

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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About The Little Villa on Highland Avenue

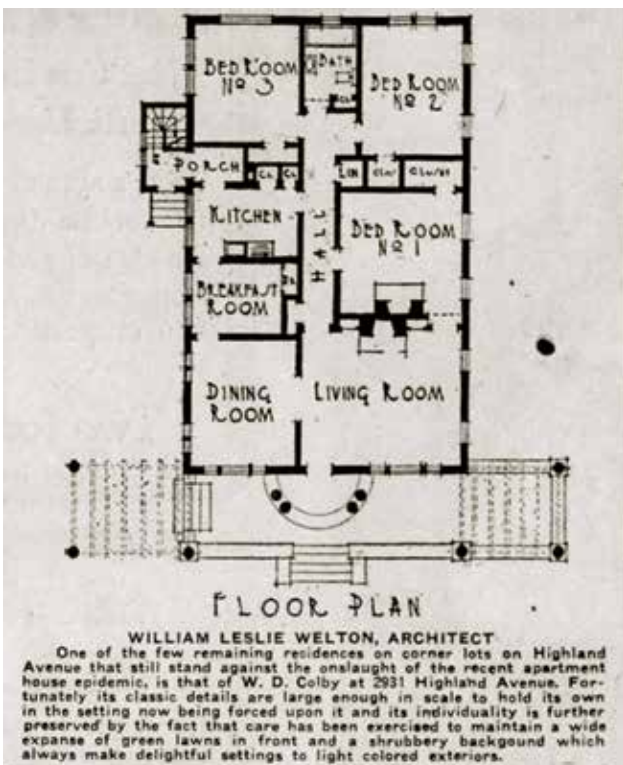
By Randy Merritt and Marjorie White.

Today's grande avenue was the preferred location for those achieving success in the Magic City. Here in the Gilded Era, those who put the Magic in the Magic City --lawyers, realtors, newspaper men, merchants and business owners, mine and mill owners-- built their homes here from the late 1880s until 1923, when the "Little Villa" filled the final lot.

A developer has purchased this beloved neighborhood residence nestled high above the avenue at Rhodes Park. His intent is to demolish it and build several townhouses on the grounds. The intriguing residence is more than 100 years old, has incurred some settling typical of properties of its age, but is structurally sound according to a recent engineering report sponsored by the Friends of Highland Park. More than 2,000 persons have signed a petition to support saving the residence for future generations. Here's the story of the residence and its builders.



"The Little Villa" on Highland Avenue, the residence of Mr. & Mrs. W. D. Colby, built 1923, 2931 Highland Avenue, designed by William Leslie Welton. Photograph Birmingham Area MLS Inc.



Floor Plan, William Leslie Welton, Architect. *The Birmingham News*, May 18, 1930.

Highland Avenue's "Little Villa" derives its inspiration from Roman and Renaissance era country estates, known as villas. In modern times, such residences present a grand appearance with stately symmetry (one half mimics the other) and classical elements. A curving concrete drive leads to the Little Villa's front entrance. This entrance is flanked pergolas on either side of a tiled terrace. The front façade's principal windows have tiled hood projections. Walls are stucco painted white, the tile roof red. A roofline balustrade originally capped the facade. Landscaping installed by the Colbys included a Bermuda grass lawn, tall evergreens, and pink Carolina Estute roses covering the pergola with pink blossoms, the later manured and tended by Mrs. Colby. The designer of the residence, Birmingham architect William Welton had trained in Boston and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris before coming to Birmingham to execute designs for many churches, commercial, and residential buildings including the Empire and John Hand Buildings, the Tutwiler Hotel, and George Ward's Temples of Vesta and Sybil.

At construction in 1923, the Little Villa sat on a 104' x 210' corner lot that included five garages.

"From what is said to have been one of the most unfavorable locations possible for a house, Mr. and Mrs. Colby have built a home that Birmingham realtors have tried to purchase more than once."

— Alexander Nunn, *The Birmingham News*, March 14, 1928.

Builders of The Little Villa

Mr. & Mrs. W. D. (Willis Dwight) Colby built the residence and lived here from 1923 to 1936. Born in Ohio in 1854, Colby was a 60-year old successful businessman when he built the "Little Villa." The couple married in Ohio in



Mr. & Mrs. W.H. Colby, 2931 Highland Avenue upon the eve of their golden wedding anniversary, September 23, 1934. Photograph by *The Birmingham News*.

1884 and moved to Birmingham where Colby established the Colby Decorating Company in 1890. To the couple two children were born Carroll Dwight Colby, who joined his father's business, and Evelyn Colby Root. (Carroll was named for Mrs. Colby's (Mary Esther Carroll Colby) relative, Charles Carroll, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from Maryland).

Beginning with the sale of wallpaper, pictures, and art goods, Colby's firm grew into a full service interior decorating company, offering and installing all manner of wall, window, and ceiling treatments, "period and modern" furnishings, and art not only to Birmingham buyers, but also, in association with national firms, to clients across the United States. *The Birmingham News* of March 1, 1902 commented that the firm handled "the choicest things that the season affords or the most fastidious taste desires." Projects ranged from residences, to hotels, theatres, clubs, and the Birmingham City Hall. The firm did the interiors for the Tutwiler Hotel in 1914, the Pantages Theater in 1927, and the 25th floor Newspaper Men's Club atop the Jefferson Bank building, later known as the Comer Building and today as residential condominium.

Long headquartered in several downtown stores and the Lyric Theatre, in 1926 architect Charles McCauley designed a 100' x 100'



Colby Decorating Company Building (1926), 2400 7th Avenue South, today the Dread River Distilling Co. ABOVE: *The Birmingham Post*, August 15, 1931.

showrooms for the firm. The building's owner TCI President George Gordon Crawford invested \$100,000 in this the first mercantile building of its type erected on Southside. Colby Decorating held a long-term lease.

The Birmingham Post Herald of December 17, 1929, provides a description of the company's holdings. Valued at \$50,000, these include living room, breakfast room, and porch furnishings, rugs, antiques, works of art, plaques, mural paintings, painted sconces, mirrors, lamps and shades, and draperies and curtains. Together with ladders, scaffolding, spray paint guns, sewing machines, pressing irons, saws, lathes, and hand tools, and office furnishings, they were auctioned to satisfy the firm's bankruptcy.

The Colby residence on Highland Avenue was sold in 1936. Its original owner died two years later. In subsequent years, the "Little Villa" would attract design professionals who appreciated its unusual design and setting.



Interior and furnishings designed by Colby Decorating Co., Newspaper Men's Club. Postcard, c. 1914-1916. Merritt Collection



View in First Floor Lobby, The Tutwiler, decorated and furnished by Colby Decorating. Photograph, c. 1930, Merritt Collection.