

The Historic Briggs Building



Briggs Hardware Building
Photo by Elizabeth Alley, courtesy of
Raleigh Historic Districts Commission

By Clifton Barnes

When the law firm of Everett Gaskins Hancock started looking for a new location, the partners wanted to stay near downtown Raleigh, close to all the activity and vibrancy of the city.

Instead, they found what partner Ed Gaskins calls “the ideal location in the *middle* of all the activity.” When office hours end, downtown life doesn’t, he said. “It’s as busy at 10 o’clock at night as it is at 4 in the afternoon.”

Not only that but the members of the firm, all history buffs in their own right, believe they are in the perfect building – the historic Briggs Building, which has stood on Fayetteville Street since 1874.

“To be working in a building that has served Raleigh for more than 135 years is really exciting,” Gaskins said. “Plus, it’s such a beautiful building with such a rich history.”

The building served for 120 years as a family-owned hardware store. The prominent Briggs family developed the Oakwood neighborhood of Raleigh and helped construct many of Raleigh’s landmarks including the North Carolina State Capitol building, which

was the first landmark in the city to make it onto the National Register of Historic Places in 1970.

Just three years later, the Briggs Building was placed on the National Register, even ahead of Oakwood. And, why not? At the time the building was completed, the ornately decorated four-story building was the tallest building in Eastern North Carolina and it was Raleigh's first skyscraper.

"It was a very, very fine building for downtown Raleigh when it was built," said Myrick Howard, president of Preservation North Carolina which, in the late 1990s, helped save the building along with the A.J. Fletcher Foundation. "They built a really upscale building in downtown Raleigh that you might have seen in Louisville, Baltimore or New York."

Primarily an Italianate style of architecture, the red brick with light accents is reminiscent of the Victorian Gothic style while the window hoods harken the medieval style. Most of the detailing on the front of the building is cast iron. While fairly narrow, the building is quite long – extending a full block to Salisbury Street.

With buildings on either side and no electricity available when built, perhaps what is now considered the most distinctive feature of the building was constructed – a light well in the center, running through all floors to allow the sun in.

With the invention of electricity, the light well had been covered up over the years. The top of it was covered by corrugated metal that had become a home to pigeons. The third floor portion had been floored over and on the second floor it was simply covered up.

The public can come in and view the renovated light well through the Raleigh Museum, which is housed on the first floor of the building.

"I call it our \$500,000 light well only half joking because we had to do a lot of work to open it up again," Howard said. "It is a very cool feature of the building."

Developer Greg Hatem of Raleigh's Empire Properties has been instrumental in the revitalization of downtown Raleigh but he credits the renovation of the Briggs Building as kick starting the effort.

"Preservation North Carolina and the Fletcher Foundation were the only ones who could pull it off. Economically, it didn't make sense for developers," Hatem said. "They put a stake in the ground and said, 'We're not going to let buildings dilapidate any longer – we're going to bring them back.'"

When Preservation North Carolina, housed on the second floor, moved in the building in 1999, the entire block was a wasteland, Howard said. "It was really pitiful," he said. "The number of vacant storefronts greatly exceeded the occupied storefronts when we moved down here. It was a pretty dismal scene."

Not only that but Hurricane Fran had soaked the interior of the Briggs Building itself and it was in bad shape. "The building was pretty close to being condemned," Howard said. "Windows were out, the roof was leaking, and to add to the problem, it's a wood-framed structure." While there are brick walls, the actual floor and wall structure is wood so the

building had to be brought up to city fire codes, which were more stringent in the late '90s than they are now.

"This couldn't have been done without the Fletcher Foundation," Howard said. "Fletcher really brought the most money to the table and made it happen."

Greg Paul, chairman of the Raleigh Museum board, said the project truly stopped a long period of decline in downtown Raleigh. "It's been really great for Fayetteville Street in particular, and downtown in general, and Raleigh as a whole," he said. "We need to respect the integrity of our downtown properties more than we did back in the day. There is so little left of that fabric that we really need to honor the pieces that remain."

The Briggs Building certainly has an honorable history, which includes a legend that Thomas Henry Briggs liquidated all the family assets into gold and silver and put them in lead pipes toward the end of the War Between the States. As Sherman's Army approached Raleigh after devastating Atlanta, he buried the coins. After the Civil War ended, Briggs dug up the coins and started expanding his business, which included beginning construction on the Briggs Building.

The rich history of the building would not be complete without mentioning some of the important tenants of the upper floors of the building. "Major cultural institutions started here," Howard said. "My impression was that others who used the building were here for a few years before building their own permanent homes." For instance both the Catholic Diocese and the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church both started in the Briggs Building. The Raleigh YMCA, the Raleigh Little Theater and the NC Museum of Natural Sciences all started operations in the Briggs Building.

In addition, the offices for the architect of the Executive Mansion were housed in the Briggs Building. And, on the third floor, where Everett, Gaskins, Hancock now resides, the local National Guard, known as the Oak City Guard, had a training center there more than 100 years ago. While much of the brick wall has been replaced or repaired, there are still some spots that could be bullet holes from where the guardsmen took target practice.

It's unclear what other law firms may have practiced in the building, but Everett, Gaskins, Hancock is believed to be the only law firm in North Carolina, and possibly the country, where clients enter through a museum.

"We are really happy to have them here," said Paul, the chairman of the museum. "It certainly helps us pay the rent on the building which is good but having an established and respected firm that takes the whole floor is great. We look forward to some enjoyable times."

Indeed, the good times that the Briggs Building ushered in during the late 1800s are back in downtown Raleigh in great part due to the historic, renovated Briggs Building.

(Barnes, who has won more than 70 journalism awards, served as director of communications for the N.C. Bar Association for 15 years and, before that, was a newspaper writer and editor. He is now a freelance writer, editor, web developer and communications consultant living in Cary with his wife and son. www.cb3media.com.)