

Brinkley Female College (Ghost House)  
683 So. Fifth Street  
Memphis  
Shelby County  
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-189

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89-MEMPH  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C.

HABS  
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29-MEMPH  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BRINKLEY FEMALE COLLEGE  
(Ghost House)

HABS No. TN-189

Location: 683 S. Fifth Street, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee.

Latitude: 35° 07' 43"

Longitude: 90° 02' 58"

Present Use: The house was dismantled and moved July 1972. It will be reconstructed in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

Significance: This monumental Classical Revival mansion with its stately Ionic portico was built in the nineteenth century. It is most famous in Memphis because of a "Ghost Story" which dates to the 1870s when the house was occupied by a female college.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1856-59.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following chain of title may be established from the Register of Deeds of Shelby County.

1856 Deed June 4, 1856, recorded June 19, 1858 in  
Book 33 page 563 (5.81 acres - \$2900.00)  
Willoughby Williams  
to  
W. J. Davie

1860 Title Bond May 26, 1860, recorded April 22, 1865 in  
Book 53 Part 1 page 143 (to secure \$30,000.00)  
W. J. Davie  
to  
R. C. Brinkley

1866 Deed September 11, 1866, recorded October 13, 1866 in  
Book 57 Part 1 page 459  
W. J. Davie  
to  
R. C. Brinkley

1898 Deed November 16, 1898, recorded November 21, 1898 in  
Book 264 page 428  
Wm. J. Brinkley  
to  
Jennie Breen (widow of John)

- 19      Transfer (not located) between 1914-1920  
    Jennie Breen  
        to  
    Frederick W. Ries
- 1969 Deed October 31, 1969, recorded November 7, 1969 in  
    Book F2 Instrument 3579  
    Ruth Ries Billions and Margaret C. Ries  
        to  
    Wurzburg Brothers, Inc.

B. Historical Context: This house is important as the stage for the most sensational ghost story in Memphis history. The story, one of the most thoroughly reported of which the writer is aware, may be summarized as follows:

In 1870 the second owner of the house, Col. Robert C. Brinkley, established there the Brinkley Female College, under the supervision of the Rev. J. D. Meredith. On February 21, 1871, a pupil at the school who was practicing on the piano in the upstairs hall was startled by the appearance of an emaciated young girl in a moldy pink dress. The apparition disappeared without speaking. Two days later the same pupil, Clara Robertson, saw the same child in another upstairs room. This time there were two other girls and a teacher present before the spectre vanished; they saw nothing. Clara's reluctance to return to the school (where she was a day student) was overcome by her father, attorney J. R. Robertson, with the help of a medium who happened to be a client of his. This spiritualist, Mrs. Nourse, advised Clara to address the ghost if she saw it again, and to ask what it wanted. The opportunity came on the following day (again in the presence of witnesses, who saw nothing but heard mumbling). The ghost said that her name was Lizzie Davie; that her father had built the house, and that its present owner had no right to it. Unfortunately, the Davie family had all died and there was no one to inherit the property. However, a jar buried under a stump behind the house contained papers which would enable Clara to claim the property as her own; this would please little Lizzie and permit her to rest in peace. Some of this was not spoken at the time, but revealed by the ghost through the medium (Mrs. Nourse) at a semi-public seance at the Robertson home.

An increasingly bizarre sequence of events included the unearthing of the jar in the presence of some fifty spectators; an order by the ghost not to open the jar for sixty days; a plan to open it publicly on the stage of Greenlaw's Opera House; and, finally, the mugging of Mr. Robertson and theft of the jar from its hiding place under the seat of his outhouse. All of this was dutifully reported in the papers, and the people of Memphis were variously on edge or in stitches for weeks.

Some facts support almost every good ghost story. This house was built for Winston J. Davie between 1856 and 1859. His residence is shown in the 1859 City Directory as "Overton Tract," but it was in fact across Georgia Avenue from that tract (in which he never owned land). In 1860 he executed a title bond to R. C. Brinkley to secure the loan from Brinkley of 1200 shares of stock in the Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company, with a par value of \$30,000.00. Davie, then President of the Southern Bank of Tennessee, was to repay the par value in stock or cash at the end of four years. However, during the Civil War the bank failed; the railroad was operated by the military (both sides), making its stock temporarily worthless to Brinkley or to Davie. The mortgage was not foreclosed by Brinkley, but in 1866 Davie sold him the home "for the amount due Brinkley and the further sum of \$15,000.00." The disputed point, if the ghost knew something not recorded in the deeds, seems to be the "amount due Brinkley." Had Davie repaid the borrowed stock in the now thriving railroad? Existing records are silent. In any case, \$15,000.00 was not an inconsiderable sum. Brinkley's daughter bought Annesdale, a much more elegant home on fifteen acres, for only twice that amount in 1870.

One prediction of the ghost was that if Clara Robertson did not acquire the property (via the papers in the jar) it would never be worth anything to its owner. This mild curse seems to have been enforced. Brinkley Female College closed in 1872; its principal operated Meredith Female College for three years in another location. Brinkley and subsequent owners witnessed the overcrowding and commercialization of the neighborhood, and for forty years before it was dismantled in 1972 the building was a tenement house for as many as eight families at a time.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Information: The architectural description of this building was written down during the dismantling operation in 1972.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 40' from east (front) to west plus 11' for the front porch x 54' north to south. There are a series of smaller additions to the rear of the building. They do not interrupt the building's mass as seen from the front. There is a two-level, two-room addition with a one-level, one-room addition behind that.

The building is two stories high and is five bays wide beneath the Ionic hexa-prostyle portico. The major portion is a simple rectangular block.

2. Foundations: Brick.

3. Structural system, framing: The building is constructed of wood frame walls with 2" x 5" studs. There are 5" x 8" members flanking each side of the brick chimneys. The corners have some diagonal struts for bracing. The walls support 2" x 8" joists and 2" x 7" roof rafters.
4. Walls: The walls are covered on the exterior with horizontal wood siding having 4-1/2" to the weather. At the corners are molded pilasters with panel insets (both faces). The building is painted grey.
5. Porches: The entrance portico is the most notable feature of the house. It stands a full two stories tall, the columns uninterrupted in their full height of 23'-4". The columns have wood shafts (ca. 2'-4" diameter, with twenty-four flutes), 17" high cast-iron bases and 22" high cast-iron caps. The concrete slab of the portico is 21" above grade. There is a small balcony over the entrance doorway at the center of the portico. Members of this balcony are not of original construction.
6. Chimneys: There are four chimneys: two on the north and two on the south. They are located just within the frame exterior walls and were masked from the exterior by the wall siding. The simple chimneys are of brick.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: There is a 3'-6" x 8'-0" x 1 3/4" wood panel entrance door on the east (front) side. The door is flanked by sidelights and topped with a transom. The woodboard surround was topped with a low triangular pediment. The doorway composition measures 9'-2" wide x 13'-0" high. This composition was repeated on the west side but was later altered when the additions were built. A similar composition is found on the second floor.
  - b. Windows: The windows are double-hung and of wood. There are flat board surrounds, and the first floor east windows (under the portico) have low triangular pediments. First floor windows measure 3'-5" x 7'-9"; second floor windows measure 3'-5" x 6'-5".
8. Roof: The hip roof was covered with slate tile shingles. Later that surface was covered with green asphalt shingles. The cornice was an extension of the 2'-6" entablature over the portico. It was of wood and had two horizontal members to the architrave and a plain frieze topped with block dentils.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The two floor plans are identical. There is a central hall running through the building from east (front) to west. It is flanked by two rooms on each side. On the first floor there is a double parlor. Room additions had been made to the rear of the original building.
2. Stairways: The main stairway is located along the south wall of the entrance hall. There are twenty-five risers in a single straight run (risers = 7"; treads = 12"; width = 3'-5"). There was an open wood railing. The attic stairway was located directly over the main stairway, and was enclosed. It was 3'-0" wide, had seventeen risers of 8-1/2" and treads of 8-1/2".
3. Flooring: 4-1/2" pine boards are used.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Wood lath and plaster; the central hall has a vertical board wainscot 4'-3" high. Walls are 6" thick.  
  
Ceiling heights: First floor = 13'-6"; Second floor = 10'-0.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The interior doors on the first floor are 3'-4" x 10'-6" x 1 3/4" and have four panels. The doors have ten-board surrounds.
  - b. Windows: (Not recorded).
6. Hardware: Standard hardware.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is located on the west side of Fifth Street about 100 feet south of Georgia Avenue. The building's great Ionic portico faces east toward the railroad tracks on the other side of the street.

PART III. -- SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

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- "Ghost of 1871 May Vanish in Removal of Old Mansion," Memphis Commerical-Appeal (July 14, 1972).

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Talley, Robert. "Memphis' Creastest Ghost Story," Memphis Commercial-  
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..... "Ghost Story Stirs Memories; Many Visit Crim Old Mansion,"  
Memphis Commercial-Appeal (October 30, 1939).

..... "Two More Residents Recall 'Ghost' Scare," Memphis  
Commercial-Appeal (October 31, 1939).

..... "Yester Year in Memphis," Memphis Commercial-Appeal (April  
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Summer 1972

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#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1972 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the West Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was done by Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, and Richard H. Hulan, project historian (Nashville).

Susan McCown, HABS Architectural Historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in the Fall of 1985, for transmittal to the Library of Congress.