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The Legend of Lily Flagg

Though not by far so old as many homes still standing in Madison County, an old residence on Adams Avenue, at one time owned by Samuel H. Moore, prominent plantation owner, bids strongly for a place among local history.

Once allowed to fall back in appearance until it lost even a savor of its former beauty, this building was remodeled in the 1920's to give its present outward aspect, a tall, expansive, square building reaching up into the spreading trees around it. But not even the four tall columns of its front hint of the superb architecture of its interior.

This home, as far back as can be learned, always had been the scene of some of Huntsville's most magnificent social events.

The lover of ghost stories would find ample material with which to frighten Southern darkies, should he interview some of its past owners. Such tales are encouraged largely by a tall tower on the top of the building.

The first sale of the land on which the home stands was recorded in 1838, when John Read bought it from William H. Pope, son of Leroy Pope, who at one time owned all of the land upon which the city has been built. The lot then extended down to Locust Street. In 1842, it was sold at a profit of around \$150 to John Read, also a large landowner. Nine years later, Read bargained with James L. Watkins for \$90 more than he had paid for it. The last owner passed it to his son, Robert H. Watkins.

The Watkins family is given credit for building the home, which was erected in the '50's. By that time, a half century or so after the town first had been incorporated, Huntsville began to be recognized throughout the South for its beautiful homes. This reputation started a local building feud.

Watkins was not to be outdone. On all sides of him were stately dwellings, and he wanted his to be included among them. The corporation limits ran as far south as Williams Street. In this southern section, many of the wealthier residents had built their dwellings.

Not far away from the Watkins property stood the residence of Dr. Charles H. Patton, erected by Leroy Pope. Even nearer was that of Governor Bibb. But all along the streets were houses of more than creditable construction.

To a lumberman at Courtland, who had amassed a name for his remarkable selection of well-grained wood, Watkins sent for cedar, chestnut and walnut pieces. In the meantime, slaves were put to work preparing hand-pressed brick for its walls.

From Charlottesville, Va., also known for its beautiful home, came Charles Bell, a Negro carpenter who had had experience there, to build three spiral stairways as one of the features of the interior. South Carolina furnished another Negro craftsman to make plaster of paris moldings. Frescoing was put together in sections.

All woodwork inside was of walnut. Two spiral stairways led to the second floor. The third, built around a large post, led to the tower on the roof, which consisted of two floors. So far as could be ascertained, no other such cupola was to be found anywhere in the South. World travelers spoke of a similar lookout in Paris, but of no other. This addition furnished a beautiful view of the surrounding country even allowing a sight of the Tennessee River on clear days.

Including the two in the tower, the home was made up of 16 rooms, two of which were large double parlors. Nine doors gave access to the outside and 58 large windows supplied light. Those next to the ground extended down to the floor.

Woodwork was put together with pegs and was of a different style in each room. In tearing up the floor of the kitchen a few years ago, one of the small wooden hammers, used to drive in the pegs, was found under the building.

Beneath the parlor at the southeast corner of the home was built a fine wine cellar. This stood above the ground and was designed on the best advised plan. A cistern also was added. This home was Robert Watkins' gift to his

bride, Margaret Carter. She, however, lived to enjoy it only a short while. Soon after its construction, the Civil War came on and drew the men away to war. The wife had just given birth to a child when the Yankee forces, under General O. M. Mitchell reached Huntsville.

Into the yard of the home they came to spread their tents, alarming the servants so that they ran to the weakened mother with the news. She died a few hours later.

The property afterward became that of Samuel H. Moore, owner of several plantations, chief of which was the one at Lily Flag, considered one of the richest farms in the county. Samuel H. was the son of Dr. David Moore, local physician, who had received his education in Virginia and been graduated in medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. The father had bought considerable land at the first land sales in Madison County in 1809. He was one of the three trustees to whom Leroy Pope deeded one half of his purchase covering the site of Huntsville. They were given the right to divide off and sell lots and to use the proceeds for the advancement of the town.

As times were somewhat better when Samuel Moore became the owner, he improved the interior of the building to a much greater extent. Bathtubs, uncommon then, were brought from New York, lighting fixtures from abroad and marble mantle pieces came from Italy.

This resident was a bachelor and a member of the legislature, but a lover of social activity. Many prominent visitors in the city were his guests; many local celebrities were married beneath the high ceilings of its immense rooms, amid surroundings banked with flowers in true Southern style; and many dancers took advantage of its spacious halls.

Back to this home in 1892 came Samuel Moore from the fair at Chicago, where he had gone to display his prize cow, Lily Flag, just pronounced the world's greatest butter producer. To celebrate her success, he decided upon a reception in her honor.

This event cost hundreds of dollars. A dancing platform, 50 feet square, was erected at the rear of the mansion and was illuminated with one of the first electric lighting systems in this section of the country. Gay lanterns were hung in every nook and corner of the yard and the house,

painted a bright yellow for the occasion, literally was banked with flowers.

Formal invitations, bearing a picture of the cow and the figures of her world record, were sent to prominent persons as far north as Chicago. On the night of the event, guests arrived in evening clothes to join a line which moved slowly through a small stable at the rear, where the little Jersey stood amid a bevy of roses.

An Italian orchestra from Nashville furnished the music for the occasion. Wine and champaign were at hand all about the yard and special tables were brought in to hold the refreshments. One of these was covered by more than 50 different kinds of cakes.

This event lasted way into the morning. Older residents prize it as one occasion in their lives they will never forget.

After Mr. Moore's death, the home passed into the hands of Miss Kate Barnard, his niece, and later to Earl Smith, late local attorney. In 1919, Smith deeded the property to his wife, Mrs. Margaret DuBose Smith.

Mrs. Smith's first move was to modernize the home. Using her own judgment in regard to architecture, she made changes in the house and yard at a cost of \$50,000.

Porches were added, four tall columns were built to set off the front, four bathrooms were divided off on the inside, new floors were laid and the dull walnut woodwork was changed to ivory. Shrubbery was planted about the yard.

This former owner recalls that she had little trouble hiring workmen to remodel the home. During the Civil War, it is said, gold was hidden in pots about the grounds. One of these, containing \$3,000, was rumored to have been found by a carpenter in later years while tearing up a porch floor. Another, it is reported, was never found.

A knocker, still on a door of the home, was from one of Charlottesville's oldest residences.

During Mrs. Smith's ownership, Admiral Dewey's son, also of the U. S. Navy and a world traveler, visited the home as a possible buyer. He seemed delighted with it, she said, and explained that he had never seen in any part of the world architecture that would parallel that of its interior.

But the spacious rooms and halls, with the odd tower above, reached by means of the winding stairway, gave

the home an air to which some Negro servants could never become accustomed. Their belief in ghosts controlled their imaginations. Mrs. Smith recalls that more than once they rushed to her with tales of lamps that had jumped off tables, of lights that had lighted suddenly when no one was around, and of mysterious noises.

