

Stewart Burden was brick mason and house mover

By Carroll McMahan



When Stewart H. Burden told hospital attendants his arms were broken “when a house ran over me,” he wasn’t kidding. According to an Associated Press report published in the [Knoxville Journal](#) on October 18, 1957, “Burden, a 69-year-old house mover, had a dwelling tied to a stump with a rope as it was moved along an incline. The house rope broke and the house slid over Burden.”

Stewart Burden was injured moving a house in Townsend, Tennessee. Burden was walking alongside the truck, checking things as his crew climbed with the house in tow.

When the rope broke, the house slipped and fell on Burden mashing him twelve inches into the soft dirt and resulting in hospitalization. After a short recuperation period, he returned to moving houses.

Stewart Henry Burden, Sr. was born in Sevierville on January 29, 1890 (his age was listed incorrectly in the 1957 AP article). Along with many of his uncles and cousins, he was taught the family trade of brick making and brick masonry by his maternal grandfather Isaac Dockery.

Burden also took a correspondence course in drafting after which he established a construction company partnership with his brother George, known as Burden Brothers.

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As a young man, Stewart Burden moved to Detroit, Michigan where he worked as a waiter at the Statler Hotel for a few years. Moving back to Tennessee, he used waiter skills he learned in Detroit at Tate Springs Hotel, a fashionable resort featuring mineral springs located at the foot of Clinch Mountain in Bean Station, Tennessee. While working there he met and married Lee Tate of Jefferson City, Tennessee.

He soon returned to Sevierville with his bride and built home on Burden Hill near his parents, John and Mollie Dockery Burden.

Stewart and Lee were parents of seven children: Celestine (Sims), Juanita (Chandler, Lundy), Stewart, Jr., Lois (Powell, Armstrong), Eugene and Martha(Bowden).

In 1918 Burden built his first kiln on J.I. Huskey's farm in the Allensville Community. The bricks were used for private residences. After he and his brother formed their construction company they were contracted to build the New Central Hotel in 1924 and an elementary school for the African-American children in Newport. Later they built the Park Theater on Court Avenue, Broady's Hospital on Bruce Street and Yarberry's Hospital on Cedar Street along with numerous other buildings.

Burden was extremely interested in the education of the black children in Sevier County. Before New Salem Church was built in 1886, school classes and church services were held in an old log structure on a cliff just above the home of Leeta Maples McMahan. Stewart Burden and most of his cousins attended this school in the New Salem Church building.

Many years later Burden Brothers Construction Company built a wooden schoolhouse for black students in McMahan Addition. However with no assistance from the county, the cost of paying teachers' salaries was more than they could afford.

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Fortunately, a grant provided by the Rosenwald Fellowship, an organization for issuing grants to further the education of African-Americans in the early part of the twentieth century enabled the black community to have a new brick school building.

Along with \$2,200 from the Sevier County government, \$800 from the local black community provided the required matching funds needed to build the new school named Pleasant View.

Along with others in the community Stewart and George Burden cut timber and laid bricks to keep the cost of the new school as low as possible.

In the 1950s, Burden extended his business ventures to include sash, door and cabinet work.

He also built a small grocery store on the corner of Newport Highway (Now East Gate Road) and Burden Hill Road. Carl Smith and his wife Ollie operated the store. After several years, Carl Smith added a single pump “filling station” and cut hair in the back of the store on weekends.

Sometime later Carl Smith expanded his business and built his own building across the street. Afterwards Burden operated the grocery store himself. The store suffered major damage on May 11, 1959 when a station wagon driven by Beulah Whaley of Oak Ridge hit the building.

Perhaps, Stewart Burden’s most lasting legacy is that of a house mover. With a motto “We move anything,” he was the first person called when anyone in Sevier County or surrounding counties needed something moved.

Although a complete list of buildings moved by Burden’s House Movers would number in the hundreds, a notable example includes moving the Bruce McMahan house from Bruce Street to Court Avenue. The house is still standing and today it is owned by the Temple family. It is the oldest dwelling house in Sevierville.

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He also moved the First Baptist Church parsonage across the street from its original location for John Temple. The house is still standing on Prince Street across from the Sevierville/Sevier County Fire Hall and it is the home of Mary Joyce Temple Hughes.

Burden moved numerous buildings for real estate developer J.B. Waters. When Waters purchased some of the Sevier County Poor Farm buildings, Burden divided them into four houses and moved them to McMahan Addition to be used as rental properties.

Dave and Mattie Householder's house had to be moved when the divided highway was built in Pigeon Forge. Burden and his crew placed the house on big timbers and then pulled it back on rollers with a big truck. Mrs. Householder, who would not stop her corn canning for the move, said she could not feel the house in motion as she went about her work.

A widower since 1954, Stewart Burden lived a long, full life. When he retired Stewart moved to Knoxville where he lived with one of his daughters until he was admitted to Fort Sanders-Sevier Nursing Home in 1987. Stewart Burden passed away on August 10, 1988 at age 98.

Today numerous examples of buildings built by Burden Brothers and houses moved by Stewart Burden can still be found in Sevierville and Sevier County.