

# A Piece of History

The story of the Estes Professional Building in Downtown Athens, Tennessee

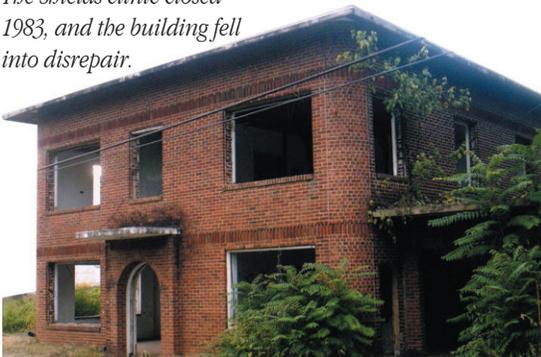
*Written by Pat Chester  
Photography by Robert Burleson*

**A**lthough the exact time of construction remains uncertain, evidence indicates that the building presently named “Estes Professional Building” was built sometime between 1937 and 1942. The art-deco style building, located at 296 West Madison Avenue, was commissioned by Dr. Lester Shields and his wife, Ester, to be used as a hospital bearing the couple’s name. The Shields Clinic remained operational until Dr. Shield’s death in 1983 but has since fallen into a state of disrepair.

In 1976, Jerry Estes moved to Athens to start practicing law after graduating from The University of Tennessee College of Law. Estes continued to practice until 1982 when he was elected as district attorney to serve over Bradley, McMinn, Monroe, and Polk Counties. Estes served as school board attorney prior to becoming District Attorney.

Estes served a long and esteemed tenure from 1982 to 2006, when he chose not

*The Shields clinic closed 1983, and the building fell into disrepair.*



*Believed to have been built in 1940, the building at 296 West Madison Avenue was originally home to the Shields Clinic. It is the birth place of many of Athens former and present residents.*

to seek re-election. In those 24 years, Estes oversaw prosecutions, and was actively involved in several high-profile cases. Many were covered by regional media such as an illegal fireworks factory, and others were even reported by national media. He oversaw cases involving contract killings and even one case featured on NBC’s Unsolved

Mysteries. The show’s airing led to the location of a Tennessee man that had escaped the Bradley County Jail and Fled to Canada in 1978 after being charged with the murder of two teenage girls. Estes was responsible for the enormous undertaking that led to the suspect’s extradition and eventual first and second degree murder convictions.

After retiring from public service, Estes started planning his next career move. Estes knew that he wanted to open an office in a historical building near the Athens Courthouse, but he was uncertain which one best met his needs. His wife, Robin, saw an article in the Knoxville News Sentinel about the people restoring many of the buildings in



*Jerry Estes*

Downtown Knoxville and recommended that he ask for assistance. David Dewhirst was the developer responsible for much of Knoxville's downtown renovation, and Estes knew Dewhirst's brother Jim.

After a couple of months of meeting and looking at buildings around Athens, Dewhirst and Estes finally had narrowed it down to two options. Both the old Cherokee Hardware building and the Monkey House were on the table, but the Cherokee Hardware building sold and the Monkey House didn't have enough parking. While in Athens with the two architects one afternoon, they drove by the Shields Clinic and the architects asked if Estes had thought about looking into it. Estes' son, Will, had already urged him to look at it, but Estes did not think it had sufficient parking. Once the parking situation was resolved, Estes proceeded with the purchase of the building.

With Dewhirst's guidance, Estes bought the Shields Clinic in late 2007 and began construction right away while opening a



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temporary office on Cook Drive. Estes also received the help of Dewhirst's architects: Mark Heinz and Aaron Pennington. They worked hard to capture the art deco attitude of the building while still making it practical as a law office. After the new windows had been installed, people started calling Estes conveying how excited they were to see the old building brought back to life.

This enthusiastic response from the community revealed something to Estes. "It might be my name on the deed," said Estes, "but the building belongs to everyone." Many people in the

community had a story to tell about the old building; in fact, many of the older residents were born in the Shields Clinic. As Estes started to hear more of these stories, he began to dig deeper into the history of the building.

The building is believed to have been built in 1940 and was probably built by Webb Construction Company. The Shields family lived in an apartment in the hospital while the doctor was away during World War II and was occupied by a number of nurses after they moved out. Several of the babies that Dr. Shields delivered ended up working for him as a nurse or receptionist. The earliest verified birth was that of Donald Henry McKeehan on May 20, 1946. The property remained in the Shields' family trust until after the death of Mrs. Shields on October 21, 1989. During this period, it began to

*Early stage of the renovation.*



*Estes opened a temporary office on Cook Drive while the restoration was underway.*





The interior walls were 12 inches of plaster and concrete. "It was built like a bomb shelter," said Estes.



Years of vandalism and neglect had left the building a state of disrepair.



fall into disrepair and was used for such things as a Halloween haunted house to raise funds for the Rescue Squad.

The property was conveyed by the Shields' Trust to B. L. and Adrienne Williams in 1996. In 2001, the Williams' sold the property to Dennis and Brandi Jones, who had moved to the area from Florida where Mr. Jones had been a building contractor. Mr. and Mrs. Jones recognized the uniqueness and potential of the building and planned to renovate it during their slow periods in the construction business. During their ownership the hipped roof was replaced, and some interior demolition work was done.

Estes had quite a bit of work ahead of him when he started the project. The only original part of the building that was left was the front door if you don't count the walls, and even they needed considerable attention. Fortunately the floor plan didn't need much work to transform the building into a law office, but there were a number of walls and doorways that needed moving. This



wasn't easy because the interior walls were 12 inches of plaster and concrete. "It was built like a bomb shelter," said Estes. "We later found out that was because the doctor wanted to add more levels to the building later."

All things considered, there were only two major issues during the process. One was the cold weather, but the biggest was the x-ray machine. After all the years of vagrants and vandalism, the x-ray machine was still sitting there. It was very large and heavy, and it took some additional engineering to get the device removed and disposed of.

The final step in the process, of course, was the decorating. Estes had help from Sharon Johnson from Johnson Home Furnishings as well as the ladies that worked for him and his architects. The interior achieves a balance of art-deco style combined with modern convenience and sensibility.



On April 13, 2009, Jerry N. Estes Law Offices, PLLC moved into the building, and it was renamed the Estes Professional Building. A plaque was engraved by White's Marble Works, and a time capsule set behind it in the courtyard wall.

Because of the community interest in the building, an open house for the public was advertised in local

newspapers and held on May 14, 2009. It is estimated that almost 400 people walked through the building. Notable attendees included Sharon G. Lee, associate justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court, and Robert "Gus" Radford, retired district attorney General and past President of the Tennessee District Attorneys General. There was a big cookout in the courtyard, and a ribbon-cutting



*The final step in the process, of course, was the decorating.*



ceremony was conducted by the Chamber of Commerce. Estes invites anybody who wants to see the building to come in for a tour, but please call before dropping by.

Estes loves coming to work in his “new” building. Over his 35 years as an attorney, Estes has just about seen it all. “When I look back, all I can say is it’s all been very interesting,” he says. He had a very successful tenure as the district attorney, but now Estes has the ability to



pick and choose his clients. “It’s not all about the money,” said Estes. Today, Estes’ practice areas include business law, real estate law, and estate planning. Estes also speaks at seminars to teach people about the ins and outs of estate planning. The next seminar is on November 7 in Chattanooga, TN. You can register online at: [www.nbi-sems.com](http://www.nbi-sems.com) or call 800-930-6182. For more information on Jerry Estes Law Offices, PLLC, visit [www.jesteslaw.com](http://www.jesteslaw.com) or call 423-507-1157.