

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

Many of you will remember our "River Hill" (the extension of 24th Ave. northward from corner of 5th St. and 24th Ave.) prior to the widening and improvements made in 1951. You will recall the row of shanties and poorly constructed sidewalk along the east side.

How much do you remember about the west side of River Hill? First there was no sidewalk of any sort. Yes, the electric service to Northport was on this side. How well do you remember the small, unique and mysterious structure about midway of River Hill? This building was of a good quality brick masonry, with first class roof and heavy steel plate door.

The heavy brass padlock was very similar to those used at the calaboose (city jail). The building was unique in that there were no windows or visible ventilation and no sign or label to disclose its identity. Its miniature size (about 10 feet by 10 feet) gave it a tinge of mystery.

Over a period of many years I asked dozens of friends as to the identity of this building and I do not recall a single correct answer. Some thought it a burial vault, some guessed it to be a jail of some sort.

Well, what was it?

"It" was a powder magazine known as the "powder house." A city ordinance prohibited more than a certain maximum storage of dynamite or other explosives (such as gun powder) in a vendor's place of business. The City of Tuscaloosa built this powder magazine many years before the Civil War for a safe storage place for any excess explosives that a merchant might receive in a new shipment.

The city marshall kept the only key to the powder house so a merchant had to contact him to obtain any explosive material stored there.

When River Hill was widened and otherwise improved with curb and gutter in 1951 the powder house vanished.