The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 19 | Number 1 Article 10

3-20-1993

From Nashville to Nottingham: A Serendipitous Flight of Fancy, Kinship and Friendship

Elise Stephens

Follow this and additional works at: https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly

Part of the Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Stephens, Elise (1993) "From Nashville to Nottingham: A Serendipitous Flight of Fancy, Kinship and Friendship," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 19: No. 1, Article 10.
Available at: https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol19/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

FROM NASHVILLE TO NOTTINGHAM: A Serendipitous Flight of Fancy, Kinship, and Friendship

Elise Stephens

Each year now, in October, Nashville, Tennessee hosts a Festival of Books at its Capital Mall. Authors make themselves as available as next-door-neighbors used to. They read their material, reveal intimate details of the writer's psyche, sign personalized autographs and make themselves available for drinks or coffee. This camaraderie and helpfulness inspires hundreds of would-be writers and thousands of readers to continue their romance with the written word. It was at the Nashville Festival that I met Captain Kangaroo and Jimmy and Roselyn Carter and secured their autographs, among others, for the Foundation's Autograph Quilt a few years back.

Another highlight of the Nashville Festival is the antiquarian book sale that coincides and is less than a block away from the Capital Mall. There, last year, I lucked onto a 1909 Bandanna Ballads by Howard Weeden that had been owned by Alex Haley and only paid $35.00 for it. I also found some sheet music of very special interest to me: a copy of a score written by Sidney Homer, a cousin of mine and Winslow Homer. It was the score for Howard Weeden's "A Banjo Song." A serious classical composer at the turn of the last century and married to Louise Homer, one of America's premier opera singers, Sidney wrote in his autobiography *My Wife and I* the following:

> "One morning I picked up a little green book that our friend Helen Paxton had sent to me two years earlier. It was easy stuff, short lines. I set three of the little poems to music and took them home to show my wife at lunch. I knew she would laugh to see how I

> had (for the moment, of course) fallen off my high horse. She liked them! And when my wife likes a thing there's no doubting it. I think I was a little crestfallen that she didn't realize I had stepped down from my pedestal.
>
> The three songs were "Mammy's Lullaby," "Uncle Rome," and the "Plantation Hymn" from the *Bandanna Ballads*, by Howard Weeden.
>
> I thought then that I was getting into a bad way, letting down the bars, but now I am glad I wrote those songs. (192-193)
>
> One morning I was trying to set a Bandanna Ballad, "I Love to See Dat Cotton Field," and it wouldn't go because of an awkward last line; so I turned a page and found another. The time was short as we had a rehearsal at eleven. At the rehearsal I showed it to Morganstern, and he roared. "You can't write a popular song — look at that!" referring to the sequences on the last page. I was afraid he was right; it was a little cheap and a little dressy. This was "A Banjo Song." I asked Kurt Schindler if he thought it would ruin my reputation. He wanted to spare my feelings, but he had to say he thought it would (204)."

Those who have heard The Huntsville Symphony's flutist Doris Hall play Homer's haunting Weeden Ballads know, without hesitation, that Homer's reputation is intact, indeed enhanced.

Equally extraordinary was my next find: a copy of a book written by Maurice Barley entitled *Houses & History* published in London by Faber and Faber in 1986. Maurice Barley, a professor at the University of Nottingham and his

wife Dianah, a local magistrate, had provided a home away from home in 1957-58 when I spent my Junior year abroad at the University and lived and boarded with them and their children. Pipe in hand or mouth, smoke circling his head, I remember him well, always at work in his study leaning over house plans and cityscapes. No detail was too small or clue too minuscule to be overlooked by this archaeological Sherlock Holmes as he solved the mysteries long encased in England's dusty dwelling places.

And now, as editor of the *Quarterly* it is my pleasure to pass on some nuggets garnered from Barley's 1986 book, the fifth he has written on England archaeology and architecture.

1. Over half the book is devoted to the Middle Ages, 1200 - 1550 because "England and Wales together possess far more small houses built before about 1550 — or significant remains of them — than any other country in western Europe." (p. 12)
2. "When Anglo-Saxon kings adopted Christianity in the seventh century, they were persuaded that stone was the proper material for churches." (p. 32)
3. Master carpenters and masons were "key figures" in medieval building. (p. 32) "Throughout the Middle Ages the great majority of townhouses were built of timber, but stone was used in some places for two-story houses." In the late 12th and 13th centuries, where stone was available, "timber walls were being replaced ... by walls built of stone." (p. 33)
4. By the end of the Middle Ages, brick and tile were in use. Bricks were used as ballast in ships and became increasingly popular in building. Tiles were used in floors "from the thirteenth century onwards," but almost exclusively in "ecclesiastical buildings." In London, fire regulations outlawing thatch in 1212 prescribed "tiles as an alternative to shingles" for roofing. (p. 36-37)

5. By the end of his reign Henry VIII "owned over fifty houses — more than any other king of England before or since," (p. 168)

6. "Out of a total of about 5,000 country houses in 1675, about a thousand remain in private hands and another hundred or so belong to the National Trust." (p. 170)

7. "Henry VIII's palace of Nonsuch was the largest framed building ever erected in England." (p. 173)

8. "Contracts for Charles II's palace at Winchester provided for nearly 7 million bricks; an ordinary modern house uses about 30,000." (p. 179)

9. Bricks could be fired in a "clamp" which was simply "a stack of raw bricks packed with fuel, covered to retain heat and then fired." As many as 100,000 could be fired but some would be over or under-fired. Kilns built of brick were preferred, however. (p. 181-184)

10. "Libraries came into fashion only after c. 1700, ... for gentlemen who collected books as well as paintings and sculpture." (p. 206)

11. "From c. 1575 onwards a revolutionary feature appears: for the sake of a more compact plan, the kitchen and its associated rooms were placed in a semi-basement, separated by a flight of stairs from the hall. The arrangement was specifically French in origin." (p.. 209)

12. By 1800 the country seat or home was smaller and "was planted on the ground" its "principal rooms, with French doors or windows with low sills, opened directly on to gardens and a 'natural' landscape created by Capability Brown of Repton." (p. 211)

The book makes fascinating reading, covers all classes of houses and people and provides excellent background for the enjoyment of Masterpiece Theater.