

# The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

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Volume 18 | Number 3

Article 17

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9-1-1992

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### Recommended Citation

Jones, Virgil Carrington (1992) "Honeymoon Heartbreak," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 18: No. 3, Article 17.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol18/iss3/17>

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# Honeymoon Heartbreak



Three months to live, the doctor said.

In the face of this direful future, Mary Chambers joined hands with William Bibb to take the nuptial vows.

Across the western face of a mausoleum in Maple Hill Cemetery, standing shoulders above other monuments in the corner delegated to Huntsville's earliest settlers, the story is told.

This gray sepulcher, easily singled from the marble horde about it, has an air which might signify to the reflective mind that some unusual episode lay hidden within its bosom.

The key to its century-old past is seen in the message of its evenly-chisled epitaph:

Mary S. Bibb  
Wife of Wm. D. Bibb  
Daughter of Doct. Henry Chambers  
Born October, 1816  
Married Feb. 24, 1835  
Died May 26, 1835

Three months later, as recorded in the epitaph, Mary died.

Old and young alike mourned her death. It had come as the blush of youth lay new upon her cheek, just as she started out upon the happiest stage of a girl's career.

A not unusual household blunder was to blame.

Huntsville, as proud as it was in the early 30's, felt even prouder that William Bibb and his brother, David Porter Bibb, of Belle Mina, then just reaching manhood, were attracted here by the beautiful belles. Both of these young swains were handsome, polished, a new generation of one of the first families of Alabama, and they drew

attention wherever they went.

Their father was Thomas Bibb, second governor of the state, who had stepped into that office upon the accidental death of his brother.

Frequently, these young men rode their spirited horses along the streets of what then was the largest community in almost the entire state, or hailed into town from their home in Limestone behind all the menial dignity of high-hatted coachmen. Often, they stopped at the residence, now that of W. W. Newman, built by their father for their sister, Mrs. William Bradley.

Few were the big Huntsville dances in that day which did not have the Bibb brothers at some prominent place in their grand marches. The "light fantastic" to these eligible beaux was a part of their education.

So only nods resulted when the pair finally restricted their attention to two cousins of the community - Mary Smith Chambers and Mary Parrott Betts.

Mary Chambers was the daughter of Dr. Henry Chambers, early Alabama legislator. Born in Virginia, he was graduated from William and Mary College in 1808, studied medicine for a time, and then settled in Alabama, where he practiced his profession until 1812.

When the war of that year occurred, he served as a surgeon on the staff of Gen. Andrew Jackson. He set up his residence finally in Huntsville and was a member of the state constitutional convention here in 1819. He was elected U. S. senator and continued in that office until his death in 1826, while en route by horseback to Washington.

In his memory, the Alabama legislature named Chambers County. His wife was the daughter of an army officer, from whom Fort Smith, Ark., got its name.

Quite often after the Bibb brothers had made up their minds, they drew rein in front of the widow Chambers' home, now the residence of R. P. Weeden. There they made love until a reasonable hour, charming the cousins who were drawn even closer together by the attention they shared from these two young suitors.

Relatives on both sides watched with approval. This courtship seemed the logical preliminary to unions which would connect three prominent North Alabama names.

By the fall of 1834, matters had been brought to a head.

The brothers voiced their proposals, and the two cousins had accepted unanimously. They were to be united in a double wedding.

Much excitement marked the Chambers and Betts households after the betrothals had been announced. The ceremony was to be fittingly carried out. No detail, however important, was to miss its share of preparation. Huntsville was to remember the function as one of the outstanding occasions of its history.

Off to Paris went orders for elaborate wedding gowns for the future brides. Both trousseaus were to be prepared of the finest materials, and were to be as complete as the world's leading designers could make them.

Party after party brought the couples into the limelight of social activity during the next few weeks. The prominent of Madison and adjoining counties buckled down to the extended celebration these marriages demanded. Announcement of the wedding date was expected at each function.

Christmas came and went without word of the lovers' plans. January wore on. Yet, no one became alarmed over the state of affairs, because the betrothed were together almost constantly, and there was no lack of evidence that their minds were definitely set.

Only those who were more closely related to the girls' families knew the reason for the delay. The wedding gowns had not arrived.

Parents soothed the daughters by telling them of the time and care required to make bridal outfits from fine materials and of the weeks taken up by a slow voyage across the ocean. France was thousands of miles away, they recalled.

But even these solaces did little to curb the girls' impatience. Each stage coach that rolled into Huntsville, they imagined, brought some message of their costumes.

Not until early February, however, did a large foreign-looking package arrive. And when they breathlessly tore away its wrappings, they found only Mary Chambers' outfit. The other had been held up by lack of material.

The cousins were overcome with disappointment. More relentless days of waiting! Further intensive watch for the mail! Indefinite delay of this happiest event of their lives!

Days went by, and then William Bibb and Mary Chambers declared their intention to marry at once, even though such

a stop would mean the end of their plans for a double wedding. Mary Betts and David Porter, realizing their own impatience, agreed with them in their haste.

The ceremony was to take place at the Chambers home. Excitement increased as days passed. Invitations were dispatched hurriedly. Fingers were busied with sewing. Cooks turned their attention to increased larders. Friends came in numbers to heap congratulations. From distances, relatives wrote that they had made plans to be present.

A few nights before the wedding, an old Negro mammy called the intended bride and her cousin to one side.

"Chilluns," she said, "yo' better tek some medicine 'fo his marriage comes off, 'cause yo' don't want yo' faces mussy when all dem good lookin' gen'mens gits here. I'se gwine fix yuh up some ahead ob time, and den yo'll be de prettiest things present."

The girls looked at each other and laughed, but they nodded assent. This old slave had cared for them since childhood.

The Negro hustled off into another room and returned presently with a glass of clear liquid.

"Tain't nothin' but salts," she coaxed. "Tain't gwine hurt yo'."

The girls hesitated over which should take the medicine first.

"You're the one who's getting married - you take it first." Mary Betts urged.

So Mary Chambers hurriedly drank the distasteful dose. As she set the glass down, she grasped her throat.

"I've been poisoned!" she screamed.

While her cousin soothed her, the Negro mammy dashed into the other room, to return a moment later in tears.

The "salts" had come from a bottle containing oxalic acid!

A slave hurried away for a doctor. In a few minutes, the Chambers home, for days overflowing with happy wedding plans, was buried in deep gloom. William Bibb's fiancée could live only a short while - three months at the longest.

Physicians, minus stomach pumps and other medical discoveries of today, were powerless to help her. It was a matter of slowly dying of ulcerated stomach. William

Bibb was mad with grief when informed of the tragedy. For days he attended his sweetheart's bedside constantly, fondling a hand that gradually weakened in his grasp.

Then, one day, his muscles tensed, and he stared into eyes that watched him continually.

"Mary," he said, "you and I are going to be married."

An entirely different wedding from that planned took place on Feb. 26. Friends and relatives with forced smiles gathered to watch the Rev. John Allen, first pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, unite the couple in holy wedlock.

Across the bedspread, directly above the form of the beautiful girl, lay the wedding gown that had come from Paris.

Mary Chambers lived three months to the day from the date of her marriage.

Afterward, the bereaved husband had one of the finest monuments money could buy placed above her grave. It was a mausoleum, the first erected in Maple Hill Cemetery.

Across the face of this marker were inscribed the three principal dates in Mary Chambers' life - her birth, her marriage, her death. One error, however, was made. The wedding date was given as February 24. This was the date the license was issued. The ceremony was not solemnized until two days later.

This unusual sepulcher was a cause of much superstitious gossip among Negroes in later years. As time blotted out the details of the unfortunate girl's death, darkies explained that the tall mausoleum was placed there because the grave was that of a woman who died sitting up in a rocking chair, so that she had to be buried that way.

Limestone County records show that William Bibb was married again on February 3, 1840, this time to Mary L. Mitchell.

Descendants of Mary Betts, the cousin so intimately connected with this tragedy, today include Mrs. George Duncan, Athens, Ala., granddaughter; Robert Chambers Bibb, Jr., Huntsville, great-grandson; Mrs. James H. Pride, Huntsville, great-niece, and Major Edward Chambers Betts, Washington, D. C., great-nephew.





Photo by Swartzel

In 1969 the Watkins-Moore home is one of the most beautiful in the South.