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Mr. Strong's "Riverboat House"

Early days on the Tennessee River, the sound of engines churning the muddy water, or cotton buyers and plantation owners as they bargained in the cool of the evening, or darkies chanting happily beneath the pale glow of a Southern moon, all might echo from the walls of the old Charles W. Strong home on a hill overlooking the highway a mile this side of Meridianville. (Ed: Mount Charron subdivision on North Memorial Parkway now lies on what was once part of the Strong estate. The home still stands on the crest of a hill north of, but adjacent to, Mount Charron.)

This house came bit by bit from the wreckage of an old river boat which ended its journeys up and down the stream at a point near Ditto's Landing at Whitesburg.

Today, it stands in its entirety, nearly 100 years old, a memorial to that period in Alabama history when a man built his home as a place from which he might daily go out into the fields to work and direct, returning at meal time for food obtained almost altogether from the surrounding acreage.

Though passed from the hands of its builder's family more than two score years ago, many of those who descended from its halls - the Powells, Kellys, Davises, McClellands, Burkes, Morrows and Strongs - still live not so many miles away.

Charles Strong, the builder, was born in Goochland Co., Virginia, in 1804. With his parents, George and Mary, (also called Polly), Strong, he migrated to Alabama several years prior to 1820, and settled on a large tract of mostly virginland near Meridianville, much of which was obtained from John Meux, heir to Richard Meux. His brothers, Pleasant, Hopson and Robert Strong, were also along.

In 1828, at the age of 24, Charles married Didama Humphrey, two years his junior. His wife had come South with her parents in an oxcart at the age of 12, taking turns with the rest of the family in walking and riding, and likewise had stopped on a farming site at Meridianville. After his marriage, he had lived in a two-room log cabin on his father's place, making his money from cotton that he grew on certain tracts allotted to him.

In 1828, this settler bought 60 acres of land in a section adjoining that on which his dwelling later was built, beginning a series of purchases which were to continue until his death in 1871, and to bring his total holdings to nearly 2500 acres, including lots in Huntsville and Meridianville, and several larger plots between the two settlements. His home site was acquired from his father's estate in 1835.

The large yield of cotton brought in by this rising young planter was transported for shipment to Whitesburg by means of wagons with large scoop bodies on them, somewhat resembling bowls on wheels. One day, while on such an excursion to the river, he noticed a boat anchored high and dry in the shallow waters near the shore. Upon inquiring, he found that it had been damaged and had been towed there to be junked.

Dressed lumber was a scarce article in that day, so the thought of wasting such good building material naturally caught his attention. He had a cabin, but he needed a real home.

Without further delay, he traced the owners of this craft and bought the hull for a paltry sum. Then, for weeks these odd-shaped wagons hauled cotton to the landing and returned loaded with boards and beams.

Two Negro slaves, Charlie, a professional blacksmith, and Jim, equally as well trained in the shoemaking trade, were his lieutenants in erecting the structure, which was to be his castle until he died. These men saw to every item that went into the building, preparing the foundation, chimneys, floors and all.

When they needed a piece of lumber which had not been salvaged from the ship, they went to a platform they had erected for the purpose and sawed by hand the required weather-boarding or sleeper, one standing on the top of the frame and pulling a cross-cut saw, while the other co-

operated from the bottom.

The house was placed on a high hill overlooking Madison County for many miles in all directions, except that shut off by a range of mountains behind. The foundation was of limestone rock, fitted into the excavation made there in the side of the fairly sharp slope to the road below. Two big rooms, with two small pantries, made secure from the outside by small barred windows between them, went into the basement. Immense fireplaces and doors were located at each end of this lower part.

A stairway led from the room on the south to a wide hallway above. This corridor, opening to the front and back, was bordered on each side by rooms 22 feet square. Stairs near the rear enabled one to clumb to the attic above, used as a sleeping quarters for the children.

The front door was in two panels, each five feet wide. These opened out upon a porch made of cedar and standing several feet from the ground on two large rock columns.

The lawn, terraced to prevent erosion and to aid descent to the circular driveway beneath huge trees beside the road, was set off mostly with cedars, and planted in many different kinds of flowers and shrubs.

Designing the layout of both the home and plantation to suit his own taste, Strong had the icehouse dug a few feet from the house on the north side. On the south was located an immense cistern, 30 feet deep and holding close to fifty thousand gallons of water. A two-room kitchen and store-room was erected a few feet to the rear and southwest side of the cistern. A dozen or more cabins for the slaves stood directly behind the house.

The stable and gin were built in a bottom on the south side of the rise on which the home was located. Near the stable was dug a 90-foot well. As water could be obtained from the source at only certain seasons of the year, Strong had another excavated in the field directly across the road, a quarter of a mile from the house. Water there was free-stone.

A half-acre plot of land a few yards south of the stable was exempt from taxation. This was the family graveyard. Around the area were planted alternately, pines and cedars. Another row of the trees divided the tract in half, allowing a space to bury members of the family on one side and

slaves on the other.

Strong was a great lover of fishing, even up to his death. So to furnish him a field for this sport and to refill his ice-house during the winter, he had a spring in a bottom toward the mountain dammed, creating a pond that covered at least an acre.

This planter knew his cotton and made his livelihood chiefly from that source but fruit was his hobby. He had practically every variety that would thrive in this climate planted around his home. Grapes held first place among them. On the top of the mountain behind his home, he started a vineyard that covered a six-acre field, in addition to two or three smaller vineyards.

Eight children had been born before the family moved into the home. These included Mary, who died young; George, a physician who died in Meridianville; David, killed in the Civil War; Robert; Sally, wife of Josh Kelly; Pleasant DeKalb; Fanny, who was married successively to Dr. Holbert Davis, George Schamberger and James Jackson; and Sue, wife of Will McClelland.

Those born in the home were Nannie, who never married; Henrietta, wife of Dr. James Burke; Cornelia, the present Mrs. Peyton Powell, and the only surviving son or daughter; and Callie, wife of Tom Morrow.

As each of these children married (except Pleasant DeK.) the father divided off a section of the lowland and a section of the wooded mountain land, averaging more than 100 acres, and gave it to them. This was his little bridal present.

Strong, like many another Southern plantation owner, lost a great deal during and following the Civil War. Much of this was in property taken by the Yankees, or in food and other articles destroyed to keep the invaders from carrying it off, but the principal part, of course, was in the scores of slaves freed in 1865. Despite this misfortune, however, the planter died without having once been in debt.

Many raiding parties stopped on their way south from Meridianville to raid his larder. One band carried away 12 mules at a single visit. They left certificates for the property, to be cashed by the Federal government, but Strong was never successful in collecting on them.

Mrs. Powell recalls that more than once she and her

mother and sisters fed Yankee soldiers in one of the two main rooms of the house while Confederates munched quietly in the other.

She also recalls the destruction of all but 50 barrels of wine made from grapes grown in her father's vineyard. He had stored these up prior to the war to age. When raiding parties began to arrive he ordered his slaves to carry one barrel up into the mountains and hide it, and to break in the heads of the others.

Both Robert and David went off with the Rebel recruits from this section, the former at the age of 18. Robert fought through the entire conflict and surrendered at Vicksburg. David was killed at Greensboro, Ala., and had been buried there in the Moore Cemetery for three months before the news reached his family.

Deed records show that, in almost consecutive years between 1828 and 1861 Strong bought some tracts of land.



Charles Waite Strong

Then for five years, from the outbreak of the war until the year following the surrender, his name was not recorded. Nevertheless, in 1866, he again began to build to his estate, and added nearly 700 more acres before his death.

His closing days were spent quietly there among his daughters and with his aging wife on his plantation. Fishing occupied most of his time. So did the fruit trees and the flowers. Almost daily he turned his horse's head up the winding pathway, bordered on each side with bear grass, to inspect carefully the vineyard he had last seen only the day before

With servants gone, members of his family were forced to turn their hands to many things unknown to them before. The kitchen out in the yard was abandoned for one of the two rooms in the cellar. The other was used as a weaving room. Many inconveniences about the home were altered to become part of the revolution that followed the end of slavery.

The planter died in February, 1871, and was followed seven years later by his wife. That was the end of the Strong home.

This land, bought in 1830 by George Strong from John Meux, was sold to Dr. J. O. Watts in 1878. Five years afterward, it came back into the hands of John P. Powell, J. P. Burke, Robert N. Strong and Sallie B. Kelly, heirs to the Strong estate. Then it was sold to William Allen. Many different persons have owned it since. The home is now occupied by W. P. Satterfield and family.

The orderliness and thoroughness of the plantation days are gone even though the house still stands in a sound condition, with only the addition of a room at the rear as a change. Chimneys, floors, the roof, large windows at the front and tiny windows at the back, the wide front door and rear doors of two boards, even the hand-carved mantle-pieces, have served for nearly a century with little evidence of their age. The walls of the foundation, the brick floors of the cellar, the two tiny pantries in which were stored molasses, sugar, flour, coffee, cheese and the more valuable gems of the larder in the old days, are almost as sound as ever. Even the small hole concealed back into the rock facing the fireplace, as a safe place to store the long-stemmed, burning clay pipe, remains in the lower room on

the hearth.

The immense cistern and surrounding cedars seem to have been the only items about the yard to have withstood the wear of time. Only a pit marks the icehouse. The kitchen, slave cabins, stables and gin have been obliterated. So has the fish pond which in later years became the power source for the gin. The vineyard is still there.

In an open bottom below the house, the graveyard, which once was bordered by the entwined boughs of cedars and pines, now is a pitiful witness to the absence of either sentiment or respect for the dead. A later owner felled the trees almost level with the ground. Tombstones are piled here and there about the exempt spot. Perhaps, in a few more years, only the childish markings on the walls of the home will remain as a monument to Charles Strong. (Ed: This home has been completely restored. 1969)

