

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Newsletter

May 2001

## Renew, Restore, Rediscover Historic Schools

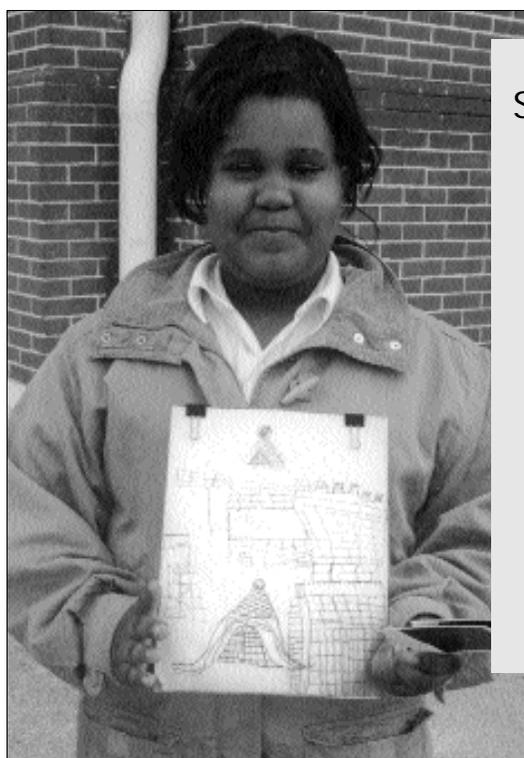


Citizens in Birmingham will join thousands of individuals around the country as part of a nationwide celebration of the 30th annual National Historic Preservation Week, May 13-19, 2001.

"Restore, Renew, Rediscover your Historic Schools!" is the theme of the week-long celebration. Older and historic schools, if properly renovated and adequately maintained, can provide a first-class, state-of-the-art learning environment for new generations of students. Historic neighborhood schools allow young people to walk to class, enjoy a smaller, more intimate facility with neighborhood friends, be surrounded by distinctive design, and be more closely

connected with the community. Schools in random, isolated locations out of town afford little of this. They promote isolation, loss of identity and sprawl.

"At the heart of every American community is the neighborhood school," said National Trust President Richard Moe. "In this age of sprawl, it's more important than ever to rediscover the role historic neighborhood schools play in towns and cities across the nation. If your school is endangered, fight to save it. If it's been saved, celebrate it. Preservation Week is a time for students, families and communities to come together and rally round these marvelous and irreplaceable neighborhood anchors."



### Society Calendar

6:00 p.m., May 17  
Reception for the  
*Alabama Architecture-  
Looking at Building and Place*  
photographic exhibition  
and publication  
Birmingham Public Library  
Library Gallery.

May 3-30  
*Alabama Architecture*  
Birmingham Public Library



Powell School students: left, right and above. MLW

## Powell School & Its Honoree—James P. Powell Birmingham's First Elected Mayor & Friend of Education

James Powell was born on a plantation in Virginia in 1814, five years before Alabama became a state. When his family lost its fortune, the teenager dropped out of school and worked in the fields. In the evenings, he taught his younger sisters.

At age 19, he set out on horseback for Alabama to study at a private school in Lowndes County. Here he taught for a while.

Adventure soon called. The lanky, six-foot tall lad became a pony express rider, delivering the mail over dirt trails across the state. When stage coaches began carrying mail and passengers, Powell formed a company that dominated the service, thereby making him a wealthy man.

He married and lived in Montgomery with his wife and daughter Mary. His business prospered during the Civil War.

After the war, he sent his family to Europe to be educated and to travel. Powell also traveled, visiting England's great ironmaking centers.

In 1871, Powell, then 57-years-old, ran the company that bought the farmlands that would become Birmingham. He moved here and lived in a railroad shack as the streets and avenues of the new city were laid out. When there was nothing here, he provided a vision of what might be: "our magic, little industrial city."

A year later, Powell became Mayor and chief cheerleader for our city. His flowery prose advertised Birmingham to newspapermen across the nation. They wrote glowing stories about the fabulous opportunities to build a city here. People came.

Powell wanted Birmingham children to go to school. He donated his salary as Mayor to support their education. He believed that education was the key to the future. The community responded by naming its first school for him. The first Powell School opened April 20, 1874. Powell died two years later.

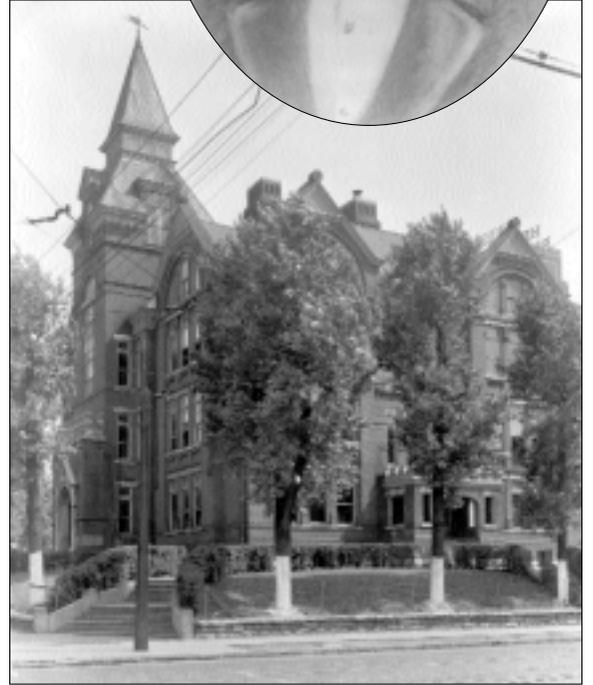
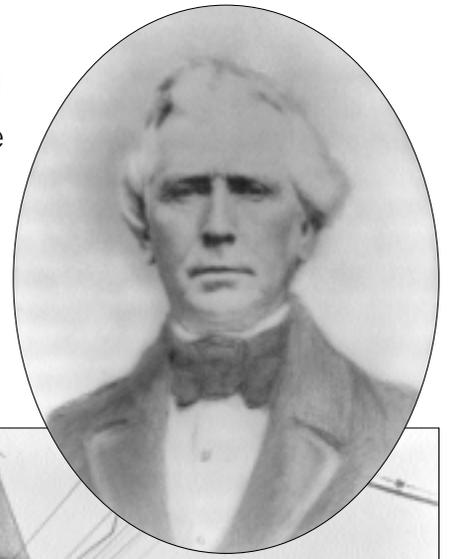
Ten years later, Birmingham furnaces poured forth lots of iron and scores of people came here to make iron and new lives.

In 1886, a new and enlarged Powell School rose at Sixth Avenue North and 26th Street. Folks claimed that Powell was the finest school building in the South.

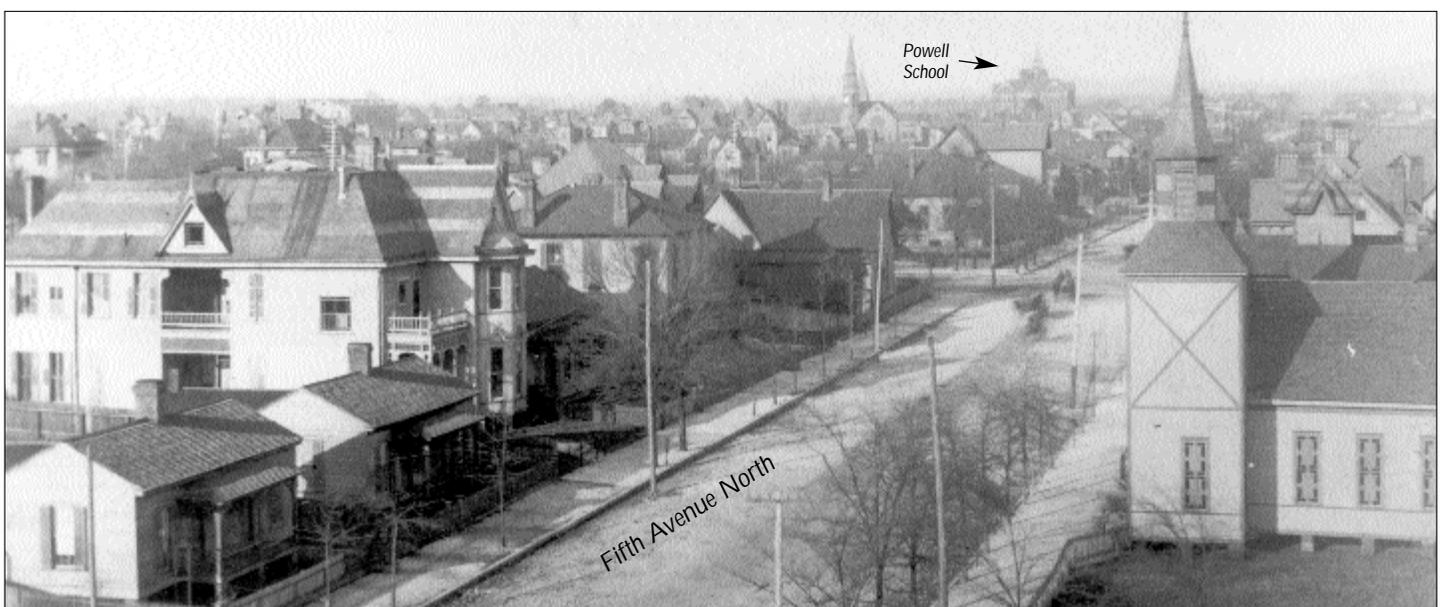
Birmingham became and remains the South's largest industrial workplace. (We made more iron than anywhere else in the world.) Powell's vision for an industrial city came true.

Today, Powell School remains, as do the offices of the company that founded Birmingham, and the furnaces that poured forth the iron that made our city grow. They are the Birmingham Realty Company at 2118 First Avenue North and the Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark where Birmingham Historical Society's office is located.

Powell School closes as a regular elementary school this spring. The Birmingham Board of Education is currently exploring new uses for our first school.



James R. Powell in 1873, Powell Elementary in the late 1920s, Powell School Cornerstone, 1888 and page 3 Powell School Baseball Team and Instructor seated at the front entrance, no date. Historic photographs courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives.



Powell School's neighborhood in the late 19th century. Courtesy Birmingham Public Library Archives.

## A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools

Is a new school building always better than an older one? Some people seem to think so.

Parents who want the best for their children are likely to equate “best” with “newest.” Teachers and school administrators, frustrated by having to meet high standards under trying working conditions, may see a large, new building as a way to solve diverse, and even unrelated, problems. Their goal is to educate children, not preserve older buildings.

School boards and local governments want to demonstrate that they are meeting their responsibilities. A shiny new school building proclaims that they are doing their jobs.

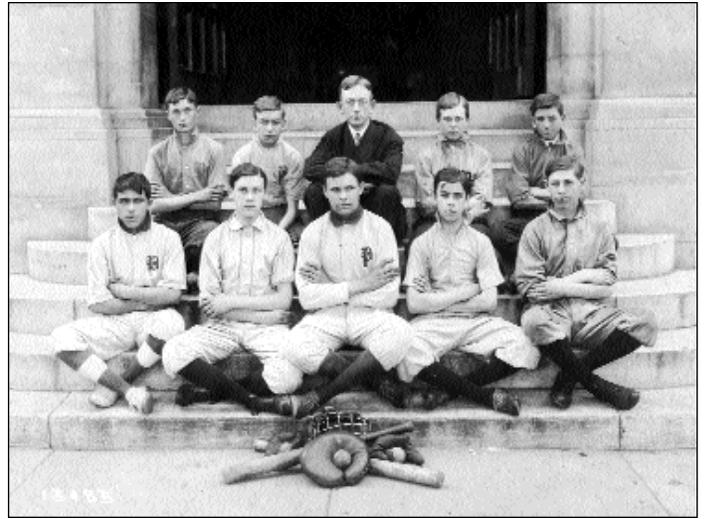
School facility planners rely on national guidelines that currently suggest that bigger is better, and that it takes a new building and a large site to include all the features a “modern” school should have. And so, throughout the U. S., the policies and practices of state and local governments routinely encourage and reward construction of new schools, rather than maintenance and renovation of older ones.

When school districts, advertise for and hire architects, they tend to engage those professionals who know a lot more about designing new buildings than renovating older ones. After all, not all architects have training or experience in the sub speciality of historic rehabilitation. But all have been taught how to plan a new structure that meets a list of client specifications and applies standardized formulas.

The general public, not fully informed about the alternatives, may tend to agree with this preference for building a new school rather than fixing us the old one. Talk of constructing a new building usually generates more interest and excitement than talk about replacing the mechanical systems, reconfiguring spaces and doing repairs and refurbishing spaces, and doing repairs and refurbishing the existing one. That’s why it’s often easier to pass a bond issues for new construction than for renovation. Even parents and community members who really like the neighborhood school may simply feel resigned or powerless once the school district has decided to close it.

Do students benefit from attending older neighborhood schools? As many case studies suggest, the advantage to children and the surrounding community can be significant.

For students, it can mean spending their days in unusually welcoming or beautiful places that encourage learning and positive interactions. Older schools may offer comfortable classrooms with natural light and breezes pouring in from large windows, and with pleasant surprises—like a reading nook, a stage, or a fireplace. Or they may be grand buildings with finely decorated entryways, libraries, and auditoriums—all proclaiming to students and to the community the importance of what takes place there. Attending school in an older building can provide students with constant, subtle lessons about their place in community history, and about respect for the past, appreciation of fine architecture and craftsmanship, and wise use of material resources. When students can walk to school, rather



than having to rely on bus rides or lifts, it encourages them to participate more fully in school activities and to develop a greater sense of connection to their own neighborhoods.

Closing neighborhoods schools often has an impact on other concerns faced by community members: the safety and stability of neighborhoods; the spread of sprawl development; the break down of social networks; wasteful government spending; lack of sound environmental planning.

The time has come to look more critically at the assumption that “newer is better” when it comes to school buildings. It is also time to consider what is being lost each time an older neighborhood school is razed or retired.

*Kerri Rubman*

This article is reprinted, with permission, from the introduction to the National Trust’s *A Community Guide to Saving Older Schools* available from Preservation Books, The National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036, 202-588-6053, [www.nationaltrust.org](http://www.nationaltrust.org).

- One-third of all public schools, serving 14 million students, need extensive repair. Most substandard schools are in central cities, with largely minority and poor student populations and in the west.  
*U. S. General Accounting Office.*
- A major capital investment to upgrade the nation’s school facilities may take \$322 billion to repair and modernize America’s schools and provide them with adequate technology  
*National Education Association, May 2000*
- The average public school in America is 42 years old. Twenty-eight percent of public schools are more than 50 years old. Forty-six percent lack the electrical and communications wiring to support today’s computer systems.
- Many school districts opt to abandon or raze existing school buildings and construct new facilities rather than renovate and modernize their facilities. Beginning in 1997, for the first time since 1982, school districts are spending more funds erecting new schools than upgrading or expanding existing school buildings. In 1998 nearly four times the amount (nearly \$12 billion versus \$3.7 billion) was spent on new construction and additions as opposed to renovating existing resources.
- About 14.1 percent of the operating budgets of local school districts was devoted to maintenance in 1920, but only about 4 percent by 1990.  
*National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities.*

*Standards for school facilities are set by the education agency of each state, not by any federal agency.*

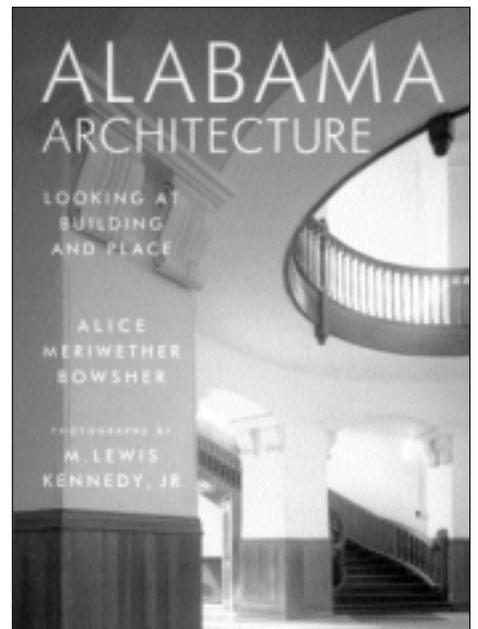
# See Alabama First

The Birmingham Historical Society joins the Birmingham Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Alabama Architectural Foundation and the Alabama Power Company Foundation in celebrating the release of Alice Bowsher's *Alabama Architecture—Looking at Building and Place*. The publication celebration and exhibit opening will take place from six to eight p.m. on Thursday, May 17 at the Birmingham Public Library. Please come and bring a friend.

Architectural historian and editor Alice Bowsher, trained at the National Geographic and the National Trust before returning to Birmingham to become the Society's first full-time director in 1978,

served as associate with the architectural firm of Kidd, Plosser and Sprague. Ms. Bowsher currently serves as National Trust Advisor from Alabama and is active in the revitalization of the Alabama Preservation Alliance, a new statewide nonprofit, advocacy organization.

Birmingham commercial photographer Lewis Kennedy enjoys photographing our city scene, especially its architecture and heavy industry. Ever since his first Brownie camera, Kennedy has delighted in the views through the lens. His photographs for *Alabama Architecture* were made over a two-year period. Robin McDonald designed the volume for the Alabama Press.



## Society Notes

### A New Hillman!

Inspired by the local campaign to Save Hillman Hospital and the generosity of their great-great grandmother, Mrs. T. T. Hillman (one of influential the Board of Lady Managers who worked to create the hospital for the care of the poor), Jim and Patti Hillman of Salisbury, Maryland have named their daughter born, March 24, 2001, EMILY ROSE HILLMAN.

### Ladies Sign up to Save Hillman

Members of the Woman's Chamber of Commerce, as well as other church and civic groups have been circulating petitions to save Hillman. Mail your petitions to the Society.

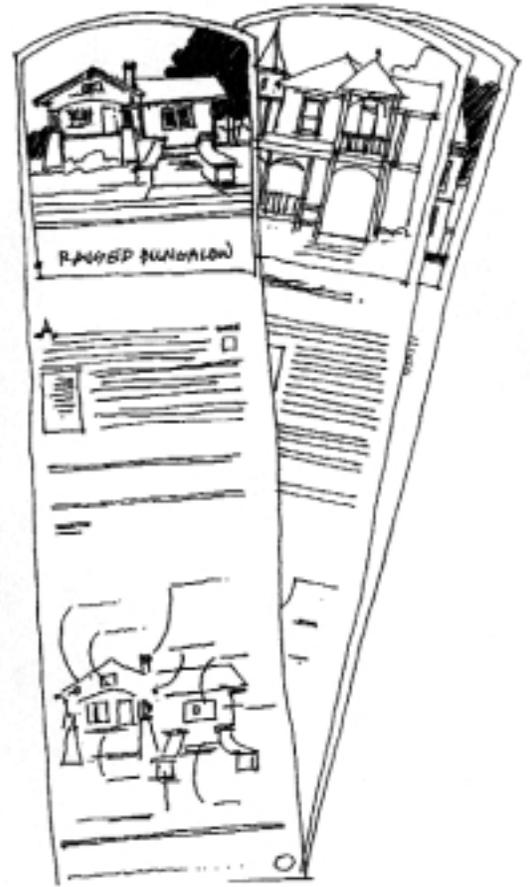
### Beloved Houses, Important Houses, Special Places

Cheryl Morgan will be sketching houses across the city this summer for the Birmingham Historical Society's *Field Guide to Houses*. What shall she sketch? Please send photographs with addresses to us at BHS, One Sloss Quarters, Birmingham, AL, 35222.

### Find the Iron Man on the net

*Vive Vulcan-40* pages of multi-disciplinary, background materials and lessons for 3rd-5th graders are now up on the Society's web site: [bhistorical.org](http://bhistorical.org).

*Below, left to right: Society leaders, teachers, school alumni, school board and neighborhood leaders and board of education officials applaud preservation efforts at Ramsay and Avondale Schools at the BHS Preservation Awards celebration, Dr. Pepper Building. Jim Strickland.*



One Sloss Quarters  
Birmingham, Alabama 35222

Address Correction and Forwarding Requested

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during National Historic Preservation Week, May 13-19, 2001

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