

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 16 | Number 1

Article 5

12-21-1989

The House That Isaiah Built

Charles S. Rice

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rice, Charles S. (1989) "The House That Isaiah Built," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 16: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol16/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

THE HOUSE THAT ISAIAH BUILT

Charles S. Rice

The 1850s were a prosperous decade for Huntsville, as indeed for most of the South. It was during these affluent years just prior to the War Between the States that many of the South's finest homes were built. The war would soon bring financial ruin, however, and these lovely homes would remain as relics of a way of life that had vanished forever.

One such antebellum dwelling has stood on the northeast corner of Huntsville's Holmes and Calhoun streets for more than 130 years. This is the story of that house and, in part, of the families who have called it home.

The builder, Isaiah Dill, was a prominent attorney and insurance agent in 19th century Huntsville. Dill was born in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on Christmas day, 1806. He moved South when he came of age, and practiced law in several small cities before moving to Huntsville in 1843. Dill had served as deputy register in chancery for the circuit court in Moulton, Alabama, and was chosen to fill the post of register in chancery for Huntsville on or shortly after his arrival.

On March 5, 1846, Isaiah Dill married Martha E. Sprague, daughter of a local artist.



Martha's father, Henry Sprague, had died when she was a child. According to family tradition, Sprague was finally poisoned from his habit of touching his paint brushes to his tongue. The old red-brick Sprague home still stands on the northwest corner of Randolph and Green streets.

The new Mrs. Dill was raised by a stepfather, but apparently inherited some of her father's talent. Martha was a skillful portraitist and had graduated at the top of her class at the Huntsville Female Seminary in 1838.

By the mid-1850s, Isaiah Dill was a wealthy gentleman with a sizable family including six children. Therefore, on October 25, 1855, he purchased 2.56 acres of land on what then was the edge of Huntsville from Meredith and Mary Smith Calhoun. The price for the homesite was \$1,150. Thomas J. Taylor, in his manuscript *History of Madison County, Alabama*, written during the 1880s, notes the following:

Stephen Cayton and William Gurley were among the first to settle south of Holmes Street, and in 1857, Thomas H. Hewlett built the house where S. S. Darwin now lives and Isaiah Dill on the corner east of him...

The house is said to have taken two years to build, and the date of 1857 apparently marks its completion. This would appear to be confirmed by a record in the courthouse of a trust deed for \$2,300 made to Martha Dill's mother, Elizabeth Sydnor. The deed states that Mrs. Sydnor had sold her home on April 29, 1857, and that "said money was advanced to me to aid in building my present residence in the city of Huntsville." The Thomas Hewlett mentioned by Taylor was another prominent citizen. Hewlett had purchased his lot of .44 acres just one day after Isaiah Dill on October 26, 1855. The two houses stood on the opposite corners of Holmes and Calhoun





mantels, while the bannister was beautifully shaped from cherry. Plastering the walls and ceilings completed the interior.

In appearance, the Dill house is Federal with Greek Revival influences. The 1861 map of Huntsville clearly shows the rear porch to be original, while the front porch apparently is not indicated and was possibly added by the Dills after that date. The plan of the house is of a type that descended from the old dog-run log cabin. A large entry hall, divided by a doorway, passes through the center of the house. Two large rooms open off of the hall on either side.

until 1977. Then, after a fire had damaged the Hewlett house, it was torn down.

Isaiah Dill built his home well back from the street on both the Holmes and Calhoun sides. The work is believed to have been supervised by Dill's friend and neighbor, Matthew W. Steele, son of famous Huntsville architect George Steele. All walls, both exterior and interior, are composed of 18 inches of hand-made brick. The floorboards are random width, edge cut pine. Poplar was used for the door frames, window frames, and

The parlor, front entry hall, and dining room all display elaborate woodwork reminiscent of fluted Greek columns. The woodwork of the remaining rooms, not meant for show, is much plainer. The downstairs doors are four-panel Federal fashion, while the upstairs doors are two-panel Greek Revival. The parlor is distinguished by splendid sliding six-panel pocket doors, which can be opened for special occasions. The downstairs ceilings are twelve feet in height, and every doorway is surmounted by a transom to allow in more light.

The upstairs of the house consists of the landing and four large bedrooms. The bedroom on the southeast has an attached balcony. Interestingly, the house was built to include closets. Two upstairs bedrooms and a downstairs room which apparently also served as a bedroom have closets formed from the space between the fireplace and the adjacent wall. Small trunk rooms were built for the two bedrooms facing Calhoun Street.



The arrangement of the house is well thought out and is much like that of the central portion of Oak Lawn, a large plantation dwelling built in the 1840s. The woodwork is almost identical with that found in George Steele's own Plantation home, Oak Place.

The parlor and front entry hall of Isaiah Dill's home were both originally papered with the same floral patterned wallpaper. With the exception of the upstairs trunk rooms, all other rooms were painted. The choice of colors at the time must have been limited, for the original colors discovered during restoration

were gray, a dark red, and a pumpkin-like orange.

There are a total of eight fireplaces, five exterior doors plus the balcony door, and 29 windows. A small storage room on the back porch completed the house and added two more windows.

The spacious house was built as one unit, and not added to at various periods as many older antebellum houses are. It is reported to have cost \$9,000 to build Isaiah Dill's home, a considerable sum at a time when a laborer might be paid a dollar a day. The kitchen was located just south of the house in the brick servant

quarters, which also contained two comfortable bedrooms for the Dill slaves, a family of nine headed by Uncle Parker and Aunt Nancy. Other structures included the stables and a small shop where Martha Dill's stepfather, William Sydnor, practiced his trade as a cabinetmaker. The city limits passed through the yard, which was completely enclosed by a wooden fence.

The original occupants of Isaiah's house were he and his wife Martha, their children -- Henry, Mary, Charles, Ellen, and Arthur, and Elizabeth and William Sydnor. Isaiah's brother, Andrew H. Dill, joined him in his law practice for some years and also lived in the house just prior to the Civil War. Andrew left Huntsville about 1860 and moved to Chicago. One child was born to the Dills in the house, a daughter, Carrie, in 1858. Another child, baby Frank, had died on July 30, 1857, possibly in the house.

Just prior to the Civil War, Isaiah Dill's fortunes were at their highest. In addition to his position as register in chancery for Madison County, he was a practicing attorney, an agent for three Northern insurance companies, and secretary of the North Alabama Telegraph Company. He was

also prominent in the Odd Fellows and was a ruling elder of the First Presbyterian Church. Then the war brought disaster.

On the morning of April 11, 1862, Huntsville awakened to the sound of cannon fire near the railway depot. A Union army led by Brigadier General O. M. Mitchell had pounced on the defenseless city. Huntsville would remain under Union occupation throughout most of the last three years of the war.

A Union regiment moved into the buildings of the Greene Academy, the private boys school directly south of the Dills' property, and the war literally came to the Dills' doorstep. Dill family tradition recalls some of the wartime events of long ago. The Northern soldiers made short work of the family's poultry, even though one private who was caught in the act was punished by his commanding officer by being forced to carry a heavy log across his shoulders from sunrise to sunset. The Dills decided to remove temptation from the soldiers' midst by the unusual expedient of covering an upstairs bedroom floor with newspapers and bringing the remaining chickens into the house. The soldiers could still hear the rooster crowing every morning, but

could not find him anywhere. After a few days, chickens were removed to the attic for obvious reasons. The Dill children also were quite distressed when Union soldiers took turns racing on Isaiah's old carriage horse. The overaged animal had been retired and given to the children as a pet. They never saw their horse again.

Nevertheless, relations with the occupying army seem to have been fairly friendly during the early years of the war. When twelve-year-old Mary Dill came down with typhoid fever, the Northern officers sent over a slab of beef to make her some broth. Later, however, conditions grew

worse. The family silver was hidden away, as Union soldiers began entering the kitchen to take anything they wanted. Drunken soldiers often fired their rifles into the air or into the streets. In November, 1863, an inoffensive civilian was shot by a soldier as he walked past the Dills' house. The bullet shattered a bone in the unfortunate man's arm, and the doctors had to amputate. A year later, on November 26, 1864, Union soldiers angry at having to evacuate the city set fire to the Greene Academy. The school was destroyed. When the Confederate army re-occupied Huntsville a few days later, 17-year-old Henry Dill took the opportunity to enlist in



Company A, 4th Alabama Cavalry. He served under General Forrest until the surrender in May, 1865.

The end of the war found Isaiah Dill in an embarrassing situation. Although he had been a Douglas Democrat and opposed to secession, he subsequently accepted the appointment of commissioner for the Confederate District Court for the Northern Division of Alabama. He was therefore required to petition for the restoration of his United States citizenship. Isaiah did so on August 9, 1865, and his pardon was granted by President Andrew Johnson on September 29, 1865.

Dill's pardon application provides a glimpse of the ordeal experienced by Huntsville residents during the war. "In October, 1863," he wrote, "a horse was forcibly taken from me by some United States troops under the command of General Crook, who were then passing through Huntsville. During the latter part of the year 1863, and from thence on to March 1865, at various times, some four hundred feet running measure of my fencing was destroyed by the Federal troops who during that time occupied Huntsville. And, in the latter part of December 1864, my stables and some other outbuildings

about the stable lot were removed by the Federal soldiers; whether destroyed or not I do not know."

During the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, Isaiah Dill lost the position of register in chancery he had held for a quarter of a century. In 1871, however, he was honored by being selected Alabama grand master for the Odd Fellows. He also represented Alabama in the Grand Lodge of the Odd Fellows of the United States.

Isaiah died on July 5, 1877, at the age of 71. His funeral was held in the lovely parlor of his home.

The Dill children now numbered five, young Charles Dill having died in 1873, at the age of only 23. Uncertain what to do with their home, they turned for advice to one of their father's friends and fellow attorneys. He suggested that they sell their house at public auction on the courthouse steps, as was the common practice. The auction was held on August 12, 1878. The winning bid was \$4,400, considerably less than the \$11,000 the property had been valued at in the U.S. census of 1860.

Sadly, the Dill children divided the money and moved from their home of over twenty years. Henry Dill, M.D., settled in

Tuscumbia. Arthur Dill remained as a Huntsville policeman. Mary Dill dedicated her life to teaching generations of Huntsville's children in a small private school of her own, while her sister Ellen taught in a college at Abingdon, Virginia.

Three other families have called Isaiah Dill's house home in the 113 year since his death. The first of these was headed by Robert L. Pulley, a wealthy landowner of Limestone County who purchased the house at the auction in 1878. The Pulleys and their seven children would live in the house for the next forty years. Robert Pulley died on April 10, 1901, but his will provided that the house would remain in his wife's possession for as long as she lived.

The old house underwent a number of changes during the Pulleys' occupancy. Sometime around the turn of the century, the red brick house was painted ivory. Gas lights were installed and then replaced with electric. A frame kitchen was added just off the back porch, though the brick servants quarters continued to be used. The downstairs bedroom closet was broken through and a frame bathroom added. Water closets were still such novelties that the handle

bore the word 'press.'

Automobiles were beginning to replace horses in the early 1900s, and one of Huntsville's first cars was a Stanley Steamer owned by Terie Pulley's husband, T. H. Wade. A neighbor recalls that Tom Wade must have spent as much time starting his steamer each morning as it would have taken to walk to his office on the courthouse square. Wade apparently considered it worth the trouble.

The rear sections of the lot were also sold off at this time. Henry Chase of Chase Nursery built his beautiful home on one of them and a dentist named C. Walter Krantz built an attractive Edgar Love-designed house on the other. Dr. Krantz soon had to move to Colorado for reasons of health, and sold his home to the Dreger family, who live in it to this day.

Georgia Strong Pulley died on December 27, 1919, and her children decided to put the house on the market once more.

The next family to occupy the house was that of William H. Cummings, who secured it for \$15,500 on February 2, 1920. Cummings owned the Huntsville Furniture Company, and also was

the RCA Victor dealer for all of North Alabama. His shop stood on the courthouse square between Harrison Brothers Hardware and H. C. Blake Plumbing.

During the Second World War it became almost a patriotic duty to provide housing for the workers. The house was divided into apartments. Bathrooms and small kitchens were added for each apartment. The end of the balcony was sawn off to accommodate a new staircase for the tenants. In 1955, another section of the property was sold and the century-old servants quarters were torn down. The house remained as apartments until the late 1960s, and then stood empty for several years following Cummings' death.

Water leaking through the roof damaged most of the plaster ceilings while the house was unoccupied. Wallpaper hung in shreds in almost every room. Nevertheless, the basic structure of the house remained sound and about one acre of land remained. The original brick walk still led to the front porch, and much of the old iron fence stretches across the Calhoun Street frontage. In March, 1972, Charles E. and Frances Seaman Rice became the new owners. The Rices immediately began



converting the house back into a one family dwelling. The ceilings almost all had to be replaced and the many layers of damaged wallpaper carefully removed. The floors, which had been painted at various times, were sanded clean and termite damaged boards replaced. Several of the



fireplaces had been converted to small coal boxes long ago, and were opened up to their original appearance. The wooden additions made by both the Pulley and Cummings families had been riddled by termites and had to be torn down. Eventually, the old Pulley kitchen was reconstructed in the backyard as a studio.

Some changes were necessary to modernize the house. The downstairs bedroom was converted to a kitchen, and the two upstairs trunk rooms were combined to allow for a bathroom. Both central heating and air conditioning were added. However, only one part of the house as it now appears is not original. A brick utility room was built where the Pulley family's wooden bath-

room had stood in the rear of the house. This room contains another bathroom as well as the washer and dryer, and was deliberately made to appear as a late Victorian addition.

One unexpected advantage of restoring an old home turned out to be the interesting people one meets. Over the past sixteen years, the Rices have become acquainted with members of all the families who have owned the house that Isaiah built. The late Mrs. Elizabeth Dill Punch, daughter of Isaiah Dill's son Arthur, proved to be a valuable source of information on the early history of the house. Her sister-in-law, Mrs. Edna Dreger Dill, provided additional information. Edna Dill's brother,



Alvin Dreger, has spent his entire life living next to the house and also knows many stories about it. And, one day Robert Pulley, a grandson of Robert L. Pulley, stopped by and told of his childhood memories visiting his grandmother in the house before the First World War. The Rices were even surprised to meet several descendants of Reuben Street, the man who was shot in front of the house during the Civil War.

Frances and Charles Rice in fact became so interested in their home, that with the encouragement of architect Harvie Jones, they were prime movers in the creation of the Old Town Historic Preservation District. The purpose of the district is to help insure that this house and the many other historic homes in the area will continue to survive for future generations to enjoy. Let us hope that it succeeds.

Charles Seaman Rice graduated from the University of California and California Polytechnic State University. He served as an army combat engineer in Vietnam and was a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand. He has been a university lecturer, a freelance writer, and editor of Thailand's leading tourist magazine. He is active in Freemasonry and is a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans.

Notices from *The ALABAMA REPUBLICAN*

November 14, 1818

The subscribers inform the inhabitants of Huntsville and Madison County generally that they carry on the house, sign, and ornamental painting and glazing business in all its branches, they are well acquainted with all the modern improvements in the art, from their experience can promise full satisfaction to all who may favor them with orders in their line of business. Apply near Mr. Patton's Cotton Gin, or at Phelan & Dillen's.

Henry Sprague & Austin Porter

October 26, 1821

Henry Sprague informs his friends and the public that he has removed his shop next door south of the Printing Office, where all kinds of sign and ornamental painting will be done at the shortest notice.

NB -- Orders from all parts of the State attended to.

A House That Got Away



The Hewlett House, located on the corner of Holmes and Calhoun, built in 1857 and torn down in 1977.

