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Quietdale

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Quietdale

Though it was never seen by the man who planned it, who worked in anticipation of the day he could rest beneath its roof, "Quietdale," the Erskine Mastin home on Meridianville Pike embodies all of those ideals which brought so many young men South to seek their fortune - the love of a spacious mansion as the center of a surrounding plantation. (Ed: Quietdale is the home adjacent to Lee High School on the north. 1969.)

This home was the idea of William "Black Bill" Robinson, high sheriff of Madison County from 1842 until he died in 1852. For years, he built it in his mind, working over each detail imaginatively. Then death interfered.

Respecting his wish, his widow, however, continued with the plan and erected the house a year or two afterward.

Contrary to the custom today, by which almost every home carries the architect's touch, this dwelling bears the personality of its builder in every detail. No massive columns set off its front, no towering facade marks the south side as the main entrance, yet there is everything about this structure to make it seem out of place in any surroundings other than those of a plantation.

A further item points to the care with which this home was prepared. Robinson spent many months gathering lumber for the dwelling, and when it was completed, there was enough material left to erect another.

Mr. and Mrs. Erskine Mastin worked with a studied interest in restoring the mansion to as near its original beauty as possible. The home has been modernized, but no major feature - and only those minor ones absolutely necessary - has been changed.

The land included in the estate first was entered by John

Williams Walker, grandfather of Judge R. W. Walker of Huntsville, who served as the president of the constitutional convention for the Alabama territory and as the first United States senator from this state. Later, it was owned by John F. Newman, William Fleming, Lemuel Mead and, finally, by Robinson.

This last owner came to Madison County from Virginia around 1825 or 1830, it is believed, for he was not born until 1808. Some of the old-timers here recall that their fathers considered "Black Bill" Robinson the smartest man in the county, and records indicate that they were right, for he was one of the largest land owners in this section, having thousands of acres in North Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi. In addition to this, it is said his ambition was to own 500 slaves before he died, a desire which was never quite realized. In the settlement of his estate, however, one inventory lists ninety two slaves at an estimated value of nearly \$60,000., but there were scores of others to take care of his seven plantations.

Jerry Robinson, one of his slaves, who later worked for Dr. William Burritt, grandson of "Black Bill" and present owner of his large plantation in Big Cove, often recalled his master's early start. This Negro had run away from his first owner and had come to Huntsville. After a time, he had been leased by Robinson.

"Black Bill" is said to have been the first brick manufacturer in Madison County. If this is true, Thomas Brandon and George Steele, earlier masons, must have obtained their material from the kilns at Chattanooga or elsewhere prior to his arrival, as such often was the case. At any rate, Jerry, the slave, was put to work making brick.

"Marse Bill considered me his right-hand man," Jerry used to recall. Sometimes I was a brick-maker. Then again, I sawed lumber, standing at the bottom of a pit while another Negro worked the saw with me from above. That was what gave Marse Bill his start - me and my knowledge of them trades."

Some of the first brick manufactured by Robinson were used to build the old Mastin's mill at Mastin's lake north-west of the present W. P. Dilworth property.

Later, "Black Bill," who allowed no one to deprive him of his rights and almost daily became engaged in a tiff over

some matter or another, was made high sheriff, a dignified office in those days, and the most sought after position in the county. This was the real beginning of the fortune built up by this man, for from then on he amassed wealth.

He was a keen financier, and almost everything he touched brought him wealth. He signed several deeds of trust which later were executed in his favor. Between 1838 and 1847 he was in a business of some sort with Benjamin Jolley. In addition to this, he owned 298 shares of capital stock in the Memphis and Charleston railroad, the first section of which, that between Huntsville and Memphis, was completed in 1851.

As his wealth increased, Robinson made plans for the home he had dreamed of all his life. Strangely enough, he wanted it to be a frame house and of the best lumber to be had. To Bridgeport, he sent for this material, having it shipped down the river by boat to Whitesburg landing where it was culled and then hauled to Huntsville by oxcart.

After he had collected all this lumber, he died, in the 44th year of his life. The end came while he was attending a Fourth of July barbecue at Cold Springs on Monte Sano Mountain.

Robinson left a widow, Caroline Moore of Hazel Green, and five children: William and James P. who never married; Mary K., wife of Dr. Amatus R. Burritt, owner of a home still standing near Eustis and Greene Streets; Fannie J., wife of J. L. Ridley, and Charles T., who married and lived at Pulaski, Tennessee.

The site chosen for the home met with the widow's approval, for there she could be nearer her husband's family than at her first residence, since torn down, at the corner of Gates Street and Oak Avenue. Across Meridian Pike from the mansion she was to build was her brother-in-law, James, whose dwelling near the McCormick estate also has been razed. Even nearer, at the Dilworth estate, lived John Robinson, a cousin by marriage.

A slight change, through necessity, was made in locating the mansion so carefully planned by her husband. He had selected a point between the present site and the railroad track, but this had been done before the bed for the railway had been laid. When this northern branch of the Memphis and Charleston began to take form, though it was

not completed until after the home was built, Mrs. Robinson decided the building should be farther up on the rise leading to Chapman's mountain.

Every piece of this 14-room house was made or hand-sawed by slave-labor, yet the manner in which each little board or decorative item is put together indicates the care with which work was done in those days. Months were required in preparing the structure.

An odd feature is noticed about this home. Upon passing through the front door, entrance was gained to a reception hall, with four doors, two at the back and one at each side, all leading to other parts of the house. Those at the back each opened upon a stairway, separated by a partition extending up to the ceiling of the second floor. In other words, the house was divided after leaving the entrance hall.

This division, naturally enough, supposedly might have been made so that the women could be segregated on one side of the house and the men on the other, but further details indicate otherwise. Rooms to the right of the reception hall were immense chambers separated by large sliding doors. Those above were of the same dimensions and also had sliding doors between them. On the left side of the house, rooms were smaller and had more intricate divisions, including hallways and dressing rooms.

The most logical deduction, it seems, is that the right side of the house was used for entertainment, while the left side was devoted to family requirements.

All rooms of the first floor were 16 feet high and measured more than 20 feet in other dimensions. The ceilings of each of the two immense rooms to the right were set off with large center decorations of a dahlia design, all done by a slave artist. At each end of the long room, formed when the sliding doors were thrown back, were tall pier glass mirrors which reflected into each other from their locations nearly 50 feet apart. Astral lamps, rare paintings, deep rugs, gold cupids and statuettes formed food for this reflection. Other features of this part of the house were two mantelpieces of imported Italian marble.

Doors were unusually wide, though not of an extraordinary height. All had transoms above them, the glass of which was prepared by fitting two panes of equal size into the opening, perhaps because the single pane of the dimen-

sion needed could not be obtained. This fixture over the door on the west side of the house was enclosed with a tri-colored glass to catch in contrasting colors the dying rays of the setting sun.

A feature of the front door was noticed in its outer knob, which like all those in the main hallway, was of silver, thus avoiding a contrast when the portal was thrown open.

In the attic was placed a narrow stairway leading up to a trapdoor, which permitted one to go out upon the flat copper roof above. This was Mrs. Robinson's idea, for it would aid her in drying her fruit for Winter use.

From this high position, Huntsville appeared almost at one's feet, while an excellent view of the surrounding mountains could be obtained. Mrs. Robinson, through this arrangement, once was enabled to stand upon the top of her home and watch a Civil War skirmish a short distance to the southwest.

Eight bells, each with a different tone, summoned servants to various parts of the house. These signals were worked by wires leading to the chimes on the back porch.

Wide porticoes surrounded the home on all except the east side, thus allowing the early morning sun to penetrate the two large lower parlors. The ceiling of the front porch was highly decorated by panels of plastering in floral patterns.

More than 30 huge oaks, with spreading branches that throw a blanket of shadow about the spacious lawn, towered above the house. Beneath these, scores of boxwood trees marked off the wide walkway leading down to the picket fence, where the roadway circled before the customary horse block. Off to the west side and to the rear of the home were located the flower and vegetable gardens.

Directly behind the dwelling and almost touching one corner of it was built the slave quarters, containing the kitchen and five other rooms. A cellar, in which could be stored fruit and vegetables, was dug beneath it. The double porch on this structure was of cedar.

At the back of the slave quarters stood a large smoke-house while the well-house and barns were off to one side. The ice house, since filled up, was located at the rear of the garden.

In the large rooms of this pre-war mansion have been

held many a characteristic plantation dance. There, lovers stole off from the gay throng for a quiet stroll in the spotted moonlight beneath the towering oaks. And the sound of shuffling feet and the tone of string instruments carried delight back to even the oldest darkies at the rear.

This home escaped all pillage during the Civil War. On the hill to the east of it was located the Yankee barracks, maintained there for several years after the struggle, but not once did the invaders molest the widow and her children in the large mansion near them.

Mrs. Robinson died Jan. 30, 1885. The following Fall, the estate was offered for sale at public outcry and was bought by Erskine Mastin.

Members of Erskine Mastin's family who lived there with him included his wife, nee Lula Spragins, and seven children: Robert, of Pheonix, Ariz.; Mary Irby, Richmond, Va., director of public health nursing for the State of Virginia; Hervey, who died in 1906; Sallie, wife of Eugene Gill; Henrietta, of New York; Laura, who married R. Sayler Wright of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Lula, wife of Jay W. Harlan of Danville, Kentucky.

A visit to "Quietdale," as the estate is now known, gives a fairly comprehensive glance into the life of the last century. All is run on the basis of a profitable plantation.

The boxwood and picket fence have gone from the front lawn, but hedge surrounds the mansion on three sides. The driveway now curves up to the front doorstep. On each side of it and in all parts of the yard are roses, peonies, flags, tulips and other flowers.

Very few changes have been made in the home. Original floors have been left in all cases. The partition, however, which once divided the house from top to bottom, has been torn out, and the stairway moved to one side of the room to the rear of the reception hall, so that it now leads up to the second floor by means of a wide landing.

Antique furniture of all kinds, dressing cases, mirrors, massive sideboards, highboys, desks, presses and walnut closets, now aids in furnishing the large corners of the building. Numerous ancestral painting also give the home a colonial touch.

The old slave quarters at the back have been connected with the upper floor of the main house by means of an

extended porch and short flight of stairs, while the kitchen has been moved to a rear room of the main dwelling.

The interior of the second floor of this outer house in no way resembles its original self. It is now divided into a den and billiard room, both redecorated and the latter cedar lined. This is one spot to which the present master of the home can slip away for a quiet and entertaining hour.



Photo by Swartzel

In 1969 Quietdale retains the charm of the Old South.