VACANCY:
Historic Site Seeking
Another Worthwhile Tenant

Have you ever stared in awe at the strange, deserted brick structure south of Macon on U.S. Highway 63? Many have, but few have ever stopped to find out the true history of this magnificent building.

When first built, the building provided training for boys as the Blee's Military Academy, and in later years it was converted into the Still-Hildreth Sanatorium. But after more than 50 years of service, the doors were locked in the late 1960s. Now the 64,000 square-foot structure stands gloomily over its destitute court yard, waiting for restoration.

Frederick Blee was an outstanding Macon citizen. He was president of the First National Bank of Macon, the Macon Citizen Printing Co. and the Hartford Loan and Investment Co. He owned the Blee Theater and the Jefferson Hotel in Macon. According to a story in the Macon Chronicle-Herald, he was responsible for replacing mudstones and cobblestones with bricks, creating parks and establishing contemporary buildings and a modern sewage system.

Fredrick William Victor Blee was born in Aix-la-Chapelle, Germany, March 30, 1860. He came to America in 1881, became a lieutenant colonel in the Iowa National Guard, and was appointed aide-de-camp to Governor Horace Boies.

He next became headmaster of the St. James Academy in Macon, a good school but a financial failure. Blee served there for five years until he retired due to failing health. After his father's death in 1896, Blee inherited a German estate and a large sum of money which he used to build the Blee's Military Academy.

For the cost of the building, about $1 million, Blee's really got his money's worth. The building consisted of 64,398 square feet and was constructed of fireproof brick. Every door, door casing, baseboard and window in the building was of molded copper. Many of the floors were made of marble and there were marble pillars.

Blee, a good scholar and soldier, wanted to establish a school with high standards. The academy was developed as a home and school for fifth through 12th grade boys. The goals of the academy were to teach the boys respect, honor and reliability, as well as military discipline. Their academic studies, which covered six years, included chemistry, physics and foreign language, as well as English, math and history. The academy employed 12 teachers giving it a 10 to one ratio of students to teachers. Tuition for the Blee's Academy was higher than for any other western academic school.
The school, however, was not all academics. The students had a recreation room with pool tables, a piano and tables for chess, checkers and cards. There was a one-twelfth-mile running track and a swimming pool. The ground floor housed target rifle ranges, bowling alleys and complete gymnastic equipment. A lake of 20 acres provided a place for fishing, boating and skating.

Blees died in September 1906. His widow later married an instructor of the academy and they continued to operate the school until it went bankrupt three years later. The building was then purchased by Andrew Taylor Still, Arthur Grant Hildreth, Harry Still and Charles Still for the treatment of patients with mental and nervous diseases.

The Still-Hildreth Sanitarium was founded March 1, 1914. According to the 1965 “Journal of Osteopathy,” the institution “was known for the handling of nervous diseases, proper environment, the right kind of food, and the proper system of exercise, all coupled with proper osteopathic treatment.”

Dr. Andrew Taylor Still had for years said, “Insanity and kindred nervous troubles could be cured by proper conditions and surroundings.” Following his belief, his sons, Drs. Charles and Harry Still, and Dr. Arthur Hildreth opened the sanitarium in Macon.

In 1914 the national recovery rate from mental illnesses was 10 percent. “Due to the positive approach toward their patients,” Dr. Harry Still said, “Still-Hildreth’s recovery rate was 35 to 65 percent.”

According to Dr. Harry Still, “They started a different social trend. The patients ate in a dining room in a co-educational existence with linen, crystal and silverware.” The patients were exposed to a variety of recreation. They played softball, tennis and golf. Many residents of Macon came to the sanitarium to play bridge and bingo with the residents. The patients were allowed to attend large balls and regular parties. They went on excursions, picnics, in town to movies—things that were relatively unheard of in those days.” Dr. Still said.

The Still-Hildreth Sanitarium was unique in its osteopathic approach to mental illness, but the hospital also used

Fredrick William Victor Blees opened the Blees Military Academy in 1899 in order to teach boys between the fifth and 12th grade “respect, honor and reliability, as well as military discipline.” In addition to his emphasis on academics, Blees provided the students with several forms of recreation, including pool tables and board games, and a wide range of athletic and gymnastic equipment. (Photo courtesy of Macon Chronicle-Herald)

The grounds of the 70-acre estate in Macon include a 20-acre lake. The building itself was built by Fredrick Blees with money he inherited from his father's estate in Germany. His academy consisted of 64,398 square feet of fireproof brick, with molded copper doors, door casings, baseboards and windows. The structure became the Still-Hildreth Sanitarium in 1914. (Photos these two pages courtesy of Jo Morrow)
treatments similar to other institutions of that day. The three main types of therapy used were psychiatric therapy, physical therapy and chemotherapy. The physical therapy included electric shock treatments and fever therapy. During fever therapy, the patient was locked in a cabinet and his temperature was raised to 106 or 107 degrees. Hydrotherapy was used to promote elimination of poisons that had a bearing upon the condition.

When the sanatorium went out of business in the late 1960s, Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine took over for a few years using their interns and doctors for the same cause, but the institution was closed soon after.

Gary Dickinson purchased the property for $75,000 and gave it to the city of Macon with the agreement that the city would purchase the other 70 acres. Dickinson said the building was assessed at above $800,000 several years ago; Mayor Kiser said the value might be as much as $1,000,000.

Mrs. Jo Morrow of Macon is a member of Blee's Still-Hildreth Building Preservation Incorporated. She said, "It's kind of a lengthy name but there's a lot of sentimental value attached to the building. So many people in Macon County worked here and had connections with it; no one wanted to see it destroyed." The group wants to preserve the building and try to keep it from deteriorating further. Preservation committee members hold flea markets on weekends in the annex building to raise money for the preservation project.

Some people want to tear the building down and sell the brick but Mrs. Morrow opposes this. She would like to see the building preserved and possibly used as a display area for local community groups. Mrs. Morrow feels it would be a big mistake to tear the building down. She has had architects examine the building, and they said, "This will be here when the new buildings are rotten and gone. There's just no building that they've put together like this."

Dr. Andrew Taylor Still (above) and Arthur Grant Hildreth (right) purchased the Blee's Academy to use as the Still-Hildreth Sanatorium for the treatment of patients with mental and nervous diseases. Although the national recovery rate from mental illness at that time was only 10 percent, Still-Hildreth’s recovery rate was 35 to 65 percent, according to Dr. Harry Still. Their innovative approach to treatment of mental illness was responsible for the hospital's success. (Photos this page courtesy of Still National Osteopathic Museum)
The top two photos are interior shots of the Still-Hildreth Sanitorium. Left, the hospital operated its own dairy. Above, another view of the grounds shows an ornate gazebo built near the lake. (Photos this page courtesy of Jo Morrow)