

Montrose Court: A City Landmark... 55 Years Later

By Mike McGee; Johnson City Press-Chronicle, Thursday January 5, 1978

“Landmark” – the term denotes an object so associable with a certain locality it can be used as a point of reference in daily conversation.

As such, a landmark should possess unusual physical characteristics or have attained at some point a reputation for uniqueness.

Pro or con, such is the claim by **Montrose Court**, an apartment complex on Johnson City’s south side proclaimed an architectural and engineering marvel at its founding in **1922**, but condemned as a hovel in recent years.



Montrose Court in 1925; Burr Harrison Photo

Montrose has made its mark on the Southwest community, changing from a manor for society’s upper crust as far back as pre-Depression days to a low-rent tenement in the past decade.

It is now a landmark deplored by its neighbors. As recently as November, **Joe Cannon**, chief city building code inspector and other city officials uncovered violations of fire and building codes in the structure. The inspection came at the request of members of the Southwest Community Improvement Association.

Owner **Hollan Patrick** was given 30 days, which ended December 30 to clean the complex. His efforts have not yet been checked by Cannon’s staff, but if the efforts are not sufficient, the landmark could possibly be condemned, closed and eventually destroyed.

Cannon said Tuesday that Patrick could be given an extension on work time if there are signs of major repair work in the building. Enclosing and fireproofing the old stairwells, a check of the electrical wiring. Closing of the old elevators and plaster work would constitute such a sign, Cannon said.

Patrick said Tuesday there is a possibility he will sell Montrose Court and at present an option exists to purchase the property. Patrick, who has owned the property for 12 years, would not reveal the interested party nor the intended use for Montrose. Cannon said the sale, or merely an option to remodel Montrose, would be a reasonable request for an inspection extension.

The aging structure's death would probably be celebrated by neighbors, but for different reasons from those marking its opening, when it was heralded as a veritable palace, by a "**Montrose Court Edition**" (May 28, 1922) of the *Johnson City Chronicle*.

Even at a time considered a boom period for Johnson City, Montrose's estimated \$200,000 building costs were staggering. And rent for each of the 28 apartments was high.

But for your rent, all the most recent luxuries were supplied. Built-in bath tubs, instant hot water, individual parking garages and Murphy beds were drawing cards for area elite.

The Tudor-style architecture of Montrose was chosen because it happened to be the architect's favorite. The man behind the style, **D. R. Beeson, Sr.**, now resides in his own Tudor-style home on Hillcrest Drive with his son, D. R. Beeson, Jr., architect and city commissioner.

The elder Beeson remembers the 55-year old structure as being the "brainchild" of several of Johnson City businessmen and landowner **George L. Carter**, who owned all territory west of Buffalo Street to (and including) East Tennessee State University.

These men – **S. R. Jennings, James A. Summers, W. W. Miller, George T. Wofford, J. W. Ring, H. G. Morrison and R. W. Dickerson** – supplied the financial backing and Carter provided the plot in Johnson City's most sophisticated subdivision.

The Southwest Addition, as it was called, had been established 13 years earlier in 1909 as a surveyed and planned community by Dr. John Nolen, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nolen undertook an even more ambitious task in 1916 when he designed the City of Kingsport.

Possibly the only readable blueprint, or planner's map, available on the original design of the Southwest Addition is in the ownership of **Victoria Green**, 430 West Pine Street. Miss Green's map is still on the original paper from 1909, showing only slight variation from the area today.

Beeson called Carter, with his strong railroad connections, the founder of the business importance of Johnson City and the inventor of Kingsport.

Carter apparently pushed for the development of Johnson City's Southwest community, which he aided when he donated 116 acres to the state for a teacher's college. The site is now East Tennessee State University. The location of Montrose was to capitalize on the community's position midway between Johnson City's downtown business district and the growing importance of the Southwest region, said Beeson.

When Montrose was built, there were only three houses along what is now Southwest Avenue, and even that thoroughfare had to be paved when Carter granted the state the ETSU property, said Beeson. All three houses said Beeson, belonged to employees of the Clinchfield Railroad.

Coordinating the construction of the complex was an outfit called the Southwest Apartment Company, of which the seven previously mentioned businessmen were the directors.

Beeson said the apartments in Montrose varied in size: 6 were five-room apartments; 11 were four-room; 5 had three rooms; 4 had two rooms; and two had one room each. Appropriately, each varied in rent cost in accordance to size.

The structure was considered a wonder, he said, and great pride was held in the fact that it was almost entirely a Johnson City project.

Walls were by Johnson City Shale Brick Corp., wood material by Miller Brothers, hardware, paints and cement by Summers Hardware Co., wiring by Bishop Electric Co., roofing by S. M. White, plumbing by A. H. Abernathy, decorative work by Watauga Cement Products Corp., and gas service by Washington County Gas Company.

Some outside concerns did participate, but by and large, Johnson City's "palace" was constructed by local skill.

The building's elevator was still unusual, since it was a passenger elevator, as opposed to a freight. It was billed as "absolutely accident-proof and requiring no operator." Some visitors were amazed that the

elevator stopped level with the floor, requiring no step up or down to get off.

To the possible amusement of today's Montrose detractors, the 1922 *Chronicle* told of a "modern labor-saving device" called the TUEC Stationary Vacuum Sweeper that was to be used in Montrose Court to keep it "clean and free from bugs and vermin." The product was endorsed by Henry Ford.

As for the structure's landscaping and adjoining park, the wives of the stockholders of Southwest Apartment Co. formed a Ladies' Committee to plan and suggest the flower plots, parkways, lawns and private park, the latter their highlight.

Beeson said the complex's decline from grandeur began quite early, possibly as soon as 1930, when luxury was not affordable and when people started desiring one-floor housing. Around 1928, according to Patrick, Montrose was heavily damaged by fire starting in the dumb-waiters and garbage chute. Both were removed immediately after the fire, he said.

During the following years, the structure changed hands several times and gathered rumors such as the one **that Al Capone had roomed there on his trips between Chicago and Miami. Beeson could not confirm this rumor, but admitted something "clicked" when it was mentioned.**

The 1922 "Montrose Court Edition" referred to the apartment complex as a veritable fairyland – a title it still retains offhandedly in some viewpoints – and it maintains an aging grandeur of sorts.

But its death knell may now be sounding if Patrick or the possible new owners of the structure cannot meet the city requirements scheduled to be checked within the week.

The opening of the complex was met with much enthusiasm 55 years ago, and once "Montrose Landmark" is gone, its opponents might wish their push for its destruction had not been so energetic.