



## “Let’s Put Our Shoulders to the Wheel”: Beginning of HSF in 1955 Interview with Freeman Jelks, Jr.



What follows is the transcript of an oral interview with Freeman Jelks, Jr., who is one of the few remaining participants in the founding of Historic Savannah Foundation in 1955.

**Telephone Interview:** February 14, 2005. **Interviewer:** Jamie Credle

**Name:** Freeman Jelks, Jr.

**Birth date:** 10/12/29

**Birth location:** Savannah

**Location of homes in 1955:** 48 E Broad (white house with a picket fence in the Trustee’s Garden area) “I rented”

**Education:** Went to prep school up North; graduated from Princeton 1951 in Economics

**Military Service:** Army during the Korean War stationed in Japan for 2 years

**Profession in 1955:** Journalist> Following the war I went West instead of East. I wrote a weekly column for the Savannah Morning News on my travels

**What was Savannah like in 1955?**

It was segregated. There was no appreciation of old buildings except among a few.

With the loss of the City Market and the Wetter House being torn down due to lack of concern about either -- a lot was torn down before then of course -- They happened about the same time -- City Market to make way for a parking garage.

It was a real city market. Black people sold stuff – things like vegetables and possums. We could consider it charming today. At the time there were health concerns. It had horrific odors. There were health concerns by the Health Department. As a journalist I was aware of city officials. The Health Department Director, Dr. Claire Henderson, told me the city would have had to close it [if it were not torn down]. It had no sanitation at all.

**What about Columbia Square?**  
I had never laid eyes on Columbia

Square and I was 26 years old. When I heard Mrs. Nephew K. Clark (Kass Clark - Mrs. Reuben Clark’s sister-in-law) say, **“If they ever tear down the Davenport House I will leave Savannah”** I went to see it for the first time in my life. You just did not go down there. The area was a slum.

Goethe Funeral Home wanted to turn the lot where the house stands into a parking lot.

I went down to the Davenport House to see it for myself. When I went in the stink of urine was appalling. And I had smelled some pretty bad stuff -- having been in army in Japan during the Korean war.

The janitor’s basin (under the stair on the first floor) was used as a urinal. There was no door on the janitor’s closet . . .

Ten tiny apartments were chopped out of it. Wooden partitions all around.

**What made the 7 ladies – the  7 ladies?**

Anna Hunter got galvanized. She said, “This is appalling.” She was very disturbed by the loss of the City Market and she galvanized the others – the other six ladies.

There were two maiden ladies -- who were not part of the “7 ladies” -- Elizabeth and Emily Ravenel, from the Charleston Ravenels. ( Their niece Mrs. John D. Carswell is alive and would enjoy talking about her aunts) were most concerned about the fate of Savannah’s old buildings.

Elizabeth was joined on a local radio show by a Savannah businessman, Mr. Frank Walstrohm, who was Swedish born and very successful here in town, to debate the issue. He was in favor of the demolition of the market. Elizabeth Ravenel said, **“But you were not born here.”** Everyone heard the radio show.

The City Market gave Anna Hunter a platform. She lived on River Street on the Bay Street level. For the time living there was “the cutting edge”. It was literally brave to live surrounded by the “Bay Street ca-

dets” – local winos, who lived on the streets in her neighborhood.

The Davenport House issue brought [the city’s preservation movement] into focus and gave it a forum.

Come back to Walter Hartridge. His widow, Susan, lives on Isle of Hope – Pinewood Avenue. His nephew, Walter C. Hartridge, would also be interested in the discussion of history, but he was only about 15 years old at the time.

There was no window dressing with the ladies. [They were all involved for a reason and were personally concerned about the issue.]

Thumbnail sketches:

- **Anna Hunter** – The six other ladies would not have done it without her. She was a distinguished painter and wrote for the Savannah Morning News. She was extraordinary. She believed..

- **Lucy McIntire** – God’s Gift to Savannah. She was remarkably capable, giving and organized. Her voice quavered (a la Katharine Hepburn in her later years). Remarkable woman. She founded the Junior League of Savannah in the 1920s. It did lots of good work. Her granddaughter, Lucy Smith Brannen, is very much like her – Savannah Christian lower school principal.

- **Kass Clark** – Mrs. Reuben Clark. Her husband was the President of Savannah Bank – Savannah’s largest bank. She was a Yankee with Yankee traits – direct, very aggressive, very outgoing. She got things done and she was very attractive. Her husband had a position that was useful but she “cared”. She renovated a home on West Gaston – one of the first to restore a house for personal use. They bought it c. 1950. He was from Savannah. Cornelia’s father-in-law, Robert W. Groves, was looking for a new president for the bank and got him to come back to Savannah from Albany, NY.

- **Elinor Adler** - A great lady. By being Jewish, she broadened and

deepened the base of the group.

- **Dorothy Roebing** – Her husband, Mr. Robert Roebing, was one of the wealthiest men in town. They lived at Modena Plantation on Skidaway Island and he was a recluse. To come to town they had to come by boat. There was no bridge to Skidaway Island. She raised her children out there. She was a friend of Anna's. They called her "Dickey" Roebing

- **Nola Roos** – She owned a pecan shop on Bull Street near the Desoto. I knew her the least well.

- **Jane Adair Wright** – She was the daughter of the Rector of Christ Episcopal Church. She loved downtown. A lovely lady. Later she was very active with Mrs. Rubin Clark in the Owens-Thomas House

### Events surrounding the sale of the Davenport?

It involved finding out about the sale and then keeping it from being torn down. The building was held in trust by the Atlantic Savings and Trust. Mr. James Carolan, president of Atlantic Savings and Trust, saw nothing of merit in the Davenport House. When Mrs. Summerlin said she wanted to buy it, he signed.

### What was the meeting like?

 A fundraising meeting was held in the Gold Room of the Desoto Hotel to rally for the Davenport House – to buy the house?

I had called on a few people including Mr. Groves, who pledged \$1000 (a lot of money). Mrs. Raymond M. Demere (Robert H. Demere, Jr. is her grandson) liked to call her's "the first contribution." I had raised just a few hundred (plus the \$2000).

The Monsignor of the local Catholic Church was interested in downtown. The Irish part, the Old Fort section was 100% Irish and the DH bordered on it. People may know it now as the Pirates House area. Monsignor James McNamara, a Savannah native?, loved downtown and he prevailed on Summerlin to restore it or to sell it to someone who would. From her standpoint it was better to

have a vacant lot than a slum across the street. That was bad for business.

Many people simply did not want to go downtown. So much was derelict. A few areas had been saved but most were west of the Davenport House. A few people lived on Jones Street but it was mostly dentist offices. If you could afford to you would not live downtown. Ardsley Park was the residential neighborhood of choice.

Summerlin did not profit financially from her endeavors to purchase the Davenport House.

Also to be noted: Directly across Habersham Street—east of the Davenport House is the Stone House. It was saved by the late Herman Coolidge, prominent local attorney, Federal judge, and noted historian, who convinced Fred Wessels, president of Atlantic Fire Insurance, which owned the building and planned to tear it down for a parking lot. The Davenport House and the Stone House anchored the square but buildings were torn down on the NE corner.

Preservation of the Stone House, directly across Habersham from the Davenport House, was integral to saving the square. Lee Adler has often talked about the importance of "architectural mass." We have lost that on the NE side of Columbia Square. They were in dilapidated condition but they represented mass.

The group of concerned citizens went to the Gold Room saying "Let's save the Davenport House." But there were no big bucks coming forth. Then Walter Hartridge stood up and said he would guarantee the balance over the small amount I had raised, but he wanted the Davenport House to be in the name of Historic Savannah Foundation. He put up the money to buy it. Back then there was no Historic Review Board. There were 7 ladies with little business experience. Many wondered if the effort – Historic Savannah Foundation – would fly as a business.

Word got around about the meeting and about 100 people attended. It was not a large room [The Gold Room at the Desoto] probably 100 by

100. It was where they held tea dances and such.

The group was comprised of "nice people from Savannah" - "Savannah society" (all white as I remember). Everyone felt the same way – and expressed it 50 different ways.

As an example, Emma Adler sat behind me and goaded me to stand up and speak for "Hall Street! Hall Street!" I had expressed earlier about "putting our shoulder to the wheel." But nobody put up the money - except for the pledges we already had – until Walter Hartridge. He saved the Davenport House. The sentiment came from his heart not his head. I guess his contribution was \$16,000. "7 ladies" wasn't going to make it happen – despite the \$1000 from the Groveses.

After the DH was saved they put me on the first board of Historic Savannah. The ladies added 3 men plus a kid – me. I was the fetch and tote person at 25 years old. The men were the movers and shakers of the community -- H. Hansel Hillyer, John Rauers, Judge Alex Lawrence and Freeman Jelks, Jr. Walter Hartridge was not a member of the board. He did not want to be.

- Alexander Lawrence was a prominent attorney and he later became a Federal judge as well as a renown Georgia historian.

- John Rauers was a realtor and HSF was interested in the preservation of real estate – worthwhile building of architecture or historic merit.

- Hansel Hillyer, president and largest stock holder of Savannah Gas Company, got involved for two reasons. First he was a "mover and a shaker." He liked and was good at being out front. His wife, Mary, restored Trustees Garden – which was owned by her husband's company.

All those men have been dead for 20 years and the ladies for 15.