

RESTORING PELL CITY

The Wright man for the Job



Wright restored the facades in a portion of historic downtown Pell City.

Story by **Loyd McIntosh**
Photos by **Jerry Martin**

Today's Pell City may be on the verge of becoming the next middle-class suburb of Birmingham – or Anniston — depending on your perspective. But this town built on the backs of hardscrabble cotton mill workers has a history more in line with a Eudora Welty short story or William Faulkner novel. The Pell City that erected itself on the banks of the Coosa River more than 120 years ago, in practical terms, bears little resemblance to the thriving town of today.

In recent years Pell City gained a new hospital, a veterans home, a Chik-Fil-A and a Publix – as sure a

sign of “progress” as any — while the property that was once the historic heartbeat of the city, the Avondale Mills plant, is gone for good. Built in 1903, the cotton mill was the primary source of employment in town for generations before it closed. Then, it went up in flames due to an accidental fire in 2008. It was an inglorious end to a structure that stood for more than a century, a fate the surrounding neighborhoods — known as the mill village – and parts of downtown Pell City could easily have followed without some help. But historical restoration can be a tricky business. Fortunately, home-builder and restoration expert Andrew Wright is not only knowledgeable about Pell City's history, he's practically lived it.

Wright, now 67, was born in Pell City in the mid-

Wright's new passion still working with his hands.



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A neighborhood gets new life from old structures.

1940s, a time when he remembers the local doctor still made house calls by horse and buggy. Interstate 20 was not yet even a glint in Eisenhower's eye, and the cotton mill provided sustenance to the city's population with few choices. "If you didn't work in the cotton mill, you starved," says Wright.

Wright's parents and grandfathers all worked at the mill, and he recalls vividly being called 'linthead,' a derogatory term often used to describe people dependent upon the mill. Essentially segregated from the rest of town, the cotton mill, Wright says, was a presence that loomed large over every corner.

While chatting in the kitchen of his home today on Hardwick Lane, Wright is surrounded by historic photos from his childhood and salvaged items from mill village houses all over town. Like Pell City, the mill is a large part of who he is, even though he was able to escape a life of toiling in the factory. After high school, Wright joined the Navy before setting out on a varied career path, such as running a landscaping company, a teacher and, eventually principal of Iola Roberts Elementary – the first school, as a child, he attended with non-lintheads. In the early years as a teacher, Wright worked as a homebuilder during the summer to earn extra cash. He eventually answered the call to build full-time with a special place in his heart for restoring mill village homes.

"The mill made them to accommodate the people who worked in the mill and they weren't particularly concerned about how well treated those people were," Wright says. "Each house was given a pecan tree or two, all of them had out houses, there was no indoor plumbing. I remodeled a lot of those just to keep them from being torn down."





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Each house in the mill village was either three or four rooms and had a coal-burning stove for heating. They were simple wood structures that didn't even have insulation. "They must have backed up and said, 'That looks good to me,' because the houses were never square," Wright says. While most of the houses he remodeled over the years still sit on their original plot of land, Wright and a business partner rescued seven mill village homes, originally located near Pell City High School, that were scheduled for demolition.

"I went over there and looked at them and said, 'I'll give you \$300 each for them.' They were going to burn them. I said, 'No, let's don't do that,' because there were people that I had actually known who lived in them and had grown up in them," Wright explains. "I paid the school system \$300 each as a donation." Today, those structures are modern, single-family homes located just off Hardwick Road. They stand as preserved pieces of Pell City history, evidenced through Wright's 'discoveries' during the renovation process.

"We found old coins, old Army cards and letters that had been sent home to their families from World War I. Most of them were found behind the mantles. There was a lot of history there, and I learned a lot from it," Wright says. "I'd literally call any family members still around and tell them, 'I found your granddaddy's old draft card' and stuff like that. We'd find as many people as we could."





It was Wright's interest in and knowledge in historic preservation that caught the attention of Kate DeGaris, a longtime friend and owner of several buildings in Pell City's downtown. After receiving some funding to help with the renovation of the downtown district, DeGaris contacted Wright about doing the work on five of her buildings on Cogswell Avenue. Wright was already highly regarded in historic renovation circles and was a building inspector in Talladega during that city's period of restoration. Still, he was surprised at what he found during the project.

"The buildings in Pell City are actually built out of what's called slave bricks," Wright explains. "That doesn't mean that a bunch of slaves made the bricks, that's just the name of the bricks because they're all handmade. Out of 10 million bricks down there, no two are identical." Wright says he gave this method of brick making a try, realizing just how much time and effort it took to construct downtown Pell City. "They would take the clay, pat it and round it out, knock it into the frames, then pat it with their hands and let it dry, and take it out of the wood frame," he says. "I actually tried this myself, and it just took a long time."

On the interior of many of the downtown buildings, Wright noticed some other interesting construction features, including timbers made out of entire trees used as trusses which, after over 100 years in use, have done their jobs superbly. Built in or around 1903, the buildings he renovated in downtown were erected with whatever materials the original builders had on hand. With no sheet rock available, many of the builders looked to their farms and barns for materials.

"They took clay and mixed it with animal hair and smeared it on the inside of the walls in all those buildings. You can still see the animal hair. If you look at it closely you'll see that it's dried clay and animal hair with paint on it," Wright says. "It was an effective technique because they're everywhere downtown and been there for 100 years. You couldn't get away with that now."

Now semi-retired, Wright and his wife, Trish, live in an older home overlooking a small pond that they open up to the neighborhood to fish whenever the mood hits. Wright, for the most part, spends much of his time working in his pottery studio behind his house or entertaining his grandchildren. While talking about all he has built – literally and figuratively — in and for his hometown, he says, "Downtown and the old houses were my favorite thing to do. I like building new houses, but I'm just a history guy." ●

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