Dr. Thomas Fearn: Pioneer Builder of Huntsville

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By LYNN MURRAY

In the lusty days at the turn of the century when the Tennessee Valley lay in peaceful tranquility, pioneers came from Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana to settle in the curved and rounded river valley. They were attracted by Hunt's Spring, named after John Hunt an early settler who built the first cabin there in 1805. The abundant supply of fresh clear water and the robust valley air made the location an ideal one for a township. When Madison County was carved out of the Mississippi Territory on December 13, 1808, the town which grew around the spring was chosen as the county seat and named Twickenham. However, the English connotation proved too great for the citizens who had fought in the Revolution and the name was changed to Huntsville.

Huntsville emerged almost overnight as the cultural and commercial center of what later became the new state of Alabama. After some controversy growing out of the Yazoo Fraud of the 1790's, land was auctioned off at a United States Land Sale in 1809. Shortly thereafter the land office for the lower Tennessee Valley was moved to Huntsville. The sales brought increasingly higher prices as wealthy young planters from throughout the South turned their attention to acquiring large land holdings in Madison.
County. Among the most brilliant and learned individuals who invested their lives and fortunes in the area was Dr. Thomas Fearn of Danville, Virginia.

There is surprisingly little written about Dr. Fearn or his family despite his significant contributions to the social and economic growth of the Tennessee Valley. A founder of Danville, his father, Thomas Sr., was a member of the Committee of Safety in 1775.¹ There are records of the senior Fearn's two daughters by his second wife, Lucy Coleman Allen. Leannah Fearn married Charles Payne on June 16, 1800.² Widow ed by him, she later married Samuel Patton on March 31, 1819.³ Thomas Sr.'s third wife, Mary, daughter of Dr. Robert Burton, gave him three sons: Thomas, Robert Lee, and George. After her husband's death, Mary Burton Fearn remarried and later moved to Huntsville, where she died Mary Dodson, March 2, 1848.⁴

Thomas Fearn was born November 15, 1789, on his father's plantation near Danville in Pittsylvania County, Virginia.⁵ After completing his early schooling in Danville, he attended Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, in 1806, and the Old Medical College at Philadelphia, graduating in 1810. He arrived in Huntsville the same year to practice medicine and found the thriving community in the midst of an economic boom.

Between 1810-1818 Dr. Fearn acquired a large amount of land in Madison County, some of it in the heart of the bustling city. Sometime prior to 1816 he purchased the lot on Franklin Street where he built his beautiful home.⁶ When General Andrew Jackson marched south through Huntsville in 1813 to meet the Creek Indians in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Dr. Fearn served as the surgeon of a battal-
ion and a regiment of Tennessee and Alabama troops. In recognition of his professional excellence, Jackson, in 1814, appointed Dr. Fearn "Surgeon's Mate" in charge of Huntsville's military hospital and "All the sick and wounded of the army." 7

By an act of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature, the first bank of Alabama was incorporated on December 11, 1816. Dr. Fearn was named one of the nine commissioners. Incorporated as "The President, Directors and Company of the Planters' and Merchants Bank, of Huntsville," 8 the bank was organized primarily to meet the rising demand for currency during the North Alabama economic boom. Stock was sold the first Monday in February, 1817, and the bank opened its doors for business on October 17, 1817, with a capital of $49,137.97. 9

The location of the land sales office in Huntsville was the key to the economic success of the energetic city. With LeRoy Pope as its president, the Planters and Merchants Bank soon procured through his friendship with Secretary of Treasury, William H. Crawford, the right of deposit for the funds received by the land office. This privileged position of the bank; the passage of the Usury Law by the first Alabama Legislature; and LeRoy Pope's appointment as Pension Agent for Alabama enabled the bank to engage in highly profitable speculation. But the bank's money-grabbing activities eventually proved its undoing, when William B. Long, the crusading editor of the Huntsville Democrat, launched a vigorous attack through his columns. 10

Dr. Fearn, however, had given up his directorship in 1818 to continue his medical studies in Europe at the Royal College of Surgeons in London and St. Thomas' in Paris. There he earned a reputation of excellence in his profession that followed him back
to Huntsville. One writer said of him:

Among the physicians and surgeons of the time, Dr. Thomas Fearn was by far the most celebrated--holding a high rank among the scientists of the South... On his return (from Europe) he took a high position among the physicians and surgeons of the day and was a valuable contributor to many of our medical journals.11

Dr. Fearn attained a high professional reputation among his colleagues for his research on the use of quinine, which he made from the bark of trees to treat typhoid fever. His findings were published in a medical journal and attracted the attention of prominent medical men, and marked the beginning of a revolution in the treatment of that dread disease.12 He was also a member of the Board of State Medical Examiners from 1823 to 1829. During his years of practice, he was offered the chair of surgery at Transylvania University, Center College of Kentucky, Louisville School of Medicine, and the Cincinnati University. Honorary degrees were conferred on him from Rutgers College in April, 1827, and Transylvania in March, 1827.13

Dr. Fearn's medical reputation is further enhanced by the story that was passed down by his children about the naming of Monte Sano. According to their account, he had been treating a child for a disease similar to colitis for some time with no visible improvement, so he built a cabin on the mountain and moved the child there. When the child recovered a few weeks later, Dr. Fearn christened the place Monte Sano, which means mountain of health. One writer has stated:

This is possibly true for Dr. Fearn was a physician who did not adhere to the beaten path of his prede-
cessors in this profession. When he failed to find a successful cure, he invented one of his own, just as in the case of his discovery of the nature of quinine. He was well educated, and he likely enough thought of the combination of words by which the mountain has been known for more than a century.14

Dr. Fearn and his brother George were among the early developers of Viduta, a village on Monte Sano which was incorporated in 1833. It was their intention to develop the mountain into a health resort. Although the dream was not realized in their lifetimes, many of Huntsville's wealthier citizens built summer residences upon the mountain.

With his beautiful Franklin Street home completed, Dr. Fearn began to court Sallie Bledsoe Shelby, the tenth child of David and Sarah Bledsoe of Sumner County, Tennessee. They were married on February 26, 1822 and had seven daughters. Mrs. Fearn was a prominent member of the First Presbyterian Church, and her daughters sang in the choir.

Business enterprises with cotton proved successful ventures for Dr. Fearn. By 1820, he and his brother, Robert Lee, had established themselves as successful cotton merchants in the Tennessee Valley. Cotton in those days was marketed by shipping the bales in flatboats over Muscle Shoals down to New Orleans when the Tennessee River was at high water. Ten miles south of Huntsville at Ditto's Landing, or Whitesburg as it came to be called, the cotton was loaded onto wagons and left there to await the next shipment. This strategic location caused Dr. Fearn and several other prominent Huntsvillians to envision building their own city on the river and connecting it with Huntsville by means of a canal. The idea was to deepen the waters of Big Spring Creek and run the canal into Price's Fork of Indian Creek, meeting the
Tennessee River at the bluff city of Triana. 15

On March 11, 1820, the following notice was published in a local paper:

Notice is hereby given that the erection and completion of a two story frame building, thirty-two feet by twenty or of a building or buildings equivalent in value thereto, by the 1st of January 1821, upon any lot in the town of Triana, will entitle the proprietor of said lot to an indulgence of two years from said time upon the original cost of the lot upon which said building shall be erected. 16

The notice precipitated a rush for prime locations on the newly laid city streets. On December 21, 1820, the Indian Creek Navigation Company was formally chartered by the Alabama Legislature, with LeRoy Pope, Thomas Fearn, Stephen S. Ewing, Henry Cook, and Samuel Hazard as commissioners. Stock was advertised for sale on March 30, 1821, at fifty dollars per share to establish a capital of $2000. The directors were elected on April 16, 1821, with Dr. Fearn being selected as president of the group.

The flurry of excitement surrounding the construction of the canal became somewhat muted a year later when Dr. Fearn, as president, advertised for bids on the unfinished half. 17 The construction of the canal had turned out to be much more complicated and expensive than anticipated, and most of the Indian Creek Navigation Company's early promoters gradually withdrew their support. It was only through the preserverance of Dr. Fearn, who may have spent about $10,000 of his own money, and his brother, George, that the canal was ever completed.

On January 26, 1827, the Southern Advocate advertised that though the canal was not completed the Indian Creek Navigation Company was prepared
to ship cotton to the Tennessee River.\textsuperscript{18} Four years later the canal was finally completed. It was the first canal to be built in Alabama, and on Tuesday, April 5, 1831, Huntsville staged a celebration in its honor. The canal, known by this time as "Fearn's Canal," could accommodate boats loaded with eighty to 100 bales of cotton and fifty passengers.\textsuperscript{19}

Before the opening celebration, however, a new scheme was already being hatched in the eager minds of the canal's promoters to do something to make the Tennessee River itself more navigable. Plans were well under way by 1826 when the state legislature enacted a bill to appoint a canal commission to improve the navigation of the Tennessee River. The commissioners elected by the legislature were Clement C. Clay, Thomas Fearn, Nicholas Davis, and James Jackson of Alabama. Benjamin Reynolds and William Moore represented Tennessee.

The six commissioners ran an article in the January 5, 1827, issue of the \textit{Southern Advocate} discussing the merits of building a canal system into the Tennessee River, comparing the proposed system with the Middlesex (Boston), Erie, and Union (Pennsylvania) canals. They estimated that the "whole cost of improving the Tennessee River for small steamboats of four inch draught to Knoxville" would be about $487,760. Arguing that the "savings in the ascending freight alone would be five hundred and ten thousand dollars annually," the commissioners asked for public and governmental support of its proposals.\textsuperscript{20}

Unfortunately, improvements in the Tennessee River were not destined to be made for another 100 years, and then, interestingly enough, not by the state but the federal government. Nevertheless, the Indian Creek Navigation Company by 1835 had made
tentative plans to enlarge Fearn's canal to make the stream navigable for large boats at a cost of $150,000.

One year earlier, however, the completion of the Decatur-Tuscumbia Railroad sounded the whistle that marked the end of America's canal era in the lower Tennessee Valley. The Indian Creek Canal had fared rather well, clearing $4,675.08 on toll alone between January 16, 1832 and February 25, 1835. The canal continued to operate for about ten more years, but by the time the first railroad was built in Madison County in 1851 it was gone and the dream city of Triana lay desolate on the bluff.

Dr. Fearn was not only the builder of Alabama's first, and the nation's second city water works. The land near Big Spring was purchased at the 1809 land sales by LeRoy Pope for ten dollars an acre, John Hunt having lost title to the land. Hunter Peel, a skilled engineer who had emigrated to Huntsville from England, acquired rights to the property in 1823 and undertook to supply the town with water from the large spring by hydraulic machinery near the present First National Bank.

A number of damaging fires in 1829 triggered a public controversy over the apparent mismanagement of the water works. Peel and Thomas Barclay designed and installed a new system with an engine house, water turbine, pump, and dam. The Southern Advocate urged the town to build a water reservoir to complete the system; shortly thereafter one was duly constructed on Pope's Hill.

George and Thomas Fearn purchased the water works on June 15, 1835, for $2,530.30. On December 3, 1836, they made an agreement with the city of Huntsville to construct pumps to lead to the courthouse to extinguish fires. Completion was to be
within five years. To do this, the brothers erected a large cistern in the rear of the Huntsville Branch of the State Bank of Alabama, which was under construction on the cliff overlooking the spring. In 1841, Dr. Fearn, having become the sole owner of the water works, became involved in a controversy with the bank about his right to build the cistern. Fortunately, the bank's $10,000 suit for damages was thrown out by the chancery court on December 13, 1841, and the Fearns contract with the city was honored.

Fearn's water works, thereafter smoothly and efficiently run, were a source of pride to the city as evidenced by the following glowing description:

The water works of Huntsville have ever been a marked feature. Water is forced up an elevation of ninety-six feet into a reservoir (sic) on a hill in the edge of the city, whence it is distributed over town through the principal streets in five inch cast pipes. The power used at the spring is a turbine wheel and a nine inch pump. The water facilities of the city give to every family the opportunity of running a waterpipe into their yard, thus giving an inexhaustable supply of pure and fresh water at all times. There are water plugs established at convenient distances all over the city, used in case of fire. 22

The rates of water rents, as recorded in Dr. Fearn's 1834-7 account book, were not exorbitant, but enough to make his investment of over $4,000 worthwhile. Families of five persons and under were charged fifteen dollars per annum; families of six, sixteen dollars per annum; families of seven, seventeen dollars per annum, etc. The local tavern was assessed forty dollars plus three percent of rent or annual value. A confectionary where liquor was sold paid twenty dollars, but only fifteen dollars was
assessed against a confectionary where no liquor was sold. 23

Dr. Fearn's third important business enterprise (he had by 1837 given up the regular practice of medicine) was the Fearn, Donegan and Company. They advertised themselves as a general commission, receiving and forwarding merchants with offices on 17 Caronadet Street in New Orleans, and between Whitesburg Pike and Franklin Street in Huntsville. 24 Other important positions of community trust which he held included that of director of the Northern Bank of Alabama, Huntsville Hotel Company, and Madison Turnpike Company; and president of the Board of Trustees of Huntsville Female Seminary and the North Alabama College for men.

Even though he was involved in many commercial aspects of Huntsville's early growth, Dr. Fearn still found time to devote to public service. He was a Madison County representative to the state legislature; trustee of the University of Alabama; presidential elector; and member of various state and national commissions, including the October 23, 1849, convention, representing fifteen states which met in Memphis to promote a railroad to the Pacific. At this convention, through the efforts of Clement C. Clay and Fearn, a number of the representatives of the southern states voted to meet in Huntsville the following November 26, to promote a railroad which would connect Memphis, Tuscumbia, and Huntsville with Rome, Georgia. 25

Locally, Dr. Fearn was one of the early supporters of the First Presbyterian Church which was established on October 13, 1822. A leader in Huntsville's brief abolitionist movement, he served as one of the vice presidents of the Huntsville Auxiliary of the American Colonization Society that met at the
Presbyterian Church in 1832. Dr. Fearn was also a member of the committee to draw up rules for the Committee of Vigilance in Madison County.

Perhaps it was because of his feelings about slavery that Dr. Fearn did not favor secession in 1861. However, when the Alabama's Secession Convention elected nine deputies to the proposed convention of seceding states to be held in Montgomery on February 4, Dr. Fearn was one of those named. The esteem in which he was held by his constituents was further indicated by his election to the First Confederate Congress. He held this position for about a month, resigning on March 15, probably because of ill health.

There is little else known of Dr. Fearn's activities during the Civil War period, though it was reported that he was among those who refused to sign Federal General Ormsby Mitchel's allegiance document during the first occupation of Huntsville in May, 1862.27

On January 19, 1863, Miss Sarah Lowe noted in her diary that Dr. Fearn had died in his home on January 16. "I was very distressed to learn of the death of Dr. Fearn," she wrote, "but he has suffered so much that I believe that his death is for the best. With the afflicted family I sympathise greatly."28

The petition to probate Dr. Fearn's will was made on January 17 and was filed one month later on February 17. Interestingly, his obituary did not appear in the Democrat until the April 2, 1863 issue. Dr. Fearn was laid quietly to rest in Maple Hill Cemetery beside his wife, who had died twenty-one years before him on May 2, 1842. He left his children, the beautiful brick home, deeds to property scattered all over Madison County, and the memory...
of a cultured and brilliant father whose dreams for Huntsville stretched beyond every new horizon.

1Frederick A. Virkus, editor, The Abridged Compendium of American Genealogy (Chicago, 1925), 548. Thomas Fearn, Sr., lived from 1745 to 1805.

2Catherine L. Knorr, Marriage Bonds and Minister’s Returns of Pittsylvania County (Pine Bluff, Arkansas 1956), 64.

3Kathleen B. Williams, Marriages of Pittsylvania County, 1806-1830 (1965), 120.

4Kathleen Paul Jones and Pauline Jones Gandrud compilers, Alabama Records, Madison County, Vol. CXXXIV (June, 1952), 49. Mrs. Dodson was buried in Maple Hill Cemetery.

5Thomas McAdory Owen, History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography, Vol. III (Chicago, 1921), 567. Dr. Fearn was the great-great-grandson of Richard Lee, the emigrant of Westmoreland County, Virginia, Secretary of the Colony of Virginia, first attorney general of Virginia, and the ancestor of Henry Lee, Lighthouse Harry Lee, and of Robert E. Lee.

6Victor B. Haagen, The Pictorial History of Huntsville (Meriden, Connecticut, 1963), 113. The house was not completed until the 1820’s.

7Owen, op. cit., III, 567.

8E. M. Betts, Early History of Huntsville, Alabama (Montgomery, 1916), 32. The other commissioners were LeRoy Pope, John P. Hickman, David Moore, Benjamin Cox, John M. Taylor, Jesse Search, Clement C. Clay, and John W. Walker.


12 Ibid.


15 Betts, *op. cit.*, 66. Triana was incorporated on November 13, 1819.

16 *Alabama Republican*, March 11, 1830, 1.

17 *Alabama Republican*, April 26, 1822, 3.

18 Page 4.

19 Betts, *op. cit.*, 68.

20 *Southern Advocate*, January 5, 1827, 2.

21 "Thomas Fearn Water Works Account Book." Mss. in Huntsville Public Library.

22 *Williams' Huntsville Directory, City Guide and Business Mirror* (Huntsville, 1859), 18.

23 "Thomas Fearn Water Works Account Book." Other assessments included the following: private bath house, $2.50; each horse or cow, $1.00; lawyer's office or doctor's shop, $5.00; blacksmith's shop, $10.00; apothecary's shop, $20.00; and printing office, $20.00.

24 *Huntsville Democrat*, October 22, 1842.

26. David L. Darden, "The Alabama Secession Convention," Alabama Historical Quarterly, Vol. III (Fall and Winter, 1941), 327. David P. Lewis of Lawrence County and Richard W. Walker of Lauderdale County were the other North Alabamians included in the group. Both were anti-secessionists.


28. Sarah Lowe's Diary. Typed Mss. in Huntsville Public Library.