The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 18 | Number 3 Article 7

9-1-1992

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Recommended Citation
Jones, Virgil Carrington (1992) "Wade's Clock House," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 18: No. 3, Article 7.
Available at: https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol18/iss3/7

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Wade's Clock House

From a picture on the face of a clock, carted slowly down from Virginia, came the exterior design of the Robert B. Wade home, built in 1818 by his grandfather, on a lane leading to the west of Meridian Pike (Ed: North Memorial Parkway), one mile south of Meridianville.

Out of the soil there, on a several hundred acre plantation, this mansion grew, brick by brick, each made by five huge Negro slaves, also brought from the Old Dominion.

Nearby as they worked stood David Wade, the master, carefully supervising the construction of this domicile which was to be his castle in the new land to which he had migrated. It was to be a structure that would last, and he wanted to see that it was well done.

The builder's purpose has been largely realized, for a member of the fifth generation to live there is one of the present occupants. The building is solid, almost as it was when completed, but time has not kept up the neat appearance it once had.

Just what induced David Wade to come to Alabama, other than the general trend southward at that time, is not known. He had been active as a farmer at his old home and had been located in Hanover County, one of the richest agricultural sections in the state. These points are revealed by a slave agreement of 1809 which he brought south with him.

In the spring of 1817, David and his two brothers, Berry and John, loaded their supplies and equipment in oxcarts, gathered up all their cattle and horses, and set out. A strange cavalcade they appeared, picking their way through the country, with their slaves strung out behind them.

When they reached Tennessee, John admired the land there and decided to settle, but the others continued on to

Alabama, which then had been open to immigrants only a few years.

After reaching Madison County and finding the type of soil he was looking for, David sent word back to his wife, Eliza Grantland, who came down with her children by boat and was met at Ditto's landing by her husband.

On April 10 of the year he arrived, this settler bought two adjoining half-sections of land from Peyton Cox for $3,525. According to the deed filed on the transaction, this acreage then was in the Mississippi Territory, and had been entered by Thomas Freeman, who surveyed the county for the government.

Then Wade began his home. As quarters until the home was completed, he had his slaves build a two-room log cabin on the plantation.

Often back in Virginia, David had sat before the fire and gazed at a mansion pictured on a fine Seth Thomas clock standing on the mantlepiece above him. This dwelling was imposing, stately looking, just the house to be surrounded by rolling acres of cotton. So, naturally, when he actually began himself a home, he looked to this ideal for guidance.

In a cleared spot a few yards from the site, the slaves began making brick. Thousands were prepared, for thousands were to go into the home. While some worked there, others dug the cellar and started laying the walls.

Including the basement, which was a little more than half under ground, the house was to be three stories high, with three rooms on each floor. Chambers were large, and those on the end had six big windows to them. Walls were thick and solid.

On the outside of the brick portico, he built his colonnade, extending all the way to the eaves of the mansion, just as shown in the picture. Six columns were erected, with more than 12,000 bricks in each.

The entrance to the dwelling is its distinguishing feature. A stairway at the back of the columns leads up four or five feet to a large vestibule, bordered on each side by a smaller column.

Exactly in line with the front doorway, a walk was laid off between rows of boxwood to the road, nearly 200 feet away. A wide lawn stretched out on each side.

The dining room and kitchen, the latter with an eight

foot fireplace, were built of brick several feet behind the home. This was particularly a convenience during the summer when members of the family could go out in the small building under the trees and eat with the shade to protect them.

David Wade lost no time in clearing his land. The two half-sections he had bought were separated by the road in front of the home. That part on which he built was of a gradually rolling nature, while the other led gently up to a low range of mountains. With the cotton that grew on this soil, he began a fortune which was to grow into a fairly large figure before his death.

On June 7, 1826, David wrote to his niece at Charlottesville, Virginia, partly as follows:

> "I understand from your letter that you married Mr. D. S. Mosby, and that your friends approbate the same, and further it appears from your writing that you entertain a very favorable opinion of Mr. Mosby's doing well, which I earnestly hope he will, for your prosperity through life would afford me great pleassure. The death of your grandfather and grandmother, and particularly the death of your own mother, must no doubt have brought on you those sympathizing feelings which we all have on those occasions, but these events should remind us of our own dissolutions, for in a few years we shall be removed from this terrestrial ball to the invisible world where the virtuous will enjoy peace and tranquility through endless eternity.......
>
> "My family are all in good health and going on pretty well. I have five children, and as you never had the opportunity to see them I will here set their names - Margaret, Amanda, Malvinia, David, Harriet and Robert B. These are the names of my rising family, and they beg to be remembered to you. I have had some thought of bringing Margaret to Virginia to go to school. You will, therefore, much oblige me by writing me, respectively, the terms of board, tuition, et cetera, in Charlottesville..."

Of these children, Robert married Mollie Borgas and re-

moved to a plantation in Big Cove, while Margaret became the wife of John Turner of Limestone County.

Upon the father's death just prior to the Civil War, the plantation was left to the two single daughters, Amanda and Harriet.

This was a good move, so far as Amanda was concerned. Many residents still remember her as an active little woman with sparkling brown eyes and black hair, almost frail in appearance and very animated. They recall that she rode horseback a great deal, and that she was afraid of nothing. Often, she rode to town by herself in the dead of the night through necessity, or wrapped her robe about her and tramped off to the barn in the dark to investigate a strange noise which had awakened her.

Her sister, however, was of just the opposite type. She was a blond, resembled Queen Victoria in features, and was larger and taller than the other.

These two women lived there alone. Amanda was the manager of the farm, while Harriett took care of things around the home.

Apparently, no task about the plantation was too big for Amanda. When there was work to be done, she saddled her fine little riding horse and rode out to see that it was done. Those who remember her recall that she had a good business head and that she could not be tricked. To illustrate this latter trait, they cite the time she distrusted some men who were digging a well for her, and had them let her down into the hole so that she could watch them work.

One of her principal business deals was to have a saw-mill brought down from Tennessee to saw up timber felled in clearing some of her land. The McCormick home on Meridian Pike was built from a part of the lumber resulting.

Amanda had a time during the Civil War. When the Yankees made their appearance in the county, she went at once to the commander and obtained the following order:

> "Protection is hereby given Misses Harriet and Amanda Wade for their plantation and property. No foraging will be allowed on this property without special orders from the general commanding."

She also obtained numerous passes through the lines,

An order of this kind, obtained in 1863, follows:

> "Permission is hereby given to Miss Amanda M. Wade to go by Shelbyville with one two-horse wagon and teamster, and one carriage or buggy."

On a trip through the blockade to Nashville, she once was accompanied by several of her neighbors, including Mrs. Octavia Otey, Mrs. Hancock, Sabe Darwin, John Bentley and Will Hancock. Along with them also went Zenie Pruitt, slave of Mrs. John Pruitt of Meridianville, who bought the supplies she was sent for with only her memory as a guide.

But all the orders for protection she obtained failed to keep some Yankee from stealing one of Miss Amanda's mules. She spent more than one disappointing day riding

Farm Residence R. B. Wade

about the Federal camps in search of it. Even up to 1892, shortly before her death, she had a lengthy correspondence with General Joe Wheeler, then in Congress, asking him to introduce bills or to advise her the best manner in which to have her claims for this stolen property recognized.

Amanda and Harriet took two of their nieces, Helen and Anna, to educate. During their stay there at the home, numbers of dances were given for them in the big rooms of the second floor. A band was brought out from Huntsville and couples were gathered from the surrounding neighborhood. And while all this merriment was going on among the young people, the two old maid aunts would look on with approval, occasionally slipping off to another room to see that nothing had happened to the dainties they were to serve on a huge table later in the evening.

Hospitality, with as true a Southern purpose as David had in taking his design of a mansion from the clock, has always been the keynote in the home. Often, barbecues, spiced with mint juleps from the large wine cellar in the basement, drew crowds there to spend the day beneath the shade of trees at the side of the lawn. Festivities of this kind sometimes were held in the moonlight, while musicians waited to begin the waltz.

Harriett was the first of the sisters to die. She was followed a few years later, in 1898, by Amanda.

Shortly before their death, they had taken Robert B. Wade, the present occupant and son of their brother, Robert, there to live with them. Upon their death, the home was left to him, His granddaughter, Rene Rush Shamblin, grand niece of Stonewall Jackson, is the fifth generation of the family to occupy it.

Much about this home now reminds one of the antebellum days. Heavy antique furniture decorates each corner and rare chinaware bedecks the sideboard. Small window panes and ceilings of hardwood with floors of white oak, remain unchanged.

At the rear, dining room and kitchen – with pothook still hanging from its huge fireplace – stand, but are not used. In the loft above is to be found a spinning jenney, more than 100 years old, upon which the family once spun thread for its clothes.

Off to the side, the smokehouse remains almost as solid

as the day it was put there.

The sound of David Wade yelling to his slaves is all that is needed to put this home in its clime. The rest is there, even to the old clock standing upon the mantlepiece, idle now, but ready to run after a moment's winding.

Ed: The Wade home is no longer in existence, but the smokehouse is as it was in the 1930's when this story was written, "solid as the day it was put there."

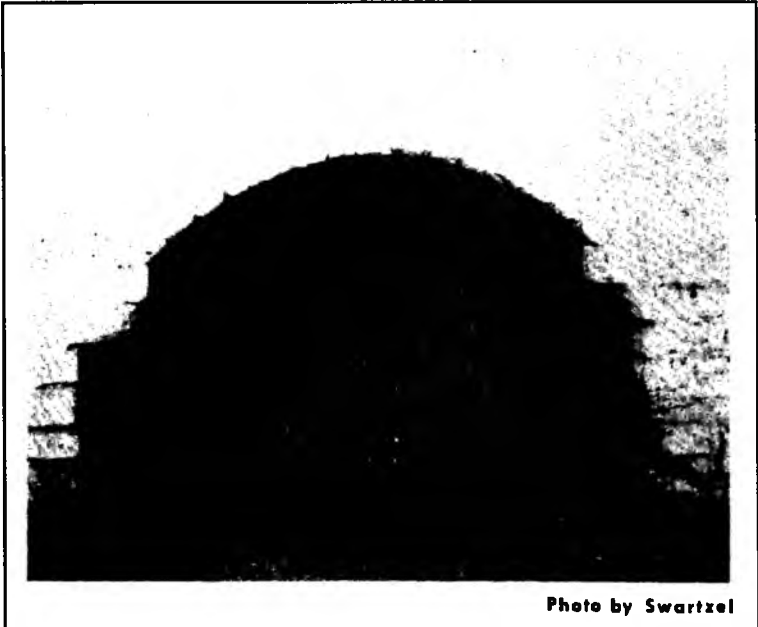

Photo by Swartzel

The fireplace in the Wade smokehouse. Smoke from hickory fires was channeled through a specially built chimney to the upper floor where meat was hung to cure from hand hewn rafters.