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The Otey Mansion

The Otey home, just south of Meridianville, Ala., on North Memorial Parkway, claims two chief features of distinction: that it was an early residence and that it embodies the fundamental characteristics of a real Southern mansion.

Always surrounded by flowers, even from the first, this hospitable home sits and broods over the days that were, the days of the Deep South, of slavery at its height, and of the supreme enjoyment of the square-dance when the home circle was the dominating appeal.

This residence was built about 1850 by Madison Otey as a surprise for his bride, Octavia Wyche of Mississippi.

Walter Otey, son of Col. John Otey who commanded a battalion of riflemen during the Revolutionary War, was the first of his family to come to Alabama. He and his wife, Mary Walton of Salem, Va., whom he married in 1800, came to Huntsville early in 1817. For a few months they lived in the town, rapidly growing in population, then bought a section of land a mile south of the present site of Meridianville.

Then, that section of the country was heavily wooded, but it had much promise as a farming section. Walter first cleared away the forests on the brow of a gradual rise leading up from the trail that had been broken north from Huntsville toward Tennessee (Ed: This trail is now North Memorial Parkway.) With the trees he felled he fashioned a two-room log cabin, spacious on the inside and having a large hallway between the two rooms. This structure of white oak was weather-boarded and plastered, providing the coolest type of home in the Summer and the warmest in the Winter. Using this cabin as his domicile, he began

a plantation. More land was cleared, more acres added, more slaves bought to carry on the work. Finally, he had acquired one of the largest farming tracts in the county, comprising the majority of the land between his home and Flint River. This acreage was virgin soil, rich and ready for the plow, so he made the most of his opportunities.

Faith in friendship, however, which required merely that he sign a note of security, nipped his efforts in the bud. This friend's name is one which even Otey's descendants cannot identify now, but Walter staked nearly all for him and lost. When obligations were paid he had only 250 acres to call his own.

That blow was the death knell to the original owner of the property. Soon afterward, he died.

His widow took over the estate. The children of this pair included John Walter, owner of Bell Tavern in Huntsville and the first Probate Judge of Madison County, who married Cynthia Smith; Lucy Ann, wife of Rhoda Horton, former owner of the McCracken home on Meridian Pike; Mary Frances, married to James Robinson, owner of the adjoining plantation and whose home once stood near the old McCormick estate; Caroline Louisa, married to John Robinson, builder of the Dilworth home, whose land adjoined that of her sister, Mary Frances; Eliza, wife of Mr. Dillard; Armistead, who married Elizabeth Dozier; Christopher, who first wed Emily Smith and later Margaret A. Blackwood; William Madison, who married Octavia Aurelia Wyche; and Maria Melinda, married to John W. Pruitt of Meridianville.

These children were educated at the best universities the South afforded, after which they were married, an event in their lives which took them, one by one, away from that little two-room cabin - that is, with the exception of Madison who remained to take care of his mother.

Madison began to look about for a wife. His search ended at the plantation home of the Wyches, an old English family that first had settled in Virginia. Octavia accepted his proposal to marry and he returned home to prepare for the ceremony.

First, Octavia must have a home that would approach to a substantial degree the mansion, surrounded by slaves, to which she had been accustomed while living with her father.

The present home was the result of that preparation. This spacious ten room house was originally Italian in style but since has been changed so that it now is embellished by the four Ionic columns that characterize this Old Southern mansion.

As planned by Madison, the dwelling was divided into ten rooms, those on the first floor measuring 20-foot square, with unusually high ceilings. A 40-foot hallway, with double doors in the center, divided the house. Bannisters of cherry wood followed the course of the stairway as it led up from a point toward the back.

The woodwork of all windows and doors, secured with wood pegs, was fluted and painted in ivory. Floors were made of hard pine, sawed in wide planks and planed on one side. Only hand made nails were used in the construction.

A row of slave cabins was built at right angles to the main dwelling. As a final step, he had one room of the old cabin moved to the rear of the house and used as a kitchen, another characteristic of those days, for the odor of cooking must not bother the master or his family.

Next came the arrangement of a lawn that would serve as a suitable surrounding for the front of the house. Madison had vague ideas about this but he engaged the services of an English landscape gardner to complete them.

First, the architect laid off a drive a little to one side of the mansion, which ended in a circle directly in front. Next, he planted a row of pines along the lawn's edge, then a row of holly, and finally a row of cedars, interspersed with walnut and locust trees. These he arranged in such a manner as to allow passersby a full view of the home.

Two huge oaks down on the side of the road escaped the gardener's axe. These later became a resting place for travelers. Here they reined their horses and chatted idly in the shade, while a Southern sun baked the dusty wagon tracks only a few feet away.

The peak of the landscaper's work came in the two flower gardens he placed at each side of the mansion. These were arranged in squares, on the inside of which two ovals of boxwood, set three feet apart, allowed a strolling place for lovers or for an admirer of flowers.

Next to the inner circle of boxwood were planted tall, white lillies, then a double row of tulips, then hyacinths

and finally a pink crepe myrtle. At each side and end of the ovals of boxwood were placed rosebushes. In the little triangles at the corners of the square, peonies and roses, bordered with white and blue duck lillies and violets, bloomed.

Walks led from each end of the porch to these gardens, while still another carried one from the front to the flower bordered circle of the driveway and to the horse block.

Upon completing the last details, Madison had his Negro driver, Henry, hitch up his two fine carriage horses, "Jim Black" and "Jim Brown" to carry him to get his bride. This vehicle resembled half a goose egg, with Henry perched high up in front on a small seat.

Upon their return, Madison and his bride, Octavia, began a characteristic plantation life. Numerous dances and other social events livened its halls. While a bright moon lighted the way for guests as they strolled about the lawn, an orchestra from Huntsville furnished music to as many as 40 couples at one time. Never a Christmas went by that attention did not center upon a bounteous dinner for at least a score of friends. Among those who enjoyed the hospitality of this home was Bishop Harvey Otey of the Tennessee diocese. He and his daughter, Donna, stopped there as guests when he dedicated the Episcopal Church in Huntsville.

Madison and Octavia were the parents of six children. These included Imogene, married to William Fields, owner of a 3000 acre farm at Castlewood, Va.; William Walter of Birmingham who married Sophia Robertson and formerly settled near Meridianville; Marie Rebecca, married to John M. Hampton of West Point, Mississippi, settled near Meridianville; Laura Elise, unmarried; Lucille Horton, married to John Bealle Walker, formerly of Rockingham Co., Va., and who later lived in the old home; and Madison, who died in childhood.

The father was unable to serve during the Civil War because he was too old and because he was afflicted with carbuncles. In his stead, he sent his overseer, named Neaves, who served throughout the war without a scratch.

During the Civil War numerous soldiers were given food from the little log cabin at the back. The family's biggest loss at the hands of the Yankees were 40 tons of hay, stolen

from a field in front of the house. In addition to this, a cedar fence surrounding the lawn was torn down and taken to the camp on the Dilworth estate where the boards were made into stockades for mules.

During Reconstruction Mrs. Otey was a valuable friend to the local Ku Klux Klan. Beside buying whistles for members of this group she made many of their robes and other trappings.

One night Mrs. Otey looked out upon the lawn of her home. There, silently surrounding the buildings were at least 100 white-robed Klansmen. As she walked out upon the porch, each of them bowed low upon his horse's neck. Then the leader asked if there was anything they could do for her. Receiving a negative reply they turned and rode silently away. Later that night a man was taken out and whipped for beating his wife.

Both Madison and Octavia lived to an old age. After their death, the home passed into the hands of the Walkers. This mansion still retains much of its old atmosphere. Large trees shade it generously. Boxwood from the flower gardens, prepared more than three-quarters of a century ago, bedeck it on each side. Even the old kitchen made from the log cabin, now used as a crib, remains.

The two huge oaks that once stood along the roadside have been gone for years. A storm blew down one, while the other was sawed into stove wood to make way for the route of the present highway. At the north of the house, beneath another large oak, water still is obtained from two large springs.

Upon entering the home, the visitor's eyes are attracted immediately to the two oil paintings on the wall. These are of Walter Otey and Mary Walton, sketched before they left their Virginia home more than 150 years ago. In a room to the right hangs another portrait, that of Octavia Wyche and her mother, painted while the daughter was only five years old.

Much of the original furniture of the home still remains. Rosewood, mahogany and cherry fittings, rare in their antiquity, are to be found in every corner. A heavy four-poster bed, a melodeon, a sideboard that antedates rollers, and many other objects of this nature are included. Chief among them all, however, is an odd-looking old piano of

rosewood. From the notes of this relic alone might come more romance of the Old South than even the pages of history have revealed.



The Otey Mansion in 1969.