

W. T. HUTCHENS BUILDING  
100-104 South Jefferson Street

( HUNTSVILLE MULTIPLE RESOURCE NOMINATION)

Estate of the Hutchens Brothers  
Vernon F. Hutchens, Manager  
2508 Washington Street  
Huntsville, Alabama 35811

Lot 1, Block 18, Old Town; 89' (Jefferson) X 150' (Clinton)  
16 537850 3843090

1916: Architect unknown  
Baxter Brothers, Huntsville, contractor  
1921: Architect unknown  
J. M. McKee, Huntsville, brick mason

#### DESCRIPTION

The W. T. Hutchens building is an attached, two-story, brick commercial structure on a corner lot. The original four-bay portion (100-102) at the corner was constructed in 1916 and the two-bay addition (104) on the south was erected in 1921. Marking the second floor level is a wide band of white terra cotta decorated with a series of small shields and several courses of moldings. The upper story windows are paired with each set having a contrasting masonry sill and a brick lintel ornamented with three small terra cotta blocks. A projecting box cornice, also of terra cotta, is molded with a repeating pattern composed of a geometric and floral design and set above four narrow bands of classical moldings. Both of these terra cotta courses continue along the side street facade. The addition is built to an identical design except the upper cornice and lintel blocks are merely flush unornamented stone while the lower cornice dates from the most recent remodeling.

The street level facade has been somewhat altered as is common with commercial structures. The corner building (100) was built for the Hutchens hardware firm and probably continued the storefront elements traditional at the start of the century, i.e., large panes of plate glass set in wooden frames, a wood and glass door in the center, and the whole topped by a deep transom of Luxfer prism glass that spanned the store facade. The middle store (102) was originally a movie theater, but no photos have been discovered to reveal this facade as built. In the late 1930s, the Hutchens company expanded into both stores, retaining the hardware shop in the corner building and opening a gift shop/housewares store in the middle portion. The existing facade today seems to date from this expansion and consists of plate glass display windows set in aluminum sashes beneath a storewide signboard which covers the transoms. The doorways are slightly recessed. The first floor of the addition was occupied for many years by the Alabama Cafe, the facade of which never matched the adjoining stores. Today this facade has been remodeled to create a vertical design in redwood and glass although the new first floor cornice continues the placement and profile of the cornice on the original portion, thereby giving the building a continuity it had lacked for decades.

The second floor of the Hutchens building is divided into a series of offices except for the section above 104 which was built as an apartment for the Hutchens family. The second floor now is mostly vacant, but the owners currently are repairing this floor for rental offices. On the first floor both 100 and 104 retain the original pressed tin ceilings and coved moldings; 102 has a dropped ceiling so the pressed tin probably is still in place although not visible.

Separating 100 and 102 is a sidewalk doorway giving access to the stairway to the second floor offices. A section of the Luxfer prism transom survives above this entrance although concealed by the signboard; whether the remainder is still in place above the display windows is undetermined.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The W. T. Hutchens building is architecturally significant because it illustrates and embodies those characteristics that define small scale, small town, commercial structures during the first quarter of the twentieth century. It typifies in its design, materials, and method of construction those features most commonly employed in the creation of retail establishments for small, individual shop owners; however, the use of terra cotta courses to dress up the basic components imparts a unique identity to this particular example. The significance of the Hutchens building is further enhanced by its integrity of location, setting, materials, design, and associations.

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During the late nineteenth century, buildings constructed in Huntsville and other small towns to house local retail firms displayed predominantly Victorian features and a variety of applied ornamental motifs. However as the new century opened, architectural tastes underwent a profound change while the needs of these small retailers remained fairly constant. The result was that Italianate, Queen Anne, and Gothic designs were replaced by much simpler and plainer designs that reflected in many respects the corresponding shift in residential construction from Victorian cottages to bungalows.

The W. T. Hutchens building demonstrates the specific features of this new commercial style while displaying an individual decorative touch. The basic form of a narrow, two-story, brick structure was carried over from the nineteenth century with the first floor occupied by the store and the second intended for either professional offices or apartments; but the appearance of these buildings underwent a major transformation. First, the vertical emphasis was exchanged for a horizontal one. Vertical dimensions became lower, tall narrow windows were replaced by pairs or groups of short windows, tall metal cornices gave way to simple brick parapets, and strong horizontal courses, which spanned the width of the building unit, broke the facade into a series of layers. The second significant change involved the treatment of architectural ornament: its use became restrained and its role was subordinated to the overall composition. Ornament in these early twentieth century buildings tended to function as low-key accents to the structural design.

The Hutchens building illustrates these changes with its repeated pairs of squat, double-hung windows sharing a common sill and lintel, its brick bearing walls, and its visual division into horizontal layers by contrasting terra cotta courses which mark each ceiling level. The majority of similar structures relied on flush masonry or brick courses, but the design of the Hutchens building incorporated projecting, patterned terra cotta cornices, thereby imparting a distinctive presence not usually encountered in buildings of this class.

The structure immediately across the street from the Hutchens building had also employed patterned terra cotta panels as a foil for the brick walls, but this building has been demolished leaving the Hutchens building as the finest and sole extant example in Huntsville representing this particular variation of a once popular style of building.

The upper floor facade and side wall of the Hutchens building survive intact. Although the street level facade has undergone some modifications, these have been minimal in the two northern sections, consisting of the substitution of aluminum for wooden sashes. The traditional composition of display windows with a recessed and centered entrance has been retained. The full width signboard has been carefully fitted into the transom space. The addition on the south has been the most modernized, but this reworking was designed to continue the first floor cornice line of the adjoining building and so is less destructive than the earlier facade as seen in photographs from the 1940s.

The Hutchens building is a significant structure of downtown Huntsville by virtue of its age, its style, its nearly original condition, and its continued use by local retail and professional firms.

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100-104 South Jefferson Street

The Hutchens Company, Inc.  
Vernon F. Hutchens, President  
2508 Washington Street  
Huntsville, Alabama 35811

Lot 1, Block 18, Old Town; 89' (Jefferson) X 150' (Clinton)  
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Baxter Brothers, Huntsville, contractor  
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J. M. McKee, Huntsville, brick mason

#### DESCRIPTION

The Hutchens building is a two-story, brick commercial structure. A projecting terra cotta course of small, regularly spaced shields defines the top of the street level while another projecting cornice terminates the second floor below a brick parapet. The upper cornice is composed of blocks of terra cotta decorated with a filigree design in the manner of Louis Sullivan. The double hung windows are paired under flat brick lintels accented with small terra cotta squares in the middle and at each corner. A single masonry sill unites each pair of windows. An addition on the south is built to an identical pattern except the cornices are merely flush, unadorned courses. This store was added in 1921 and has been remodeled on the ground floor for an architectural office.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

The Hutchens Company was, and still is, a successful locally owned mechanical contractor and hardware supply firm. The owners erected this building for their business and originally rented and occupied the second floor as apartments and offices. Also in 1916, they erected another building in the next block of Jefferson which was demolished in 1977.

The structure is an example of post-Victorian commercial construction in Huntsville and is a more pleasing design than some later buildings of the same style. It is decoratively influenced by Sullivan's organic terra cotta designs developed earlier in Chicago. It is a straightforward design in the Commercial Brick style featuring grouped windows and just enough applied ornament to make it visually interesting.

W. T. Hutchens Bldg.  
100-104 S. Jefferson  
Huntsville, Alabama



**CENTRAL  
BUSINESS  
DISTRICT**

HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

