

## CUNNINGHAM & CUNNINGHAM: ARCHITECTS

Jeffrey R. Willis\*

The history and heritage of Greenville County have been significantly impacted by the architecture of its buildings and residences. Over the years, talented designers have contributed to this heritage. Among the prominent architects working in Greenville during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the brothers, Frank Harrison Cunningham and Joseph Gibert Cunningham.

The brothers grew up in Anderson. James Richardson in his 1930 *History of Greenville*, comments: "From the neighboring county of Anderson, Greenville has acquired many of her prominent and substantial citizens."

Their parents were Joseph Gibert Cunningham and Sarah Harrison Cunningham. Their maternal grandfather was Col. Francis E. Harrison, after whom Frank was probably named. Again, Richardson comments: "Their father was for many years one of the substantial merchants of Anderson, and the sturdy characteristics of his Scots-Irish ancestry he passed on to his sons."



Frank



Joseph

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Frank and Joseph were educated in the Anderson schools. They both entered Clemson Agricultural College in September 1899. This was only Clemson's seventh year in operation; The college opened in 1893.

They both majored in textile engineering; an excellent field to enter, since the textile industry was booming in the southeast at this time. The textile engineering program was housed in a Textile Building, the architectural style of which resembled a textile mill. Neither brother actually ever worked in the textile industry. Probably it was at Clemson that they became attracted to civil engineering and architecture.

The Clemson catalogue declared: "The course [textile engineering] gives the student a special knowledge of textile subjects, both theoretical and practical but at the same time he receives such literary education and refinement of mind as are essential in a good general education"



Frank (left) and Joe (right) as cadets

There has no architecture department at Clemson at this time. The Engineering Department did offer a degree program in architectural engineering. A Department of Architecture was not established until 1933. It became a School of Architecture in 1958 and a college of Architecture in 1971

The brothers appear to have been very close to each other. Whether Frank, who was two years older than Joe, waited so that they could attend Clemson at the same time cannot be known. Not only did they both major in textile engineering, they were involved in identical

extracurricular activities. Perhaps this was in part because they were both musical. They were both members of the orchestra, band, Glee Club, and tennis team. Both were members of a dance society – the German Club. The one exception when the brothers' activities did not parallel each other was the staff of the yearbook, the *Oconeen*. Frank served as art editor.

For five years after graduating from Clemson in 1903, the Cunningham brothers were involved in what might be considered apprenticeships. Joseph worked for J. E. Sirrine & Company in Greenville. While in New York City for two years following graduation, Frank presumably worked with an architectural firm. At any rate, he returned to Anderson in 1905 and opened a practice in architecture.

The brothers, who had been so close while at Clemson, reunited in 1908 to form a partnership in an engineering and architectural firm in Greenville. Together and separately they executed plans for both public buildings and private residences that were praised for the beauty and dignity of their design. Their commissions were not only in Greenville but in surrounding towns and cities as well.

One of the first commissions the new firm of Cunningham & Cunningham received was from William Choice Cleveland in



*The Cleveland Building (1908)*

in 1908 to design a commercial and office building on the northeast corner of South Main Street and McBee Avenue. The ground floor was occupied by stores, the largest of which was S. H. Kress 5 & 10. The Cleveland Building was demolished in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

In the same year, 1908, the firm designed the first in a line of distinguished residences. The home of Henry H. and Janie Harris, on Crescent Avenue, showed the influence of the Tudor style popular in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The construction cost was \$6000 (\$95, 000 today).



*The home of Henry H. and Janie Harris, on Crescent Avenue, shows the influence of the Tudor style.*

Also in 1908, the firm designed a home for Edward and Mary Gage on East Washington Street and for Charles and Nannie Allen on Broadus Avenue. Neither of these is standing today.

The brothers quickly established a reputation for themselves in Greenville. Commissions continued to mount. In 1909 St. Paul's Methodist Church became the first in a number of churches in Greenville and the surrounding area designed by the firm. Located on a triangular space at the intersection of Pendleton and Vardry Streets, the church demonstrated the growing popularity, at the time, of the classical revival style. The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 launched a revival of interest in classical architecture. The Exposition had an impressive ensemble of classical buildings, murals, and statuary.



*St. Paul's (Pendleton Street side)*

In 1910 Cunningham & Cunningham was hired to design the remodeling of the W. L. Maudlin Building on West Washington Street. During 1911 the firm carried out a number of significant designs. One was for an addition to the First Presbyterian Church and the remodeling of the existing church.

One of the largest and most important commissions awarded the firm in 1911 was to design the Imperial Hotel on West Washington Street. The seven-story building has a steel skeleton frame, which carries most of the load of the floors. The walls are load-bearing masonry, not fully integrated with the skeleton frame. The Cunninghams were among the first to use this new technique. Surrounding the top is a heavy cornice supported by large, decorative brackets reminiscent of the Italianate style of Victorian architecture. Fan lights are placed above the ground-floor doors and windows. Considering the fact that the architects of this building were 29 and 31 years of age, the accomplishment was impressive. The building has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Imperial Hotel was later renamed the Greenville Hotel.



*The Imperial Hotel*

Also in 1911 the brothers were commissioned to design the Oakland Avenue School in Spartanburg, which was their first large out-of-town job.

To avoid the monotony of an unadorned, long facade; the main entrance to the school was recessed into the facade and dramatically flanked by two-story Doric columns. Stone belt courses also broke up the facade, and keystones adorned the top of the windows. The Oakland Avenue School closed in 1959 and was demolished soon afterward. Its site is occupied today by the Main Branch of the Wells Fargo Bank in Spartanburg.



*The Oakland Avenue School*

W. C. Cleveland must have been pleased with the commercial building designed for him on Main Street in 1908. In 1912 he and Alice Burnett Cleveland commissioned the firm to design a residence on East Park Avenue.



*The Cleveland home on East Park Avenue*

The large clapboard house was a good example of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American residential taste. The wrap-around, one-story porch was supported by pairs of columns, and ended on the right-hand side in a porte cochere. The interior of the home had a very wide central hall, which Alice Cleveland hung with scenic wallpaper. The Cleveland home is no longer standing. Its site is occupied by condominiums today.

Another residential commission in 1912 was a home on North Main Street for Wildon and Annie Jordan. Wildon Jordan was the owner of Jordan Building Company. This home still stands in the block between Stone Avenue and Earle Street.



*The home of Wildon and Annie Jordan*

William and Sara Bates asked the firm to design a home for their property on the Spartanburg Road (now North Street) outside of Greenville. The Bates home, again, shows the popularity of the classical revival style in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The use of the monumental portico was popularized by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian architect, Andrea Palladio, to add grandeur to an otherwise unimpressive structure. That is the case with the Bates home. William Bates had a real estate business in Greenville.



*The home of William and Sara Bates*

After designing residences for other persons, Frank and Joseph Cunningham came to the conclusion that it was time to design homes for their own families. They acquired adjoining lots on East Park Avenue, almost immediately across the street from the Cleveland residence. On these lots they built homes which display an architectural sense of humor. Except for the choice of different exterior material, the homes are a mirror image of each other. (See below)



The home of Joseph and Beulah Cunningham, shown on the left, has a red brick exterior. The exterior of Frank and Eoline Cunningham's home, on the right, is stuccoed and painted and given an additional gable. Also, the front entrances of the houses differ.

While 1912 was a banner year for residences, the Cunninghams also had an important commercial commission. The Finlay Building was constructed on the northeast corner of Main and North Streets. The second floor was occupied by offices, while Batson's Store occupied the ground level. Batson's specialized in women's ready-to-wear clothing.



*The Finlay Building as it looked originally*

The Finlay Building survives on its corner today, but in altered form. Ivey-Keith Department Store had occupied a tall building, farther north on Main Street, for many years. In 1949 Ivey's acquired the Finlay Building. The remodeling included the addition of gables to the roof line. (See p. 50) Today the back wall of the building still shows traces of the two lives of the building.

In the 1960s Ivey's closed at this location and moved to McAlister Square. After lying vacant for many years, the building was remodeled for shops on the first level and condominiums on the upper levels.



*The Finlay Building during the 1949 remodeling for Ivey's*

In addition to designing beautiful structures for individuals and businesses, Frank and Joseph Cunningham also designed entirely functional, unadorned buildings. In 1913 and 1914 they designed several warehouses on McBee Avenue for the Piedmont & Northern Railway.



*Piedmont & Northern Warehouses*

In 1914 Converse College asked the firm to undertake its second, large Spartanburg project. Judd Science Hall turned out to be the brothers' first venture into Gothic Revival architecture on a monumental scale.

Converse wanted incorporated in the design, a tower at the top of which would be an observatory. This central tower, crenelated at the top, turned out to be the building's most important architectural features. Dominating the tower was an elaborate stone entrance. On either side of the top of the entrance were intricately carved Gothic open niches. Above the entrance was a large diamond-paned lancet window. The requested observatory tower was hexagonal and placed asymmetrically on the right side of the central tower. The large windows of the flanking wings of the main building provided ample light for the laboratories.



*Judd Science Hall at Converse College*

In 1917 the Cunninghams designed an addition to the Imperial Hotel. Although the first section of the hotel had been built only six years earlier, Greenville's rapid growth at this time created a need for additional rooms downtown. At this time the only other downtown hotel of any size was the Otteray Hotel. The original building for the Imperial Hotel had cost \$45,000 in 1911. The addition cost \$150,000 in 1917, reflecting the escalation of building costs during World War I.

So far the brothers had designed homes, schools, churches, science buildings, and hotels. In 1923 they added another category: hospitals. J. W. Jervey asked for a plan for the Jervey Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital, which was built on Church Street, at the northwest corner of Coffee Street.

In 1924 the brothers designed a new office building for themselves. The Cunningham Building faced East Coffee Street, at the northeast corner of Spring Street, and was Tudor in style. Constructed of mellowed-brown brick, the building had double street entrances, which were outlined by elaborate stone work. The second-floor casement windows had diamond-shaped leaded glass panes. The architectural firm occupied the upper floors. The ground floor was rented out for commercial use. This little architectural gem was demolished to make way for the widening of Spring Street from two lanes into four lanes in the 1970s.



*The Cunningham Building*

From 1924 to 1927, Frank and Joseph Cunningham designed schools for the towns of Pendleton, St. Mathews, Easley, Woodruff, and Prosperity. The Easley High Auditorium has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1927 they carried out a commission for the construction of 44 houses at Mills Mill No. 2 in Woodruff.



*Mills Mill Village*

Frank Cunningham died in 1928 at the age of 48. Joseph survived his brother by 41 years and continued the practice alone until his retirement in 1956. He died in 1969. Joseph Cunningham became a mentor for many young architects, who referred to him as "Uncle Joe." One of these commented that Joseph Cunningham was "a man's man and a lady's gentleman."

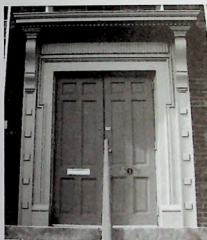


*Frank Cunningham*



*Joseph Cunningham*

One of Joseph Cunningham's first commissions on his own was to design, in 1929, a new home on Townes Street for Greenville's Congregation Beth Israel. An all-purpose room was first constructed on the ground floor. Later, as funds became available, the sanctuary was added above. The relatively simple, but beautiful, little building is classical-revival in style. A pair of Doric columns supports an entablature and pediment, the architectural details of which are now obscured by aluminum siding. The restrained, but elegant, detail around the entrance door is typically neoclassical, as is the beautiful Palladian window on the left side of the building. In 1957 the congregation began the move to a new property on Summit Drive.



*Beth Israel Entrance*



*Palladian Window*

Over the next decades, Joseph Cunningham continued to design schools and churches for Greenville and the surrounding area, including Tumbling Shoals, Pickens, Jonesville, Greer, and Travelers Rest. The most impressive of these churches is Trinity Lutheran Church on North Main Street in Greenville.

Built on high ground, the large Goth building successfully fulfills the mission of the Gothic style by giving the impression of soaring to the heavens. The width of the entrance is exaggerated by the use of three separate doors with pointed arches. Flanking the doors is a pair of buttresses, attached to the front of the building. Above the doors is a massive "west window" divided by lancets.



*Trinity Lutheran Church*

Other church designs executed by Joseph Cunningham were Tabernacle Baptist Church on Hudson Street in Greenville and Francis Asbury United Methodist Church on East North Street, across from the Bates home. Both of these are in the classical-revival style.



*Tabernacle Baptist*



*Francis Asbury Methodist*

Several of Greenville's textile mill communities have churches designed by Joseph Cunningham. One of these is Monoghan Baptist Church, built in 1932.



*Monoghan Baptist Church*

On the commercial side, Joseph Cunningham designed three branches of Fidelity Federal Savings & Loan Association on Antrum Drive, East Lee Street, and in Berea. Among his later residential designs were the home of Mr. and Mrs. Waddy Anderson on Byrd Boulevard and the home of Bill and Katherine Merritt on Parkins Mill Road.



*Waddy Anderson Home on Byrd Boulevard*



*Merritt Home on Parkins Mill Road*

The last major project to which Joseph Cunningham contributed was the Greenville Memorial Auditorium on East North Street.



*Greenville Memorial Auditorium*

The Cunningham brothers were talented and enterprising. Their surviving homes, buildings, and churches are a testament to their ability. This account of their careers is by no means a complete study, nor is it an adequate treatment of the subject. The goal of this study has been simply to remember the contributions to Greenville's heritage of two engineers and architects from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to hope that their surviving buildings and homes will remain a permanent part of Greenville's history.