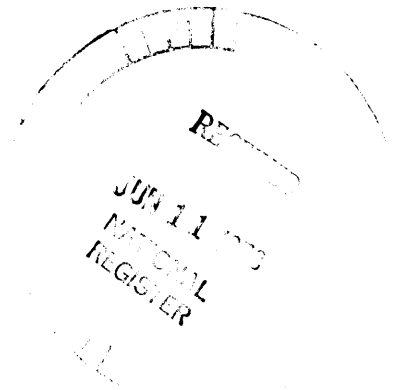


44. THE BIG SPRING  
West Side Square

City of Huntsville  
Mayor Joe Davis  
P. O. Box 308  
Huntsville, Alabama 35804

Part of Lot 7, Spring Block, Old Town;  
16 537915 3842940



DESCRIPTION

The Big Spring is a natural, underground spring which produces an average of twenty million gallons of water daily although forty million gallons have been recorded after a heavy rain. The ground under the Courthouse Square is riddled with limestone caverns through which the water flows, surfacing at the bottom of a bluff as a spring of clear, cold water. From the spring the water flows into Fagan Creek, down the Huntsville Spring Branch to Indian Creek, and hence into the Tennessee River at Triana. The land immediately surrounding the spring has always been accessible to the public as a park and never built upon except for pumping stations. In the late 1960's, the area was redesigned and landscaped by the Huntsville Housing Authority.

The spring emerges from a limestone bluff along the top of which runs West Side Square. A semicircular stone basin abutting the cliff contains the water which is then carried in a narrow stone-lined channel in a westwardly direction across Church street where it forms a lake. A flight of steps descend from the Square to the level of the spring and the area is decorated with fountains, walkways, footbridges, and circular patterns of plantings. Prior to this improvement, the area was terminated along the Square by a block of nineteenth century brick structures which enclosed the space; they have been demolished so that the space now dribbles out at that end. The low buildings to the north have been replaced with a huge nondescript office building that is totally out of scale with the area. However, the antebellum bank on the bluff above the spring on the south remains. The beautiful old trees which provided shade and increased the feeling of seclusion have been removed, and the sweep of lawn has been fragmented by an arbitrary pattern of walks and plantings.

SIGNIFICANCE

The role of the Big Spring in the history and development of Huntsville cannot be too highly emphasized. The presence of the spring was the principal reason that Huntsville developed here. The constant availability of fresh drinking water apparently was considered more important by the nineteenth century settlers than the improved transportation which they could have had by locating ten miles south on the banks of the Tennessee River. The spring also influenced the physical development of Huntsville. When the streets were laid out, it was thought desirable to contain the spring entirely within one block, which was called Spring Block. Because the bluff ran 33 1/2°

THE BIG SPRING  
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Continuation:

west of north, the street along it was laid out at that angle rather than due north and all the other streets conform to it. By 1823 a water system was under construction that would distribute the spring water to the town. A reservoir was built on the Square and pipes made of hollowed cedar logs were used to carry the water to each house. Because of the presence of the spring, Huntsville probably had the earliest public water system west of the Alleghenies.

During the 1830's, the overflow from the spring was utilized by flatboats to float cotton bales to the Tennessee River. In the late nineteenth century, the city, which had purchased the spring in 1843 and the waterworks in 1858, could offer textile mills free water as an inducement to locate their plants in Huntsville.

In 1889 the public water system supplied 591 hydrants, 162 water closets, 63 baths, 24 urinals, 87 sprinklers, and 7 soda founts.<sup>1</sup> From 1920 until 1950, the revenue from the sale of water was the biggest single source of income for the city's general fund. Pumping from the Big Spring stopped in 1957, and by 1964 the city was obtaining its water from the Tennessee River.

The Big Spring served all the water needs of the city as it grew from a small town of several hundred people to a modern city of almost 100,000. The park area around it has always served as a public gathering space and as a source of pride for the town.

<sup>1</sup> 1973 Annual Report of Huntsville Utilities, page 12