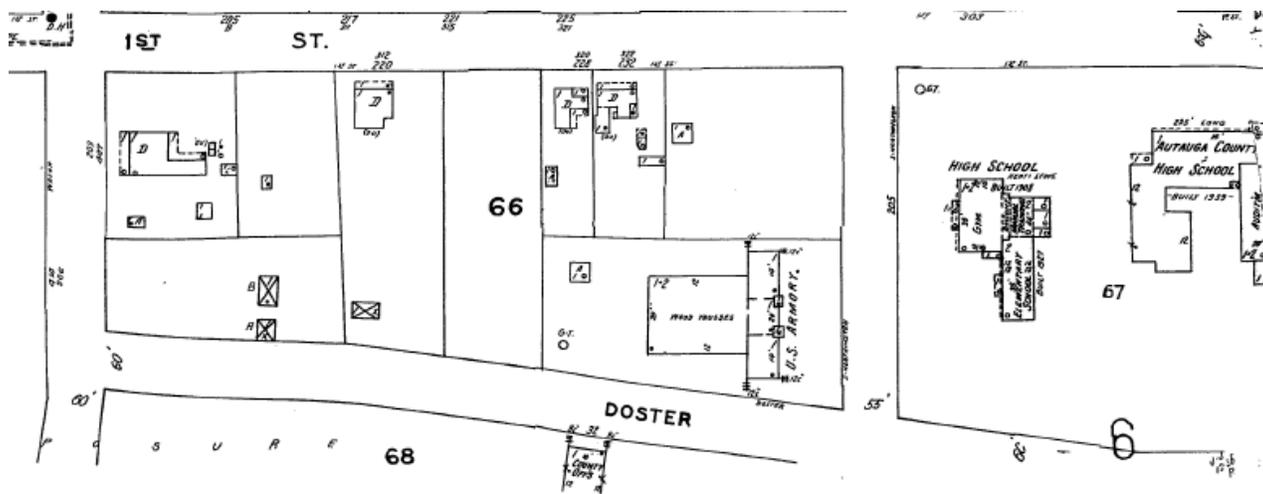


Figure 6 - Detail of 1942 Sanborn Map of Prattville showing the old armory building. Source: Birmingham Public Library Sanborn Maps Collection.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE DANIEL PRATT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

In 1838, Daniel Pratt purchased from Joseph May the tract of land that would eventually become Prattville.<sup>1</sup> The spot was chosen for its convenience to Autauga Creek, as well as its manageable distance to the Alabama River and central location to many plantations in need of gins.<sup>2</sup> Pratt set about constructing his cotton gin manufactory, as well as setting up a town that would draw in potential residents. The marshy, overgrown site already had a sawmill, but not much else.<sup>3</sup> Pratt quickly put his laborers, both free and enslaved, to work creating the buildings that would become the center of his new industrial village

By the close of the nineteenth century, Prattville was a bustling town that included not only a gin factory, but also a foundry, cotton mill, and various other industrial and commercial endeavors.<sup>4</sup> This industrial core gave the town a look and plan that differed from so many southern county seats, where the courthouse square predominated (See Figure 7).

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<sup>1</sup> Gray, *Autauga County: The First Hundred Years 1818 - 1918*, 45 – 46.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 – 20.

<sup>4</sup> Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin*, 103 – 111; Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form.”



Figure 7 – Map of downtown Prattville, with subject buildings marked and labeled. Source: Google Earth.

Daniel Pratt, as a northern industrialist in the antebellum South, utilized his position as best he could. He fostered relationships with the all-important planters of the region, as well as maintained professional relationships with other local gin-makers. Pratt's factories employed both free and enslaved labor before the Civil War and he owned a fairly large plantation himself. Several of the enslaved laborers even worked as and held the title of "gin-maker," which some proslavery southerners detested, as they believed enslaved laborers should not be learning skilled trades that would make them more skilled than free white laborers.<sup>5</sup>

Pratt both hired and purchased enslaved laborers, often looking to out-of-state purchases for the types of skilled labor he required. Pratt's northern father did not approve of slavery and Pratt's only defense to his father when he discussed the few

<sup>5</sup> Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin*, 103; Shore, *Southern Capitalists*.

slaves he owned before moving to Alabama was that it was necessary in the South in order to get ahead, as well as that he “rendered no mans [sic] situation more disagreeable than it was before.”<sup>6</sup>

Pratt also participated in the “overwork” system of slavery, which could be attributed to his father’s influence. This method gave enslaved laborers an incentive to essentially put in overtime. Pratt paid his slaves wages for any extra work they performed, and in 1845, he even used this method to pay a relative of his wife’s who had moved to Prattville.<sup>7</sup> Pratt’s unique position as both an industrialist and a plantation owner allowed him to be able to justify in his own mind a world in which slavery could continue and benefit both industry and planters.

After the Civil War, industry in Prattville continued to flourish, as is evident in the numerous buildings dated from this time period in the nomination for the Daniel Pratt Historic District as well as what can be seen in the downtown cityscape today.<sup>8</sup> The Panic of 1873 did affect Prattville, mostly by delaying the construction of a railroad through the town, but overall the Pratt factory continued to grow.<sup>9</sup> Pratt encouraged the fostering of medium-sized industrial towns throughout the New South rather than trying to imitate the large cities of northern industry.

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form.”

<sup>9</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 263 – 264.

The complex of industrial buildings located in downtown Prattville just across the Autauga Creek, as well as the commercial buildings that line what are now West Main and South Court Streets are evidence of Prattville's past as an important industrial village. Daniel Pratt's cotton gin manufactory largely still remains, although the site sustained a heavy loss in the 1960s with the loss of the Pratt family home and another large loss in 2002 when an adolescent-set fire destroyed the late nineteenth century Prattville Manufacturing Company buildings on the east side of Autauga Creek. However, the silhouette of the late nineteenth century gin factory building provides the backdrop for the downtown and is one of the most recognizable sights associated with the city, as seen in Figure 8.



*Figure 8 - View of downtown Prattville, with the Daniel Pratt industrial complex visible in background. Source: City of Prattville Government website.*

After Daniel Pratt and Esther Pratt's deaths in 1873 and 1875 respectively, Pratt's nephew Merrill Pratt and his daughter Ellen Debardeleben inherited Pratt's real and personal property.<sup>10</sup> Henry and Ellen Debardeleben eventually sold of all their stakes in Prattville industries and moved to Pratt City, where Henry embarked upon exploiting the mineral resources of the northern part of Alabama.<sup>11</sup> In 1882, Merrill

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 295 – 296.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

purchased Ellen DeBardeleben's half of the gin factory interests, leaving him the sole owner of the company, with the exception of "a working interest in the profits," held by W. T. Northington, a notable Prattville citizen who also held large shares in the Prattville Manufacturing Company.<sup>12</sup> Merrill Pratt died in 1889, leaving ownership of the gin factory to his son, Daniel Pratt II. Daniel Pratt eventually sold the interests of the Pratt Gin Company, as did the Eagle Cotton Gin Company, the Winship Machine Company, Munger Improved Cotton Machine Manufacturing Company, Smith Sons Gin and Machine Company, and the Northington-Munger-Pratt Company, in 1899.<sup>13</sup> This company became known as the Continental Gin Company.<sup>14</sup> The merger was the brainchild of W. T. Northington, who wished to "pool the knowledge of the engineers and assure large and efficient production at lower cost."<sup>15</sup> The company underwent another merger in 1964 that changed the name of the company to the Continental/MossGordin Company, and a further merger in 1975 led the company to become the Bush Hog/Continental Gin Company.<sup>16</sup> Despite these name changes and mergers, the company continued to have Pratt family and Prattville ties until 2008.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 296; Algernon L. Smith, *Continental Gin Company and Its Fifty-Two Years of Service* (Birmingham, 1952), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey and Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form."

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Continental Gin Company and Its Fifty-Two Years of Service*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>16</sup> Autauga County Heritage Book Committee (Autauga County, Ala.), *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama*, 9.

The Pratt site was used in its capacity as an industrial site from its creation in 1839 up until 2008, when the current owners decided to move most of their manufacturing outfit overseas. While this incredible stretch of productivity makes Prattville and the Pratt complex unique, it has worked against some of the preservation aspects of the property. The Pratt mansion was originally located a mere 200 feet away from the complex, just west of the creek, factories, and the downtown. However, when Bush Hog/Continental Eagle needed more space for expansion in the 1960s, company officials demolished the Pratt mansion. The continual use and usefulness of the Pratt complex likely saved the factory buildings themselves, however, the loss of the Pratt mansion was irreplaceable.

In December 2014, Continental Eagle (the most current incarnation of the Daniel Pratt/Continental Gin Factory) placed the Prattville complex for foreclosure auction. The Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority purchased the complex for around \$1.7 million.<sup>17</sup> The complex contains five historic buildings that date between 1848 and 1911, and several newer buildings, as seen in Figure 9.

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<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Burylo and Marty Roney, "Prattville's Historic Cotton Gin to Be Auctioned off Dec. 29," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, December 6, 2014, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2014/12/06/cotton-gin-prattville/20002365/>.



Figure 9- The Daniel Pratt/Continental Eagle industrial complex, with historic buildings labeled with construction dates. Source: Google Earth

Ideas of what to do with the complex were varied, from selling the materials for scrap to help offset city debt to creating a museum. It was very quickly decided that the complex must remain in the cityscape, as it is not only a huge icon for the city, but it is also quite literally the entire reason the city exists. The Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority partnered with Pratt Mill Partners, a developer from Atlanta, to create a new vision for the gin complex.<sup>18</sup> The current developers, Pratt Cotton Gin

<sup>18</sup> Marty Roney, "'Gin Shop' Likely Home for Prattville Public Safety Building," *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 5, 2015, Prattville Progress Online Archive,

Mill, LLC, is a subsidiary of LEDIC CQ Realty Company.<sup>19</sup> The plans as of August 2016 include re-using the old Continental Eagle administrative building as the City of Prattville's new public safety building, which will house many of Prattville's first responders, as well as rehabilitating the factory buildings into luxury loft apartments.<sup>20</sup>

Daniel Pratt constructed an integrated industrial complex that expanded over time to include several warehouses, factory buildings, a foundry, and various other buildings. Over time, some of these buildings were lost, but the core of the complex remains.

In 1852, Daniel Pratt replaced a gristmill on the creek with a "three-story brick building, 232 feet long and 29 feet wide."<sup>21</sup> Pratt had this structure built to house several shops under one roof. Some he utilized, while he leased others out to men who would form cordial business relationships with him. By 1857, the building was home to the sash, door, and blind factory (leased by Pratt to Ephraim Morgan), a grist mill, a

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<http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2015/12/05/gin-shop-likely-home-prattville-public-safety-building/76836220/>; Marty Roney, "Prattville Approves Lease for Public Safety Building," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, January 20, 2016, Prattville Progress Online Archive, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2016/01/19/prattville-approves-lease-public-safety-building/79034390/>.

<sup>19</sup> Marty Roney, "Prattville's Gin Shop Project a \$20 Million Investment," *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 5, 2016, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2016/02/05/prattvilles-gin-shop-project-million-investment/79892832/>.

<sup>20</sup> Roney, "Prattville Approves Lease for Public Safety Building"; Roney, "Prattville's Gin Shop Project a \$20 Million Investment."

<sup>21</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 39.

machine shop, a carpenter's shop, and a carriage and wagon factory.<sup>22</sup> This building is situated on the west bank of the Autauga and is the main structure that can be seen from the downtown business district today, as seen in Figure 10 . The structure is angled on the eastern elevation to follow the creek line. The building is abutted on the southwest elevation by the Daniel Pratt Cotton Gin Factory building (see Figure 11).<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 10 - View of sash, door, and blind factory building from Court Street.*

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<sup>22</sup> Bailey and Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form"; Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey and Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form."



*Figure 11 - View from Autauga Creek of junction of sash, door, and blind factory building with later additions to complex.*

The Daniel Pratt Cotton Gin Factory, built c. 1854, represents Pratt's effort to expand his gin manufacturing business and its capacity for production. The building is also three stories, with one hip-roof end and one gable-roof end that abuts the gabled end of the sash, door, and blind company building.<sup>24</sup> This building contains an architectural element that Pratt brought with him from his New England background – the square cupola. Many of the commercial buildings Pratt designed and constructed were Italianate in style, and several across the town included square cupolas and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

belfries. Pratt's cupola is similar to others throughout New England, including his native state of New Hampshire (see Figure 12).



*Figure 12 - Image of Free Will Baptist Church, Strafford County, New Hampshire. Source: Library of Congress*

The Italianate style of architecture was popular during the 1850s and its popularity in use for commercial buildings lasted until the 1880s. However, this style for commercial buildings are not so plentiful in the South and it is likely Pratt's affinity for this style stems from his New England upbringing and the connections to the north he maintained throughout the years. This Italianate thread runs throughout most of the

mid- to late-nineteenth century buildings in Prattville. The square cupolas and belfries are characteristic of Italianate style and the few that remain have become emblematic for the city of Prattville. The Pratt Cotton Gin Factory building, the Prattville Male and Female Academy, and the first Autauga county courthouse were all Italianate structures. The Prattville Male and Female Academy was demolished in 1929 in order to build a new school, but the academy also featured an Italianate-style belfry – the bell of which is still on the site today.

The later Gin company building abuts the east elevation of the original (1854) Daniel Pratt Cotton Gin Factory, and was erected in 1896.<sup>25</sup> Given the date, Daniel Pratt's great nephew, Daniel Pratt II, likely commissioned this building. This building's east end has decorative elements that are seen in many of the historic photos of the Pratt Gin Factory – a large doorway with a Syrian arch and raised terra cotta lettering of "Daniel Pratt Gin Co."<sup>26</sup> The Syrian arch and the building's usage of terra cotta are both incredibly representative of the time of construction and shows that this small southern town was still influenced at the end of the nineteenth century by northeastern trends, particularly those popularized by H. H. Richardson and James Renwick, and was also concerned with creating industrial spaces that were architecturally relevant and aesthetically pleasing. Both elements are still visible today (see Figures 13 and 14) and serve as a reminder that Pratt viewed his companies and Prattville as an investment that

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

should be made not only to work and produce, but to be made beautifully and treated well. When viewed from downtown, this building is situated behind the sash, door, and blind building.



Figure 13 – Front of 1896 building, with Syrian arch and terra cotta raised lettering at the entrance.



*Figure 14 - Detail of Syrian arch and raised terra cotta lettering on front of 1896 building.*

The Continental Gin Company Warehouse building is the last extant registered historic structure on the property. This building was built in 1911 for the purpose of storing gins. This structure is situated east of the previously discussed buildings, and is the first historic structure built on the site after the merger of Pratt's business interests and those of Continental Eagle.

Pratt put great care and effort into his expansions, hoping they would stand the test of time and “induce those who come afterward to keep up the place.”<sup>27</sup> For the most part, his efforts were worthwhile, as both the 1851 Sash, Door, and Blind Factory as well as the c. 1854-55 Daniel Pratt Cotton Gin Factory building are still standing in 2016. While Daniel Pratt did not design or build the 1896 or 1911 buildings, both are part of the early history of the complex and show the company’s expansion and evolution over the decades.

The remaining structures on the Pratt industrial site are either no longer extant, or were not considered historic when the National Register of Historic Places nomination were completed. These structures are still important to the site, and one of the more recent structures is a new chapter in the history of adaptive reuse in Prattville. The Prattville Manufacturing Company buildings and Daniel Pratt’s mansion are the two no longer extant buildings, and the 1960s Continental/Moss-Gordin administrative building, which stands where the Pratt mansion formerly stood, is the building not currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Prattville Manufacturing Company (PMC) buildings were situated on the east side of Autauga Creek, lining the south end of what is today Court Street. Building number 1 and building number 2, constructed in 1887 and 1896, were nearly identical except for the Italianate-style square cupola on the 1887 building, as seen in Figure 5.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form.”

These buildings were erected to house the Prattville Manufacturing Company, the local cotton mill, which was incorporated by Pratt and other notable members of the community.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the gin factory, the manufacturing company employed “mostly women and children from poor rural white families.”<sup>30</sup> This company was successful, but never reached the success of Pratt’s Gin Factory.<sup>31</sup> The company passed through several owners after Pratt’s death. In 1946 the PMC buildings were sold to Gurney Industries Inc., which begins operations in 1948.<sup>32</sup> Gurney Industries eventually vacated the buildings, and they passed into the ownership of George Walthall Jr. and John and Ann Boutwell. The group planned to utilize the empty buildings to help revitalize the downtown commercial district of Prattville.<sup>33</sup> However, they never realized these dreams. The old Prattville Manufacturing Company buildings were lost in a fire on September 10, 2002.<sup>34</sup> Instances like this disaster make the saving and utilization of the remaining historic fabric of downtown Prattville so crucial. The loss of the Prattville

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 3 – 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 76 – 77.

<sup>32</sup> Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form.”

<sup>33</sup> “Prattville Mill Still Smolders,” *WSFA*, September 12, 2002, <http://www.wsfa.com/story/933408/prattville-mill-still-smolders?clienttype=printable>; “Five Teens Sentenced in Fire at Landmark Prattville Mill,” *Gadsden Times*, December 8, 2002, <https://goo.gl/l7za5B>.

<sup>34</sup> “Five Teens Sentenced in Fire at Landmark Prattville Mill”; “Prattville Mill Still Smolders.”

Manufacturing Company buildings is not the first loss of historic buildings on the Pratt industrial complex.



*Figure 15 - The former Prattville Manufacturing Company building. The advertisement in the foreground reads "Ride the South with Rebel" and refers to the Rebel Oil Company. Source: Alabama Department of Archives and History.*



Figure 16 - Historic photo of the Prattville Cotton Mill, later incorporated as the Prattville Manufacturing Company. Source: Alabama Mosaic

In 1842, Daniel Pratt used his training as carpenter and builder to build a large, imposing Greek Revival mansion on the north side of the Autauga Creek, as seen in Figure 16.<sup>35</sup> The home had a perfect view of Pratt's industrial complex, as well as the

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<sup>35</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 11.

whole of downtown Prattville. This home was left to Pratt's daughter, Ellen DeBardeleben.<sup>36</sup> Merrill Pratt, Daniel's nephew and ward, whom he treated as the son he never had, purchased the Pratt mansion from the DeBardelebens soon after Daniel Pratt's death.<sup>37</sup> The mansion likely passed from Merrill Pratt to his son Daniel Pratt, as he also inherited Merrill's ownership of the gin company. Sometime after the merger of Pratt Cotton Gin Company and several other major gin manufacturers, the company purchased the land that contained the Daniel Pratt home. Continental Eagle Gin Company used this facility for storage for a while, but eventually decided that progress and expansion of the company would necessitate demolishing the house in order to build new administrative buildings.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 295 – 296.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 101 – 102, 295 – 296.



Figure 17 - View of Daniel Pratt's home courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The Daniel Pratt home was demolished in 1961.<sup>38</sup> Boone Aiken, a noted local news correspondent, relates the mansion loss in the *Montgomery Advertiser*. According to Aiken, “the palatial former home of Prattville’s founder was razed to make room for an expansion of the cotton gin company which Pratt founded in the last century.”<sup>39</sup> The home was apparently “still in perfect condition” when it was demolished – so much so that the wrecking crew actually fell behind their demolition schedule because the house

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<sup>38</sup> “About Us.”

<sup>39</sup> Boone Aiken, “Prattville Home Falls to Progress,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, n.d.

was so difficult to tear down.<sup>40</sup> It speaks to the attitudes of the time that this finely crafted home designed by the man who founded not only the town in which the home stood, but also the company that was responsible for its demolition. This incident is one Prattvillians do not wish to repeat, and this incident helped pave the way for the current endeavors to save and adaptively reuse the industrial complex, as well as the continued use of some of the older buildings in downtown Prattville. Further details of the Pratt mansion can be seen in Figures 18 through 20.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



Figure 18 - Rear view of Daniel Pratt home. Source: Library of Congress.



Figure 19 - Rear side view of slave quarters and laundry. Source: Library of Congress.



Figure 20 - View of Pratt home from mill pond. Far end of sash, door, and blind factory building at left. Source: Library of Congress.

Almost immediately after gaining ownership of the complex, the HPRA set about attempting to halt and repair water damage to the historic buildings. The roofs of the buildings needed repairs, and all of the buildings contained broken windows (see Figures 21 through ).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Marty Roney, "HPRA Buys Prattville Landmark for \$1.7 Million," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, December 30, 2014, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2014/12/18/auction-prattville-landmark-locals-nervous/20618541/>.



Figure 21 - View of damage to 1896 building.



*Figure 22 - View of damage to sash, door, and blind factory building. Note smashed windows, trees and other vegetation growing on building.*

From the beginning of the complex’s adaptive reuse journey, the most sought-after plan of action was to partner with “reputable developers to repurpose the buildings for residential use.”<sup>42</sup> Negotiations with developers continued after the property was purchased, and by the end of 2015, there were further negotiations for a tenant to take over one of the newer buildings on the site. The local city government began negotiations with HPRA to use the 1960s administrative building on the property to house the city’s police, fire, and IT departments, as well as provide office space for the Autauga County Emergency Management Agency.<sup>43</sup> This building is what was erected in the place of Daniel Pratt’s home site in the 1960s, as seen in Figure 23. While

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Roney, “Prattville Approves Lease for Public Safety Building”; Roney, “‘Gin Shop’ Likely Home for Prattville Public Safety Building.”

the building replaced an already historic building, this office itself now contains historic fabric that contributes to the story of the Daniel Pratt industrial complex. City government and the HPRA reached a lease agreement to this effect in January of 2016. The agreement stipulated that the city council would pay the HPRA \$249,000 per year for thirty years, but the HPRA is responsible for renovating the building as the city wants it beforehand. The lease payments from the city will replace the funding the HPRA currently receives from the city council.<sup>44</sup>



*Figure 23 - The Continental/Moss-Gordin Administrative Building, constructed in the 1960s on the site of Daniel Pratt's home. Image courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.*

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<sup>44</sup> Roney, "Prattville Approves Lease for Public Safety Building."

This particular structuring of the lease agreement allows for the city to have use of new office space that is still located in the downtown district, the HPRA is able to continue with its preservation of the site, and the city does not have to construct or buy another building for the expanding city government. This is not the first lease agreement the HPRA has entered into in order to keep a downtown building inhabited – they also own and rent out the building on Chestnut Street behind the old post office, currently rented by a local grocer, and the former church on Fourth Street that is currently leased to the City of Prattville government for use as the Cultural Arts and Special Events department.<sup>45</sup>

From the windows of the new luxury apartments, one will be able to take in almost all of the downtown commercial district, including the old county courthouse and the old post office. These two building also represent crucial adaptive reuse of downtown buildings.

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<sup>45</sup> Marty Roney, "Prattville Historic Group Becomes Development Leader," *Montgomery Advertiser*, October 9, 2015, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2015/10/06/prattville-historic-group-becomes-development-leader/73471296/>.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRATTVILLE'S FIRST COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Prattville became the third county seat of Autauga County in the late nineteenth century, when the legislature voted to move the seat from the community of Kingston.<sup>1</sup> The move was “long desired by Prattvillians.”<sup>2</sup> The change came along with many others to the South during the Reconstruction period. Prattville’s booming industrial economy allowed it to thrive even as many communities in the South were still reeling from the effects of the Civil War and its aftermath. As the population and economic center of the county during the time of relocation, the move made sense for Autauga County.<sup>3</sup> Prattville has been able to continue its success and hold onto its title as county seat ever since 1868. Between 1870 and the present-day (2016), Prattville has only constructed two county courthouses, and they are located approximately two blocks from each other. Both courthouses are still extant today.

The first county courthouse in Prattville was designed by George Littlefield Smith, and was built in 1870 at the corner of South Court Street and West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. George L. Smith was a prominent citizen involved in the Pratt Gin Company as well as the sash, door, and blind factory. The building cost \$15,000 to build and the funds were

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<sup>1</sup> Jeannie Johnson, *Autauga County History* (Prattville, Alabama: Autauga County Heritage Association, 1992), 9, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, *The Conquest of Labor*, 254.

<sup>3</sup> Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form”; Johnson, *Autauga County History*.

raised by subscription.<sup>4</sup> After taking a tour of the nearly completed building, the editor of the *Autauga Citizen* newspaper claimed that “without boasting, we can truthfully say that our new courthouse, when finished, will be a splendid and lasting monument to the architectural genius of its builder and to the enterprise and liberality of our citizens, and, at the same time, it will be a temple of justice of which every Autaugian will justly be proud.”<sup>5</sup> The building, with the c. 1920s addition can be seen in Figure 24.



*Figure 24 - The first Autauga County courthouse in Prattville, including its c. 1920s service station addition. Image courtesy of the City of Prattville government.*

This Italianate style building is three bays wide across its west elevation, which faces South Court Street. The south elevation contains seven bays and the entire building is detailed with paired brackets underneath a gabled roof. The front addition covers the original entrance and is constructed in a traditional commercial style with

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<sup>4</sup> Autauga County Heritage Book Committee (Autauga County, Ala.), *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Historic Prattville and Autauga County*, n.d., 305.

arched entrances to the pumping station overhang. The two story structure has also been altered by covering over windows on the first floor and installing a new door on the south elevation, as seen in Figure 9. It served the county until the new county courthouse was built in 1906. The need for a new courthouse only 36 years after the construction of the previous courthouse is evidence of just how rapidly Prattville and Autauga county grew in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> After the new courthouse was begun, the 1870 courthouse building was sold for \$5,000, with the proceeds being put towards the new county jail and courthouse building.<sup>7</sup> The two-story, brick building is an Italianate-influenced design that has been modified throughout the years to adapt to the various uses it has served.

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<sup>6</sup> "County History," *Prattville, Alabama Website*, n.d., [prattvilleal.gov/county.htm](http://prattvilleal.gov/county.htm).

<sup>7</sup> *Historic Prattville and Autauga County*, 305.



*Figure 25 - Present-day view of old Autauga County courthouse.*

The structure that began as a courthouse is still extant today, but has undergone many changes and served as much more than a courthouse. Not long after the new courthouse opened only a couple of blocks away, the previous courthouse became a gas station and auto repair shop. Evidence of its life as an auto repair shop can still be seen in the front addition of an overhang and parts of two pumping stations between the

façade and South Court Street. The building went through some years of vacancy, as well as serving as a warehouse for Autauga Livestock Supply in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup>

The value of this building lies in its evolution and the early adoption of adaptive reuse. The lives this building has lived are a testament to the resiliency and time-tested nature of this piece of architecture, as well as what adaptive reuse can do for a community. It is also very likely that the open interiors required of a nineteenth century county courthouse aided this building in its continued survival. The adaptability of its interior allowed the building to be useful in a number of commercial endeavors. The building stands the test of time and is still extant because of the vision of successive owners who saw the value in this already well-constructed building.

The building is currently being used as the Martin Courthouse Theatre for CJ's Dance Factory. The large open gallery that previously served as the courtroom is being converted to a recital space for the company.

The courthouse has been used in a capacity other than its original function since 1905. The building originally housed both the courthouse and the jail, and while the courthouse itself has been altered over the years, the attached jail has been largely left intact. Another facet of the city's growth is evident through this building, not only in the fact that the building was replaced by a new, larger, Richardsonian Romanesque courthouse in 1906 a mere two blocks from the 1870 building (see Figure 26), but also in

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<sup>8</sup> Bailey and Gamble, "Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form."

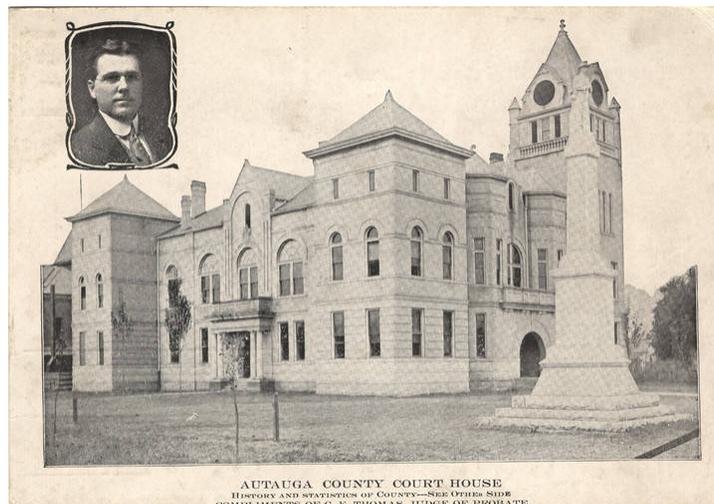
that the building was very quickly sold and eventually became the downtown gas and service station for Prattville automobiles.



*Figure 26 - View of Court Street, with 1870 courthouse in foreground and clock tower of 1906 courthouse in background.*

The 1870 county courthouse also contains Italianate elements such as paired brackets under the eaves of a gabled roof and rectangular floorplan. After these buildings, the styles begin to shift. The c. 1896 building on the Daniel Pratt industrial site shows that Prattville continued to be concerned with current architectural trends. The

Richardsonian-Renwick inspired entrance to the building, with its raised terra cotta lettering over a Syrian-arched entrance, shows that Prattville officials were not only aware of current trends, but that the commissioners of the building were interested in borrowing from different styles to create a unique architecture they felt was representative of the city and its industrial endeavors. While the final building in this architectural transition phase is not covered fully in this thesis, it is important to note for the sake of understanding the architectural landscape. The 1906 second county courthouse for Autauga county is still in use in 2016. While it has been modified to accommodate the growing county over the years, the architecture of the building has largely remained the same. This building is largely influenced by Richardsonian style, as evidenced by its distinctive corner towers, arched windows, and successively smaller windows on each story. These elements can be seen in Figure 27.



*Figure 27 - C. 1910 view of the 1906 Autauga County courthouse. Image courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.*

The transition of architecture from mid-nineteenth century architecture to the architecture of the early twentieth century is evident in these buildings, and continues in the two buildings that are discussed in successive chapters. One also can see not only the continued architectural transitions in the city, but also how the popularity of the automobile affected the boundaries of downtown. While it would take an economic crisis for these two buildings to be constructed, their location and eventual adaptive reuse tell the story of a community determined not to lose its historic downtown to city expansion and progress.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE WPA ARMORY

Prattville experienced incredible growth and expansion throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, owing in great part to the continued expansion and progress made by Continental Gin Company and several other manufacturing and industrial outfits that made their way to Prattville. However, by the time the stock market crashed in 1929, most of Alabama was already plunged into depression, as agriculture took a downward turn earlier in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> In Alabama, the Depression hit in waves or sections, affecting agriculture first, and then the manufacturing industries.<sup>2</sup> And for Alabama's poor, the Depression did not change much at all.<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt's New Deal programs were present in various forms and capacities throughout the state, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In Alabama, the WPA provided funding and labor for several new buildings, including two in Prattville.

During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) embarked on a large-scale building operation. This organization created by President Roosevelt's New Deal served the twofold purpose of putting jobless Americans back to work and creating and upgrading public facilities across the country. One of the types of buildings the WPA set about renovating and constructing during this time was National Guard

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<sup>1</sup> William Warren Rogers, ed., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 465.

<sup>2</sup> Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*, 134.

<sup>3</sup> Rogers, *Alabama*, 466.

armories. These buildings were chosen, as well as several other types of buildings because they upheld the goal of the WPA which was to not only put Americans back to work, but also to construct buildings to “benefit the public health and welfare.”<sup>4</sup> For WPA projects, particularly armory renovations and construction, the War Department was the agency that acted as federal sponsor.<sup>5</sup> By the time the WPA’s armory projects were complete, the United States had 400 new armories built by WPA funds and labor.<sup>6</sup> The goals of the armory renovations and constructions specifically were to “encourage and facilitate recruitment and training of national guardsmen, and to provide communities with a large communal meeting space for non-military purposes.”<sup>7</sup>

The Prattville Armory was built by the Works Progress Administration in 1935 and 1936.<sup>8</sup> The building opened for occupation in 1936, but was not dedicated until July 1, 1937.<sup>9</sup> The Art Deco style of the armory is common not only of the time, but also of

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<sup>4</sup> DoD Legacy Resource Management, *Built by WPA - CCC: 1933 - 1943; New Deal Historic Resources on Department of Defense Installations*, n.d., 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “New Plans for Armory,” *The Prattville Progress*, February 6, 1936, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “To Speed Work on Armory,” *The Prattville Progress*, April 16, 1936, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>9</sup> “To Occupy New Armory,” *The Prattville Progress*, July 23, 1936, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Dragoons Are Entertained,” *The Prattville Progress*, April 15, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Notables To Attend Armory Dedication,” *The Prattville Progress*, June 17, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Prattville To Go On the Air,” *The Prattville Progress*, June 24, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Dedicatory Exercises Draw Large Crowd,” *The Prattville Progress*, July 1, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

WPA building style. Most of the armories constructed by the WPA during the 1930s and 1940s were Art Deco or Art Moderne in style.<sup>10</sup> The Prattville armory is very similar to other armories built by the WPA in Alabama during this time (see Figures 28 through 30).



*Figure 28 - 1953 front view of Fort Dixie Graves, a WPA armory in Montgomery, Alabama. Image courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.*

The tripartite octagonal windows above the entrance are present in all three buildings, and each building has the same motif of central entrance flanked by inset wings on the left and right. The building pictured in Figure 28 is located in Montgomery, Alabama, which is the closest major Alabama city to Prattville, as well as the state capital. The building in Figure 29 is located in Troy, Alabama, about 60 miles southeast of Prattville. The similarities between these three buildings show the general building style of WPA armories, as well as how Prattville's armory fits into this style. The 1935

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<sup>10</sup> DoD Legacy Resource Management, *Built by WPA - CCC: 1933 - 1943; New Deal Historic Resources on Department of Defense Installations*, 22.

Prattville armory became home to the local National Guard chapter, the Prattville Dragoons.<sup>11</sup>



*Figure 29 - 1966 view of front entrance to Fort Charles Henderson, a WPA armory in Troy, Alabama. Image courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.*

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the Prattville Dragoons was also the name of the cavalry unit mustered from Prattville during the Civil War. While the armory itself is important, this name is indicative of the larger cultural and political climate that blanketed the south at this time.



Figure 30 - Detail of triple octagonal windows at Doster Memorial Community Center in Prattville.

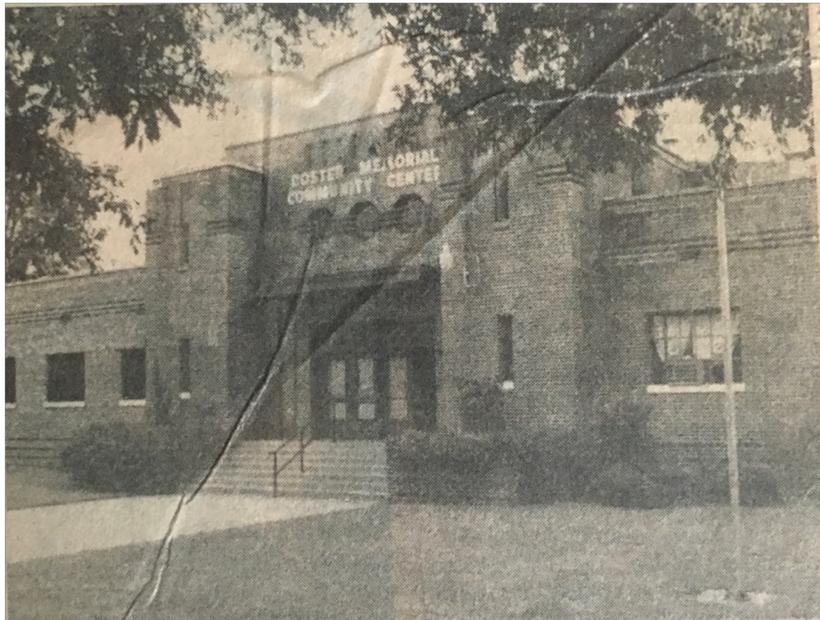
The Armory quickly became one of the major community centers in Prattville. The Dragoons hosted dances and the public was encouraged to patronize the bowling alley inside the armory, with proceeds from these events being added into the armory fund.<sup>12</sup> Even the local basketball teams relocated their games and tournaments to the Armory after it was built.<sup>13</sup> The armory was used in this capacity until 1972, when the Alabama National Guard and the City of Prattville government arranged a land swap that would give the armory new land to build upon on the outskirts of town, with room for storage and expansion, while the city received the c. 1935 building located just outside of the

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<sup>12</sup> "To Occupy New Armory," *The Prattville Progress*, July 23, 1936, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>13</sup> "Basketball Fans Happy," *The Prattville Progress*, volume 52 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; "Basketball Is Most Entertaining Sport," *The Prattville Progress*, February 4, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; "Basketball Friday Nite," *The Prattville Progress*, January 27, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

traditional downtown commercial district. The building was largely unchanged between its construction in 1935 and when the city purchased it in 1972. Figure 31 shows the building in 1984, before the city began its renovations.



*Figure 31 - View of the entrance to the old armory before the city's renovations.  
Image courtesy of the Prattaugan Museum and Visitor Center Archives.*

Armories built by the Armory Commission division of the Works Progress Administration were meant to also serve as community centers for the cities in which they were built. Given this secondary function, the reuse of the Prattville armory makes sense for the community – the old city armory is now the Doster Memorial Community Center. The name is in honor of the Captain of the National Guard unit at the time when

the building was constructed. Many WPA buildings were built to be changeable and adaptable structures that would provide generally for the communities in which they were built.

The citizens of Prattville began to push for a community center that could be used for school performances, pageants, meetings, and other events and activities held by local clubs and organizations in the 1970s, as the city was expanding.<sup>14</sup> The city was growing rapidly as more industrial outfits chose to locate in Prattville, with the population ballooning from 13,413 in 1970 to about 21,000 in 1980.<sup>15</sup> This rapid growth pushed the city to upgrade and acquire new facilities in a financially responsible manner. The impetus for Prattville's reuse of an existing building rather than turning to new construction stems from issues associated with costs. Prattville realized that finding a building that was reusable was much more financially feasible than creating an entirely new building.<sup>16</sup> Knowing this, the city council began looking at buildings within the city that could be renovated to the use of community center.

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<sup>14</sup> Rose Wojnar, "Doster Center Awaits Update," *The Alabama Journal*, September 6, 1984, Building Files, Prattaugan Museum Archives; Mary Anne Dunkin, "Center Sees Increased Activity," *The Prattville Progress*, April 15, 1986, Building Files, Prattaugan Museum Archives; Rebecca S. Cotton, "Community Center Rehab Slate to Begin," *The Prattville Progress*, July 1984, Building Files, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Autauga County Heritage Book Committee (Autauga County, Ala.), *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Cotton, "Community Center Rehab Slate to Begin."

The February 17, 1972 issue of *The Prattville Progress* newspaper reported that the city council named co-chairmen and created a committee to discuss “the possibility of providing a new community center in the city.”<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1980s, “everybody talked about needing a community center” in Prattville.<sup>18</sup> The city of Prattville acquired the building they wished to use as a community center, however, they did not have the funds necessary to renovate the interior of the building until 1984.<sup>19</sup> The city waited several years to begin raising funds for the renovations, but once it began it took three years to acquire the necessary funds.<sup>20</sup> The money needed to renovate the armory for proper use as a community center was raised by “postponing all but the most vital equipment purchases and . . . an unexpected increase in sales tax revenues.”<sup>21</sup> The city’s renovation plans included renovating the auditorium as well as adding air conditioning, improving accessibility, “redecorating the front entrance,” and putting in a ticketing office.<sup>22</sup> The accessibility improvements can be seen in Figure 32. The renovations were completed in the fall of 1984, and the Doster Memorial Center was in high demand shortly after.<sup>23</sup> As of 1985,

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<sup>17</sup> “City To Buy \$12,000 Ambulance,” *The Prattville Progress*, February 17, 1972, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Dunkin, “Center Sees Increased Activity.”

<sup>19</sup> Wojnar, “Doster Center Awaits Update.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dunkin, “Center Sees Increased Activity”; Wojnar, “Doster Center Awaits Update.”

the local newspaper reported that more than 70 community groups used the Doster Memorial Community Center for their meetings and events.<sup>24</sup> Several groups today continue to use the Doster Memorial Community Center and the buildings also currently houses the city government's Parks and Recreation department offices and serves as the venue for many of the department's classes, clubs, and events. The facility is also available for rent and therefore provides a source of funding for the city as well.



*Figure 32 - 2015 view of the Doster Memorial Community Center, which was built by the WPA as a National Guard Armory. Image courtesy of Google Earth.*

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<sup>24</sup> Linda Reffett, "Doster Project Nearing Completion," *The Prattville Progress*, February 9, 1985, Building Files, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

The story of the Doster Memorial Community Center points not only to Prattville's growth, but its continued efforts to use the structures available to provide for the benefit and well-being of the community. The renovations altered the entrance to the building, but were necessary to bring the building into compliance with accessibility standards as well as city code. The outer historic fabric of the building is largely still intact, but the inside of the building has been renovated multiple times. Therefore, this building is likely only eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under criterion C because the outer architectural elements are still incredibly indicative of WPA architecture.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE WPA POST OFFICE

As the Depression raged on, New Deal programs continued to be put into effect to boost the economy. The Works Progress Administration's building efforts were not confined to armories and other national defense buildings – any building that would house a federal entity could be requested. One of Prattville's congressional representatives during this time set about to secure funds for Prattville to have the WPA build the town a new federal post office building. Just two years after the Prattville Armory was constructed in 1935, the city of Prattville began to work with the federal government on plans to construct this new post office. Rumblings of the possibility of a new post office began in early 1936, when Congressman Sam Hobbs telegraphed the post master for Prattville that there was a "fair chance for new postoffice [sic] building for Prattville."<sup>1</sup> This plan would come to fruition that year, and the new post office would be opened by 1938. The process for this federal project included bids for possible sites as well as bids by contractors for the job. The post office was not to be built by

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<sup>1</sup> "Chance For Postoffice," *The Prattville Progress*, April 1936, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

federal labor, rather the money for the project would go to the lowest-bid contractor and that contractor was required to utilize “a certain amount of local labor” for the project.<sup>2</sup> The federal government allocated \$45,000 for the project, and a site offered by the City of Prattville at the northwest corner of Second and Chestnut streets, that included the city hall building was accepted for the new post office location.<sup>3</sup>

Once the government selected the lot on Second Street – what is today West Main Street, contractors began to bid on the project. The Upchurch Construction Company of Montgomery who had just completed work on nearby Wetumpka’s new post office won the bid and began work on the building in November of 1937.<sup>4</sup> Plans for the post office included a marble and brick exterior, which eventually became an entirely marble exterior by a bit of political maneuvering on the part of Congressman Hobbs.<sup>5</sup> Hobbs hinted that a marble front for the post office might be possible and there

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<sup>2</sup> “To Select P.O. Site,” *The Prattville Progress*, July 30, 1936, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>3</sup> “Postoffice A Step Nearer,” *The Prattville Progress*, June 17, 1937, Bound Prattville Progress Newspapers, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Work Begins on \$45,000 Postoffice,” *The Prattville Progress*, November 4, 1937, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Government Wants Bids,” *The Prattville Progress*, July 1936, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Eight Bids on P.O. Site,” *The Prattville Progress*, July 16, 1936, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>4</sup> “Work Begins on \$45,000 Postoffice.”

<sup>5</sup> “Prattville Postoffice,” *The Prattville Progress*, 1936, Prattaugan Museum Archives; “Work Begins on \$45,000 Postoffice”; “Marble For Postoffice,” *The Prattville Progress*, 1937, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

“would be a greater probability of the specifications for the new building including a marble front” if Chestnut Street were paved.<sup>6</sup> At the very next council meeting, the city council voted on and passed an ordinance to pave Chestnut Street with city funds.<sup>7</sup>

Once both frontage streets of the post office location were paved, the specifications changed from brick, to brick and marble, to a final, all-marble plan.<sup>8</sup> The marble exterior of the building is a lasting reminder of the political maneuvering Congressman Hobbs did to get his constituents better roads in exchange for an aesthetically pleasing post office.<sup>9</sup>

The new Prattville post office was officially dedicated on April 28, 1938, apparently 90 years to the day after the opening of the first post office in Prattville.<sup>10</sup> The Art Deco style building has 5 bays on the Main Street elevation, which is also the main entrance, as can be seen in Figure 33. A renovation of the post office took place in 1968 for an extension to the rear of the building and remodeling, housed under what the United States General Services Administration called a “modernization” project.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Prattville Postoffice.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Work Begins on \$45,000 Postoffice”; “Marble For Postoffice”; “Prattville Postoffice.”

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Representative Sam Hobbs, See: Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> “Post Office Dedication Drew Crowds, Officials,” *The Prattville Progress*, March 30, 1996, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>11</sup> “Government Asks Post Office Bids,” *The Prattville Progress*, September 1968, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

This modernization project included installation of air conditioning, as well as installation of a “counter line which will include windows for stamps and other postal services, . . . new post office lock boxes, and upgrading of the heating system.”<sup>12</sup>



*Figure 33 - 1966 view of the entrance to the old Post Office. Source: Alabama Department of Archives and History.*

The building served its purpose as a post office until June of 1996. By this time, Prattville was experiencing rapid expansion to the east, and the government felt it necessary to move the post office to a more central location. The plans were to close the downtown location and open a new facility on the east side of town – the area experiencing the most rapid growth. Many citizens of the western and downtown sections of Prattville were worried that this move would lead to citizens having one less

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

reason to go downtown.<sup>13</sup> Senator Richard Shelby met with the town to ensure them he would “do everything [he] can do,” and that he understood “closure would hurt the downtown area.”<sup>14</sup> Despite major concerns from the citizens of Prattville and Shelby’s efforts, plans to close the downtown facility moved forward in August of 1996.<sup>15</sup> Before the post office moved, the building was opened to state and local governments for bidding.<sup>16</sup> Both the city and county governments submitted bids, and eventually the city’s bid was accepted.<sup>17</sup> The city wished to utilize the space for offices and storage, as the city was still rapidly expanding and had no place for the ballooning administration that accompanied this population growth.

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<sup>13</sup> Brightman Brock, “Why Not Post Office Downtown?,” *The Prattville Progress*, January 27, 1996, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Jim Plott, “Shelby Discusses Prattville Post Office,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, February 23, 1997, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Tracy Lee, “Bids Submitted for Use of Downtown Post Office,” *The Prattville Progress*, July 3, 1996, Prattaugan Museum Archives.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 34 - View of City Hall Annex, formerly the Prattville post office, from the southeast.*

Today, the building houses the offices of the city engineering department, the planning department, and for a while longer, several fire department officials, as well as some storage and is known as the City Hall Annex. The entrance has been renovated in order to make the structure more accessible, but the rest of the exterior of the building is as it was after the 1968 renovation (see Figure 34). The extension added in 1968 adds square footage to the rear of the building (see Figure 35). The building is directly across the street from the current City Hall, and is older than that building by 36 years. Evidence of the building's original use as a post office can still be seen through small

interior details, but all that remains of the United States Postal Service downtown, is a single mail drop-off box on the property of the City Hall Annex building (see Figures 36 through 39).



*Figure 35 - Present day view of northwest side of City Hall Annex, formerly the Prattville post office.*



Figure 36 - Interior detail of light switch.



Figure 37 - Interior detail of service counters in City Hall Annex.



*Figure 38 - USPS drop off boxes located on the eastern side of the City Hall Annex.*



*Figure 39 - Interior detail of original staircase in City Hall Annex.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The style of historic preservation that began in the late nineteenth century was, as most first attempts at something are, lacking in depth and meaning. The women who began this field were certainly products of their time, and focused on the only type of history they knew – the history of the “great men.” Their preservation priorities can be seen in what was preserved at these early sites, how it was preserved, and how the sites that became museums then interpreted these buildings and the people who lived and worked there. Preservation and history have, for the most part, evolved past this concept, and have expanded their own definitions.

The evolution of preservation as a whole can be seen on a much smaller scale by looking at the case of Prattville, Alabama. This community has always been proud of its history, but did not begin a coordinated effort to preserve its built history until it experienced several losses to its historic landscape in the twentieth century. It began with preserving the history of prominent citizens, as there are many nineteenth century houses that belonged to notable citizens that have been preserved, as well as the major public buildings, like the first county courthouse.<sup>1</sup> The city then began to preserve some

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey and Gamble, “Daniel Pratt Historic District National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form.”

of the “newer” buildings on the historic landscape, and many of these projects were spurred on by budgetary concerns and community interests rather than by a city government-held preservation ethic.

The city and the HPRA’s most recent endeavor into preservation and adaptive reuse is also its most planned and history-driven preservation project. The city and the HPRA understand how important the Daniel Pratt industrial complex is to the historical landscape of downtown, as well as the community’s attachment to these buildings. They are hoping this attachment leads to community members renting the apartment units that will be created in the complex, and that this influx in downtown residents will also result in an influx of downtown patronage. Their goals are certainly ambitious, but the community values its downtown district and therefore, the historic buildings within that district.

Preservation for the sake of preservation is an unattainable goal for many buildings, and this particular form of preservation does nothing for the community. To truly work and work well, preservation must have a usefulness. A building saved simply because it is beautiful will likely not stand the test of time unless it is also useful to the owners and the community.<sup>2</sup> Preservation is, for many, as much about function and community-

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<sup>2</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They’re Built* (New York, NY: Viking, 1994), 23.

building as it is about lovely architecture or buildings where historical events took place.<sup>3</sup> Prattville is a community that understands the true purpose of preservation and adaptive reuse and what it can provide for the community.

Prattville's story begins in 1839, but it is a mistake to assume that only pre-Civil War buildings are important to the historic fabric of the community. Prattville's history can easily be read on the landscape, if one knows how to read it. The downtown district curves along the banks of the Autauga Creek, with the commercial district on the east bank and the Daniel Pratt industrial complex on the west bank. Downtown follows a grid system for the first several blocks, but the grid becomes much less strict as one travels more than a mile in any direction from the creek. The influence of the automobile can be seen in this development, as well as in the existence of early to mid-twentieth century buildings on what would have been the outskirts of Prattville in the nineteenth century.

Small town communities, particularly small southern communities, are beginning to realize their historic value and work to preserve and use their historic properties to help their communities flourish.<sup>4</sup> As the late twentieth and early twenty-first century move away from downtowns starts to reverse, many communities are starting to realize there is not much left of their downtowns. Prattville, however, managed to keep much of its downtown intact, and most of these buildings currently have tenants. There are some

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<sup>3</sup> Schmickle, *Preservation Politics*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

vacant buildings, but the future of Prattville's downtown is by no means bleak. As the rehabilitation of the Pratt Industrial complex begins, hopes are high in the downtown district.

The plans for the loft apartments that will inhabit the industrial complex also include a footbridge that will give tenants easy access to the downtown district and will encourage the utilization of downtown as the center of the community.<sup>5</sup> Downtown business owners are excited about the future of downtown, as they have already experienced an upswing in business since the HPRA purchased the complex.<sup>6</sup>

The efforts already underway could be furthered by educational outreach from one or more of the historical or preservation groups in the city. Many members of the younger generations, as well as those who recently moved to the community, do not know the depth of the city's history, let alone how much of the built history is intact and in use. I grew up in this community, and until I began my research, I was unaware of the original uses of several of the buildings covered in this work. During my research, I discovered many fellow native Prattvillians had no idea the City Hall Annex lived another life as a post office, or that the building where we all attended junior high dances and many attended summer day camp was once the National Guard armory. Educational efforts that emphasize not only Prattville's unique roots, but also how Prattville grew

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<sup>5</sup> Roney, "Prattville's Gin Shop Project a \$20 Million Investment."

<sup>6</sup> Marty Roney, "Prattville Leaders: Gin Shop Sale a Boost for Downtown," *The Montgomery Advertiser*, January 3, 2015, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2015/01/01/prattville-leaders-gin-shop-sale-boost-downtown/21172499/>.

and dealt with national issues like the Civil War, World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II, among other events would serve to bond individual citizens with the community in which they live. Interpretive signage at the twentieth century buildings could improve this educational gap, as well as outreach by the museum through offering walking tours.

Emphasizing the downtown district as an evolving area that stretches across nearly two centuries rather than selecting a specific block of time that represents the “original” downtown allows for a wider range of preservation and reuse and helps to prevent downtowns becoming littered with abandoned or vacant lots. It is difficult for some southern towns to accept, but history did not stop after the Civil War, and most towns did not freeze after this time. Many towns continued to grow and expand and build. More recent history is often overlooked in towns with a deep and rich history, but twentieth-century built history is still historic, and worth not only studying but also keeping.

Prattville’s endeavors into historic preservation and adaptive reuse illustrate the community’s understanding of the importance of historic downtowns and maintaining the historic fabric of the city. The community continues to grow in size, and demonstrates an understanding that the most fiscally sound and community-driven way

to expand is to reuse the properties already extant rather than demolish and build new every few decades. Prattville's population is currently around 35,000 people, and shows no signs of slowing.<sup>7</sup>

The preservationist groups in Prattville, as well as the city government, also understand a crucial element in preservation – the importance of the public/private partnership. The Historic Prattville Redevelopment Authority, while technically a municipal board that receives funding from city government, partners with local businesses, developers, and the city government to ensure the continued existence and vitality of the downtown historic district. While the HPRA is one of the major current driving forces behind the city's preservation efforts, some of the older preservation efforts came directly from the city government, from private citizens, or from the Continental Gin Company. However, it is important to point out that both the city government and Continental Gin Company were not always so preservation focused. Continental Gin Company, which had become Continental/Moss-Gordin, is responsible for the loss of the Pratt home that overlooked the downtown district, and the city government demolished several previous city hall buildings before constructing the current one in 1973. Now that the city realizes the benefits of growing into historic buildings across the downtown district rather than demolishing and building larger and

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<sup>7</sup> "2015 US Census Population Estimate" (Census.gov, 2015), [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml).

larger city halls, it is likely that this city hall will remain on the downtown landscape for much longer than its predecessors.

As Prattville continues to grow larger, the downtown district still strives for and emanates the feeling of a small, rural community, although it now contains some businesses that would not necessarily belong in a rural historic downtown district, such as a craft beer bar and a locally-sourced, all-natural popsicle shop. Local government holds nearly all city events downtown, and the emphasis of all these events is a community atmosphere, with downtown serving as the “unofficial front porch” of the community.<sup>8</sup> Walking down Main Street and seeing the looming square cupola of the Daniel Pratt industrial complex, one can still see the historic fabric of the downtown district, and one of the biggest reasons this district is still largely intact is because businesses, individuals, developers, city government, and the community continue to find usefulness in the historic structures that populate the almost three square miles of original Prattville land. The city government understands the importance of the downtown and invests in this district as much as the businesses that own or rent in the district.

Prattville’s preservation story can teach other small town communities not only methods of pursuing preservation, but some of the earlier stories show what not to do. However, even in these stories of what not to do, there is a silver lining, as in the case of

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<sup>8</sup> Marty Roney, “Prattville to Celebrate Birthday,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/progress/2016/09/07/prattville-celebrate-pratts-birthday/89955462/>.

the demolition of Daniel Pratt's home. The building that replaced Daniel Pratt's antebellum mansion is now of historic age itself and will house city first responder offices instead of remaining vacant or being demolished for even further new construction. Preservation is a process, it is unending, and some may not yet see all the benefits of it, but when done in a way that either makes a property useful again or continues a property's usefulness, it is hard to argue against. Preservation, rehabilitation, and reuse, when done properly and sensitively, can benefit all the members of a community – business owners, individual citizens, local government, and the community's economic standing.<sup>9</sup> If there is only one takeaway from the story of Prattville, and it is worth arguing that there are many more than just one, it is the realization there is a reason historic buildings are still extant – they were built to last, and if taken care of, they will last and likely outlast the usefulness of new, function-specific construction.

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<sup>9</sup> Brand, *How Buildings Learn*; Schmickle, *Preservation Politics*.

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