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HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA



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THE STEGER-NANCE HOUSE: RESIDENCE OF AN EARLY MAYSVILLE
PHYSICIAN

by

William J. Stubno, Jr.

Partially hidden from view, the old Dr. Steger residence has stood in Maysville, Alabama, as a reminder of a time when land was inexpensive and "cotton was king." Built almost 130 years ago, the home, retaining most of its Greek Revival characteristics, has changed little in its general appearance except for the front porch and rear additions. Moreover, a servants' quarters or smokehouse, constructed in the same style as the main house, still occupies its place in the back yard.

Essentially, the Steger house is a two-story brick structure with chimneys on both ends as well as one servicing its two-story ell. Interior trim, doors, and fireplace mantels are Greek Revival, a style popular in the 1840's and 1850's.

Modifications to the house have detracted somewhat from its original appearance. For example, the transom on the second floor is covered by the roof of the porch. Additionally, the one above the downstairs entrance has been removed to accommodate taller doors, although the sidelights remain. The porch, one of a series, is of recent construction, the first being some type of columned arrangement. The original cedar shingles have also been replaced.¹ Still, architecturally speaking, the home is essentially undisturbed.

The old Steger place was specifically located in the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter of section 16, township 3 south, range 2 east, part of a tract set aside for school lands. According to the

Ordinance of 1785, every 16th section of every township of Government surveyed land was reserved for schools.² Subsequently, when the Alabama Territory became a State on March 2, 1819, this Government stipulation was put into effect in all of the townships of the lands surveyed by the Federal Government of Alabama.³ On January 15, 1828, the United States Congress authorized the State of Alabama to sell the school lands of the 16th section in the various townships and to use the money for educational purposes.⁴ However, a rush by private individuals and speculators to purchase these school lands did not occur.

The 16th section in the vicinity of Maysville was not sold until the 1850's. In fact, Maysville had only started to flourish around 1838, when "a tanyard and store were put up at Maysville and several houses were built south of the 16th section."⁵ Taking advantage of the potential lucrative opportunities, William Stewart, and others, began operating various businesses in the area by 1840.⁶ On January 30, 1852, Maysville, whose limits included the southwest corner of the 16th section, was formally incorporated with the following boundaries:

That the town of Maysville, in the County of Madison, be and the same is hereby incorporated; and the corporate limits of said town shall embrace an area of land one-half a mile square, the marginal lines of which shall be equidistant east, west, north and south from the southwest corner of the sixteenth section, township 3, range 2 east, of Base's meridian.⁷

With the incorporation of Maysville, the town, fast becoming the center of a prosperous farming community, encompassed part of the 40 acres of land known as the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter of the 16th section.⁸ Judge Thomas J. Taylor, once a resident

of Maysville and neighbor of Dr. Steger, recalled:

When the sixteenth section was sold Wm. Stewart and B. B. Nunnally bought the greater section on which part of Maysville is situated and laid off town lots and the place was incorporated under the name of Maysville. . . .⁹

William Stewart had actually received a certificate of purchase for the northeast, northwest, and southeast quarter sections of the southwest quarter around 1856. After his final payment, Stewart was issued a State patent in 1860.¹⁰ Dr. Bright Berry Nunnally and his partner, Joel H. Chambless, on the other hand, had received a certificate of purchase for the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter around 1852, "at a sale made by the School Commissioners of township no. three range two east, of the 16th section"¹¹ According to court records, they then "executed their joint bonds . . . in accordance with the requisitions of the law in such cases."¹² Once full payment, on a credit system extending up to four years, was made on the purchase, a State patent would be issued.¹³ Shortly after their certificate was received, they divided the property into town lots, the first of which was to James M. Johnson that same year.¹⁴

Eventually, Nunnally and Chambless sold one of the lots to F. E. H. Steger, a local doctor, who paid for the real estate on installments. Shortly thereafter, the Maysville physician more than likely began building the Steger home, probably completed ca. 1854.

Upon the death on May 1, 1856, of Chambless, who lived near the Jackson County line, all of the lots were sold except two, one of which was "bounded . . . on the north by the premises of F. E. H. Steger . . ."¹⁵ Since Nunnally and Chambless still owed the "Township a balance of the purchase money" for the two unsold lots, a patent could not be issued.¹⁶ Additionally, the

certificate of purchase was missing, requiring the administrators of Chambless' estate to call upon acquaintances of the decedent, among them Fleming Jordan and Thomas H. Hewlett, to testify that Chambless and Nunnally had indeed purchased the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter from the School Commissioners of the Township.¹⁷ After considerable litigation, it was finally established, among other considerations, that Chambless and Nunnally had purchased the property in question, although a state patent would never be issued.¹⁸

In 1859, Nunnally, the surviving partner, conveyed to Steger title to the land upon which the physician had built his house, for \$877.00. It contained the following boundaries:

All that certain tract or parcel of land lying and being in the County of Madison and State of Alabama, being a part of the south west quarter of section sixteen in township three, range two east described as follows, beginning at the southeast corner of a lot now owned by Thomas Maddin thence eastwardly with south boundary of said Maddin's lot-and south of a plank fence six hundred and forty-two feet George W. Laughinghouse west boundary line thence northwestwardly with said boundary line nine hundred and fifty-seven feet and four inches to a stake, thence westwardly to the north east corner of James M. Johnson's lot thence with his east boundary line southwardly to his south east corner thence westwardly on his south boundary to his corner on west boundary of sixteenth section thence southwardly with said section line to Thomas Maddin's corner thence eastwardly to the north east corner of his garden thence southwardly to the south east corner of the same thence eastwardly to the north east corner of his house lot thence southwardly to the place of beginning supposed to contain twenty acres more or less, also a lot or parcel of land lying in the village of Maysville in the County of Madison, and

State of Alabama and known and described as follows, beginning at the south west corner and running east to street thence north to alley thence west to section line, thence south Sever's shop line and is bounded north by alley east by street south by Sever's and west by section line and is supposed to contain one 1/4 of an acre more or less.¹⁹

By the time this deed was made, Dr. Steger was a wealthy physician with assets of over \$15,000.00.²⁰ he was, moreover, well established in the community not only by wealth, but also by strong family ties.

Born in the Mississippi Territory on October 4, 1810, Francis Epps Harris Steger was the son of John P. Steger of Powhatan County, Virginia, and Rebekah M. Harris Steger, daughter of Francis Epps Harris, a noted Revolutionary War veteran and once secretary to Thomas Jefferson.²¹ As a young man, Steger attended "medical lectures" in Louisville, Kentucky, and later was the recipient of an honorary Masters of Arts degree in 1851 from La Grange College, a Methodist institution near Florence, Alabama.²² He was married (1841) to the former Miss Mary Elizabeth Maddin, daughter of the noted Methodist minister, Thomas Maddin, and was the father of eight children.²³

With the advent of the Civil War, Dr. Steger, according to an old letter written to Rev. Maddin during the struggle, moved to Harris County, Georgia, where he was offered a position in a hospital by a Major Jones of the Confederate Army. In Steger's absence, the house was cared for by his father-in-law, Thomas Maddin.²⁴

Rev. Maddin, a devout and pious man, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 13, 1796. He was raised in the Roman Catholic faith but became a Methodist in spite of "bitter opposition" from family and friends after his family moved to Louisville, Kentucky in 1814.²⁵ In 1818, he received a license to preach, the genesis of a ministerial career, spanning over half a century. A graduate of La Grange College,

Maddin was a charter trustee in 1843 of Athens College, at that time known as the Female Institute of the Tennessee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.²⁶ From 1846 until the coming of the Civil War, the Alabama minister was a prominent participant in the ecclesiastical affairs of the Tennessee Conference of the Methodist Church; but the war altered the course of his life.²⁷

During the conflict, Rev. Maddin, whose wife had recently passed away, was a virtual prisoner in his son-in-law's home. In his own words he described the deplorable situation:

My health, by the blessing of God is good; I eat two meals per day and sleep about six hours in twenty-four, rather restless, and lay awake many hours these long nights, chop all my wood, and work hard in the working season, have not preached for many months except a funeral sermon of Mrs. De Bou - six or eight months ago - keep no horse, so I go nowhere from home; indeed, I am afraid to go anywhere - robbers are spread over the county and Yankees hitherto on every road.²⁸

Maysville, in fact, was pillaged and burned by Federal troops. Fencing was knocked down and homes were burned, including Jack O'Neel's, as Maddin related, "where not a trace is left . . . except oneload of joist, which I paid a man \$5 to haul home and are now in the smoke-house. . . ." ²⁹ William Stewart's store and Bill Hall's Masonic hall were also leveled. Dr. Steger's old office, moreover, was utilized as an Army doctor's office, then turned into a harness makers' shop, and finally ³⁰ into a pesthouse for the care of smallpox victims. In regards to the Steger home, Union soldiers threatened to burn it on several occasions, but they only searched it. Federal troops, however, took all of the vegetables from the garden as well as the fruit from the orchard.³¹

After the war, Steger continued to live in Harris County, Georgia, and, subsequently, sold his house to Rev. Maddin in 1866.³² A few years later, he returned to his former residence in Maysville with considerably reduced assets, but was, nevertheless, able to employ a young domestic servant, Margaret Anderson.³³ In 1872, the county physician became a trustee of Maddin Chapel, a Methodist Episcopal Church, built on land donated by Thomas Maddin who had moved to Nashville, Tennessee.³⁴ In 1874, Maddin died in the Tennessee capital, and the administrator of his estate eventually conveyed title of the Maysville home back to the Stegers on July 5, 1878.³⁵

Dr. Steger, listed in a Maysville incorporation voting election in 1882, remained in the community throughout most of the 1880's.³⁶ In 1889, he sold his house, with the exception of the family cemetery located in the northeast corner of the garden, to Dr. D. H. McClain (see explanatory footnote).³⁷ He moved to Nashville where he lived until his death, caused by a stroke, on January 3, 1907. The doctor was buried next to his wife in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Davidson County, Tennessee.³⁸

The new owners of the Steger residence held title to it for almost four years. In 1893, during the Christmas season, they sold it to John W. Wortham.³⁹ In January 1907, the lot, along with adjoining property, surveyed by G. W. Jones, County Surveyor, was sold to Dr. Isaac W. Howard, a local physician.⁴⁰

Isaac William Howard, the son of James Marion and Margaret Elizabeth Howard, was born in a log house in Henegar, Alabama, on April 17, 1870. He attended school in Henegar and in Langston before going to Scottsboro College in the early 1890's.⁴¹ Later attending Southern University in Greensboro, Alabama,

Howard graduated from that institution in 1896, and then enrolled in the Memphis Hopsital Medical College. Receiving a medical degree from the Memphis school in 1899, he was subsequently licensed to practice in Fort Payne, De Kalb County, Alabama.⁴²

Dr. Howard came to Maysville with his new bride, Mary, in 1901, the beginning of a most rewarding career, and became known throughout the vicinity as "kind, considerate, patient, and cheerful."⁴³ His sister-in-law, Martha Ormand, assisted him in his practice, located in a building close to the house. A laboratory and study, moreover, were situated in the basement of his residence.⁴⁴ Due to poor health, he discontinued practicing medicine in 1930, and a year later, recorded a quit claim deed, granting all title to his wife.⁴⁵ After the death of Dr. Howard on March 19, 1938, she continued to hold title for the remainder of her life. In 1948, her daughter, Mary E. Landry, inherited the property.⁴⁶

Mrs. Landry, abandoned by her husband, Cary I. Landry, in February 1949, was a resident of New Orleans, Louisiana.⁴⁷ Whenever she visited Maysville, a town she considerably disliked, she would never go near her parent's house for reasons unknown to the family. She soon sold the house with all of its contents to Harry F. Nance, Sr, in 1950.⁴⁸

Nance, the son of Walter and Sue Nimo Nance, was a cotton ginner and farmer, active in numerous community activities.⁴⁹ At the time of his death in 1961, the house became the property of his widow, Kathyryne, who willed it to her two sons, Harry and Robert.⁵⁰ Thereafter, the lot remained in the Nance family until Robert sold it to Heyman and Betty Stephens on November 2, 1977.⁵¹

Still in the hands of the Stephens family, the Steger home is now being restored. Over \$50,000.00 has been spent so far on materials as well as many

hours of hard work on the part of the owners.⁵² One interesting item, found in the house by the Stephens, is an old Bible printed in 1849. According to the inscription on the inside cover, the book belongs to L. F. Lamberson, once a neighbor of Dr. Steger's mother and son of John Lamberson, an early settler in the area.⁵³ The house also contains other interesting items including antique furniture.

The Steger-Nance home is indeed a vital part of the early history of the Maysville community. It deserves to be preserved for future generations to admire, study, and enjoy.

The State of Ala, Madison County, s. s.
Court of Probate of said County, in vacation, 8th day of July, 1857.

Come John W. Scott, and Jane W. Chambless, administrator and Administratrix, of the Estate of Joel H. Chambless, late of said county, deceased, by their attorneys, and file a Petition in writing for the sale of the following described Real Estate, in said county, for the payment of debts, which the said Decedent, at the time of his death, owned jointly with one Bright B. Nunnally, to wit: One lot situated in Maysville, bounded on the East by the premises of George W. Laughinghouse, on the North by the premises of Francis E. H. Steger, on the West by the premises of the said Bright B. Nunnally and William H. Wortham, and on the South by the Street, or Bellefonte Road, supposed to contain about four acres. Also, a lot of ground (in Maysville) bounded South by lots sold by said Nunnally and Chambless, to Fleming Jordan and Richard Bradshaw, North by Stephen Severs lot, and on the East and West by streets, and containing about one acre and a half of ground: Ordered, by the Court, that notice of the pendency of the said Petition be given to all persons in any manner concerned therein, by publication for three successive weeks in the Southern Advocate, a weekly newspaper printed in the Town of Huntsville, in said county, that they be and appear before the Judge of said Court, at the Term thereof to be held at the Court house of said county, on the *Second Monday in August next*, and there and then contest said Petition if they think proper. A copy: Teste.
July 16, 1857. F. L. HAMMOND, Judge p. c.

FOOTNOTES

¹"Old Letter Reveals Hardships of Dixie In War," The Chattanooga Times, 27 August 1933, p. 6.

²Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion, 3rd. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp.207-208.

³Government Tract Book, p. 216, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama; Thomas M. Owen, History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography Vol. II (1921; reprint ed., Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, Publishers, 1978), p. 845.

⁴Alabama, Acts of the General Assembly, "An Act, to Authorize the Sales of Sixteenth Sections, and for Other Purposes," January 15, 1828, p. 31.

⁵Thomas J. Taylor, "The History of Madison County, Alabama," Huntsville, AL, 1880-1886, p. 38 (typewritten).

⁶Ibid.

⁷Alabama, Acts of the General Assembly, "An Act, to Incorporate the Town of Maysville, in the County of Madison," January 30, 1852, p. 315.

⁸Taylor, "History," p. 39.

⁹Census of 1860, Madison County, Alabama, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, M653, 1967); Taylor, "History," p. 39.

¹⁰Government Tract Book, p. 216 and Deed Book DD, p. 1, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

¹¹Probate Record Book 21, pp. 269-270, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama

¹²Ibid.

LEDGER SHOWING THE DEBT STILL OWED ON THE 16TH SECTION BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

B. B. Nunnally	Note 1856	Apr 14	278	92	(Remarks), B. B. Nunnally and J. H. Chambliss were joint owners of
	Apr 1855	July 1	7	70	part of Sec 16. T. 3 N. 2 East for which Chambliss gave his notes
					with Nunnally as surety - they
					Sold off lot & out of that arose
					afer between them which are
					unsettled are a settlement
					Nunnally will probably owe a
					small balance in favor of the
					note & afe - say -

¹³ John J. Ormond, Arthur P. Bagley, and George Goldthwaite, eds. The Code of Alabama (Montgomery: Britain and Dewolf, 1852), pp. 158-160.

¹⁴ Deed Book AA, p. 637, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

¹⁵ Probate Record Book 21, p. 270; "Joel Chambless," Huntsville, AL. The Southern Advocate, 14 May 1856, p. 4.

¹⁶ Probate Record Book 21, p. 270.

¹⁷ John W. Scott and Jane W. Chambless, Admr. and Admix. of Joel H. Chambless, Deceased vs. Ann E. Hereford and other heirs at law of the said Joel H. Chambless, In the Probate Court of Madison County, Alabama, 4 August 1857, Probate Case 1987, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

¹⁸ An Alabama State Land Patent was never issued, Probate Case 1876. Although the two lots were eventually sold, the state land patent for them was never issued; probably an oversight caused by the confusion surrounding the administration of Chambless' estate. The author contacted in Montgomery both the Secretary of State and the Attorney General's Office. They stated that an abstract of the property going back to 1888 would have to be sent to them in order for a patent to be issued.

¹⁹ Deed Book CC, p. 576, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

²⁰ Census of 1860, Madison County, Alabama, M653, microfilm.

²¹ Pauline Myra Jones and Kathleen Paul Jones, "Genealogy of the Harris and Allied Families," Huntsville, AL, December 1929, p. 20 and 26. (typewritten).

²² Anson West, A History of Methodism in Alabama (Nashville, TN: Publishing House Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1893), p. 625; Jones and Jones, "Genealogy," p. 26.

²³ Marriage Book 4, p. 468, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama; Jones and Jones, "Genealogy," p. 26.

²⁴ "Old Letter," Times, p. 6.

²⁵ W. Woodford Clayton, History of Davidson County, Tennessee, (Nashville, TN: Charles Elder, 1971), p. 399; West, Methodism, p. 653.

²⁶ William D. Bell, "Athens College: The First 150 Years," The Huntsville Historical Review 1 (July 1971): 4; West, Methodism, p. 631.

²⁷ West, Methodism, p. 653.

²⁸ "Old Letter," Times, p. 10.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 10.

³² Deed Book FF, p. 207, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

³³ Census of 1870, Madison County, Alabama, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, M593, 1965).

³⁴ Deed Book TT, p. 337, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

³⁵ Deed Book CCC, p. 468, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

³⁶Corporation Book 1, p. 7, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

³⁷The legal description of the cemetery was as follows: "Beginning at a small poplar tree east of the Deposit Road (33) thirty-three feet east of the section line thence with said north (100) ft. one hundred feet to a small poplar tree, thence south (75°) east (100) one hundred feet to a stake thence east parallel with and sixty feet from the north wall of the church (61 ft.) sixty one feet to a stake thence south (53) ft. fifty two feet to a stake thence west parallel with and sixty feet (60 ft.) from the south wall of the church (61 ft.) sixty one feet to a stake, thence south (75°) west (100 ft.) one hundred feet to the place of beginning containing 35/100 of an acres more or less." Deed Book RRR, pp. 552-553, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

³⁸"Died In Nashville," Huntsville, The Weekly Atgus, 20 April 1893, p. 2; "Dr. Frank Steger Dies In Nashville," Huntsville, The Evening Banner, 4 January 1907, p. 1.

³⁹Deed Book 75, pp. 594-595, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴⁰Deed Book 95, pp. 361-362. Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴¹Edmond L. Rice, Howard Family Record (Alabama: By the Author, 1979-1980), p. 6, 10-11.

⁴²Medical Record Book, p. 64, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴³Rice, Record, p. 12.

⁴⁴"Dr. Isaac Howard Rites Held Maysville," Huntsville, The Mercury, 25 March 1938, p. 1; Rice, Record, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁵ Deed Book 139, p. 370, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴⁶ Probate Case 10477, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴⁷ Affidavit, Deed Book 195, p. 481, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁴⁸ Rice, Record, p. 13; Deed Book 195, p. 473.

⁴⁹ "H. F. Nance, Sr. Dies at Hospital," The Huntsville Times, 13 December 1961, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁰ Probate Case 14284 and Will Book 16, p. 878, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁵¹ Deed Book 492, p. 311 and Deed Book 544, p. 474, Probate Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.

⁵² Interview with Mrs. Betty Stephens, owner of Steger-Nance Mansion, Maysville, Alabama, 28 June 1980.

⁵³ Census of 1850, Madison County, Alabama (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, M653, 1967); Thomas J. Taylor, A History of Madison County, eds. W. Stanley Hoole and Addie S. Hoole (University, AL: Confederate Publishing Co., 1976), p. 30.





A SHORT HISTORY OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
IN HUNTSVILLE

The first officially recorded item which indicated any interest in an Episcopal Church in Huntsville is found in the journal of the Convention of the Diocese of Alabama, held in Tuscaloosa on January 3, 1831. The item reads as follows:

"William Acklin and James Penn, Esqs., of Huntsville appeared and produced satisfactory credentials of their appointment to this convention as lay delegates. They took their seats accordingly."

One year later at the Diocesan Convention, held also in Tuscaloosa, these same gentlemen appeared and submitted a communication from the "Vestry and Wardens of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Huntsville" pointing out the fact that "the present is the most auspicious time for the commencement of a church in our town" and "that each day of delay detracts from the number of citizens who might become members of our congregation". The communication was signed by B. S. Pope, Sam Brech, R. Lee Fearn, W. Clarke and John Brahan.

These records indicate that a group of Huntsville citizens considered themselves to be an Episcopal congregation. But one wonders about the credentials of these gentlemen as official delegates. Huntsville was not at that time an officially recognized mission station. There was no church building. As far as can be ascertained, there were no services conducted by a clergyman. Although there was an interested group in Huntsville, and some members of that group were called the Vestry and Wardens of the Church, the congregation had no official status in the Diocese and no legal organization.



The First Serious Effort

However, two years later, Huntsville was made an object of missionary endeavor by the Board of Domestic Missions of the National Church. The Rev. John Murray Robertson, a priest from the Diocese of North Carolina, was sent to Huntsville, on March 7, 1834, to begin missionary work in this territory.

Trouble with the Law and the Stage

The Rev. Mr. Robertson and the congregation had a hard time finding a place to worship. For a short time the services were held in the Court House, but legal authorities objected to the use of the Court House for religious purposes. Next, a theatre on East Clinton Street was borrowed. But the congregation was dispossessed by a company of actors. Finally, the Masonic Lodge Room was procured, and services were continued in that building until the end of the year 1835. It was during the Lodge Room period that the first bishop made a visitation in Huntsville. The Rt. Rev. James H. Otey made the trip from the neighboring Diocese of Tennessee and confirmed Miss Henrietta Brown, who was a teacher in the Huntsville Seminary.

Discouraging Times

Mr. Robertson had a most disheartening experience with his congregation. It is recorded that "the missionary experienced little sympathy; and finding that nothing was done toward erecting a church or providing for a minister, he retired at the close of 1835 to his plantation in Jackson County," For seven years no further effort was made to organize a parish. One wonders what became of those gentlemen who had expressed themselves as so keenly interested in the establishment of a church. It is not recorded that any delegates attended the Diocesan Conventions during those years. Episcopal Church life in Huntsville went to sleep.

Another Start

Finally two clergymen visited Huntsville in December, 1942, and through their efforts a meeting of the Episcopalians was held and an organization of a parish effected on December 17th. Mr. George P. Beirne presided at the meeting, and, in addition to himself, there were elected on the Vestry the following men: Henry M. Robertson, John Ogden, James Penn, and J. Withers Clay. The Parish was named the "Church of the Nativity" because of the approaching Christmas season.

Beginning of Official Life

A Church is not an Episcopal Church until it is received into a Diocese under the authority of the Bishop. So the official life of the Parish began when a delegation from the newly elected Vestry attended the Diocesan convention in May, 1843, and asked that the Church of the Nativity in Huntsville be received into the Diocese. Of course the request was acceded to, and shortly thereafter the Vestry elected as the first Rector of the Church, the Rev. F. H. Laird, who arrived to take up his duties in November. The Parish was not self-supporting at this time. The Board of Domestic Missions of the National Church assisted in the maintenance of Mr. Laird. This Rector also found difficulty in the matter of securing a place for worship. The Presbyterians lent their church building for the first services. Then the congregation worshipped for a while in the schoolroom of Mrs. Jane L. Childs. And then, the Church seeming to be on some better terms with the Law, the U.S. District Court Room in the basement of the Court House was secured as a place to worship. During Mr. Laird's rectorship in 1845, the lot at the corner of Eustic and Green Streets was bought from John Y. Bassett for \$500.00, and the construction of a church building was begun. But Mr. Laird resigned in 1846. He never conducted a service in the new church for which he planned.

New Rector -- Days of Progress

In 1847 the Rev. Henry C. Lay, of the Diocese of Virginia, was elected Rector. After a few more months of services in the Court House, the church building being completed, the congregation first worshipped there in August of 1847. Within the same month the Vestry declared the Church to be self-supporting and thereafter no missionary funds were used for the support of a minister in Huntsville.

The Rev. Mr. Lay served as Rector for twelve years. Those twelve years prove themselves to have been the period of greatest progress that the Church of the Nativity ever experienced in so short a time. It is stated in the records that at the time Mr. Lay came to Huntsville as the Rector, there were but twelve communicants actually resident or available, and of that twelve there was only one male member. No doubt there were a number of interested members of the congregation who had not been confirmed and were not listed officially as communicants. At that time, apparently, it was not required that a vestryman be a communicant of the Church.

Missionary Activity

During Mr. Lay's rectorship, the Church, realizing that for many years it had been an object of the missionary interest of others, set out to repay that debt in some measure by engaging upon missionary activities. In 1851 the congregation began to furnish half the support of the Rev. T. A. Morris who was a missionary in this section of the Tennessee valley. Mr. Lay came to Huntsville as a deacon, and he left twelve years later as a bishop, having been elected Missionary Bishop of the Southwest by the General Convention of the Church held at Richmond in 1859.

During Mr. Lay's rectorship the membership grew so fast that it was necessary to plan for a new building. When Bishop Lay severed his connection with

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this Parish in 1859 he left the present church building as an inspiring memorial to his labors.

The Church purchased a Rectory on Green Street, opposite the present church building, during that time. A parish school was established. All debts were paid with the exception of \$2,606, which was still owed on the new church structure. As is so often the fate of ministers, he was not privileged long to enjoy the fruits of his labors. The first service was conducted in the present building on Easter-Even, 1859. Present the Rt. Rev. Bs. Cobbs, the Rector, the Rev. M. Robertson and the Rev. R. Hooker Cobbs, Deacon assisting in this parish since the 1st May 1858.² It was the following November that Bishop Lay moved away to administer his new jurisdiction--"The Southwest". He wrote humbly of himself: "The Rector has ministered regularly to this people, with less success than he could desire, with infinitely more than he has deserved."

The Church Building

It is a matter of amazement to many of us that a building of such size and great beauty could have been built by the members so soon after the founding of the Parish. The record is quite clear as to how it was done. The money was raised by subscription among the members. Sixty-three members made cash contributions amounting to \$29,291.93. The individual amounts noted range from \$,000 to \$10.00. Trinity Church, Wilmington, Delaware, sent a contribution of \$25.00. Other money was obtained from the sale of some property. The total cost of the church building and furnishings amounted to \$37,565.13. Every cent of this was paid with the exception of \$2,606.00 by 1861. It seems that the balance of \$2,606 was the chief topic of discussion at the Vestry meetings for many years thereafter. A glance around the church at the names inscribed on the windows tells of many families prominent in the congregation in those early days.

The Patriarch

It was in July, 1860, that the Rev. John Munro Banister of Greensboro, Alabama, was called to be the Rector. It is understood that when Mr. Banister came to Huntsville from Greensboro, The Rev. Richard Hooker Cobbs, who had been Mr. Lay's assistant, and who was in temporary charge of the Parish, moved to Greensboro to be the Rector there. Dr. Banister is thought of by the members of the Parish as the Patriarch. He was rector for forty-six years, and rector-emeritus for nearly two years. All through the trying days of the War between the States, he administered the affairs of the Parish. Many lived and died and knew no other minister but Dr. Banister. During the War, in Dr. Bannister's time, it is related that when Huntsville was occupied by Union soldiers, a non-commissioned officer of the Union forces was instructed to seize the church and use it for a stable. When the force arrived to take possession it was brought to an abrupt halt before the door. Above the door were inscribed on the marble slab the words: "Reverence My Sanctuary." When that inscription was reported to the commanding officer, he ordered that the church be not molested. For a period in 1864 the church was closed by order of he commanding general, and the Rector was ordered to cross the river and remain within the Confederate lines.

During Dr. Banister's rectorship we note some interesting changes. Another Rectory was purchased on Adams Avenue and the old one sold. At the time of the building of the new church the source of all the income for the support of the Parish was the renting of the pews. On the Monday after Easter every year the members would bid for the pews. No offerings were taken during the services until 1864 when the Rector was requested by the Vestry to announce that an offering would be taken on every Sunday. That system lasted until 1903. It was at that time the Vestry considered it wise to abolish pew rents as a method of Church support, and instead, to raise the budget by annual subscription.



The original church building was sold to the colored Methodist Church in 1878 for \$700.00. The structure was razed at that time and the materials used to construct the Colored Methodist Church building which still stands on North Jefferson Street.

In 1886 the present chapel was complete--a gift from Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb as a memorial to her husband, Wilson Cary Bibb.

In 1883, the Vestry of the Church of the Nativity gratefully accepted the offer of Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb to provide a suitable chapel for the church which had been completed in 1859. On 27 April, 1883 there was a called meeting at the office of L. P. Walker. Present were Peter M. Dox and Joseph Martin, Wardens: C. P. Walker, Jas. P. Matthews, Chas. J. McCalley and Alfred Moore.³ The following resolutions were unanimously approved:

A proposal having been received from Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb, to erect and complete upon the church lot at her own expense a suitable chapel for the use of the Parish provided the consent of the Vestry shall be granted thereto. On motion it was resolved that the Vestry gratefully appreciating the offer of Mrs. Bibb cordially accept the same, and consent to the erection and completion by here of the proposed chapel--it being understood that such chapel shall be erected upon the rear of the church lot and fronting on Green Street and near as may be, contiguous to the Vestry Room of the Church. Provided that in the erection of such chapel due regard shall be had to the preservation of congruity and of the architectural symmetry of the present church building; and that when completed, such chapel shall be delivered to and received by the Vestry for the use of the Parish at whose expense it shall thereafter be kept and preserved. Resolved that a copy of the foregoing resolution be sent to Mrs. Bibb at her present address.

It was to be a memorial to Mrs. Bibb's husband and her daughter, Fannie Marsh. Three years later, on July 17, 1886, the building was consecrated. The Vestry minutes carried this testimonial:

The Rector, Wardens and Vestrymen of the Church of the Nativity in Huntsville Alabama recognizing in the recent consecration of our beautiful Chapel the completion of a Holy Temple whose preservation as an enduring Memorial of Love has been entrusted to us and to our successors would here express their appreciation of her pious motives, noble generosity and devoted affection which inspired its erection; as a gift to the Church of the Nativity by Mrs. Wilson Cary Bibb it has entitled that excellent lady to the thanks of every member of the parish of which she was so long an earnest and beloved member who constantly illustrated her love for our Church and people and her interest in their prosperity. With sincere gratitude we accept this munificent gift as a crowning illustration of the virtues which adorn the life, and have impressed the character of a faithful Christian woman; and in humble reliance on Almighty God for His support, we therefore pledge ourselves and our successors to perpetuate with loving care that appropriate and admirable memorial not only of affection for dear ones departed but of love of Christ and His church which has been entrusted to our keeping.

The Huntsville Weekly Democrat, in a lengthy article, states:

The Consecration of the Memorial Chapel of the Church of the Nativity took place last Saturday at 11 a.m. This beautiful house of worship was erected by that noble Christian church woman Mrs. Wilson Bibb to the memory of her beloved husband and only daughter



Fannie Marsh. The Bishop, aided by Drs. Beard and Banister, officiated and Dr. Beard preached an impressive sermon. The Bishop referred in touching and affectionate words to the ordination of Mr. Percy Gordon which was to take place on Sunday.

He paid a deserving tribute to the faithful missionary work of the Rev. Charles Cabaniss who had left a sweet memory of a holy life, devoted to charity and good works in this same missionary field of labor. May he long live and grow in grace and receive the crown of the faithful servant when called to his final account. The choristers sung the chants and hymns and and (sic) interested all by their devout behavior and earnestness. May they ever remember that "Music means harmony, harmony means love, love means God.

The use of the Chapel occasioned the donation in 1888 of the east gate into the churchyard. On 13 March 1888 there was a called meeting of the Vestry.⁴

On motion of Judge Dox (?) parties applying to place a gate on the East side of the Church yard be authorized to do so, provided the same be placed near the Northeast corner of the Chapel and a graveled walk therefore to the Chapel door be made all at the expense of the parties applying therefore and not at the cost of the Parish.

In 1919, four years after Mrs. Bibb's death, her son William Garrett Bibb, gave \$5,000 for the maintenance of the Chapel.

In 1951, when Ridley Hall replaced the Mary Ann Cruse Parish House, the Chapel was redesigned in an effort to make it match and balance the new structure. The doorway facing north at the west corner was made at the center of the north side. At the same time the interior, which had been a single room, was partitioned for multiple use.

Dedication services for the new primary Sunday school department classrooms, located in the recently renovated Bibb Memorial Chapel was held on June 10, 1951. The ceremony consisted of a short procession of the primary students from their old classrooms in the parish house to the chapel, where the dedication service took place.

In its long lifetime the Chapel has been a place for worship and for instruction. Services for small congregations, held here, have complemented those in the spacious church; generations of young Episcopalians have graduated to classes in the Chapel from the children's church school in the old parish house; and at present the reverse procedure sends graduates of the chapel classrooms to advanced classes in Ridley Hall. As it approaches its centennial, the gift of Mrs. Bibb continues to honor her memory and that of her family in its lasting dedication to the Word of God.

In 1974 the Church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

At the time of Dr. Banister's resignation in 1905, he became Rector-Emeritus. With his death in 1907 a long and dearly remembered chapter in the life of the Parish was brought to a close.

Two Short Term Rectors

The next Rector was the Rev. Willoughby N. Claybrook. Mr. Claybrook came to Huntsville from Tyler, Texas, to be the assistant to Dr. Banister in 1904. When Dr. Banister resigned "because of continued age infirmities" in 1905, Mr. Claybrook was elected Rector in his place. Mr. Claybrook was a young man of great energy and initiative, but he did not remain long as Rector. He resigned in 1907 to assume the duties of missionary in the Diocese.

Succeeding Mr. Claybrook as Rector there came to Huntsville the Rev. Alexander C. McCabe, Ph.D., who assumed his duties in July 1907. Dr. McCabe resigned in 1909.

Mr. Gamble

After Dr. McCabe's resignation the Vestry called the Rev. Cary Gamble from the Diocese of Virginia to be the Rector of the Parish. Mr. Gamble took up his residence in Huntsville on July 1, 1909. One thing that attracted Mr. Gamble to Alabama was the fact that his twin brother was at that time Rector of St. Paul's Church, Selma. Both clergymen continued their faithful ministries in Huntsville and in Selma, respectively, until the time of their retirement from the active ministry. During Mr. Gamble's rectorship, a rector on Franklin Street was purchased. During this period it was increasingly apparent that there was not sufficient space on the church properties for the Sunday School and other activities of the Parish. And so, in 1912, the store building which adjoined the church lot on Eustis Street was bought and converted into a Parish House. Mr. Gamble retired in 1938.

The Rev. Randolph R. Claiborne, of Macon, Georgia, was next called to be the Rector. Mr. Claiborne began his ministry in Huntsville on September 1, 1938. During this rectorship a new rectory was built on McClung Street, on a beautiful lot which was a gift of Mrs. Richard Walker to the church. This is the fourth rectory which has housed the Rectors of the Parish in the last one hundred years.

It is seen from this brief sketch that there are a great many things in the history of the past one hundred years of which the Church of the Nativity may be justly proud. The Church has taken its place as a spiritual force in the community. It has assumed its responsibilities in the affairs of the Diocese. It

is generously supporting the missionary work of the Church at home and abroad. There are many factors that make us feel that the future holds great progress in store for the Church of the Nativity.

Footnotes

¹The main source of this compilation of the history of the Episcopal Church in Huntsville is from a pamphlet published in 1943 located in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library. Unless otherwise cited all material is from this pamphlet.

²Episcopal Church file, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library. Also the Huntsville Times, June 28, 1925.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Huntsville Times, June 10, 1951.

⁶Episcopal Church File, Op. cit.

⁷Huntsville Weekly Democrat, July 21, 1886.

⁸Huntsville Times, November 22, 1974.



BOOK REVIEWS

THE IMAGE OF PROGRESS Alabama Photographs, 1872-1917 by Melton A. McLaurin and Michael V. Thomason (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980), iv, 218pp. \$19.95, softbound.

This is a Must for all Alabama readers. It is a vivid portrait of daily life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All levels of social and economic life of the state are represented. The photographs convey the period to us in a way that words alone could not. Most are not posed.

Huntsville and Madison County are well represented among the 207 images. Just one photograph of this city is reproduced here to whet your appetite. Recognize the couple?

REPUBLICANS, NEGROES, AND PROGRESSIVES IN THE SOUTH, 1912-1916, by Paul D. Casdorph (University: University of Alabama Press, 1981), iii, 241 pp. \$18.95.

This provocative new book is a study of the disastrous schism in the Republican party during the Bull Moose era of 1912-1916, in the Deep South states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia, as the progressive Republicans behind Theodore Roosevelt competed for Republican party support with the conservative followers of President Taft.

"An important outcome . . . is that both camps made it nearly impossible for the Negro to continue his association with the GOP after 1912. Though the mass exodus of Southern negroes to the Democratic party did not come until 1932, their departure was hastened by the conservative-progressive fight for control of the GOP."

The book should be read by the serious student of Alabama history.

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