

Huntsville, Alabama

History and High-Tech

By Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Alabama is a state full of surprises for us as we visit its different cities and towns — none more than Huntsville and its environs. We managed to cram an amazing variety of fascinating experiences in our 4 days in the area.

We flew from Tampa to Huntsville by Northwest Airlines, and checked into the Courtyard Marriott, centrally located, familiar and comfortable, as well as being walking distance to shopping and restaurants. We were pleased to find high speed internet access in our room, and a delightful breakfast buffet in the lobby cafe.

When visiting a new area it's always a good idea to start with the visitor center to get a complete picture of what there is to see and do, and a bit of history about it. The Huntsville Visitor Center is well laid out in a beautiful new building, and the staff is knowledgeable and helpful. They also offer discount tickets to the area attractions

through a passport program, which we recommend, as you will want to visit all the attractions in the program. There is even a "Tourist Trolley" that hits a lot of the spots for a \$2 all day pass, so you can leave your car at the hotel.

Downtown Huntsville is being revitalized, and is noticeably bright and neat.

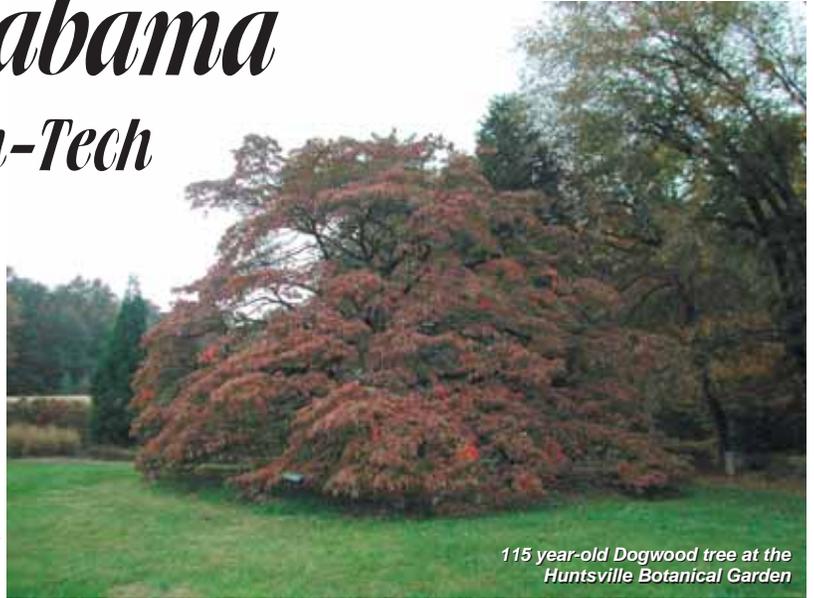
Twickenham is the city's Historical District and features Federal and Greek Revival architectural style homes. The area has the highest concentration of antebellum homes in Alabama, some of which are open to the public. The 1819 Weeden House Museum quickly became a favorite of ours, due in no small part to docent Barbara Lauster, who ebulliently brought the home to life. Maria Howard Weeden (1846-1905) was a remarkable woman — a frail and delicate poet/artist who preferred to use the name Howard rather than the more feminine Maria. Although her stories and art were well appreciated in her time (she published four books and even had an art show in Paris). Her truly important legacy is the dignity and voice she



Huntsville Visitor Center



Barbara Lauster brings Howard Weeden's story to life.



115 year-old Dogwood tree at the Huntsville Botanical Garden

gave to black servants by painting their portraits and writing down their poems and stories which are now preserved for all time. In fact, her books were used as a reference for the costumers of 1939's "Gone With The Wind" movie. Walking through the home you can almost feel her presence, especially by the window where she set up her easel. Ms. Lauster said some visitors come up to the door but won't go in the house because they "sense" something. Whatever we may have sensed was definitely warm and friendly!

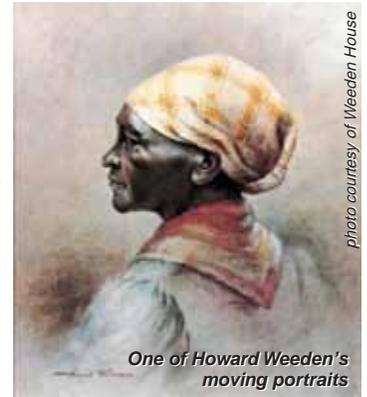


photo courtesy of Weeden House

One of Howard Weeden's moving portraits



A delectable dinner at 801 Franklin

Nearby is 801 Franklin, a charming restaurant for lunch (or dinner). We ordered the Pork Loin, Marinated with Fresh Garlic & Rosemary, with Green Beans & Mashed Potatoes. Everything was tender, fresh and delicious.

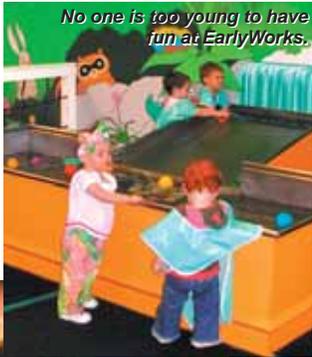
One of the south's oldest railroad passenger depots (1860) is now the Historic Huntsville Depot. The 3-story brick building now houses several miniature train exhibits as well as the history of the cotton industry that was the lifeblood of the town. Prisoners were held there during the Civil War when the town was occupied by the Union soldiers from 1862 until the end of the war. On the 3rd floor you can see the graffiti left by soldiers and workers. On the grounds of the depot costumed Civil War reenactors explain life during the period to



One of Huntsville Depot's trains.

school and tour groups during certain times of the year.

One of the “surprises” for us was the quality and quantity of excellent museums to be found in Huntsville. The first of which is EarlyWorks, the south’s largest hands-on history museum, created in 1998 to instill patriotism in children at



No one is too young to have fun at EarlyWorks.

School groups learn about American history at EarlyWorks



an early age. The entrance is reminiscent of the rotunda in our nation’s capitol. Different rooms are set up to replicate themes, and are all hands-on. Children can hear stories from a talking tree, play a tune on the giant-sized instruments, and explore a 46-foot keelboat, among other experiences. One of the rooms is set up for the enjoyment of children from birth to 6 years old. There is a “Patriots and Presidents” program held in February, in which 10 to 15 interpreters come as famous Americans to explain the importance of these people in history.

Right in town you can be transported back to 1819 at the Alabama Constitution



A potter demonstrates his skill at the Alabama Constitution Village.

Village, a half-block area replication of a time-gone-by. A group of buildings have been created to duplicate early 19th century village life. Even

though the village was built only 27 years ago, attention to detail of the bygone era is excellent. Costumed guides spin wool, make pottery, dip candles, craft furniture

and print on an old press.

Walk out the picket fence and you’re back in town, but around the corner is another historic spot — the Harrison Brothers Hardware Store. This place is so much fun to poke around in. Built in 1897, it was family run until only 20 years ago when the Historic Society bought it. It is the oldest continually operated hardware store in the state. Going through it (if you’re old enough — and we are) you will experience a lot of nostalgia, and a bit of good-grief-my-stuff-is-in-a-museum-it-is.

Another fabulous museum is the Huntsville Museum of Art, built in 1998. Along with a fine art collection, they have the largest collection of Buccellati animals in the world — 16 pieces. If you’re not familiar with Buccellati, it is a luxury Italian jewelry firm in Milan. Gianmaria Buccellati’s signature silver animals are produced by welding many silver hairs or feathers, giving the exact appearance of the natural coat of the animal over a hollow armature. They are truly breathtaking and must be seen in person.



A Buccellati silver giraffe at the Huntsville Museum of Art.

We wanted a little nature and some Alabama fresh air, so we took a short ride up the mountain to the Burritt Museum, called a “living museum”. The 168 acre complex consists of the 1935 Burritt Mansion, 19th century farmsteads, and nature trails. The location is a great place to “get away” as it is so peaceful and tranquil. Dr. Burritt was a homeopathic physician, and the mansion was his retirement home. When he died he left the



The Burritt Mansion

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Burritt's goats still roam the mountain.

property to the city. The mansion is unique — built in the shape of an X. It houses 19th century furnishings and personal items as well as a collection of Indian artifacts, rocks and minerals. The farmsteads are carefully restored 1850's era buildings that have been moved to this location, with living history interpreters in period dress to guide you through the daily life of the inhabitants. Dr. Burritt didn't

like cows milk (thought it would kill you) so he had goats instead, the descendants of which still roam the mountains.

Back down from the mountain we went to the Huntsville Botanical Garden, a 112 acre site. Only 65 acres are developed so far, but it is one of the most interesting and well thought out gardens we have seen. They have focused on creating an environment that will appeal to children as well as adults, so the entire garden is kid-friendly. They have fun seasonal festivals — we were there for the fall exhibit of many wonderful and varied scarecrows. At Christmas time the garden puts up 1 1/2 miles of holiday displays. Six hundred people (volunteers) work on the exhibit for 6 months. The garden has a very strong community involvement — different botanical societies take care of the different areas of the gardens. School children raised money to move a 115 year-old dogwood tree that was going to be destroyed to make room for a road. It is thriving in its new location in the garden. There is a butterfly house with 30 native species; a tree house; a miniature train setup with real trees grown in the Bonsai method to keep them in small scale; a Day Lilly garden that peaks on Father's Day; and the largest pepper garden in the world. Speaking of peppers, did you know: That pointy peppers are the hottest? That you shouldn't drink water or milk after eating hot peppers — it only serves to spread the heat. Take a teaspoon of sugar instead.

...Which is a good segway to dining. For a good start to a day, we went to the Blue Plate Cafe, which serves classic southern recipes and is a staple with the local folks for a hearty breakfast.



Excellent dinners are served at The Jazz Factory

One night we ate at the Jazz Factory, housed in an old Montgomery Ward Building, originally built 128 years ago. It's very classic with marble columns and a long dark wood bar. The Italian Sausage with Penne was quite tasty. The restaurant is featured in "Alabama's Historic Restaurants and Their Recipes" by Gay N. Martin.

Another restaurant we enjoyed was the family owned, cozy and classy Pauli's Gourmet Food & Wine. We had a very flavorful Alaskan Halibut in a Potato Crust sautéed with Lemon Butter Sauce, Rosemary New Potatoes, Green Beans and Carrots.

One of Huntsville's super museums is Sci-Quest, aimed at youngsters, but we oldsters enjoyed it too. There are 125 hands-on exhibits involving gravity, pulleys and sound waves —

a lot which were designed by retired NASA engineers. There's a 3D CGI movie which gives control over to the viewer to create their own experiences. Easily the most popular exhibit with the kids is "Grossology: The Impolite Science of the Human Body" where kids learn about how and why their bodies emit strange sounds and odors — complete with real sounds and odors!



Sci-Quest's most popular exhibit is "Grossology: The Impolite Science of the Human Body."

Close by Sci-Quest is the biggest attraction in Huntsville — the U.S. Space & Rocket Center. Indeed the whole future of Huntsville changed radically when Werner Von Braun and his team of scientists arrived in 1950. It is where the space program

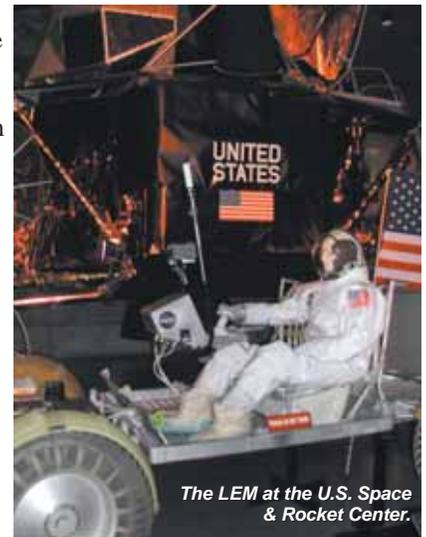


Dr. Werner Von Braun

was born, where the rocket that took man to the moon was built, and where the next generation of spacecraft is now being designed. The Center was built in 1970 (with much modernization since), and houses thousands of artifacts, including the charred Apollo 16 Command Module, a rock from the moon, and a full-sized space shuttle mockup. There are many hands-on exhibits, an IMAX Theater, and some simulator rides. The U.S. Space Camp is based at the Center, and is the only one in the U.S. It provides intensive astronaut training for kids and adults alike. The Aviation Challenge program offers Top Gun-type experiences. A few interesting bits of information we picked up at the Center were: The LEM (Lunar Excursion Module) folded up to the size of a child's playpen; the tires on the LEM were hollow, made of piano wire; Space suits have 21 layers of material in them; The first live animals to return from space were 2 small monkeys — one died shortly after her return from space, the other one lived 3 times her life expectancy.

The arrival of rocket scientists and engineers to 1950's Huntsville also brought a need and desire for art and culture, which is why Huntsville today is so aesthetically advanced. NASA engineers both

working and retired are very involved in their community, and bring their expertise and creativity into play, which is obvious when you visit the different attractions.



The LEM at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center.

Going from an outer space mindset to burrowing underground, we left Huntsville and went to Cathedral Caverns, under Gunter's Mountain in Grant, AL. Well, we didn't exactly "burrow" as the caverns are, well, cavernous. It is always amazing and humbling to stand in an ongoing formation that was started billions of years ago. There is a shark's tooth embedded in the ceiling proving that the area was once covered with ocean water.



Cathedral Caverns

We had an exuberant guide, Danny Lewis who used a “good old boy” facade to entertain cave visitors, but was really very clever and knowledgeable. His enthusiasm for the cave was infectious. The cave is 60° year round, and houses the world’s largest stalagmite column inside a commercial cave, at 45 feet tall and 243 feet around. There are other formations that are unique to Cathedral Caverns.

Driving along Lake Guntersville, we arrived at the Historical Complex in Arab, AL. This is another replicated little com-



Replicated country store at the Historical Complex in Arab.

munity with a one-room schoolhouse, church, gristmill and blacksmith shop. The schoolhouse and church are original, but all the other buildings are duplications. The builders used old wood from buildings from the same period, so the replication is more authentic.

We checked into the Jameson Inn in Arab for the night. The white columned, colonial style motel looked inviting, and proved to be warm and comfortable.

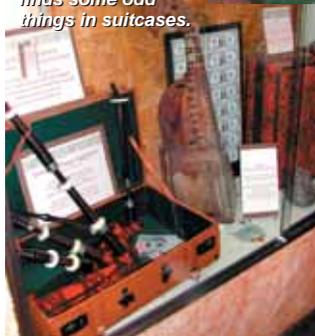
We departed for Jackson County the next morning and headed for a short cruise on Lake Guntersville, which is quite beautiful and pristine, and is known as one of the top bass fishing lakes in the country. We topped it off with lunch at The Docks, a relatively new restaurant on the water that features Shrimp & Grits, and Crawfish & Andouille Sausage Gumbo.

If you’ve ever wondered where all that airline “lost” luggage ends up - wonder no more. It is right in Scottsboro, AL at the Unclaimed Baggage Center. You will

find all manner of items there — cameras, clothes, jewelry, musical instruments and much more. They



Unclaimed Baggage finds some odd things in suitcases.



sell designer items for a fraction of their original value.

We stopped in at this fascinating store, and of course, did not come

away empty-handed. We heard a few shopping stories while we were there. A woman bought a Barbie doll for her little girl who promptly pulled the head off, revealing a roll of \$500 in bills hidden inside. Business was brisk on Barbie dolls for weeks following the incident. Workers have also found hidden diamonds and gems in the seams of some suitcases, as well as a live snake and a suit of armor in other instances.

After checking into the Covenant Cove Lodge on Lake Guntersville, we were tempted to fish off one of their six docks, but decided to watch the beautiful sunset from our 2nd floor cozy room and get ready for dinner.



View from a Covenant Cove Lodge room.

We drove to The Lodge on Gorham’s Bluff, and by this time it was dark, so we really couldn’t see the area, but it is known for lovely homes and being an art community. The Lodge itself is just beautiful, on a cliff overlooking the lake. Their elegant restaurant was candlelit, and our truly memorable dinner was prepared by Executive Chef Charles McCleskey. He started us off with a Cream of Potato & Garlic Soup with Spiced Apples that was just fabulous. A Salad of Mixed Greens with Walnuts and Blue Cheese was followed by a succulent Pan Seared Filet of

Beef with a Portobello Demi Glace and Potatoes Gratinée. You know how you remember certain places as having the “best steak” or “best lobster” you ever had? Well, Chef McCleskey prepared the “best dessert” we ever had, with his Chocolate Amaretto Creme Brulee with Toasted Almond Crust — amazing!



photo courtesy of Gorham's Bluff

Chef McCleskey from Gorham's Bluff

Huntsville and its surrounding area proved to be very enlightening. What surprises does the rest of Alabama hold? We’ll keep you posted.

If You Go...

- 801 Franklin Restaurant - 256-519-8019
- Alabama Constitution Village - 256-564-8100; www.earlyworks.com
- Arab Historical Complex - 256-586-3138; www.arabcity.org/chamber
- Blue Plate Cafe - 256-533-8808
- Burritt On The Mountain - 256-536-2882; www.burrittmuseum.com
- Cathedral Caverns - 256-728-8193; www.marshallcountycvb.com
- Courtyard Marriott - 256-837-1400
- Covenant Cove Lodge - 256-582-1000; www.covenantcove.com
- The Docks Restaurant - 256-574-3071
- EarlyWorks - 256-564-8100; www.earlyworks.com
- Gorham’s Bluff Lodge - 256-451-3453; www.thebluff.com
- Harrison Brothers Hardware Store - 256-536-3631; www.harrisonbrothershardware.com
- Historic Huntsville Depot - 256-564-8100; www.earlyworks.com
- Huntsville Botanical Garden - 256-830-4447; www.hsvbg.org
- Huntsville Museum of Art - 256-535-4350; www.hsvmuseum.org
- Huntsville Visitor Center - 256-533-5723; www.huntsville.org
- Jameson Inn - 256-586-5777; www.jamesoninns.com
- Jazz Factory - 256-539-1919
- Northwest Airlines - 1-800-225-2525
- Pauli’s Gourmet Food & Wine - 256-722-0071
- Sci-Quest - 256-837-0606; www.sciquest.com
- Unclaimed Baggage Center - 256-259-1535; www.unclaimedbaggage.com
- U.S. Space & Rocket Center - 256-837-3400; www.ussrc.com
- Weeden House Museum - 256-536-7718