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DATING THE BIBB HOUSE:

Lore, Theory, and Fact

by Eleanor Newman Hutchens

(EDITOR'S NOTE: AN ARTICLE BY CLAY LANCASTER, PUBLISHED IN A 1968 ISSUE OF **ALABAMA ARCHITECT**, CONTAINED SOME ERRONEOUS INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOVERNOR THOMAS BIBB HOUSE IN HUNTSVILLE. DR. ELEANOR NEWMAN HUTCHENS IS NOW ABLE TO SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT WITH NEWLY FOUND DOCUMENTATION WHICH DISPROVES SEVERAL OF MR. LANCASTER'S THEORIES ABOUT THE HOUSE.)

It would seem easy to date a large old house in a town that had always valued its old houses. It would seem even easier to identify the owner who had built such a house, in a town where descendants of all its owners had continued to live right down to the present. Family and community lore should transmit the essential facts, even without hard documentary evidence.

But family and other local lore can fall into error and also, unfortunately, into print. Once in print, it can be picked up and reprinted, with the result that it seems to be supported by a variety of sources.

Worse still, an occasional stranger to the town publishes uninformed speculations to support some preconception of his own. Though the guesses of such a visiting expert can sometimes be refuted by solid sources he has not bothered to consult, the correction never quite catches up with the bad guess, which may appear in a regional or national publication and remain a reference source for decades, taking precedence over accurate accounts in local journals by dint of its wider circulation and supposedly greater authority.

The Thomas Bibb House on Williams Avenue in Huntsville has undergone all these kinds

of erroneous commentary since the dying-out of the early Huntsvillians who knew its origin at first hand. Although I have never doubted the essential family report that Bibb built the house and that it was finished in the 1830's, I have not had irrefutable evidence until a very able researcher, Mr. William Stubno, recently looked for it at my request and found it.

Family lore, as recited to us by our grandmother Ellen White Newman, was clear and rather colorful. I assume she had it from her great-grandmother Adeline Bibb Bradley, who was Thomas Bibb's daughter and who lived until Ellen was a precocious six, or from Susan Bradley White, Adeline's daughter and Ellen's grandmother, who lived until Ellen was in her twenties. When Ellen was growing up the three of them lived close together, at the eastern foot of McClung Hill and at the top of White Street. The story went as follows:

After building his plantation house, Belle Mina, for himself, Thomas Bibb built the house in Huntsville for his daughter Adeline. It took nine years to build, but the family lived in it before it was finished. Its brick were made by slaves on the place. Adeline's daughter Susan was married in it in 1840, the most memorable feature of the wedding reception being the crashing collapse of a large table laden with refreshments. Susan and her husband, Thomas White, lived in

the house with her parents for several years and the first few of their twelve children were born in it. Then James Bradley, Adeline's husband, lost his money and decided to sell the house - his wife having no say in the matter under the laws of the time. Without telling her, he empowered a lawyer relative to dispose of it. When he confided the bad news to his son-in-law, rich young Thomas White replied that he himself would buy the house and that the Bradleys and Whites could go on living in it as before. Bradley accepted this proposal but left on a business trip to New Orleans the next day without notifying the lawyer of the change in plans. On his return, the lawyer reported that he had sold the house to the Beirnes. Bradley tried to undo the sale, but he had given the lawyer full authority to sell and the matter was closed. Now, Bradley still had not told any of this to his wife, Adeline Bibb Bradley, whose father had built the house for her. One day she beheld, through a window, a servant of the Beirnes setting out plants in her yard. On sending a servant of her own to inquire into this odd behavior, she received the news that her husband had given the Beirnes permission to transplant some of their flora at that time because by the date they themselves were to move into the house the

best season for transplanting would be past. Thus did Adeline learn that her house was lost.

The latter part of this tale is too dramatic to be lightly discarded, and nothing in the records found by Mr. Stubno militates against it; so let us allow it possible truth. The earlier parts, however, must be corrected.

Thomas Bibb built the house not for his daughter but for himself, on the lot where he had lived since 1821 since he was governor of Alabama. He had already given Adeline a house on the northeast corner of Franklin and Williams streets - deeding it to her husband. Bibb was developing his Belle Mina (then spelled Belmina) plantation in Limestone County, where he built another large house.

In the mid-1830's, Bibb

evidently decided to move to Louisiana, where he owned cotton and sugar plantations and New Orleans property.¹ In 1835, he advertised Belmina for sale, referring prospective buyers to his sons-in-law James Bradley and J. J. Pleasants.² In March 1836, he advertised his "new splendid family residence on Williams Street," "nearly finished," again naming Bradley and Pleasants as his representatives.³ In September 1836, James Bradley bought the Williams Street property for \$5,000,⁴ a price that reflects either family generosity or a drastic fall in Huntsville real estate values, or both.

James Bradley and J. J. Pleasants were commission merchants, partners in the firm of Martin Pleasants & Company, which owned large tracts of land in several states as well as some improved town property here and there. The panic of 1837, a

¹Thomas Bibb's will, dated 14 February 1839, identifies him as a resident of La Fourche Parish, La., though ill health may have already changed his plans. In the will, he speaks of himself as dying; he leaves Belmina to his widow for her lifetime and then to their eldest son; and the codicils, dated 16 April and 19 August, were witnessed by Huntsville men. (Will Book No. 5, pp. 439-443, Limestone County, Ala.) He died in September 1839.

²William Stubno, Jr., **A Report Concerning the Construction Date of the Governor Thomas Bibb Mansion, Located in the Twickenham Historic District, Huntsville, 1982**, unpub. Mr. Stubno cites an advertisement dated 15 November 1835 in **The Southern Advocate** (Huntsville, Ala.) giving a detailed account of Belmina and stating that it had been "erected within the last seven years." The notice is signed "Thomas Bibb, La Fourche, La."

³**The Southern Advocate**, 1 March 1836, p. 4 (cited by Stubno).

⁴Deed Book R, pp. 621-622, Madison County Probate Office, Huntsville.

national economic disaster, gradually ruined this prosperous cotton- and land-dealing firm. Presumably, the company had bought cotton at high prices just before the bottom fell out of the market. Such buying was done on credit. If the cotton could not be sold for enough money to repay the debt; and if land values slumped badly, as they did; and if time failed to bring a rise in prices before the hard-pressed banks had to call in their loans, as they did, insolvency set in.

Until his death in 1839, Thomas Bibb apparently kept the firm afloat by endorsing its notes in amounts totaling about \$600,000.⁵ His heirs - his widow, four sons, and two other sons-in-law as well as James Bradley and J.J. Pleasants - were faced with this debt. His will, written shortly before his death, left Bradley and Pleasants much smaller bequests than the others but directed that his estate not press them for payment of their debts to him as long as the notes could be extended and the interest was paid.⁶

By 1842, it was clear that Martin Pleasants & Co. could not recover. Bibb's other heirs had to assume the

debts for which he had made himself liable. In the process, they took over what seems to have been all the assets both of the firm and of its individual partners. The residences of Bradley and Pleasants thus passed into their hands. Adeline did sign, in 1842, the deed by which she and her husband sold them the Williams Street and the Franklin Street houses and other property for \$20,000.⁷ Since the transaction was all in the family and she continued to live in the Williams Street house, she may have thought of the sale as a legal fiction to save it from the general destruction of Martin Pleasants & Co.

The very serious task of the other heirs, however, was to liquidate all they could in order to pay the debts. Their own separate inheritances from Bibb did not escape; one record indicates that they jointly sold the Louisiana plantations that had been bequeathed individually.⁸

On paper, Martin Pleasants & Co. was solvent. According to the legal agreement of 1842, the firm had accounts receivable of more than \$680,000 and owned more than 30,000 acres of land,

⁵Deed Book T, pp. 333-355, Madison County Probate Office. This long document, discovered by Mr. Stubno, itemizes the assets and liabilities taken over from Martin Pleasants & Co. by the Bibb heirs other than James Bradley and J.J. Pleasants.

⁶Last Will and Testament of Thomas Bibb, cited above.

⁷Deed Book T, p. 333, Madison County Probate Office.

⁸16 La. Ann., 275-280, Charles M. Gillis & Co. v. Nelson & Donalson.



Belle Mina, with its six Doric columns, fanlight, and hipped roof, presents a different appearance from the Huntsville Bibb House. (Photograph from *Ante-Bellum Mansions of Alabama* by Ralph Hammond; photographs by the Author. Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc. New York, 1951.)

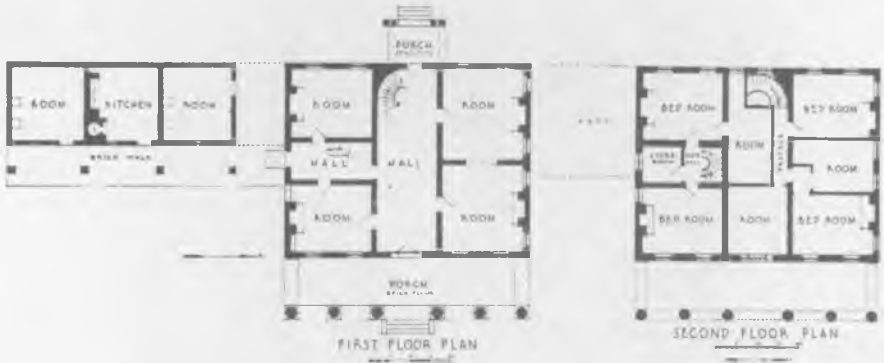
about 150 slaves, some 20 city and town lots, and stock in various companies. Against these assets were debts of about \$655,000. The fatal catch was that the debts were owed to banks, while the receivables were owed by individuals and firms, many of which were fellow victims of the panic and therefore unable to pay. Therefore, the assets turned over to the other Bibb heirs, including all interest Bradley and Pleasants might have in Thomas Bibb's estate, must have fallen far short of the liabilities that came with them. The sale of the Williams Street house in 1844 to Andrew Beirne of Virginia,⁹ whose son George and his descendants were to occupy it until 1920, must have been

absolutely necessary after the longest possible delay.

The family tale of How the House Got Away, then, was a simplified version of a major financial catastrophe that caused pain far beyond the Bradley-White household; but it is correct on the main points that Thomas Bibb built the house and that his son-in-law lost it.

Among divers items of local lore that have achieved print and been thoughtlessly repeated is the story that the Huntsville house was the twin of Belle Mina except for a few improvements. A glance at photographs of the two houses shows that they are not twins, and I know of no respect in which the second

⁹Deed Book V, p. 28, Madison County Probate Office. The house came back to Bibb's descendants when Ellen White Newman and her daughter Susie Newman Hutchens bought it in 1927.



Belle Mina. Plans by Edwin B. Lancaster, A.I.A., from *Ante-Bellum Mansions of Alabama*.

is an improvement on the beautiful plantation house.

They might have looked like twins when the outer walls were a few feet out of the ground: in each, the main block measures about 45 by 65 feet, and the solid brick construction is about 18 inches thick. But Belle Mina has a hipped roof, six Doric columns, and a fanlight over the door, giving quite a different impression from the pediment, the four Ionic columns, and the oblong light over the door of the Huntsville house.

Inside, the central hall of Belle Mina runs the full depth of the house, with a spiral staircase at the rear; in the Huntsville house, the front hall is divided from the back and an angled staircase follows three sides of the back hall. The main downstairs rooms are of about the same large Greek Revival size in the two houses, but Belle Mina conveniently has more upstairs rooms. While both interiors represent transitions from the Federal

The central hall of the Huntsville house is divided into front and back halls.





Belle Mina's long central hall with spiral staircase.



Angular staircase in the back hall of the Huntsville house.





Belle Mina's twin parlors have intricately detailed wooden Federal mantels.

to the Greek Revival style, the Huntsville house, as the slightly later one, is almost entirely Greek Revival with only a few Federal vestiges.¹⁰

The pronouncements of the outside expert who dates houses according to his idea of when they should have been built would be a source of innocent merriment if they

did not become sources for future innocent researchers. It is now in print that the Huntsville house was possibly built by the Beirnes, because (theoretically) the knowledge and taste for Greek Revival residences had not reached North Alabama at the time Bibb owned the property.¹¹ The same authority finds it "fairly certain" that the columns of Belle Mina were a

¹⁰Harvie Jones, the very knowledgeable Huntsville architect who has examined the Huntsville house from attic to basement, judges that "the decision to use the modern Greek Revival style was made before the house was out of the ground." (Letter to me, 29 November 1979). Even before Mr. Stubno's discoveries, Mr. Jones marshaled arguments against Clay Lancaster's suggestion that the house was an 1840's renovation of a Federal one, or was originally built in the 1840's.

¹¹Clay Lancaster, "Greek Revival Architecture in Alabama," *Alabama Architect* IV, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1968). Although determined to date other Greek Revival architecture late, Lancaster is strangely mild in suggesting a date later than 1815 for the portico of the Leroy Pope house. He attributes the design of that house to George Steele, who was 16 years old and had not yet come to Huntsville at the time it was built. There is some indication that Steele did design the portico in the 1840's. Lancaster chooses to call the Bibb house "the Bradley-Beirne house" in support of his thesis.

Huntsville house library. This mid-19th century marble mantel replaced the original wooden one; the Federal overmantel-mirror has classic Adamesque details.



later addition. But Bibb's 1835 advertisement mentions the colonnade running across the full front of Belle Mina, and the early 1836 one shows that he had almost finished his Huntsville house by that time. Even without this hard evidence, one might reason that the Beirnes, whose descendants live in Huntsville to this day, would long since have corrected the Bibb attribution if it had been false.

As for knowledge and taste in early Huntsville,

which the same writer assumes must have been formed in inland Georgia because the founders of Huntsville had come from there, the fact is that the founders were born in Thomas Jefferson's Virginia and the older ones had grown up there. They had helped to found Petersburg, Georgia (named for Petersburg, Virginia), had lived there for fifteen or twenty years until the growing and shipping of tobacco ceased to be profitable there, and had come from that town of wealth and political power¹² to

¹²Ellis Merton Coulter, *Old Petersburg and the Broad River Valley of Georgia*, U. of Ga. Press, Athens, 1965, p. 9. This book is essential to a study of early Huntsville. It is clear that the U.S. Senators and Representatives among the remarkable group of Virginians who built Petersburg and then Huntsville must have seen the new architecture of Washington, D.C., and Tidewater Virginia as it emerged. They were never isolated in the wilderness; no reason exists, therefore, to assume the time lag that Lancaster and some others assert without a search for such documentary evidence as may exist relative to individual houses.

found another in the Tennessee Valley.

Among them was Robert Thompson, Bibb's father-in-law, the fourth of a line of planter-merchants dating from 17th-century Virginia.¹³ The Bibbs had been Virginia landowners for four generations, too;¹⁴ and Bibb's mother's first American ancestor had come to Jamestown in 1621 as the brother and chaplain of the governor, Sir Francis Wyatt.¹⁵ The founders of Huntsville were thorough Virginians, participants in the classical spirit that produced neoclassical architecture in 18th-century Virginia.¹⁶

Moreover, they were not out of touch with current developments in architecture. Three early Huntsville physicians,¹⁷ as well as Thomas Bibb's brother, had attended medical school in Philadelphia during or shortly after the construction there of

Benjamin Latrobe's 1798 bank building which introduced major Greek Revival architecture in America. The charming letters of 13-year-old Maria Jane Walker, daughter of U.S. Senator John Williams Walker of Huntsville, note the "fine buildings" of Boston, the "handsome houses" of New Haven, and various other cultural attractions of the East. She was at school in Philadelphia in the 1820's.¹⁸

Her cousin John J. Coleman, studying law in Connecticut later in the same decade, writes home to Huntsville with equal sprightliness. Stopping in New York on his way south, he observes the New-Bowery Theatre, recently built: "The front is very imposing and Cousin Mary will have an idea of its appearance when I say that it resembles ... the front of the Bank of the U.S. on Chestnut Street, Philad" (not Latrobe's, but this remark again shows the alert inter-

¹³James Edmonds Saunders, *Early Settlers of Alabama*, orig. pub. 1899, rep. Genealogical Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1969, pp. 474-476.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 433-436.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 434, and Leonardo Andrea, "The Wyatt Family," *The Easley (S.C.) Progress*, 10 Sept. 1942.

¹⁶Joseph G. Baldwin, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*, orig. pub. 1853, rep. Sagamore Press, New York, 1957. The chapter "How the Times Served the Virginians" is a valuable contemporary account of the transplanted Virginian: his habit of carrying Virginia wherever he went, his charm and high spirits, and his vulnerability to the kind of fate that overtook James Bradley in the general collapse of 1837.

¹⁷David Moore, Thomas Fearn, and Henry Chambers.

¹⁸Copies of these letters and John J. Coleman's were kindly lent to the author by Dr. Frances Roberts.

est of young early Huntsvillians in architectural design).

Nor were their elders, once settled in Huntsville, confined to village life. Young Coleman as he passed through New Haven (for commencement at Yale), New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore in September 1828 met an astonishing number of Huntsvillians in those cities - including James Bradley, who offered him a leisurely ride home to Huntsville from Baltimore in his gig, with extra horses and a servant.

The architectural historian William Pierson laughs at the "myth" of the Alabama planter as leading a life "sustained by a firm belief in a long-standing culture, and born easily amid the graces of a hospitable and genteel social behavior."¹⁹ This so-called aristocrat, he says, was really the very frontiersman who a quarter of a century earlier had moved into the wilderness with gun in hand and helped to shape a typical frontier society, rough and ruthless. Pierson

attributes the Classical Revival in the Deep South to the sudden wealth and what he imagines to have been the consequent assumed aristocratic postures of this class. A study of the individuals who actually built the earliest Greek Revival houses in the South might have taught him otherwise. These planters were heirs to a long-standing polite culture, and it was out of no affected gentility that they carried it on and gave it new expression in houses that were among the first Greek Revival residences in America.

Mr. Stubno's discoveries - the two advertisements and the legal records on Martin Pleasants - have sifted family and other local lore and have sharply corrected the speculations of the architectural historian. The hard evidence has lain in old public documents all the time. This example must be an inspiration to the conscientious researcher and a warning to everybody who is tempted to print mere surmise as authoritative judgment.



¹⁹William H. Pierson, Jr., *American Buildings and their Architects*, 1970, p. 453.



Architectural Features

The large windows are Greek Revival in size of frames and panes (larger than Federal), but with Federal muntins (wooden strips dividing panes). In noting the latter, Harvie Jones speculated that carpentry tools used for Federal houses dictated the older style shaping. Upstairs windows start at the baseboards - probably a hot-weather defense.

The diamond-shaped windows at the gable ends of the attic are another practical thermal feature, providing cross-ventilation in summer and heat conservation in winter. An architectural student who recently visited the house said he knew of no others like them. The owner would like information about any that may exist. The diamond shape, as opposed to the usual circle, oval, or fan, preserves the severe

angles of the front and side pediments.

The columns in front are of brick with stucco finish; column bases are the same. The Ionic capitals are of stone. The entablature is wood. Pilasters are brick with wood caps and bases. (Historic American Buildings Survey.)



Stone is used for the window sills and lintels, the watertable, and under the watertable on the front of the house, while brick is used under the watertable on the sides and back. (H.A.B.S.)

Chimneys are brick with stone caps and are flush with the outside face of the wall. The roof was originally covered with wood shingles. (H.A.B.S.)

The door between the front and back halls is, again, a summer-winter convenience: closed, it stops drafts between the front and rear entrances to the house, whereas when open, it permits air to flow from front to back in summer. Throughout the house, the doorway design is Greek Revival in the living quarters, Federal in the attic and basement, the latter doors and frames perhaps saved from the older house.



The oblong lights over the front door are Greek Revival, in contrast to the Federal fanlight over the front door of Bibb's Belmina house.

Doorway between the front and back halls. Door at left goes to a narrow closet set within the wall. The two-panel doors and bullseye-corner-blocks of the frame are typically Greek Revival.





Doorway between drawing room and dining room. The vertical wooden panel at left is actually a part of the folding doors. When open, they are recessed in the doorframe of the 35-inch-wide wall.



The folding doors between front hall and library, front hall and drawing room, and drawing room and dining room are eminently practical for winter cold and summer heat. Open, they allow free circulation of air in summer; closed, they shut in the fireplace warmth of each room.

The marble mantels in the drawing room and library were installed by the Beirnes in the mid-19th century, presumably replacing Greek Revival wooden ones.



Ornately carved marble mantel in drawing room.



Drawing room mantel detail.

Detail of marble mantel in library. (See page 11.)



The kitchen wing (see H.A.B.S. drawings, plan of first floor) was formerly separated from the main building by an open covered passage and a short flight of steps. The kitchen was raised a few feet and the passage enclosed in the early 20th century. Behind the kitchen are former servants' quarters, the two stories now used as a garage and storage rooms.

The southeast wing formerly extended about twenty feet farther from the wall of the main building. This wing, while having the same trim and details and similar brick as the main house, was

not built at the same time as the rest of the house but soon after, possibly during the nine years in which the house was under construction.(H.A.B.S.) Most of this addition was removed in the 1890's.

The attic conceals an unusual feature of the house - the Town lattice truss, which may be the only residential one in existence. This building feature was designed for bridges about 1820 by the architect Ithiel Town. An article has been published on the Town lattice truss by Huntsville architect Harvie Jones.



This black marble mantel in the dining room **may have been in the house originally.** Its design is Greek Revival and matches the corner pilasters of the house.



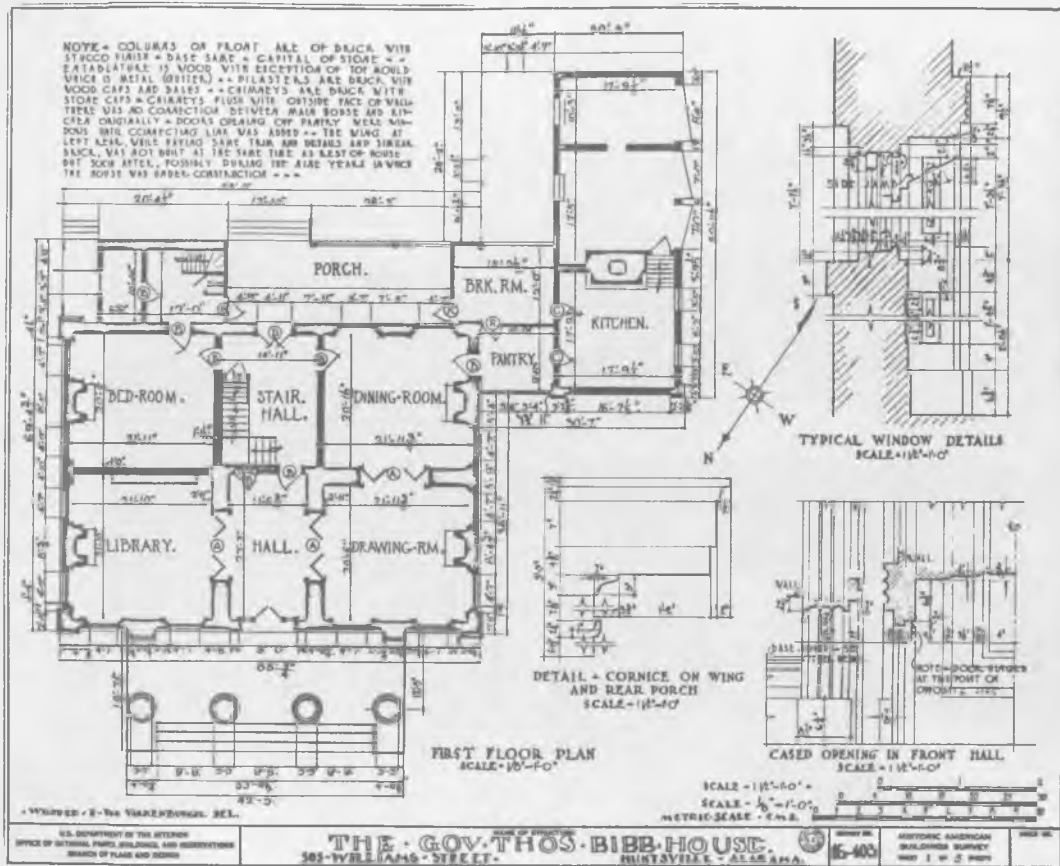
This Greek Revival wooden mantel in the southeast downstairs bedroom is probably original to the house. Another, upstairs, may have been moved from the library or the drawing room when the marble ones were installed.

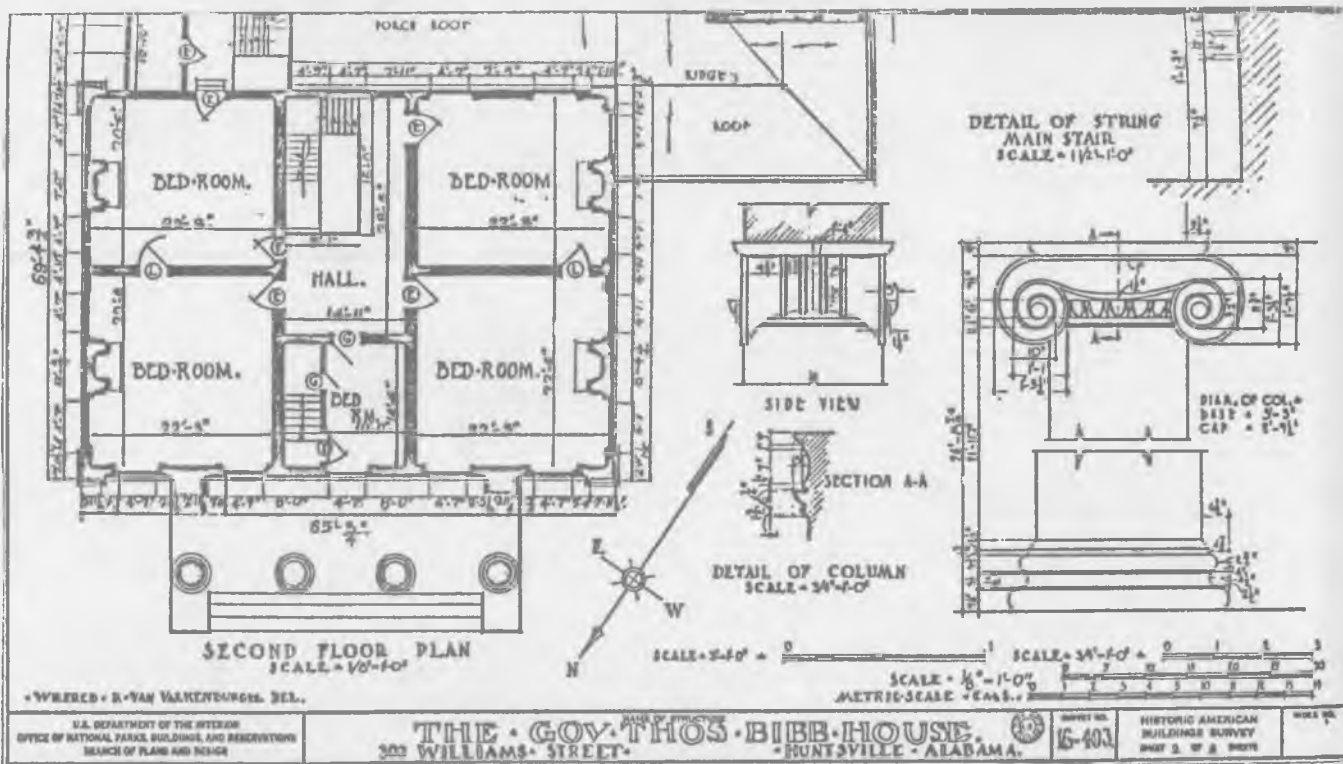


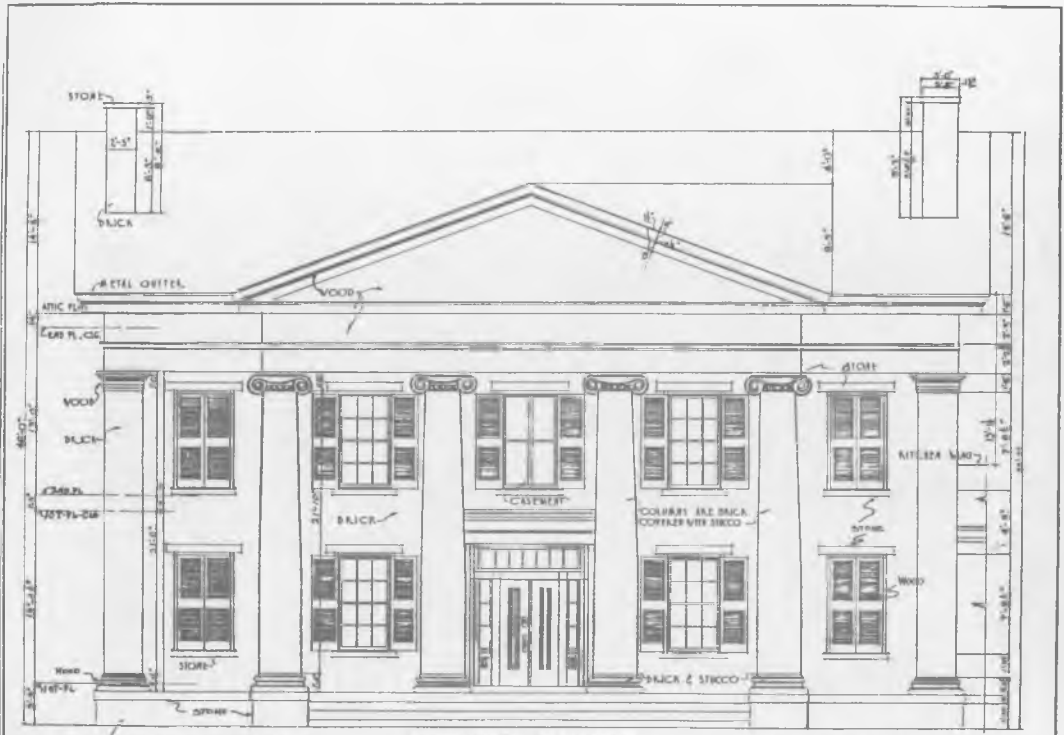
S.E. upstairs bedroom: This and other Federal Adamesque mantels are in three of the four upstairs rooms. They may have been saved from the house that preceded the present one, or a lingering preference for them may have decided the choice of them for the private rooms of the Greek Revival house.



On following pages are measured drawings of the Governor Thomas Bibb House. These drawings were done as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey of the mid-1930's, sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Interior to record America's remaining historic architecture and to provide work for architects during the Great Depression. The measurements and drawings of the Bibb House were done by Huntsvillian Wilfred R. Van Valkenburgh. Included in the Survey were eighteen Huntsville and Madison County buildings, many of which are still standing. Information from these drawings has been invaluable in the restoration of many buildings and also has been instrumental in saving some of the structures from demolition. (The Editor.)







NOTE - STORE BASEL WITHLINE OF FRONT
 ONLY - BRICK ON OTHER SIDES -- PRESENT
 ROOF IS ROYAL CORNO ROOFING - *

NORTH-WEST. ELEVATION.
 SCALE - 1/8" = 1'-0"

NOTE - ELEVATION OF BRICKS VARY AOT
 NOMA -- SEE OTHER ELEVATIONS - *

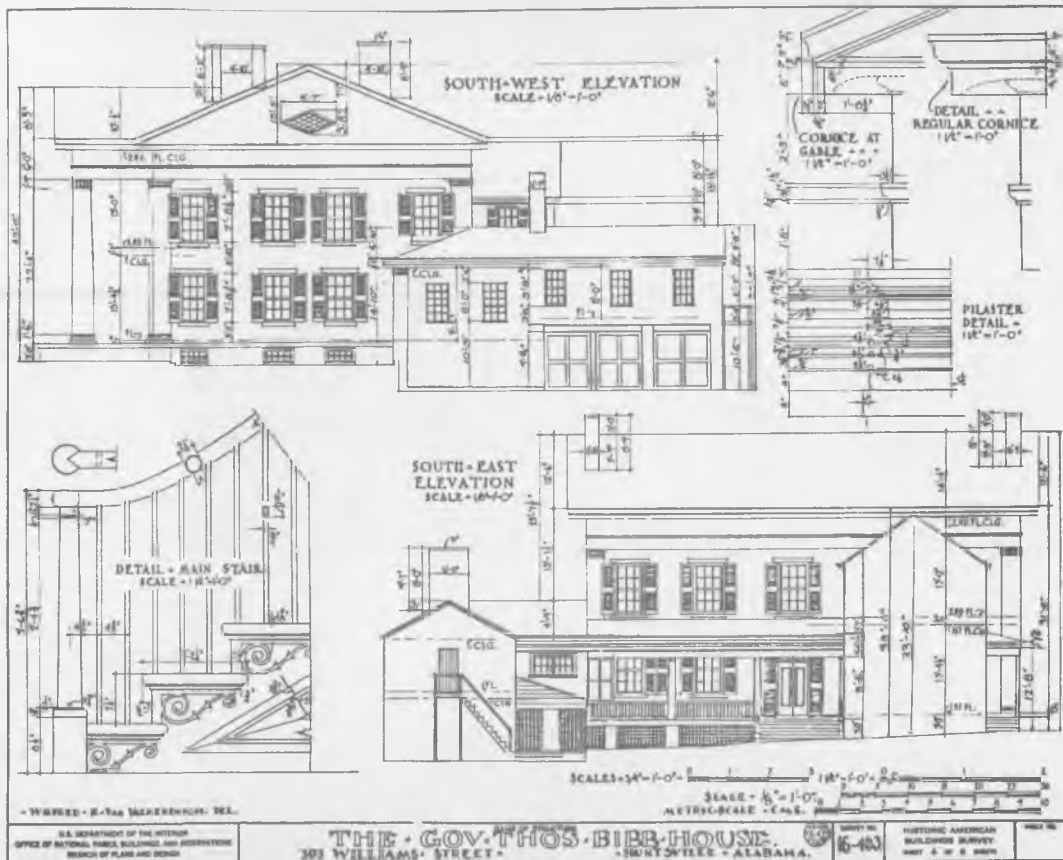
SCALE - 1/8" = 1'-0"
 METRIC SCALE - 1:250

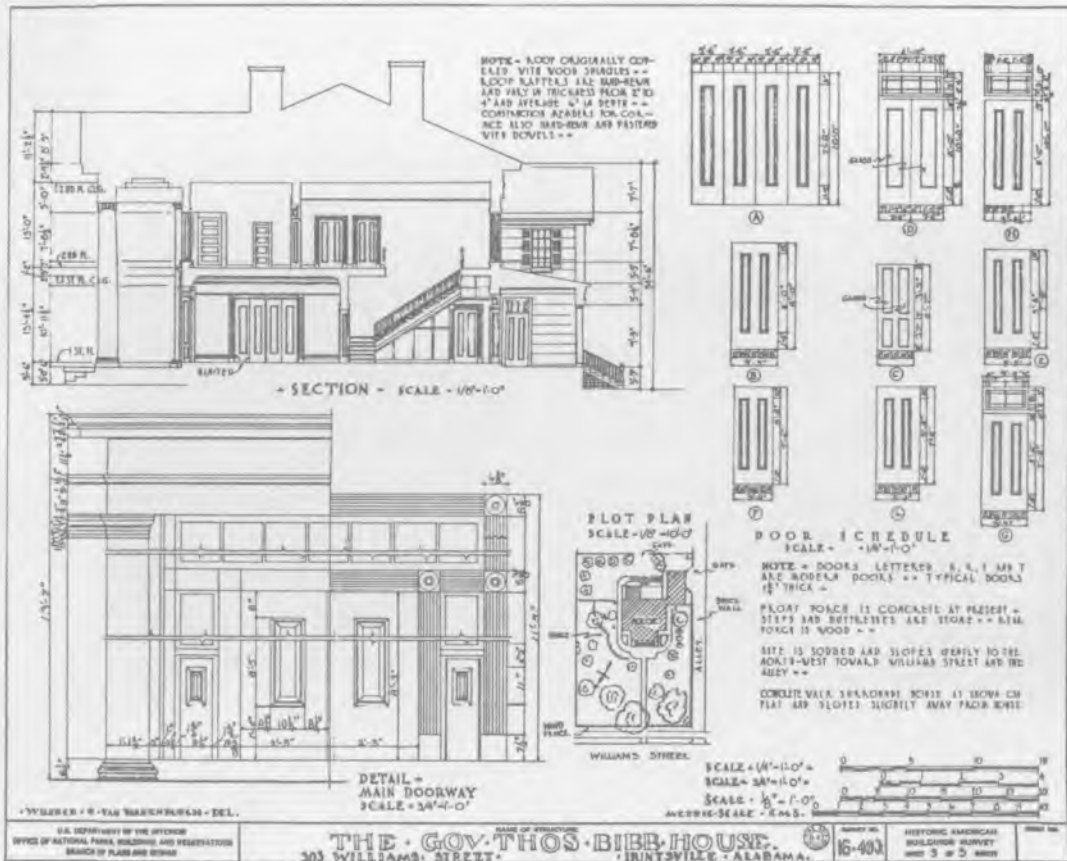
* WILKINSON - BOYD TALKER/DRUMMER, DEL.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
 HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
 SHEET 3 OF 2 SHEETS







A different view of stairway at the
Bibb House.



ELEANOR NEWMAN HUTCHENS, a direct descendant of Thomas Bibb, is a native of Huntsville who graduated from Huntsville High School and Agnes Scott College before receiving her master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. She taught English literature at Agnes Scott College and the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She is Emerita Professor of English at UAH and the author of two books.