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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

JUN 28 2002

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

Ala. Historical Commission

1. Name of Property

historic name Mountain Brook Estates Building
other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 2803 Cahaba Road (corner Montevallo Road) city or town Mountain Brook
vicinity: N/A state: Alabama code AL county Jefferson code 073 zip code 35223

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature]
Signature of certifying official

March 4, 2003
Date

ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION
State or Federal agency and bureau
In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register _____
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register _____
 See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the _____
 National Register
- removed from the National Register _____
- other (explain): _____

Daniel J. Vittoria
Signature of Keeper

4/8/03
Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u> buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u> objects
<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

 N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: COMMERCE Sub: Specialty retail block

Present Functions:

 COMMERCE Specialty retail block

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

 20TH CENTURY REVIVAL:
 Tudor Revival

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

roof TERRA COTTA: Tile shingle
 ASPHALT: Shingle

walls STONE: Sandstone
 STONE: Limestone
 BRICK

other STUCCO
 WOOD

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

See attached Continuation Sheets.

NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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8. Statement of Significance

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Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.) N/A

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

COMMUNITY PLANNING AND
DEVELOPMENT
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance: 1928-1942

Significant Dates 1928
1942

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Green, Jesse W., architect
Ford, L.E., builder

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

See attached Continuation Sheets.

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the Books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

- Previous documentation on file (NPS) N/A
- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: less than 1 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
116	521140	3704970			
2			4		

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Linda Nelson (with AHC reviewer Christy Anderson) date June 8, 2002
 organization FuturePast street & number 4700 Seventh Court South
 city or town Birmingham state Alabama zip code 35222 telephone (205) 592-8610

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name MBV Building, L.L.C. telephone (205) 870-0470
 street & number 2803 Cahaba Road zip code 35223
 city or town Mountain Brook State AL

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Description of Physical Appearance:

This is a one- and two-storey commercial building in the English or Tudor Revival style, built in 1928 as the representative village store building of the Mountain Brook Estates development of Robert Jemison Jr. It is situated on one of the points surrounding the central traffic nexus through Mountain Brook Village, a planned suburb south of Birmingham, Alabama. The building contains five commercial spaces on the ground floor and has been built out upstairs for offices, ranged along a corridor that goes from one side to the other following the back wall. Its primary two-storey block faces the main traffic circle, while one-storey wings extend along Montevallo Road to the north and Canterbury Road to the south. A full basement underlies the complete structure. Its street dimensions are three faces of generally 69, 66 and 73 feet, the longest along the south Canterbury Road side. The building's form is irregular, consisting primarily of a cross-gabled north corner portion, a dominant front-facing central gable on the Cahaba Road façade, and a simpler hipped corner portion on the south front. Behind these there are a two-storey wing along Montevallo Road and one-storey extensions on each side terminating with end gables. The long roof ridges run parallel to the sidewalks. On the south side along Canterbury Road, a low turret with a hexagonal roof nestles in an ell. Because the building is set on part of a circle and flanked by radiating streets, its front corners are not square but slightly augmented from 90 degrees. This irregularity in combination with other asymmetries of style and decoration (see below) lend the building its atmosphere of a small street in an old village—exactly what the developers intended.

The frame of the building is steel with timber-and-joist supporting construction, terra cotta block infill, and bearing walls on all but the facade (west front) wall. There is a full reinforced concrete basement beneath the entire structure. All walls but the east rear are veneered: exterior faces are brick and sandstone, with *faux*-timbering and stucco on part of the second storey exterior. The drug store corner is faced in limestone. The rear or east wall of the building is 12" bearing terra cotta blocks. The face brick is specified by the architect as "hard burned red shale clinker, laid with a skintled effect";¹ the sandstone is locally quarried from Red Mountain, laid in a "random rubble" style with "bed joints as near horizontal and vertical as possible, without any attempt at regular coursing," with a "natural split, or cleft face."² Under the storefront windows on the Montevallo Road corner the brick is laid in decorative diaperwork panels. The roof is a tile shingle (supplied by the B. Mifflin Hood Company of Daisy, Tennessee) on the street exposures and asphalt shingle on the rear slopes behind the tile ridgecaps. Storefronts have been altered over time, but upstairs the original wood casement windows are intact. There are also some lozenge-glass casements flanking the chimney on the north wing's second storey; these serve offices at that level. At the first level on this side there is a bay window serving the corner store space; the multipane wood casements have been reglazed with colored glass to match the lozenge sidelights in the altered storefront (see below). Some original 10- and 12-light commercial doors survive, with their original nickel hardware, and the original copper gutters and most of the old downspouts, scuppers and strapwork are intact. The three fine tall brick chimneys survive, although none of the fireplaces they serve remains functional.

Mountain Brook Village was planned (see accompanying birds-eye view) so that the major commercial structures would all be served by portions of a traffic circle for parking, while the main roads cross in the center without interference from parked vehicles. The crossing of the Cahaba and Montevallo Roads is the primary traffic route adjacent to the building, and it is on that corner that it is most decorated. The corner is actually the intersection of Montevallo Road with the portion of the Village circle that allows parking in front of the building. The main two-storey building is stylistically split on the circle façade: the north or Montevallo side contains two store spaces faced in brick, with *faux*-timbering and stucco in the steep crossing gables above. The south or Canterbury Road portion contains one corner store space faced in limestone, with *faux*-timbering and stucco on the second storey and a hipped-corner roof above. Another defining feature of the building, the attached hexagonal turret and "tower room", is on this south side, with an exterior stair up the wall face.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 2

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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The extending wing on the north side, which includes the two-storey portion with offices above and a one-storey store space, continues the brick facing and contains a shouldered chimney with clustered stack that breaks the eave-line. The original 12-light doors are left in these end retail spaces on both sides. There is an arched and brick-quoined recessed entry to the straight flight of steps that serves the second storey on this side, with a solid wood door replacing the original. The entries to both the store and the stair are floored in the original ceramic tiles. On the other side, to the rear of the façade and its limestone cladding, the entire south wing of the building is faced in the Red Mountain sandstone, with limestone window sills, door quoining, and stair parapet cap. In addition to the store entries, there is a double-door entry into the vestibule on this side, a room occupying the first floor of the turret; the doors are 10-light wood-frame with a Tudor-arched overlight above. The vestibule contains a curved wooden stair to the second storey, no longer in use; it also gives rear access to the corner drug store. The vestibule space is actually used as part of the drug store, now and historically. There was originally a passage under the stair that connected to the commercial store space in the south wing; this door was open when that space was occupied by Mrs. Gilchrist's beauty shop but closed when another business leased the space (see History of the Building, below). The original first-floor terrazzo floor is exposed and well maintained in the vestibule, and it is here that one can best get a sense of the building as it once was.

As noted, upstairs windows are the original wood casements. On the south corner gabled portions they have overlight panels, and on the primary central front gable the overlights are the same size as the windows and are themselves surmounted an additional window panel set in a flattened arch formed by the *faux*-timbering. It is in fact this primary gabled bay or section that is the focal point of the building's façade and does the most to create the Englishness or mediaevalism of the design. In this primary central gable wall, a decorative band of timbering fronts the spandrel panel between the storefront and the upper window sill, with quatrefoil and lozenge designs overlying the stucco. There is also a scalloped bargeboard fronting this main gable, and a weather-beaten ridge post on the roof, adding to its distinction. Just below the post, set in the gable peak, is a pointed-arch louvered vent; this Gothic shape is repeated in a wooden multipane window in the vestibule wall, now somewhat obscured by shrubbery.

On the south corner, upper windows are bands of wood casements with their heads at the eaveline, without overlights. There are two tower windows at the second storey, one (over the vestibule entry) with and one without an overlight panel. The upper tower round-head plank door is original or very early; a small window was cut into it to allow upstairs tenants, mostly female at the time, a view out when they were working in the building at night.³

Storefront configurations have survived over time, with the usual variety of modernizations and new insertions. The biggest change to the façade has been undone: the corner store, long occupied by Gilchrist Pharmacy, was modernized in the 1950s, its arched window heads occluded, the recessed corner entry filled for floor space, metal-framed windows inserted, and the storefront masonry covered with green masonite panels. The present owner, who bought the building in 1975, removed the masonite and restored the limestone in 1976; he re-exposed the original faceted limestone corner pier and the window overlights, the latter of which were stuccoed because they could not be cleared due to a lowered ceiling inside.

The north corner commercial entry was redone by City Federal Savings & Loan in the mid-1960s; their copper-framed marble signboards over the entry and side window were redone and retained by Harrison's, a men's store that has been in the space since 1992. The addition of the colored glass was done by City Federal, which reglazed the old multipane bay window with the same pale tinted panes that were added in lozenge form to the sidelight panels at the entry. The central store, occupied by Pappagallo's since 1972, had been altered by the Hartselle Shoe store that occupied the space after the departure of Birmingham Trust National Bank in 1962, including insertion of aluminum-framed show windows and addition of brick veneer (although very well matched) to the bulkheads. The entry to this central space was originally recessed in the bay to the south side, now a window, while the door was moved into the middle of the original window bay.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 3

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

There are single discrete store spaces in the one-storey end pavilions of the building on the flanking streets: these are a jewelry company on Montevallo Road and a cigar store on Canterbury Road. Both of these have recently remodeled interiors, although they have each retained their original entry doors as noted above, and the south entry retains its original copper hood. The cigar store in particular has been remodeled in keeping with the general style of the old building by the installation of fine woodwork cabinetry.

Interior finishes are intact but mostly covered up, and the room configurations are the same on the ground floor and basement. Upstairs there has been additional partitioning for offices and studios and the associated sealing off of two of the fireplaces (see accompanying floor plan drawing). The crossing access corridor was created for fire code purposes and also to provide a degree of privacy to the offices not previously available in the generally open floor plan.

The building is founded on a concrete slab basement with 12" reinforced concrete walls, on the west or front face strengthened by interior buttresses. The floors and roof are supported by cast iron columns, boxed in the commercial spaces, and steel I-beams. The ground floor is constructed in a manner using steel bar joists in place of lumber joists, these supporting a layer of metal lath that in turn supports a 2 1/2" slab of concrete. The finished ground floor is terrazzo overlying the concrete; the drug store and vestibule retain this uncovered and in good condition, and there is carpeting added in the other commercial areas. The upstairs floor is hardwood with carpet overlay. Original walls and ceilings are plastered. The downstairs ceilings are now all fitted with tile overlays or dropped grids for modern lighting and HVAC ductwork, but upstairs the ceiling heights are retained. The roof is entirely of timber construction, with ceiling joists of triple 2 X 12s.

Inside, the commercial interiors are all modernized to one degree or another. This includes lowered ceilings as noted, some added partitions and floor overlays, and the usual changes of display and lighting arrangements. The Gilchrist space is the major exception, retaining many of its original finishes and fixtures including the stainless steel soda foundation, the lower counter, the stools and sink. The room arrangement is also largely original, with changes at the rear near the vestibule and the filling of the corner entry and moving of the front door to the center of the façade width.

Upstairs the floor was primarily open, with some smaller peripheral rooms used as music studios, a seamstress' workroom, and such other one-proprietor uses. As noted above, there were and are still office rooms along the north side, one with a fireplace served by the chimney; these are along the corridor reached by means of the Montevallo Road stair. The primary open space, taking up generally the central front area overlooking Cahaba Road, had in the early years been used as a schoolroom and later was occupied by a group of local artists. In 1985 the present owner built out the space for offices and a design business; this work included sheetrocking old walls and adding new ones, in the process closing off two of the fireplaces; installing carpet, and upgrading all of the HVAC and electrical systems. The old partial corridor through the north office area was extended and entrances created to serve all the new spaces; the longer hallway now goes across the rear of the building from the north stair to the tower stair on the south side. All existing doors were used in these changes, but the old tin door hardware was replaced with the present steel knobs.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 4

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Archeological Component:

No formal archeological survey has been done in this area or around this building, but considering, at the time Mountain Brook Estates began to be developed, the pristine condition of this land near a historic route crossing in Shades Valley, there may be some possibility for subsurface remains that could provide information useful in interpreting the general history of the area.

Footnotes for Section 7

¹ Specifications for Building 13, Mountain Brook Estates files, Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ Personal communication, Banks Robertson.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 5

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Mountain Brook Estates Building is being nominated to the National Register based on two criteria: Criterion A, Community Planning and Development, because it is a critical component of, and symbolically represents, an early and significant example of a planned community that included residential, commercial, recreational and educational components; and Criterion C, Architecture, because it is a fine example of the prevailing style of English village style and materials that became popular between the World Wars and represented an ideal of success and accomplishment to which all energetic and ambitious men were aspiring.

CRITERION A: Community Planning and Development

It is a fact of the history of most older American cities that, having once established a thriving metropolis with busy streets, crowded residential blocks and, most likely, noise, smoke and general disagreeableness, the people who had created and profited from these by-products of economic vitality began to move away from the source of their wealth and to find living quarters more to their liking in the outlying areas. The development of streetcar and then automobile suburbs is a standard chapter in all city histories. In the case of Birmingham, Alabama, the growth of the suburbs was particularly influenced by the concentration of heavy industry and extreme pollution close to the heart of the city; one early industrialist, Henry DeBardeleben, once famously said that he didn't want any business to come into his town that "didn't make smoke!" Smoke and grime were indeed the evidence of wealth, but for practical purposes nobody who could afford it wanted to live where they had to see and breathe them.

Birmingham is blessed with ridges of low mountains bordering its southern flank, providing a very attractive location for the residences of the wealthier classes. Many were the families that made their residential way higher and higher up Red Mountain and, once having attained the ridge, felt that their lives were complete and their labors rewarded. The decades surrounding the turn of the of the 20th century saw the conversion of the lower slopes south of the city from rather wild wooded highlands into meandering avenues and bosky neighborhoods, anchored first by Five Points South with its parish churches and clustered shops serving the growing population. Later, as U.S. 31 and the Cahaba Road (U.S. 280) were completed across the mountain, real estate entrepreneurs and their investors bought tracts of land and created even more far-flung residential developments; these in turn attracted commercial activity, churches and schools.

Mountain Brook Estates is the original core of what is now the City of Mountain Brook, an incorporated suburb south of Birmingham; starting out with 400 acres, the Estates eventually consisted of some 2,500 acres. It is reputedly one of the earliest suburban developments in the nation (if not *the* earliest, and certainly the earliest in the South) to include residential, commercial, educational and recreational facilities as components of a planned community. It is also, along with Country Club Plaza in Kansas City and an area in Grosse Pointe, one of the three best remaining examples of a romantic suburb.⁴ In the case of Mountain Brook, the implied nostalgia of its romanticism and the explicit progressivism of its plan meld potentially contradictory ideas into, if not an "unaccusable whole" (in Ruskin's terms), then a very satisfying and enduringly successful one. Its style was overtly and consciously English country house and rural village; about such places Lewis Mumford mused that they "might almost be described as the collective urban form of the country house— the house in a park— as the suburban way of life is so largely derivative of the relaxed, playful, goods-consuming aristocratic life that developed out of the rough, bellicose, strenuous existence of the feudal stronghold. . . . To sum up: the early romantic suburb was a middle-class effort to find a private solution for the depression and disorder of the befouled metropolis: an effusion of romantic taste but an evasion of civic responsibility and municipal foresight."⁵ Civic evasion and lack of foresight can not in

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 6

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

any way be laid at the feet of its developer, Robert Jemison Jr. (see discussion below), but it is the fate of such exclusively conceived enclaves always to be thought of as snobbish and uninvolved in ordinary civic life, whatever their real virtues may be. Undeniably, however, their purpose of getting those who can afford it out of the "befouled metropolis" represents a flight from the city's problems.

The degree is notable to which these communities followed, to various extent, precepts of town planning that developed early in the 20th century, largely borrowed from England and the Town and Country Planning Movement. Mumford popularized these ideas and tirelessly promoted their adoption, since he clearly understood the physical and social deterioration inherent in unchecked and unplanned urban growth, and he knew what the loss of neighborhood character and identity meant to urban dwellers. He pointed out that successful neighborhoods had to have "well-defined architectural character as well as an identifiable social face."⁶ His prescriptions (with one notable exception) for success in suburban planning read like a blueprint for Mountain Brook Estates:

Each area in which it is intended to develop a localized life must . . . be provided with every facility for all the different branches of life that it is practicable to localize. There should be local work and occupation for as many as possible of the people living there; there should be local markets and shopping centers to provide for their daily needs; there should be educational and recreational facilities.⁷

The obvious exception here is that a suburb like Mountain Brook Estates did not have its own local occupation, a factory or major business, for economic support but was conceived as a suburban village separate from but related to the great engine, the city of Birmingham. In this it somewhat embodied Mumford's idea that such places are domestic and child-centered, sustaining an idyllic but essentially childish view of life. In its way, then, Mountain Brook can be said socially as well as architecturally to be a fine example of the Romantic Suburb of 19th-century origins.

The Jemison-sponsored developments of Forest Park in 1917 and Redmont in the early 1920s embodied tenets of landscape planning and aspects of residential style and development that were finally gaining an understanding in the United States in the opening decades of the century. In terms of landscape, these included most especially the laying of roads and grading of lots so as least to disturb the natural landscape and vegetation and to take advantage of the interesting topography. In terms of architecture, houses were overtly intended for the prosperous classes and were created in the historicist styles favored by those groups: English primarily, and also American Colonial, French, and Mediterranean. Forest Park and Redmont were conceived and executed as residential subdivisions, and commercial and educational facilities near them evolved independently as populations grew.

As early as 1905 Robert Jemison had been associated with landscape architect Warren Manning of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who had come to Birmingham in that year to work with Robert Jemison Sr. on the residential enclave of Glen Iris on the city's southside. Mr. Manning and Jemison Junior maintained over the years a professional association in plans for Forest Park and Redmont, among others, and they were to become good personal friends as well. Working with local landscape architects and engineers, Mr. Manning was to be the primary designer of many of the Jemison suburbs, his work and influence culminating in the development of Mountain Brook Estates. Mr. Jemison also employed the city's finest architects and promoted and supported architectural work of a high quality. That he was sophisticated enough in architectural matters to address them nationally is substantiated by a small news article in the winter of 1918, announcing that his speech at a national gathering of high-end residential developers was "What is the Best Method of Handling Your Architectural Work?"⁸

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 7

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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The success of Redmont and adjacent Country Club Estates (the only ones of the Jemison developments to actually make money for the original investors, according to Hill Ferguson, for whom see History of the Building following) had led Mr. Jemison by the middle 1920s to contemplate an even grander development over the mountain. This would be Mountain Brook Estates, for which the investors were assembled in 1926. That same year Robert Jemison served as President of the National Association of Real Estate Boards; it seems likely that the combination of his own success locally and his thorough knowledge of what was going on nationally in terms of progressive development led him to undertake so vast a project, one that would be called not only the culmination of his career but one of the finest planned communities and beautiful suburbs in the nation. One recently completed development almost certainly influenced him, that of Country Club Plaza in Kansas City.*

Jesse Clyde Nichols had begun development of Country Club Plaza starting in the early 1920s, and it was operational by 1925. "Nichols followed three precepts: no right angles or gridiron streets, no wanton destruction of trees, and no disregard of the natural contours of the land. . . . Exclusivity derived also from a laundry list of rigid restrictions. Land was sold subject to substantial setbacks from the street, to the provision for extensive foundation plantings, to the acceptance of racially restrictive covenants, and to the construction of driveways and garages."⁹ Country Club Plaza also had its architectural style set by the developer, that of Spain (Seville, in fact¹⁰) rather than that of old England.

Country Club Plaza was particularly original in terms of how the commercial area was developed: Nichols "put together a concentration of retail stores, and used leasing policy to determine the composition of stores in the concentration. . . ." ¹¹ As the history of the Mountain Brook Estates Building confirms, attention to the commercial and service mix in the Village was specifically directed at providing residents with what they needed on a daily basis. A discussion later in this section provides greater detail concerning the specific arrangements made by the Jemison Company with its tenants in the building in order to create this necessary commercial mix. Composition of stores was not only, however, a matter of what was provided; it was also very much a matter of what was ruled out: Barefield comments on the restrictions placed on kinds of businesses that could operate in the environs of the Village: "No business that was obnoxious by the emission of fumes, gas, odor, dust or noise was acceptable. No hospital, asylum or sanitarium of any kind was allowed, nor undertaking parlors, livery stables or veterinary hospitals. No garages for repairing automobiles could be within the corporate limits although filling stations were desirable."¹²

The residential phase of Mountain Brook Estates was begun first, and it was officially opened in late June of 1927. The brochure printed for this occasion, finely produced in the Jemison style, was well provided with drawings of the stonework pylons and walls and other landscaping features of Mountain Brook Estates, and with maps showing the curvilinear street and bridle trail designs, the large wooded lots nestling within the encircling arms of the roads, and the English-style village anchoring its western edge. All of this was described in the grandiloquent promotional style of the times, extolling the beauties of nature, the exclusivity of the setting, and the quality of the design. Concerning this last, one anecdotal source reports an interesting thing about the street plan: that it was laid out so well that, if you were lost, you could keep turning left—but not onto a street smaller than the one you were on—and you would eventually find yourself back in one of the villages (Mountain Brook Village or English Village, the latter closer to Birmingham and developed along with Redmont).¹³

A summary in the *Dixie Manufacturer* of residential construction by the end of 1929 reported that nearly 100 properties had been completed, and more were on the drawing board. Even so businesslike a publication as the *Manufacturer* could report (in copy supplied by Jemison, surely) the architectural romance of the place: "gabled

*This has been anecdotally corroborated by Mr. Jemison's granddaughter, Louise Goodall Smith, in a personal communication to Birmingham historian Marvin Y. Whiting. She reports that her grandfather was in fact inspired by Country Club Plaza.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 8

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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English houses snugly between two slopes; formal French manoirs surrounded by stately gardens, Colonial homes of ante bellum magnificence. . . . Mountain Brook Estates today is said to be the largest restricted and developed home community under unified control in the entire South."¹⁴ Under the overall plans and consulting supervision of Warren Manning, the local development team included landscape architect William H. Kessler and civil engineer John H. Glander Jr. The subdivision manager was Ruffin Smith of the Jemison Companies.

The Mountain Brook Estates Building was begun in April, 1928 and essentially finished that winter (see History of the Building, below). It was not the first commercial structure completed in the Village: a building by other investors (Charles H. McCauley, architect) was finished across the circle and leased by late 1928, and the Bearden Mercantile Building, somewhat down Cahaba Road to the south, was finished by the spring of 1929. The significance of the Estates building is, therefore, not that it was the absolute first completed but that it was the Company-produced model in two areas: (1) its architectural style and quality*, and (2) its pioneering use of lease terms to consciously create and maintain an essential commercial mix of stores for a remote community.

Since Mountain Brook Estates was one of the earliest developments in the country to include residential, commercial, recreational and educational aspects as components of a comprehensive plan, then by definition the management of the Mountain Brook Estates Building is one the earliest examples— following the pioneering one of Country Club Plaza— of the use of incentive leases by the developer to locate businesses deemed necessary to support all aspects of a planned community.¹⁵ In Jemison documents the Village is referred to as the "civic center" of Mountain Brook Estates. The Estates Building was planned, built, owned and managed by Jemison to be the visual focal point of the Village, but it was also used by Jemison as a vehicle through which he could assure the presence of businesses necessary to support the residential aspect of his development. By using incentive lease arrangements, he was able to place (1) a pharmacy, (2) a grocery store, and (3) a hardware store in the heart of the Village, which he perceived as the town and civic center of his entire development.

The use of incentive leases is common to current real estate developments. Jemison's use of such leases in the Mountain Brook Estates building would have been, however, innovative and extraordinary for its time. An examination of the early lease records indicates that the Mountain Brook Estates Building was used by Jemison to give terms and conditions to business owners to assure their presence in Mountain Brook Village when locating a business in such a remote area would not have been economically inviting and, in the normal course of things, highly unlikely to occur.

To appreciate the effect of Jemison's use of this property to ensure the presence of businesses he felt were necessary to support the entire development, lease terms and conditions of the original tenants should be examined individually:

Mountain Brook Pharmacy

Lease term: 10 years

Rent: \$100/month guarantee OR 10% of sales, whichever is greater
(Today, the standard for comparable businesses is 3-5%)

Mr. Jemison paid \$7,000 to the business owner in the building out and furnishing of the pharmacy. This represents a huge amount for its time, especially considered in relationship to the entire construction cost of the building, \$38, 432.74. To recoup this expense, Jemison was to be paid an amount equivalent to 10% of monthly sales; 3-5% of sales would have been a more normal

*For a discussion of architectural importance, see Criterion C following.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 9

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====

arrangement. For its time this would have been a dramatic example of "front loading," *i.e.*, the \$7,000 built-out by the building owner, and "back loading," *i.e.*, receiving 10% of sales, twice to more than twice the normal amount of a commercial lease.

Hill Grocery Company

Lease term: 5 years

Rent: \$1/month guaranteed OR 2% of monthly sales (meat market sales excluded)

This lease was the absolute opposite of the pharmacy lease: there was no advance by the building owner, and the 2% of sales would be a normal percentage-of-sales agreement for a grocery. The incentive in this case was the \$1.00 per month guarantee— five years in the building for \$60.00!

Bearden's General Merchandise

Lease term: Month to month

Rent: \$125/month

This would be termed a "lease of convenience." Records show that Bearden's was to be a short-term tenant at this location until a larger building more fitting its space needs could be completed. This space was used to allow Bearden's to establish a presence in the Village during the same period when the grocery and the pharmacy were opened. It also gave the Mountain Brook Estates Building the appearance of being fully occupied and vibrant when viewed from its Cahaba Road frontage.

These three businesses were the major tenants at the opening of the building, even before it was completely finished. The other smaller store spaces were gradually rented on a month-to-month basis at prices ranging from \$15 to \$35 a month (see History of the Building below, and attached schematic of ground-floor rentals).

By late winter of 1929, Jemison had the building for sale for \$100,000. Its monthly income for December was \$275— less than one-third of what a building of this valuation should economically return. The onset of the Depression stunted Mountain Brook Estates development for many years, allowing only those things already under way such as the Country Club to be completed. Very likely due to the generosity of the lease terms, both the Pharmacy and Hill Grocery Company stayed in the building, Hill's finally moving out in 1938 after completion of their own building across Canterbury Road from their old location (see History of the Building). There is no doubt that Jemison placed such importance in having these core businesses to support his development that he was willing to assume the financial responsibility of locating them all in the Mountain Brook Estates Building— his own flagship commercial building and the only one to be planned, built, owned and managed by the Jemison Companies.

In this last year of an active (though insidiously downward-sliding) economy, the Estates development continued building. The riding academy, somewhat south and west of the Village on a low rise of the landscape, was operating by the summer of 1929, with something like 27 miles of riding trails.¹⁶ The Mountain Brook Club was open for golf and social life by January of 1930, with a Southern Colonial-style clubhouse designed by New York architect Aymar Embury II in association with Birmingham's Miller & Martin. The golf course was designed by renowned designer Donald Ross of Pinehurst, who had also worked with Jemison on the old and new Birmingham

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 10

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====

Country Club courses. The Mountain Brook Elementary School was completed in the autumn of 1929, ready for students for the 1929-30 school year; in the preceding year students had had to attend classes in various locations around Mountain Brook, including those accommodated on the second floor of the Estates Building.¹⁷

The Birmingham Historical Society's history of Birmingham's landscape development has provided a good summary of Mountain Brook's significance in the areas of planning and design. Calling it "the culminating undertaking of the Jemison Companies" and "the most generously developed subdivision to date in Birmingham," the history reports that it was

intended to be an estate community with many lots six times the size of the average city lots. Houses, roads, gardens, bridges and bridle trails would capture the 'charm of the Old English countryside.' . . . Mountain Brook was among the first real estate developments in the nation to include a village shopping center. Here the development built three buildings in the old English style. All other buildings were approved by the company. The design review process included approval of designs, awnings, signs and occupants. A commercial establishment restricted commercial activities to businesses that would not "prove obnoxious by emission of fumes, gas, odor, dust or noise."

The village shopping center, a riding academy, the two country clubs and miles of bridal trails were built to provide the gracious life that Jemison & Company proposed to lure prospective buyers over Red Mountain, away from "industrial encroachments" to live with "nature as your nearest neighbor."¹⁸

Mountain Brook Estates' distinction, then, was based primarily on two things: first, that it expanded onto larger estate lots Jemison's use of landscape architecture and natural settings, and secondly that it was planned to include not only residential but commercial, educational and recreational facilities, all completely under the direction of the Jemison Companies as to their design, execution, sale and leasing. A post-World War II interview with Mr. Jemison noted that, "(w)hereas so many residential sections spring up like topsy without much overall planning, the Mountain Brook area was blue-printed in its entirety as a whole and all improvements such as paved streets installed by the developers."¹⁹ Mr. Jemison could have added that the initial success of the commercial village was because he had planned for that as well, by creating his ideal commercial building and stocking it at incentive terms with those businesses that he knew would be indispensable to the residents.

Today, for most local people, there are two structures that say "Mountain Brook" in their minds' eyes: one is the old mill along Mountain Brook Parkway, and the other is the Mountain Brook Estates Building. The Estates Building has become the symbol of Mountain Brook Village and is generally always used in any graphic representation of the commercial town (the latest example as of this writing: an April 24, 2002 Birmingham News promotional insert about the Villages of Mountain Brook, the building's gables prominently on the cover). Its style and quality represent the whole, but in addition it has attained a nearly iconic status because of the continued presence of Gilchrist (successor to the Pharmacy, see History following) on the Canterbury Road corner, serving every generation that has ever lived there.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 11

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====

NOTES FOR CRITERION A

⁴ Personal communication from Banks Robertson, based on a presentation about the history of Mountain Brook Village made some years ago to the Mountain Brook Planning and Zoning Advisory Committee by an employee of *Southern Living* magazine.

⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, p. 484, p. 492.

⁶ Lewis Mumford, "Neighborhood and neighborhood unit," *The Urban Prospect*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956 *etc.*, pp. 56-66 *passim*, especially pp. 65-66. This article was originally published in *Town Planning Review*, 1954.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66, in a direct quote by Mumford of a 1921 article by Raymond Unwin.

⁸ Robert Jemison, Jr., goes to Baltimore to make address," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, February 20, 1918.

⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985 (paperback edition 1987), p. 178.

¹⁰ Personal communication from Christy Anderson at the Alabama Historical Commission, who has a particular interest in Country Club Plaza.

¹¹ Jackson, p. 258.

¹² Marilyn Davis Barefield, *A History of Mountain Brook, Alabama & Incidentally of Shades Valley*, Birmingham: Southern University Press, 1985 (paperback edition 1987), p. 73, quoting from papers in the Jemison collection, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

¹³ Same anecdotal source as Note 4 above, from a talk to the Mountain Brook Planning & Zoning Board.

¹⁴ "Mountain Brook Estates," *The Dixie Manufacturer*, January 25, 1930, p.82.

¹⁵ The following discussion of the incentive leases is directly based on an analysis by the owner, Banks Robertson, of leasing information contained in the Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

¹⁶ For a description and map of the riding trails, see Barefield, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁸ Philip A. Morris and Marjorie L. White, Eds., *Designs on Birmingham: A Landscape History of a Southern City and Its Suburbs*, Birmingham: Birmingham Historical Society, 1989, pp. 25-26. As noted, only one of the three commercial buildings was built by The Jemison Companies, but all were under the supervision and approval of Jemison, and they were leased by Jemison. Quotations in the section quoted here are from promotional Jemison materials such as *The Jemison Magazine* and leasing documents, Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

¹⁹ "Nature plus man made Mt. Brook - Bob Jemison," *Shades Valley Sun*, March 16, 1945.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 12

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

CRITERION C: Architecture

The Mountain Brook Estates Building is significant as a fine example of the Tudor Revival²⁰ or English Village style of architecture that was very popular in the second, third and fourth decades of the 20th century, representing as it did an ideal of cultural identity and attainment sought by middle-class aspirants to upper-class styles and titles. Besides the interest and relative authenticity of its style, the building by its materials and workmanship is a good example of the type. Consistently popular as a residential style, the English architecture in this case represents a commercial adaptation that is overtly romantic and derivative because it has no American precedents in commercial areas that evolved naturally out of the national experience. Such places as Mountain Brook Village were created whole to provide a setting, an atmosphere, a stage set, and the choice of English architecture was overtly related by the developers to the romantic aspirations of the residents.

The Description of Physical Appearance (Section 7 above) gives some idea of the meticulous instructions to the contractor from the architect as to the treatment of the materials for this building, intended to create the most authentic workmanship and appearance possible. Elaborateness and care on this scale are not uncommon in the estate residences in the English style that typify the Birmingham mountain suburbs, but in a commercial building they are extraordinary. In Mountain Brook Village, the other pre-Depression buildings completed are likewise characterized by fine brickwork, half-timbering and stucco, and cross-gabled rooflines that make them good examples of the English style; none, however, shows the same scale, flamboyance, variety of material, and meticulous attention to detail that characterize the Mountain Brook Estates Building. Intending for it to be the standard to which all other commercial buildings in the Village would be held, Mr. Jemison demanded that its craftsmanship should be the best. Jesse Green, the architect, was not one of the famed firms in the city (unlike Miller & Martin) that were known for their residential projects; he was actually more known for his church designs. The contractor, L.E. Ford, did do a number of substantial residential projects for the big design firms, and so was a good choice for the builder.

There are other English-style commercial developments in Birmingham dating from the 1920s, notably the Avon Theatre and Exclusive Furniture Shop in Lakeview (NR). A smaller example is Gable Square on Southside; a newspaper article noting the construction of this "suburban" (at the time) shopping area reported that "ornamental architecture [is] popular with new development," that "suburban business blocks, built in accordance with an ornamental type of architecture and conveniently located to serve a large section of the city, are growing in favor . . ." Gable Square was of "the English type, stucco walls finished in brick, colored and gabled slate roofs . . ." Hill Grocery Company took one store and a creamery another, and negotiations were ongoing to secure a druggist, according to the article.²¹ In one respect, then, Mr. Jemison was doing on a grand scale in Mountain Brook, for a more prosperous clientèle, what everybody else was doing.

Virginia and Lee McAlester have provided a good short course on what they term the American Eclectic version of the old English style, pointing out that the English traditions are

freely mixed in their American Eclectic expressions but are united by an emphasis on steeply pitched, front-facing gables which . . . are almost universally present as a dominant facade element . . . About half have ornamental false half-timbering, a characteristic they share with some examples of the earlier Stick and Queen Anne styles, which also drew heavily on Medieval English precedents. Unlike these styles, which were usually executed with wooden (board or shingle) wall cladding, most Tudor houses have stucco, masonry, or masonry-veneered walls.²²

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 13

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====
Their short list of identifying features includes a steeply pitched roof dominated by one or more prominent cross gables; decorative or false (*i.e.*, not structural) half-timbering; tall, narrow windows, usually in multiple groups with multi-pane glazing; and massive chimneys, commonly crowned by decorative chimney pots.²³ The Mountain Brook Estates Building contains all of these features plus some additional decorative ones: some lozenge-mullioned windows, decorative bargeboards in the principle facade gables, ridgeposts, and patterned brickwork on a section of the lower facade. It contains all of the typical materials: stucco and timbering, multipane casement windows, high clustered chimneys, and brick and sandstone masonry walls, laid in a fashion to appear rusticated or "skintled," as the building contract specified (see Description of Appearance above). There is one Tudor-arched entry, that leading into the rear of the drug store from the Canterbury Road side.

The building's general shape and setting on its lots are also imitative of historic village features: it is asymmetrical and composed in unmatched portions, one hipped, the others gabled, with a short hexagonal-roofed turret or tower toward the rear on one side. The principle facade gable projects slightly and, by means of its decoratively timbered storefront spandrel, appears to overhang the first storey somewhat. The building follows the unsquared corners of the circle's street intersections, like mediaeval structures that are built to cover oddly shaped lots instead of conforming to a grid and all at right angles. The unmatched sections of the facade are made to resemble separate structures that fit together comfortably as a streetscape rather than as one large building, suggesting the accumulation over time of a naturally evolving village street. Such places are planned not only to look interesting but to feel comfortable, and this building succeeds on both counts.

Inside, of course, these houses and commercial buildings could not be mediaeval but had to be modern and convenient, as well as strong and safe. An *Old House Journal* article notes that a building's plans had to have the ability to "deliver picturesque facades without sacrificing practical . . . spaces. . . . The plan nearly always attempted, sometimes very successfully, to fit modern convenience into a suggestion of a rambling medieval plan."²⁴ As described above, the Mountain Brook Estates Building has a good appearance of rambling, despite its solid underpinning of poured-in-place concrete and "metal lumber" ground floor. In this it appears to be a more successful picturesque construction than one used to illustrate the commercial use of this style in Shaker Heights, Ohio: a three-storey corner building with regularly spaced wall gables and somewhat regimented rows of windows, looking more like a Victorian block with superficial mediaeval decoration.²⁵

An article in *The Old House Journal* by Clem Labine²⁶ suggests three reasons for America's embracing of antique English styles to express its domestic choices and social aspirations at that particular time. First, there was the romantic love of the natural, the spontaneous, and the un-mechanical, a rejection of rationalism and modernism—and by implication of the metropolis—that was also related to Labine's second suggested reason, the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Admiration for the splendors of mediaeval craftsmanship strongly imbued the technicalities of building in this style, and of course influenced the choice and handling of materials. Finally, Labine notes the symbolic value of Englishness: for Anglo-Saxons, it was their heritage, and, for non-Anglos, it was their proclamation of adoption. In either case, a house or village at Mountain Brook's level of exclusivity and newly created authenticity spoke volumes about success: "So many newly wealthy people built English houses in the suburbs during the boom times of the 1920s that it gave rise to the derisive term 'stockbroker Tudor.'"²⁷

Some remarks that could close any discussion of the Old English Revival were published in an article in *The Old House Journal* of July, 1983:

After World War I, the English Revival achieved outright popularity. The style took on political significance, becoming an affirmation of victorious English-speaking nations. A physical expression of a common English heritage, the Tudor style became the symbol of world peace and

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 14

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

prosperity. Advertisements of the period used a backdrop of multi-gabled houses as they hawked automobiles and household goods provided by a democratic society based on English common law and free mercantilism.

With all these cumulative associations, the English Revival enjoyed immense success.²⁸

It is easy to think of Robert Jemison Jr. — with his War experience, his native energy and optimism, his great learning and visionary determination, and finally his dedication to providing the people of his native city with the best environment he could imagine— to think of him, then, choosing the best of English town and country architecture to embody his ideal place to live and work.

NOTES FOR CRITERION C

²⁰ A term that Virginia and Lee McAlester point out is "historically imprecise" in that these buildings do not show so much the 16th-century Tudor style as they do a more mediaeval vernacular style. *A Field Guide to American Houses*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990, p. 358.

²¹ "Suburbs favor business blocks," *Birmingham News*, May 23, 1926.

²² McAlesters, p. 358.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

²⁴ James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell, "American houses in old English styles," *The Old House Journal*, September/October, 1991, p. 48.

²⁵ Bruce Lynch, "The popular English Revival style," *The Old House Journal*, July, 1983, p. 119.

²⁶ "The romantic English Revival," *The Old House Journal*, May, 1983, pp. 81-83.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁸ Lynch, p. 120.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 15

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

History of the Building:

The Developer, Robert Jemison, Jr.:

Mountain Brook Estates was the crowning achievement of a distinguished real estate entrepreneur and promoter in Birmingham, Robert Jemison Jr. It would be inappropriate to discuss the evolution of this development, and of the commercial building that is so symbolic of it, without giving some history of Mr. Jemison himself and how his energy and philosophy created so much of what is fine, admired and enduring in the Birmingham landscape. Mr. Jemison is accorded the same deference in Birmingham as is Mr. Jefferson in Virginia.

Robert Jemison Jr. was born in Tuscaloosa in 1878 and might have grown up a Californian if his father had not, while paying a look-see visit to Birmingham in 1884 before moving to Los Angeles, fallen in love with the Magic City and thrown in his lot with its future.²⁹ The senior Jemison involved himself in the development of East Lake; he was influential in bringing Howard College to the area from Marion in Perry County. He built the dummy line from East Lake into Birmingham, buying 100-foot rights-of-way along what was First Avenue North. Shortly after that in 1890 he organized the Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Company, whose "lines were the cords that brought together the communities of Birmingham in preparation for legal unification in 1910."³⁰ Shortly after the turn of the century he built a great house in the new suburban park of Glen Iris— Birmingham's first example of the "house in a park" romantic suburb, although a relatively small one, with twenty lots.

The younger Jemison attended the University of Alabama but withdrew in his junior year and announced that he wanted to work for a while. His father reluctantly agreed to this and put him to work in the family hardware business in Tuscaloosa; after a few months of that, Robert Jr. entered The University of the South at Sewanee and finished in 1898. After four more years in the hardware business he formed Jemison Real Estate & Insurance Company, starting out in a one-room office in the Woodward Building with the help of a line of credit from First National Bank President W.P.G. Harding, who was also the Jemisons' Glen Iris neighbor and would eventually be named Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank. By October of 1905 his business was such that he expanded into 3,500 square feet in the Massey Business College Building on Third Avenue, at which time he placed an advertisement in the newspapers stating that his office would "be equipped with handsome up-to-date fixtures, so arranged that excellent facilities will be provided for each department of our business, including City Real Estate, Suburban Real Estate, Rentals, Loan(s), Fire Insurance, Accident Insurance, Liability Insurance and Surety Bond Department. . . . The people appreciate progress and up-to-date methods. That accounts for the phenomenal growth of our Real Estate and Insurance business."³¹ In this same ad copy he makes the statement: "We believe that what's worth doing at all, is worth doing well, we therefore have specialists in charge of each department ." This is an early indication of two things that were to prove significant to his career: first, that he believed in doing things well, and, second, that he put experts in charge of what he was directing.

From the beginning, the company had a creed, from Daniel Webster: "Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions, promote all its great interests and see whether we also, in our day and generation may not perform something worthy to be remembered." This is very idealistic, and in our own age of relatively self-serving money-grubbing it is perhaps difficult to realize a time when men— and it was only men, in those days— like Robert Jemison Jr. actually worked and often sacrificed to fulfill some civic ideal of permanence and service. Even in the case of Mountain Brook, so plainly directed at affluent WASPS seeking the English country-house life in their Romantic Suburb— even here does the striving after quality and meaning infuse the undertaking and mediate what to this generation might seem like snobbery and the foolish pretensions of the industrial rich.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 16

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====

In 1906 Jemison and Hill Ferguson developed Mountain Terrace on the southern highlands, using many of the landscape-sensitive ideas he would employ in his later projects. In 1909 the Jemison companies took on the considerable task of building a model industrial village for the United States Steel Corporation, originally named Corey after a corporation official; the steel company pulled the rug out from under the half-finished project when the unfortunate Corey left the company under some kind of cloud, so that only by changing the name to Fairfield could Jemison get backing from U.S. Steel to continue. He must have been more than customarily determined to bring this planned industrial town to fruition, for he had educated himself thoroughly in the theory and practice of such developments, and he had personally visited other company towns both in the United States and Europe. This typified his grasp of planning principles and his progressive optimism in applying them in Birmingham, and also his willingness to look to experts to guide his developments. A tribute to Mr. Jemison in *Designs on Birmingham* describes these qualities in him very well:

Robert Jemison, Jr. was a man of unusual vision and of strongly held principles. His vision concerned land and people, now the one might be judiciously used to benefit the other. In efforts to translate the vision into reality, to create for people healthful, aesthetically pleasing environments in which to live and work, he drew not only upon local talent— Birmingham landscape designers, civil engineers and structural architects— but also upon persons in those fields who were nationally, even internationally, known. His vision, therefore, though local was never provincial; nor was it uninformed. Jemison read broadly. At first hand he observed pioneering work in urban and suburban design, and he took the counsel of those professionals whom he chose to work with him. Finally, his was a vision grounded in principle. For Jemison, it was axiomatic that nature deserved both respect and care; that people, if they were to live satisfying lives, required more than just food and shelter; that, beyond such basics, one ingredient essential to such a life was beauty, both natural and man-made.³²

In 1906, early in the mushrooming stage of his company's growth, Robert Jemison Jr. was elected president of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, at the age of 28. It was under his guidance that the headquarters for the Chamber and the Commercial Club was erected on the corner of First Avenue North and 19th Street, a richly finished commercial building that still stands, although unfortunately without most of its original interior. Jemison also was involved in development of the 1909 Empire Building, the 1913 Jefferson County Savings Bank building (which many believe to be still the most beautiful building in the city), and the 1914 Tutwiler Hotel and Ridgely Apartments. Before the First World War his company was instrumental in developing Forest Park, Central Park, Bush Hills, Milner Heights, and Chestnut Hill. During the War he served on the housing committee of the Shipping Board; among other committee members serving with him was Frederick Law Olmstead. The *Age-Herald* reported that Mr. Jemison was chosen for this post after his attendance at the same Baltimore real estate meeting at which he delivered his architectural talk: a committee of the Shipping Board was there, requesting that "someone be recommended for the place who had had experience not only in real estate buying and selling and valuation but who had also had experience in housing problems and in townsite development. Mr. Jemison was pointed out as the man exceptionally equipped for such work."³³

After the War came Redmont and Country Club Estates, including the Birmingham Country Club-- in those prosperous times the developments that truly were profit-making for the company. His own headquarters, the Neoclassical Jemison-Seibels Building (mostly destroyed, 1959), was built in 1925 on the southeast corner of Third Avenue North and 21st Street. In these years he was also, among his many other local and national offices, president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards. That was in 1926, the same year he organized investors for the Mountain Brook Estates development. In this work he seemed to invest all his accumulated knowledge and beliefs

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 17

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

=====
about the importance of the natural landscape and the principles of town planning, and what he did in Mountain Brook is standardly referred to as his crowning achievement, the culmination of his career, *etc.* The intention from the beginning was that Mountain Brook Estates be "the most beautifully laid out residential section to be found anywhere in the world."³⁴

Once again, the vision involved a judicious use of land, an almost idyllic natural setting, for the development of a model suburban community . . . to be largely residential and almost exclusively for persons of more than average means. . . . In short, in Mountain Brook the setting would be nature made amenable to a "socially selective" clientele and the product, a model residential suburb. . .³⁵

As it turned out, the Great Depression created circumstances under which home-buyers could not sustain their investments, so that ultimately all the original stockholders lost money. In an interview with the *Shades Valley Sun* on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Jemison & Company, Mr. Jemison said an interesting thing: that "if Mountain Brook Estates had been put on one year earlier the developers would have made money, and if they had waited one year longer there would never have been a Mountain Brook, at least not in that era."³⁶

Plainly speaking, Barefield tells us that "Jemison, like many others during the depression, lost a fortune. While many men resorted to bankruptcy as a last chance to keep their heads above the water, Jemison, honorable man that he was, eventually paid back every penny he owed, and won the respect of all who knew him. He was a giant among men, both in his beliefs and in his actions."³⁷

A short-list of Mr. Jemison's lifetime associations and accomplishments is almost exhausting to contemplate. In 1960 an old friend, C.M. Stanley of the *Alabama Journal*, wrote a reminiscent column about him in which he devoted one paragraph to just such a list:

"Who's Who in America" gives these facts about Mr. Jemison: Officer and director of many corporations; President Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 1906; vice chairman Park Commission, Birmingham; President National Association of Real Estate Boards, 1926; member city planning and zoning commission of President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1931; Trustee University of the South, Industrial School of Alabama; President State Alumni Society, University of Alabama 1906; President Birmingham Chapter American Red Cross, 1917; Member Chamber of Commerce of the United States; President Fathers Association of The Hill School, Pottstown, Penn.; director National Conference on City Planning; served 11 months as assistant manager housing division, Emergency Fleet Corporation, U.S. Shipping Board, World War. He is an Episcopalian; member Phi Delta Theta, Phi Beta Kappa; Omicron Delta Kappa. Clubs: Birmingham Country (president 1917), Mountain Brook Country, Birmingham Motor and Country, Birmingham Rotary.³⁸

Birmingham fortunately retains most of the major buildings developed by Robert Jemison Jr. in the course of his prolific career; these include the old Chamber of Commerce Building, the Jefferson County Savings Bank Building (now City Federal), the Empire Building, and the Ridgely Apartments (now the Tutwiler Hotel). The major losses are the original Tutwiler Hotel and his own headquarters, the Jemison-Seibels Building, one wondrously destroyed and the other radically altered by financial institutions to provide sites for their new main office buildings, after Mr. Jemison had retired from the stage but during his lifetime. Being a progressive always, he is said not to have flinched during the destruction of the Tutwiler, which he witnessed from across the street, calling it "progress."³⁹

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 18

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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The city is also fortunate to have the neighborhoods and suburbs that his company developed, starting in 1905 with Ensley Highlands and ending in 1930 with Mountain Brook Estates. Though by no means all intact as he originally designed and built them, they all at least to some degree reflect their original plans and qualities. Of all of these, Mountain Brook stands as his crowning achievement by all accounts, not just because of its physical beauty but because it is close to an ideal of community planning. Of all his developments, Mountain Brook is the one most associated with Robert Jemison Jr. in the public mind, and it is by Mountain Brook that he has been the most overtly honored by the naming of the linear parkways along the creeks as Jemison Park.

The Mountain Brook Estates stockholders met for the last time in 1945, after the City of Mountain Brook had been incorporated. At that time a resolution was passed deeding to the City the parkways along Shades Creek and Watkins Branch, to be created as a park to be used in perpetuity by the public and known as Robert Jemison Park. The park follows the old bridle trail along the streams. A historic marker was erected in appreciation of Robert Jemison's "courage and wisdom in the development of this area." Barefield notes that after 1945 Mountain Brook began to be developed again, and that other companies than Jemison had a significant part in its expansions. But, she says, "it was Robert Jemison who set the tone of the development, made the rules, and made sure contractors abided by those rules. The finished product might be all the tribute he wanted."⁴⁰

Mr. Jemison lived to be 96 years old, and he died in the spring of 1974. The Birmingham Historical Society has pronounced the nugget of his legacy: "Jemison's vision and dedication in the first half of this century were responsible for most of the land planning and residential development in Birmingham which are considered noteworthy today."⁴¹

History of the Mountain Brook Estates Building:

The Mountain Brook Estates Building was begun in May of 1928 and was essentially completed by December of that year. Its first commercial tenants were in the building by November of 1928, and remaining spaces were occupied after the change of the year. Final installation of some of the interior appointments and fixtures was not completed until early in 1929. The architect was Jesse W. Green, one of two firms (along with Miller & Martin) associated with the original Village plan. The contractor was L.E. Ford.

The building was constructed by Robert Jemison Jr. in a later phase of his Mountain Brook Estates development, in a village setting designed to be an integral part of one of those planned, more or less exclusive suburbs that were being developed around urban areas as the automobile facilitated the "exploding metropolis."⁴² Although not the only commercial building produced as part of the Village and not even the first one completed, it was the one sponsored by Jemison & Company and investors in the Mountain Brook Estates corporation, and its style was the model and its materials the standard for all other planned buildings in the Village center. Also, since Jemison & Company actually owned the building (the Company managed but did not own the others in the Village), Mr. Jemison was able to specify lease arrangements that could attract the sort of businesses he felt were necessary to provide essential services and amenities for his residential development. Critical among these were a pharmacy and grocery (see Criterion A above).

Mountain Brook Estates began construction in 1926 with residential development on the south slope of Red Mountain and extending into what were then the wilds of Shades Valley. The Village itself was situated as a kind of nexus or knot anchoring the 400-acre network of estate lots, parkways, golf course and riding trails that was Mountain Brook Estates. The early survey map of the development shows the Village as the "community center," although this was a functional rather than geographic appellation, as it was by no means literally central in the plan: it sits at the crossing of the old Montevallo Road stagecoach route and the over-mountain Cahaba Road, while the

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 19

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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estates billowed out to its east and south along Red Mountain and Shades Valley, and eventually up the lower north slope of Shades Mountain. The Village was therefore more or less accessible from both north and south, from the City and the new residences, notably those in the earlier Jemison development, the new Country Club District. It was intended to promote self-sufficiency in Mountain Brook and also to invite clientele from the Redmont, Country Club and other southside suburbs of Birmingham.

By October of 1928, Mr. Jemison was seeking a loan for the completion of the building.⁴³ Increasingly uncertain economic conditions were beginning to affect the sale of homes, and ultimately the Company began to accept second mortgages in payment for homes and sites,, a policy that "during the depression [was] responsible for heavy losses and, finally, the dissolution of the Company at a loss to its stockholders."⁴⁴

In October of 1928 the public face of optimism was still high, however, and even before all the interiors in the building were finished the Company's announcement of new commercial leases in the Village included a major one in the Estates building, to the W.G Patterson Cigar Company for the south front corner, which was to be operated as the Mountain Brook Pharmacy. Other original tenants in the building were the Hill Grocery Company occupying the central front space, W.G. Bearden general merchandise in the north front corner, Margaret Pekor's interior decorating studio in the northeast end on Montevallo Road, and W.E. Herron, builder and contractor, in the south end space on Canterbury Road. Somewhat later the upstairs was leased: Mrs. J.L. Evans' private dancing school, the Misses Dorothy Kettig's and Margaret Abell's art studio, Mrs. B.E. Kidd's and Miss Jennie Wood's kindergarten, and Miss Daisy Rowley's music school. The primary commercial businesses on the first floor were granted lease arrangements intended as an incentive for these established local companies to locate in what was then a somewhat pioneering situation. W.G. Patterson's 10-year lease for the pharmacy business specified \$100 a month plus 10% of sales over \$2,500 a month. In addition, Jemison furnished \$7,000 of the cost of the drug store's furnishings and equipment. Hill Grocery Company's terms were also attractive: they paid a token \$1.00 a month plus 1 1/2% of sales between \$2,500 and \$5,000 and 2% of sales over \$5,000 a month.⁴⁵ Since a standard percentage-of-sales agreement is about 5%, Mr. Jemison was striking a balance between what he saw would be earlier and later income from these leases. This is confirmed in a letter of late 1929 to potential purchasers of the building, in which a Jemison manager explained that "(t)hree of the rented stores facing the circle are leased on a sliding scale, providing for increased rates as the trading population of the Village and vicinity grows."⁴⁶

The third of these stores, Bearden's general merchandise, occupied the Montevallo Road corner only briefly before moving into its own building a short way down Cahaba Road in the spring of 1929; Jemison & Company continued to show rental receipts from the store but its former location was still vacant in the winter of 1929.⁴⁷ The Estates Building in fact was never completely rented through the Depression; in early 1939 its insurers reported that "(s)ince erection [the] building has never been fully occupied and in addition to present occupancy portions were at times occupied as a day grade school and small woodworker, manufacturing screen doors and windows."⁴⁸ Hill Grocery left their central space in 1938 and moved into their own building across Canterbury Road on the same intersection; their former space was occupied shortly thereafter by N.E. Cross. The Elektrik Maid bakery occupied the north corner, originally Bearden's, for a number of years beginning in 1938.

When W.G. Patterson's 10-year lease for the Pharmacy expired in 1938, the business was purchased by the pharmacist, Dr. M.E. Gilchrist, and Mrs. Gilchrist. Gilchrist's has continued to operate on that corner ever since. During the Depression times were hard and the Gilchrists emphasized customer service: they made deliveries, using a motorcycle that at night was kept under the stairs in the turret vestibule;⁴⁹ they also had kerb service catering to riders from the academy, who could canter up and get refreshment in paper cups.⁵⁰ Mrs. Gilchrist ran a beauty shop in the store space behind on Canterbury Road, accessible from the pharmacy through a door beneath the vestibule stairs. In the 1950s when times were better, the Gilchrists modernized the exterior, closing the corner entry, replacing the old

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 20

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

storefront windows and covering the limestone with aqua masonite. This was by far the most radical change to the premises since, other than air conditioning and a lowered ceiling, the interior changed remarkably little. The masonite was removed and the limestone restored in 1975-76 by Banks Robertson, the present owner who purchased the building in 1975, in consultation with architect Jeff Bagwell. After Dr. Gilchrist's death, Mrs. Gilchrist continued to run the business for a number of years but then retired and sold it to Edna Ward, who had worked in the store since she was 16 years old. In the 1980s Ms. Ward sold the pharmacy to a neighboring store, Ritch's Pharmacy. She maintained the luncheonette and fountain in the old location, and then when, due to ill health, she retired shortly thereafter she sold the business to her niece, Margaret Payne. Gilchrist is still going strong, retaining the original stainless steel fountain, sink, stools and lower counter, and much of the equipment. It also retains its historic clientele: "the lunch crowd, after school, and parents and kids on Saturdays."⁵¹

Mountain Brook Estates, Inc., having been unable to sell the building during the Depression, in 1942 arranged its sale to Colonial Mortgage Company at some financial loss to themselves. After this the building's ownership history is somewhat tangled: apparently Colonial negotiated a three-way split of the property into a 50% interest and two 25% interests, one of which latter was the chairman of the recently founded City Federal Building & Loan Association. City Federal itself took the old north corner space for a branch office, and in the 1960s made the exterior alterations that are seen today (see Description above).

The City of Mountain Brook was incorporated in the spring of 1942, and for a time prior to the building of the City Hall in the neighboring village of Crestline in 1952, the old Hill Grocery space was used by the city administration. The Gilchrist store in fact is still today one of three locations in Mountain Brook where public notices are posted, so the building still maintains some public function. In 1952, Birmingham Trust National Bank (now SouthTrust) moved into the Hill Grocery space and remained there for 10 years; the bank left in 1962 to move into the old Bearden building. Following the bank the Hartselle shoe store moved in and made what were the most significant changes to the space, modernizing the storefront and moving the entry from the side arched bay to the center. The shoe store was followed in 1972 by Pappagallo, which created the interior as it is today but has not changed it substantially from its predecessor's retail arrangement and features. One of the owners of the Pappagallo Shop, Banks Robertson, purchased the building in 1975 upon the death of the one of the owners who had been the most involved in occupation and management. Although the building at that time was substantially leased, there had been little investment in preventive maintenance over the years so it was in need of some attention. The first project was to uncover the facade on the Gilchrist corner (see above), which was finished by the spring of 1976. At that time other general repairs and refurbishing were done, and this work has continued until the present, including repair of the tile roof.

The upstairs interior had continued to be in use as artists' studios, with some smaller enterprises in the old peripheral rooms; this upstairs had retained its original configuration since 1929 and had received little maintenance attention and in fact had never been completely finished. In 1985 the owner renovated the main upstairs space on the front for a design firm and an accounting office; these changes included addition of partitions and doorways, closing the fireplaces served by the front chimney, sheetrocking other walls, laying carpet and building work tables, and upgrading the electrical systems including installation of central heat and air. Architect Rick Sprague was consultant on this work, and he continues to advise the owner concerning work on the building.

The activities of the upstairs tenants created parking difficulties for the retail tenants in the building, so when these firms left, the owner elected not to re-lease the space. The upstairs is therefore not leased presently, and the original studio rooms on the north wall are used by the owner for general building purposes such as an office and storage.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 21

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Interior changes to the downstairs commercial spaces have been related to tenant usage as well as to general updating; a number of these have been noted above and in the general physical description of the building. The most recent of these are the remodeling of Harrison's men's store in the old City Federal space, dating from 1992; the fine paneled interior of the cigar store where Mrs. Gilchrist's beauty shop used to be, dating from 1995, at which time the connecting door under the stair was also closed; and the refitting for the jewelry store on the east end along Montevallo Road, dating from 1997. The City of Mountain Brook made general streetscape improvements in the mid-1990s, capitalizing on the general return to village amenity and popularity that had been recently and temporarily eclipsed by shopping malls.

The Mountain Brook Estates Building has always been the prime symbol of Mountain Brook Village. It is the poster boy when the Village is represented graphically, as in even posters, newspaper articles and promotional publications. It represents and sets the style and standards intended by Robert Jemison and his investors when they began their development back in 1927. It was ironic and deeply unfortunate that the economic downturn and then the Depression wiped out their grand plan; all the original stockholders lost money, and the plan for the Village as envisioned by Mr. Jemison could not be completed. What survives of it, however, has retained its original character and regained its economic vitality. The building was added to the Jefferson County Register in 1981.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 22

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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NOTES FOR HISTORY OF THE BUILDING

²⁹ For much of the discussion of this period in Mr. Jemison's biography I am indebted to Martin Hames' biography of Jemison's friend and long-time colleague, Hill Ferguson, in *Hill Ferguson: His Life and Works*, University: University of Alabama Press, 1978, pp.37-39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³¹ Ad in *Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 1, 1905. At this time he was already developing Ensley Highlands.

³² Marvin Yeomans Whiting, "Robert Jemison Jr.: A tribute," in *Designs on Birmingham*, p. 38.

³³ "Robert Jemison, Jr., enters Shipping Board service; reports for duty march 15th," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, March 10, 1918.

³⁴ Hames, pp. 56-57.

³⁵ Whiting, p.41.

³⁶ "Jemison & Co. Celebrate fifty years in Birmingham," *Shades Valley Sun*, January 15, 1953.

³⁷ Barefield, p. 78

³⁸ C.M. Stanley, "Robt. Jemison Jr., man of many achievements," *Montgomery Advertiser*, October 30, 1960.

³⁹ Personal communication from his great-granddaughter-in-law Tabitha (Mrs. Alex) Lacy.

⁴⁰ Barefield, p. 78.

⁴¹ Marjorie Longenecker White, Ed., *Downtown Birmingham: Architectural and Historical Walking Tour and Guide*. Birmingham Historical Society, 1977, p.

⁴² A term used in 1958 by the editors of *Fortune* magazine as the title of a collection of essays defining urban sprawl and its effect.

⁴³ Memo from Robert Jemison Jr. to A.B. Tanner and Ruffin A. Smith, October 12, 1928. Jemison papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

⁴⁴ Hill Ferguson, "Mountain Brook Estates - 1926," undated typescript in Hill Ferguson Collection, BPS Archives.

⁴⁵ These figures from ledger pages and agreements in the Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives. See also discussion of the lease arrangement under Criterion A.

⁴⁶ Letter from Ruffin A. Smith of the Jemison Companies to L.E. Ervin and A.W. Fuller, December 11, 1929. Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives.

⁴⁷ Jemison & Company records and correspondence and articles from the *Jemison Magazine* issues of late 1928 and 1929 related to the Mountain Brook commercial properties. Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.

⁴⁸ Southeastern Underwriters Association, Complete Report, Jan. 30, 1939, p. 2. In the collection of the owner, Banks Robertson.

⁴⁹ "Growing up in a drugstore," reminiscence of D.O. McCluskey, who had been the delivery boy, in the "Slice of Life" feature of the *Tuscaloosa News*, undated clipping in the collection of Banks Robertson.

⁵⁰ Barefield, p.84. Banks Robertson, the present owner, remembers seeing what must have been the base plate for the hitching post set in the sidewalk; it was removed when the City did its streetscape improvements in the middle 1990s.

⁵¹ Personal communication, Banks Robertson.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 23

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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JUSTIFICATION OF THE PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The years 1928-42 are suggested to be the period of significance for the Mountain Brook Estates Building. These years represent the date of construction up until the point during the Second World War when the Jemison stockholders sold the building and the idea of Mountain Brook Village as a planned community under single management was abandoned. The year 1942 is also the year in which Mountain Brook was incorporated as a city, thereby transferring administrative and management duties to the municipality.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 9 Page 24

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

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Collections:

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Newspaper files of the Birmingham *Age-Herald* and *Shades Valley Sun*, Microforms Department, Birmingham Public Library.

Personal collection of the building's owner, Banks Robertson.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 10 Page 25

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Mountain Brook Estates Building sits on Lots 1, 2 and 27, Block 1 of the Mountain Brook Village survey, Jefferson County, Alabama.

JUSTIFICATION OF BOUNDARY

These three lots are those historically associated with this building, which occupies their majority other than for a service and motor access area in the rear between the wings. The present property survey indicates one additional lot to the southeast, but this is another building, more recently constructed.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
CONTINUATION SHEET

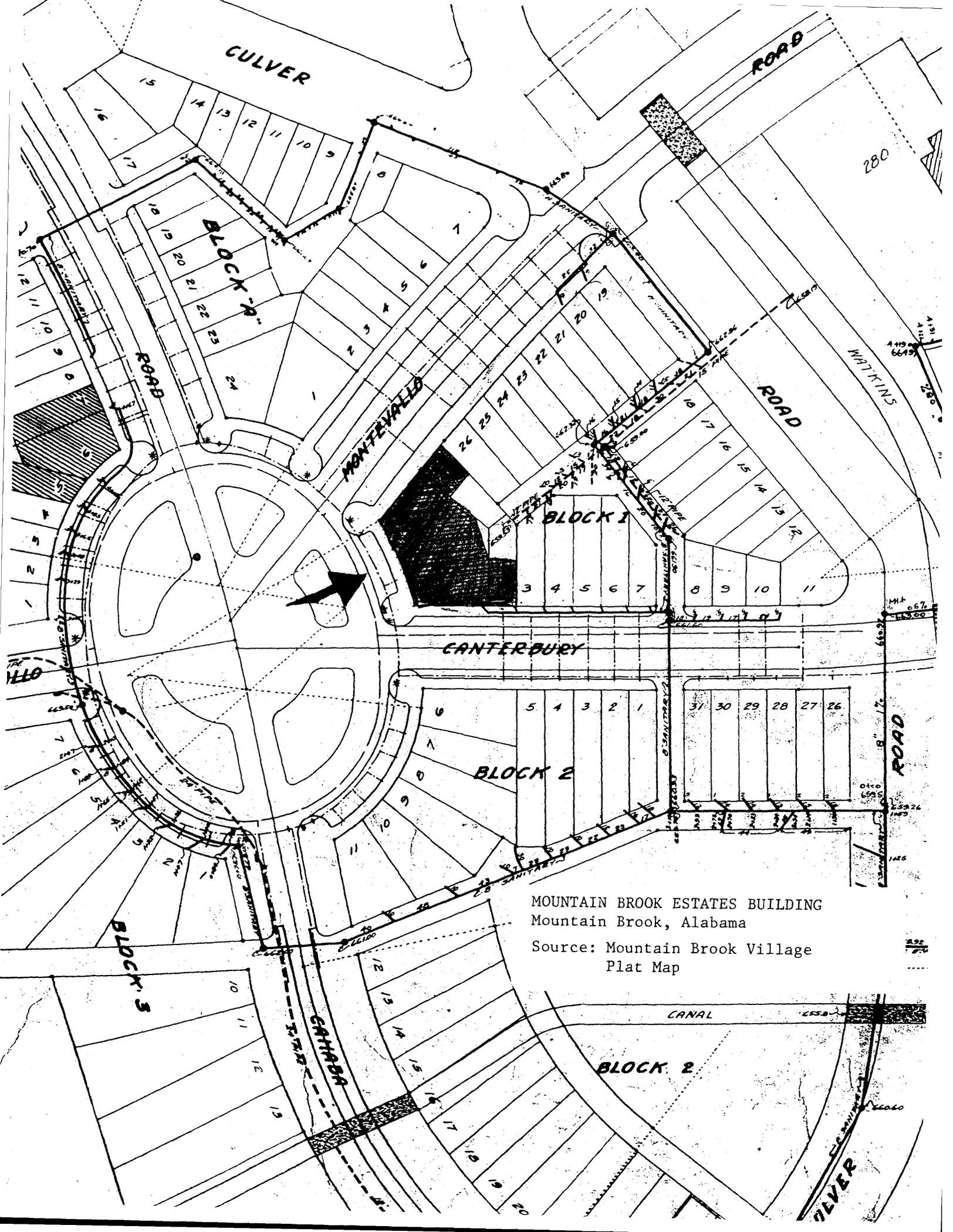
Section Page 26
Photographs

Mountain Brook Estates Building
Jefferson County, Alabama

DESCRIPTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Mountain Brook Estates building, facade and south side (Canterbury Road crossing), from SSW.
2. Mountain Brook Estates building, facade and north side (Montevallo Road crossing), from WNW.
3. NW front corner of building, detail, from W.
4. Upper facade, detail of gables, from W.
5. South side of building, detail of front corner, turret and steps, from S.
6. North side of building, detail of side gable and rear section, from WNW.
7. South side of building, detail of turret entry and store entry, from SE.
8. North side of building, detail of entry to stairs, old sign bracket, from NW.
9. Rear of building, second storey, showing both types of roofing, from NW.
10. Rear of building, detail of wall, window and shingling, from NW.
11. North side, detail of storefront brickwork and vent panels, from NW.
12. Detail of typical nickel hardware on commercial doors.
13. Detail of typical gutter, scupper and strapwork.
14. South side, detail of ground-floor turret window.
15. INTERIOR: Turret vestibule and stair, from NNW.
16. Interior of Gilchrist, looking toward rear (from W).
17. Interior of northwest corner space, from WNW.
18. Interior of Pappagallo (originally Hill Grocery Co.), from W.
19. Interior of northeast commercial space, now a jewelry store, from NW.
20. Second floor, detail of facade gable windows and ceiling, from E.
21. Second floor corridor, from NE.
22. Second floor, north-side office area and fireplace, from ESE.
23. Basement: detail of interior wall and first floor construction, from NE.
24. Basement: detail of interior concrete buttress, from E.

All photographs taken July, 2001; Linda Nelson



CULVER

ROAD

BLOCK A

MONTVALLO

BLOCK 1

CANTERBURY

BLOCK 2

BLOCK 3

CATAPPA

CANAL

BLOCK 2

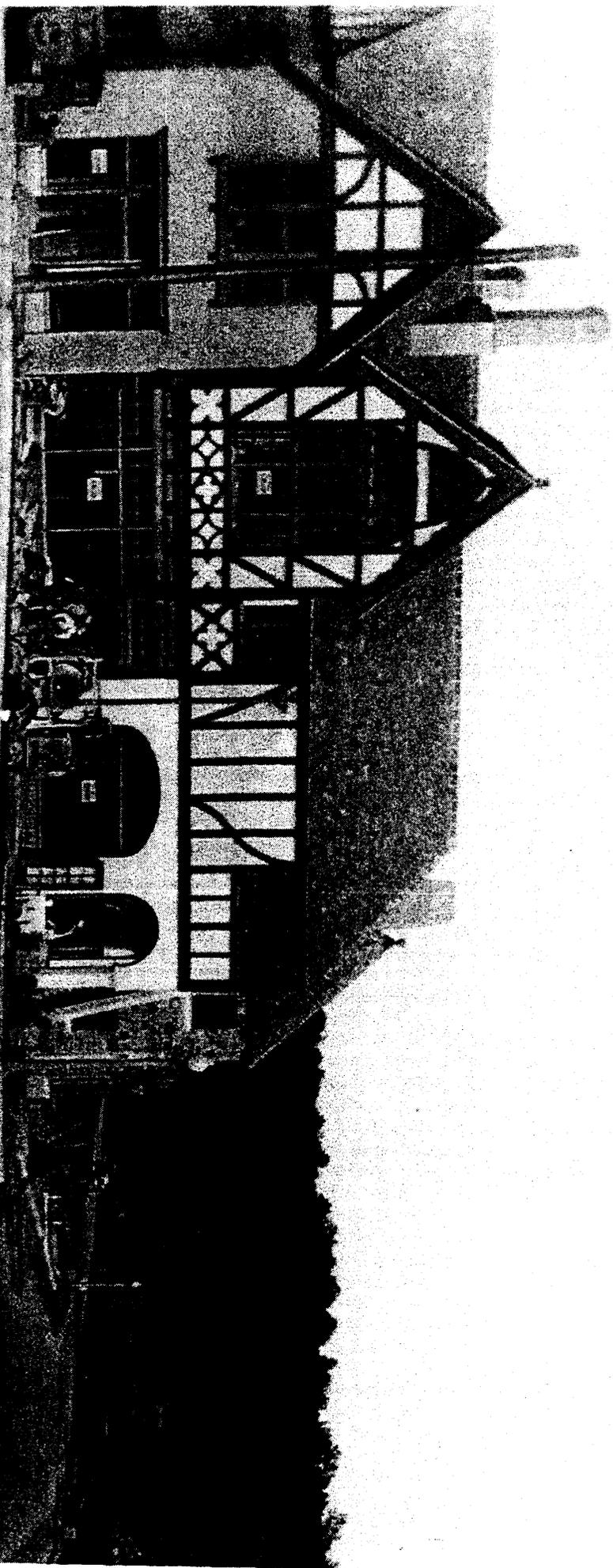
CULVER

MOUNTAIN BROOK ESTATES BUILDING
Mountain Brook, Alabama
Source: Mountain Brook Village
Plat Map

MOUNTAIN BROOK ESTATES BUILDING
Photo from Jemison Collection
Birmingham Public Library Archives
Building in construction, 1928

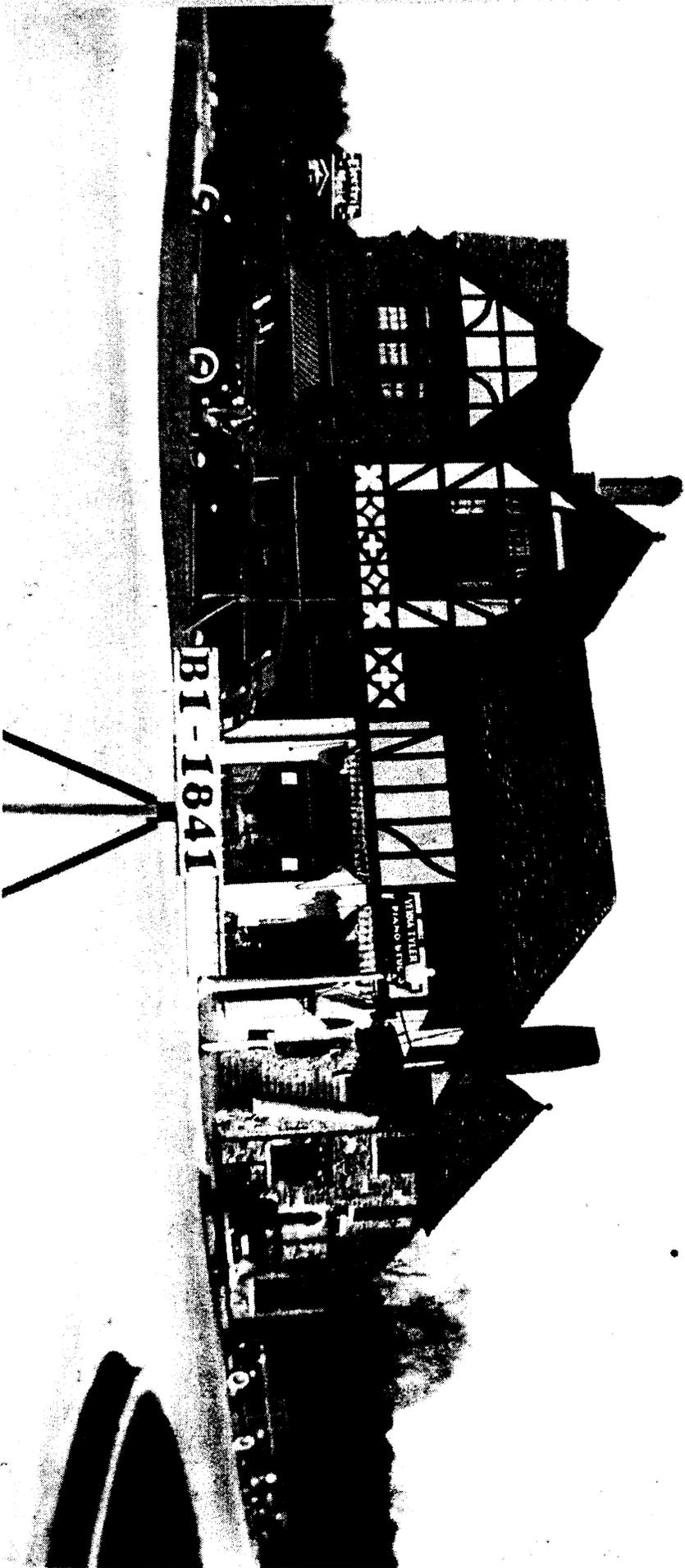


MOUNTAIN BROOK ESTATES BUILDING
Photo (enlarged detail) from Jemison Collection
Birmingham Public Library Archives
Building in construction, 1928





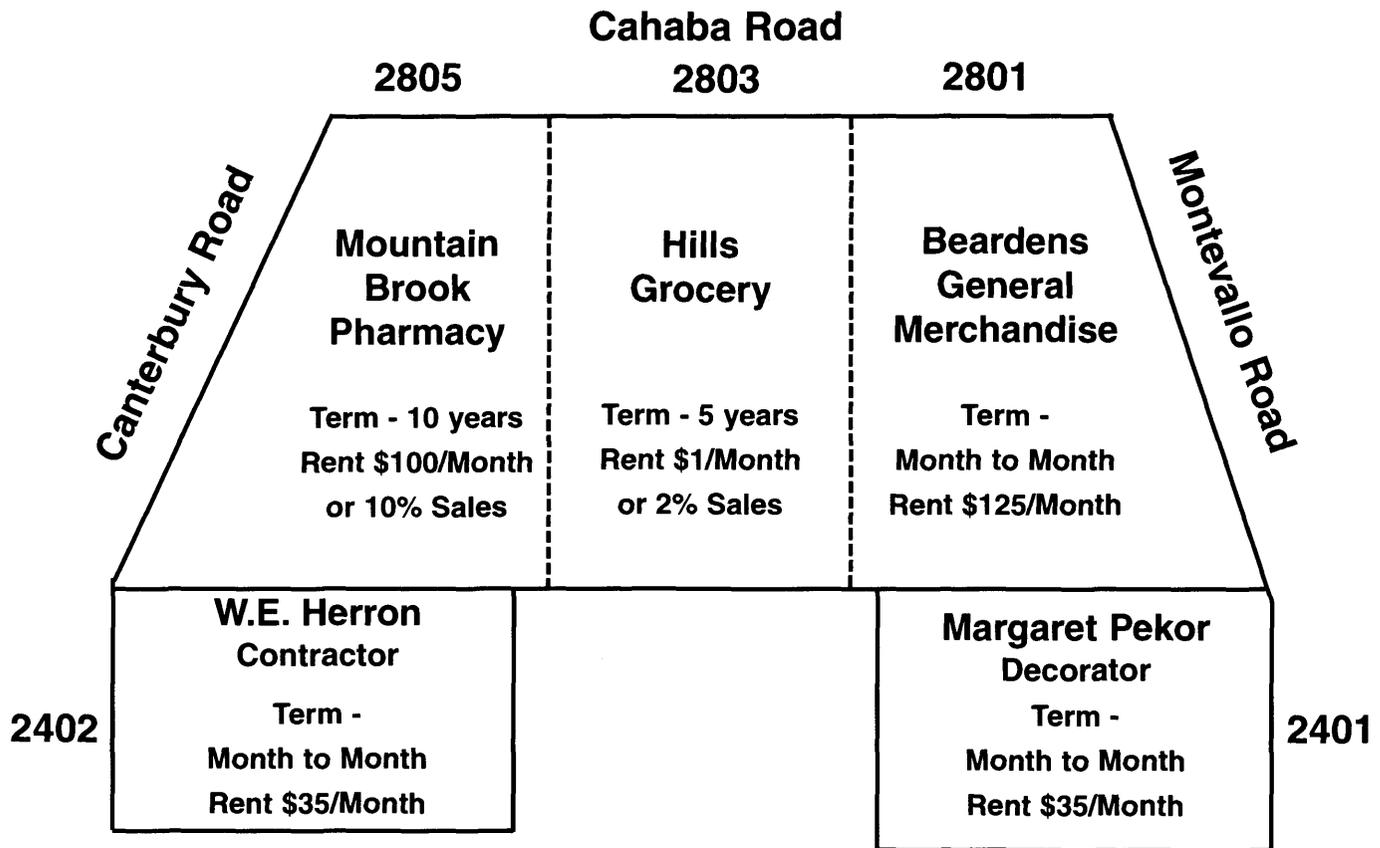
Jefferson County Board of Equalization
File 28-8-2-4-2
Photo taken March 14, 1939



MOUNTAIN BROOK ESTATES BUILDING

(not drawn to scale)

Original Tenants - 1929



Second Floor

Four tenants each paying \$15/Month
Term - Month to Month

Mrs. J.L. Evans - Dancing School

Misses Dorothy Kittig and Margaret Abell - Art Studio

Mrs. B.E. Kidd and Miss Jennie Wood - Kindergarten

Miss Daisy Rowley - Music School