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THOMAS FEARN  
THE MAN  
by

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The house that Dr. Thomas Fearn built on Franklin Street about 1822, reflects the imagination and proud heritage of the people who first settled in Huntsville in the early 1800s. Prominent planters and merchants from Virginia and Georgia made this the first English-settled town in Alabama. When the state was admitted to the Union in 1819, Huntsville was the first town in the state in population, politics, prestige, wealth and culture.<sup>1</sup> Huntsville also boasted the first newspaper in Alabama, published in 1812. The first bank in Alabama, the Planters' and Merchants' Bank, was organized in Huntsville in 1816.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Fearn was one of the most prominent men in Huntsville and possibly the most prominent doctor in the South. He was born November 15, 1789 in Danville, Pittsylvania County, Virginia, the son of Thomas and Mary (Burton) Fearn. His father was a native of Buckingham County, Virginia, and the grandson of John and Leanna (Lee) Fearn, who lived at Gloucester County, Virginia. Thomas Fearn's maternal grandparents were Dr. Robert and Judith (LaForce) Burton, who lived at Middlesex County, Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Fearn obtained his early schooling at Danville, Virginia, then entered Washington College, Lexington, Virginia, in 1806. He was graduated from the old Medical College at Philadelphia in 1810.<sup>4</sup> Immediately after his

graduation he moved South, selecting Huntsville as a good place to live and practice his profession. He found the town in the midst of an economic boom, and from all evidence, acquired considerable holdings in the county. Ann Royal, in a letter from Huntsville dated June 8, 1822, mentions Dr. Fearn, Pope and others as being "rich as princes" and envied by some people with "little minds who never did a generous act in their lives."<sup>5</sup>

In 1813, Andrew Jackson moved into Alabama to carry on the war against the Creek Indians. Henry Marks states in his book that all of Alabama, even Mobile, was regarded at the point of extermination by the "red sticks" faction of the Creek Nation, led by William Weatherford.<sup>6</sup> Among the volunteers from Huntsville was Dr. Fearn, offering his services as a physician. During this period he dressed the wounds of General Jackson. The General later appointed the doctor surgeon's mate of the hospital at Huntsville. Jackson visited Huntsville on many occasions and it is quite likely he visited with Dr. Fearn on some of these trips.

After the Creek Wars, Dr. Fearn became very active in the development of Huntsville. In 1816, he and eight other prominent local men organized the Planters' and Merchants' Bank of Huntsville, the first corporation of its kind in the state.

In 1818 Dr. Fearn traveled to Europe to study medicine and European surgical techniques. He remained there for several years studying surgery in many of the hospitals in London and Paris. When he returned to Huntsville in 1820, the physician brought with him many books he had acquired during his stay.

Most of these have been given to the library in Huntsville, but some are still in the possession of the Garth family.

On February 26, 1822, Dr. Fearn married Sallie Bledsoe Shelby (born 1806, died May 2, 1842), daughter of David and Sarah (Bledsoe) Shelby, who lived at Gallatin, Tennessee. Her family was very prominent in Tennessee and Virginia. Shelby County, Tennessee is named in honor of her grandfather, Major John Shelby.<sup>7</sup>

On June 27, 1822, four months after his marriage, Dr. Fearn bought a parcel of land on Franklin Street from his brother Robert for sixteen hundred dollars. From the amount of the purchase, one could assume that there was some type of building on the land at that time. Where the doctor lived before his marriage is unknown. According to a reference made in an Alabama deed book, he owned a brick shop on or near the public square in 1815.<sup>8</sup> The large two-story house he built on Franklin Street was done in three stages; the main part, done in the Federal style popular at that time, was probably started soon after he purchased the land from his brother. The two drawing rooms, three bedrooms upstairs and the portico were added in 1849 by George Steele, the well-known Huntsville architect working in the Greek Revival manner. The amount he charged for the addition was two thousand dollars, as stipulated in notes written to each other dated March 1, 1849 (see exhibit B). There are no records to indicate when the library was added. It is believed to have been built for Dr. Fearn's office; however, the doctor gave up his practice in 1837 because of increased business activities, so this would indicate the room may have been built in the

early 1830s.

Dr. Fearn's discovery that quinine (which he made here from the cinchona bark of South America) was the best weapon with which to cure malarial fever, left his name imprinted in the annals of medicine. His reputation grew, and honorary degrees began to be bestowed upon him. He was offered the chair of surgery at Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky; at the school of medicine, Louisville, Kentucky in 1831; and at the University of Cincinnati, all of which he refused. Dr. Fearn served as a member of the board of state medical examiners from 1823, until he resigned in 1829.

Like so many other leaders of his time, Dr. Fearn was drawn into politics. Twice he served in the state legislature, in 1822 and 1828-29.<sup>10</sup> Although he was against secession from the Union, he was selected as one of the nine Alabama delegates sent to the Provisional Confederate Congress in January, 1861. When he was defeated by the secessionists, however, he promised his support, and aided in framing the Constitution of the Confederacy.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Fearn was the builder of the second Huntsville water works, installing cast iron pipe to replace the previously used hollow cedar log "pipes." In 1836 he and his brother George purchased an existing water works from Thomas Ronalds for \$2,530. Dr. Fearn operated the rebuilt water works until 1854, at which time the City purchased it for the sum of two thousand dollars to be paid in ten equal annual installments.

The Huntsville Directory of 1859-60 listed

Dr. Fearn as a planter, not a doctor. By this time he was involved in many different ventures. With his brother Robert (according to Thomas McAdory Owen, Robert owned the land which is now the city of Memphis),<sup>12</sup> he successfully marketed cotton. This led him to construct a canal from Big Springs Creek to Ditto's Landing, on the Tennessee River ten miles south of Huntsville. For that purpose, the Indian Creek Navigation Company was chartered by the state legislature in 1820, with Dr. Fearn as one of its five commissioners. When the canal was finally completed in 1831, it could accommodate boats carrying fifty passengers and up to 80-100 bales of cotton.<sup>13</sup>

Dr. Fearn also devoted much time to civic activities in Huntsville. He was a trustee of Green Academy throughout its existence and was president of the board of trustees of Huntsville Female Seminary and the North Alabama College for Men. On December 19, 1821, he was elected to the first board of trustees of the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. (The trustees were paid three dollars a day then for meetings and three dollars every twenty-five miles they traveled to and from meetings.)<sup>14</sup> Dr. Fearn was asked to help find teachers for the staff, and he wrote many letters on behalf of the school for this purpose. The University finally opened its doors on April 18, 1831, with the help of such capable men as Dr. Fearn.

In 1862 Huntsville was occupied by Union forces under General O. M. Mitchell. Dr. Fearn and ten other prominent citizens were arrested by Mitchell in an attempt to force the community to change its rebellious attitude toward the Federal troops, to stop firing at pickets from ambush, and to extend to General Mitchell,

as well as his staff, customary social courtesies. The prisoners were requested to sign a statement urging local residents to cease their acts of hostility. They could accept that condition or remain behind bars. Dr. Fearn's house on Franklin Street was seized at this time and used by Mitchell's troops. These eleven town "fathers" were William McDowell, William Acklin, A. J. Withers, George P. Beirne, William H. Moore, Samuel Cruse, the Rev. J. G. Wilson, T. S. McCalley, G. L. Mastin, Stephen W. Harris and Thomas Fearn. A prominent visitor also seized was Bishop Henry C. Lay of the Episcopal Church.<sup>15</sup>

The twelve imprisoned men at first refused to sign the document Mitchell had drawn up, and from May 2 to May 15, 1862, they deliberated whether to sign the document. Finally, after the threat of being sent to Fort Warren, the twelve reluctantly signed Mitchell's paper denouncing all illegal and guerrilla warfare by citizens.

While a prisoner, Dr. Fearn had contracted pneumonia, and because of that lingering illness died the following year, on January 16, 1863. He left seven daughters: Mary Eleanor, who married Gustavas L. Masters of Huntsville; Sarah Leanne, who married William S. Barry, of Columbus, Mississippi; Katherine Erskine, who married Matthew W. Steele (son of George Steele) of Huntsville; Ada, married to Dr. George Steele (son of George Steele) of Huntsville; Maria Eliza, who married Wm. Willis Garth of Huntsville; Berenice Shelby; Lucie Lee, who married George Miller of Georgia.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Fearn's wife, Sallie, had died on May 2, 1842, leaving him to care for the girls alone.

Dr. Fearn's will, dated March 30, 1860 (see attachment C) stipulated that his sons-in-law, Gustavas Masters and William W. Garth, be the executors of his will. He left his watch to the oldest grandson; his wife's pearls to the daughter who had not married, and his horse Arkansas was left to his son-in-law M. W. Steele. He further stipulated that the house and furniture, along with the slaves (he had 82 at one time) would, after three years, be liquidated and divided equally among the seven daughters. Exactly three years after her father's death, Maria Fearn Garth bought at public auction, from her father's estate, the house on Franklin Street for ten thousand and one hundred dollars (see exhibit D). The house remained in the Garth family until 1964.

Thomas Fearn's life as a doctor, businessman, politician and public servant gives him a very important place in the history of Huntsville. His works live on, not just in his accomplishments, but also in the magnificent house he built.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama 1712-1840. (University: University of Alabama Confederate Publishing Co., 1976), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh C. Bailey, John Williams Walker University of Alabama Press, 1964), p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas McAdory Owen, History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography Vol. III (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Pub. Co., 1921), p. 567.



<sup>4</sup>Owen, p. 568.

<sup>5</sup>Ann Newport Royal, Letters from Alabama 1817-1822, ed. and annotated by Lucille Griffith (University: University of Alabama Press, 1969), p. 245.

<sup>6</sup>Henry Marks, Sketches of the Tennessee Valley in Antebellum Days: People, Places and Things (Huntsville: Southern Press, Inc., 1976), p. 40.

<sup>7</sup>Owen, p. 568.

<sup>8</sup>Madison County, Alabama Deed Books A, B, C, D, E, 1810-1819. Compiled by Dorothy Scott Johnson (Huntsville: Johnson Historical Publication, 1976), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Owen, p. 568.

<sup>10</sup>Edward Chambers Betts, Historic Huntsville from Early History of Huntsville, Alabama, 1804-1870 (Birmingham: Southern University Press, 1909 reprinted 1966), p. 115.

<sup>11</sup>William Smith, The History and Debates of the Convention of the People of Alabama (Spartanburg: The Reprint Co. Pub., 1975), p. 118.

<sup>12</sup>Owen, p. 567.

<sup>13</sup>Marks, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup>James B. Sellers, History of the University of Alabama, V. I (University: University of Alabama Press, 1953), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>Pat Jones, "Yanks Imprison Leading Residents in 1862 Siege," Huntsville Times (1931) as found in Historic Scrapbook, V. 3, pp. 71-73, in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

<sup>16</sup>Owen, v. 568.

