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WHY TWICKENHAM?

A Speculation on the Vision of the Founders

by Eleanor Newman Hutchens

This is a purely speculative essay, an attempt to guess why the founders of Huntsville named it Twickenham. The tradition is, of course, that their leader, Leroy Pope, wanted it named in honor of the great English poet whose surname he shared. Chroniclers of Huntsville used to say that Leroy Pope was a direct descendant of the poet, but the word eventually got around that Alexander Pope never married and is not known to have sired any progeny. The story was then modified to read that Leroy Pope was simply an admirer of his poetry. This may have been true; but it seems to me unlikely that the strong-minded group of families who planned this town would have chosen its name on the whim of one of their number, acknowledged leader though he was. I think it more probable that they wanted it to be like the original Twickenham—a place noted for its cordial society, handsome houses, beautiful gardens, and famous residents.

There is another possibility. The Virginians who founded what is now Huntsville had previously founded and lived in Petersburg, Georgia, which they had named for the Petersburg of their native state. Petersburg, Virginia, was the sister city of Richmond, the two having been founded on the James and Appomattox Rivers by William Byrd. Now, Richmond on the Thames River, in England, could be regarded as the sister of Twickenham, which lies very near it on the opposite bank. Our founders may have enjoyed the idea of naming two towns for sister
cities of towns called Richmond; but again, so serious a matter as naming the place where they expected to live out their lives probably would not have been decided on such a fanciful notion as this. Surely they had a vision of what they wanted their town in this beautiful valley to be; and Twickenham, which they could have known through the work of Pope and its other eminent people, may have provided them with an ideal.

If Twickenham in England had had a Twickenham Historic Preservation Society at about the time John Hunt was building his cabin beside the Big Spring, we might be able to see it today almost as it was in the time of Alexander Pope, who lived there from 1719 until his death in 1744. It does have a Local History Society now, however, and thanks to the generosity of that group I have obtained a booklet called "Twickenham 1600-1900: People and Places" which is a concise history of the houses, gardens, and residents of that remarkable spot. Another valuable source of information, especially on the spirit of the place, is The Garden and the City, by the American scholar Maynard Mack, a specialist in Pope and the Eighteenth Century in England. Finally, I have taken pleasure in using an 1808 volume of Pope's letters which I found in our family library. The set belonged to John H. Coleman, who must have been one of the Colemans who later became related to us, and subsequently to Charles Coleman Thach, whose family's land adjoined that of Thomas Bibb in Limestone County and who became president of Auburn. These letters, more than any other source, show Pope's delight in Twickenham and the development of his estate there. The date of the 1808 American edition, only one year before our founders chose Twickenham as the
name of their town, is tenuous as evidence but pleasingly suggestive.

It is dismal to note that 1808 was also the year Alexander Pope's house was torn down, by a later owner who became exasperated by public interest in the dead poet's residence.

In order to understand Pope's Twickenham, one must see it as the embodiment of several 18th-century ideals. One of these was adopted from the Roman poet Horace, who celebrated the joys of the rural retreat, safe from urban intrusion and corruption but enlivened by visits from good friends to share conversation and wine. Another was the fashion for Palladian architecture, and a third was an intense interest in landscaping and gardening. Alexander Pope shared and indeed did much to combine and advance these elements of the good life in the thinking of his time—and he did it mainly in Twickenham.

Twickenham began as a private park, enclosed in the 13th century by the brother of King Henry III. Three and a half centuries later, Francis Bacon lived there and is thought to have played host to Queen Elizabeth at dinner. In 1609 the Countess of Bedford, close friend of the family of James I, built a fine house where the poet John Donne visited her. One of his poems is called "Twicknam Garden." This house was demolished in 1805.

As estates from the original park were sold, Twickenham became a fashionable place to live. At Cambridge House, Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Edward Gibbon, Joshua Reynolds, David Garrick, the Earl of Chesterfield and other 18th-century
celebrities gathered for conversation. The 300-year history of this house ended with demolition in the 1930's. The learning, creative talent, and social polish epitomized in the men and women who used to meet under its roof were the very best of their age, and those names were bywords still among cultivated Virginians after the American Revolution and well into the 19th century.

Another fine house of Pope's time, a gem of a Palladian villa which by a narrow escape has survived to the present and is open to the public, is Marble Hill. Here the Countess of Suffolk entertained a circle of friends sometimes called "the Twickenham Club," including Pope, Jonathan Swift, Dr. Arbuthnot, and John Gay, author of The Beggar's Opera. Marble Hill was bought in the late 19th century by the Cunard family and plans were made to demolish it and use the grounds for a housing development, but a frantic effort pulled together enough public and private money for a rescue. It was opened as a public park, and in the 1960's the house was restored by the Greater London Council.

For us, I think the most interesting house of Pope's Twickenham would be his own, if only it had survived. When he leased the property in 1718, it consisted of a small house facing the river with about five acres behind it on the other side of a road. These acres he decided to make into a garden; and in order to reach his garden without crossing the road, he constructed a tunnel, which he decorated elaborately as a grotto and which is still there, stripped of most of its decorations. A few years ago I managed to go through it, kindly conducted by a nun of the convent that now occupies the property. The
entrance faced the river and the tunnel ran under Pope's house and under the road behind it to his garden. Friends who came by boat to his front lawn could look through the grotto and see a charming little shell temple framed by the end of the passage. From the garden, Pope could see the river and passing boats as through a telescope. He could even sit and write in the grotto, which contained several recesses and was furnished with a lamp, and one of its treasures for him was a spring of clear water that played with soothing music on his usually frazzled nerves.

The fine architect James Gibbs enlarged and redesigned Pope's small house to make a restrained and elegant Palladian villa of three stories in its central block and two at the sides. Pope later added a portico. The house in Huntsville that most resembles Pope's is the Leroy Pope Walker house as viewed from the western foot of McClung and Echols at their intersection with Williams Street. Pope had a sloping front lawn, as does the Walker house, though not narrowing to a point but continuing in its full width to the river. His house contained many portraits of his friends, some of them painted by his Twickenham neighbor Sir Godfrey Kneller. (It is gratifying to note that the Huntsville Museum of Art now possesses one of Kneller's portraits.) Among the busts of great poets and artists were one of Palladio, the Italian Renaissance architect, and one of Inigo Jones, the English architect who did most to inspire the Palladian revival a century before Pope's time.

By the time he came to plan his own garden, Pope had been interested for years in landscaping and had advised some of his
richer friends in the planning of theirs. We tend to think of Pope as the greatest exponent of 18th-century formality, symmetry, and artificiality. Nevertheless, his idea of designing a garden was to achieve above all a natural effect. There is no paradox here. As in the easily quotable lines of his poetry, much intricate art went into the apparently natural. He surrounded his five acres with thick trees and unclipped hedges, among which he made a few winding paths. Within this border he made mounds, one of them high and rocky. At the edges of the open area he had a vineyard, a kitchen garden, and utility shelters. In the large central space were clumps of trees, some statuary, a bowling green, and other walkways, all disposed so that the stroller enjoyed the sense of being in an untouched natural place but occasionally coming upon a pleasing contrast in the form of art.

This garden was internationally famous. Poems were written about it in various languages, people came to see it until a later owner spoiled it, and along with the house and grotto it became a part of the legend of Pope.

Perhaps mainly because of Pope, but undoubtedly also because of its other famous residents and their classically-inspired houses and gardens, Twickenham itself became famous as a place where an ideal of the good life had been realized. It was a rural retreat conveniently near London, it had been made beautiful, and its inhabitants were among the most interesting people alive--members of the nobility, writers, painters, witty actresses, very successful merchants, and what the 18th century called virtuosos, gifted amateurs who had made themselves
experts and sometimes expert practitioners in the arts or sciences. It was a retreat not from human society but to the very best company. It was exactly the sort of place I imagine a groups of cultivated Virginians would have liked to create for themselves. When they laid out the town of Twickenham above the Big Spring with its wild natural cliff and began to build their tasteful Palladian-derived Federal houses and plant their elaborate gardens and promptly enter upon a cultural life in which books, music, art, and practical innovation would take a lively part, they may well have been looking toward that English model.

I know little about early Huntsville gardens except that they existed. Anne Royall, in the often-quoted account of her visits here in 1817 and 1822, was primarily interested in the wealth, hospitality, and social and cultural life of the town. She mentions one house that must have been as rich in paintings and sculptures as Alexander Pope's or most of his neighbors'. But there is a description of a Huntsville garden in the early 1850's that suggests Pope's. It was that of Robert Fearn, who lived at what is now 210 Williams Avenue. John Wyeth describes it in his autobiography, With Sabre and Scalpel, as it was when as a boy from the country he visited it with his mother. Here is his account.

"I shall never forget those Huntsville gardens and the beautiful flowers. ...here the grounds were very large and this garden was laid out like a big Chinese puzzle. There were tiny paths that led in all directions, with dense rows of box along the
edges, and the beds were grouped in all sorts of fantastic shapes, and down at one end stood a small house all of glass windows where they put things away in cold weather to keep the frost from killing them. Farther away was the vegetable garden, for there were no market-houses in those early days, and every home provided for itself; and back of this, opening on an alleyway which cut the block in two, were the spacious stables for the milk-cows, horses and carriages."

This is, of course, an 18th-century English garden, perhaps showing more obvious artifice than Pope's but typical of others in his Twickenham. And it must have dated back to early Huntsville; boxwood grows slowly. My point is that early Huntsville gave much thought and care to landscaping and gardening as supports to the same values that formed 18th-century Twickenham.

Both the English Twickenham and Huntsville happen to be indebted to visiting women journalists for descriptions of the places as they once were. Here is Henrietta Pye, writing of Twickenham a few years after the death of Alexander Pope:

"The whole place is one continued garden. Plenty and Pleasure are the Ideas convey'd by its large fields of Corn and its verdant Meadows. . . . The Genius of the Inhabitants inclines not toward Commerce, Architecture seems their chief Delight, in which if any one doubts their excelling,
let him sail up the River and view their lovely villas beautify- ing its Banks; Lovers of true Society, they despise Ceremony, and no Place can boast more Examples of domestic Happiness."

Anne Royall says of the buildings in Huntsville, "The workmanship is the best I have seen in all the states"; and of its people, "The citizens are gay, polite, and hospitable, and live in great splendor.... They visit each other without ceremony, morning, noon, and night, and are invited to await breakfast, dinner, and supper; but no such thing as that bane of society, a 'Tea Party.'"

Now, as we all know, the founders of our Twickenham came here rich to make themselves richer. They bought large tracts of land, cleared them, and planted cotton. Some of them were merchants or professional men as well. Their primary energies went into the building of their fortunes. But they had as their end the creation of a certain kind of life. They built their houses not mainly on their plantations but here close together, to make a town. And they named that town Twickenham.

The story that the name was chosen because their leader was named Pope goes far back. Anne Royall is the earliest source I know, and she was here less than a decade after the naming. According to her, "Colonel Pope, it is said, tried hard to have the name changed, to Twickenham, after the residence of his namesake (and from whom it is said he is descended) in England. But places, somehow or other, will retain their first names." Her sources were wrong on two
points: the name Twickenham actually was adopted officially, and Leroy Pope was not descended from the poet. However, the story persists. Virginia Clay-Clopton, whose father-in-law Clement Comer Clay was certainly in a position to know, says, "The friends of Colonel Pope...named the town in honor of the birthplace of the immortal poet." Another slight error: the poet was not born at Twickenham. But she goes on: "For two years, until the original name was restored by a second act of Legislature, the little city was known as 'Twickingham [sic] Town,' and to many of its old families this name remains so dear that among themselves it still continues to be affectionately applied." She wrote this after 1900. This authoritative report tells us one important thing: that the name Twickenham meant much more to our founders than it could possibly have meant as a play upon the name of their leader or even a sign of reverence for a great poet. It must have had a cluster of associations, a grouping of social and aesthetic values that they hoped would define their town.

Leroy Pope may have been the first to think of Twickenham; his brilliant son-in-law John Williams Walker, a witty graduate of Princeton and quoter of Pope (including Pope's letters) may have hit upon it; even Thomas Bibb, whose sister was married to an Alexander Pope, may have proposed it. These three men rode on horseback together through much of the Mississippi Territory in 1808, soon deciding to move their families here and build, as John Wyeth says, "a new Virginia"--which meant, in those days, a bit of 18th-century English manor life. As they formed the ideal town in their minds on that long ride, the English Twickenham, as soon as one
of them thought of it, may have seemed the perfect model.

The founders of many American towns chose grandly ambitious names from Europe--Athens, Rome, Vienna, Paris. In contrast, the choice of "Twickenham" was sophisticated. It revealed a special knowledge of a certain small English community; and it announced specific and qualitative aims for a small American community. These are evidenced by the quick founding of a library, excellent male and female academies, a Haydn Society, a Thespian Society and a theater, and the attention to architecture and landscaping that the name promised.

Why was that name abandoned, and why so soon? One tradition says that simple justice to John Hunt prevailed, another that the older name could not be overcome, and a third that anti-British feeling in the events leading to the War of 1812 made the salute to England unpopular. A combination of these reasons is likely. At any rate, by the time he wrote his history of Madison County in the 1880's Judge Thomas Taylor could speak of "how we escaped the awful fate of being known to the world as Twickenham."

As Virginia Clay-Clopton has testified, opinion was not unanimous on this point. There have continued to be, and happily still are, Huntsvillians determined to keep the name alive, most notably now in that of the Twickenham Historic Preservation District. If their resolve needs any strengthening, the speculations in which I have indulged, nebulous though they have been, may possibly serve some purpose in drawing attention to the merits and attractions of the original Twickenham.