

Demolition project uncovers ad for Long-Vanished Huntsville Department Store

Published: Thursday, August 18, 2011, 7:37 AM
By Steve Doyle, The Huntsville Times The Huntsville Times



Charlie Sealy, who along with his wife is developing the \$11.5 million Belk Hudson Lofts in downtown Huntsville, wants to preserve this 1920s advertisement for Fowler Bros. store uncovered Monday. (The Huntsville Times/Robin Conn)

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Workers demolishing the old Belk Hudson department store got an unexpected glimpse into downtown Huntsville's past.

An exterior wall hidden by an adjacent office building held a well-preserved, art deco-style advertisement for the Fowler Bros. dry goods store.

Fowler Bros. occupied the corner of Washington Street and Holmes Avenue before the Great Depression. Belk took over the space in the 1940s.

Charlie and Sasha Sealy, who are developing the \$11.5 million Belk Hudson Lofts on the site, want to display the painted Fowler Bros. logo in the lobby of the apartments.

"It'll add a lot of character to the building that we're trying to create," Charlie Sealy said Wednesday.

The City of Huntsville is paying the Sealys \$450,000 over five years to preserve the original facade of the Belk building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Bricks from a razed three-story rear and side wall are being donated to Habitat for Humanity and Herb Underwood, a Huntsville resident who reclaims used bricks.

Habitat plans to sell the bricks - about 80,000 so far - at its ReStore on Pratt Avenue, said Sasha Sealy.

"They aren't going to waste," she said Wednesday. "Habitat can use the funds from the sale of the brick to enhance their operation."

For Bill Fowler, the discovery of the Fowler Bros. ad on Monday brought back a flood of memories.

His grandfather and great-uncle, William and Wesley Fowler, founded the department store around 1910 and set up shop at Washington and Holmes in the mid-1920s.

Not long afterward, Wesley left for Chicago with “a great deal of cash” to buy merchandise for the next season but was never heard from again, Bill Fowler said.

Later in life, William Fowler began making an annual Christmas trip to Miami by himself. The family now believes he was going to visit Wesley, said Bill Fowler.

After the Depression, William Fowler renamed the business “Fowler’s” and operated out of storefronts on Jefferson Street, the courthouse square and Heart of Huntsville mall.

He was sweeping up one night in 1966 when a teenage boy came in looking for money. “He was struck in the head with a blunt object and ultimately died in the hospital,” Bill Fowler said Wednesday.

Jerry Wayne Houston was sentenced to life in prison for the crime, he said.

Charlie Sealy said the more than 30-foot-long Fowler Bros. ad is being removed brick by brick in an effort to preserve it for later use in the apartment lobby.

Golden & Associates Construction is expected to begin pouring the foundation in late September, he said, and tenants should start moving in next August.

The old advertisement “is an important artifact for my own personal history but for downtown, as well,” said Bill Fowler, who co-owns the Solid Earth real estate software firm on Clinton Avenue.

“It’s important for people to know that their community has character and personality.”

© 2011 al.com. All rights reserved.