

12-21-1995

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Recommended Citation

Stephens, Elise H. (1995) "The "Door to Nowhere" Leads to "Manure Manor";" *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 21: No. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol21/iss4/5>

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The “Door to Nowhere” Leads to “Manure Manor”

by Elise H. Stephens

On the road to Falls Mill, a destination much esteemed in this section for its Living History, its real-life, daily milling of the grain that makes our bread executed on 19th century water-powered, steam-generated machinery by a genuine miller Chaucerian in his lively authenticity (see letter, last issue), one encounters other delightful sights and amusements. On recent trips to Falls Mill, I have had the good fortune to meet and be utterly charmed by Dr. James C. Gammill, recently returned from years in France and more recently a sponsoring member of the HHF. Welcome home, Dr. Gammill and welcome to HHF.

Even before meeting Dr. Gammill, Dot Johnson and I had stopped at his enchanting home on the David Crockett highway, just down from the Simmons-Shadow house at Beans Creek. On that visit I photographed the



exterior and the vista as best I could through the side-windows of Dr. Gammill's front and back doors. The elegant brick Georgian house has a kitchen in the rear which Dr. Gammill had renovated, with the emphasis on innovate, to resemble a French-Swiss chalet with windows open on the back to view the Cumberlands and a loft for cozy sleeping. Betwixt the kitchen and house, Dr. Gammill has added an inviting, sun-lit, open-windowed garden room The Door to Nowhere which is actually an 18th Century French Louis XV wardrobe door backs onto the kitchen loft and fronts the intimate garden room. Dr. Gammill, ever the romantic,

explains that while the "door on the one hand leads to nowhere in concrete reality, symbolically it leads back to a part of old Salem's past."
(letter, Jan. 2, 1996)



Dr. Gammill sent me three articles, and visits to the area generated more information about historic Old Salem, a stopping off point in the migration of families into North Alabama. Once a thriving cotton port, Beans Creek connecting to the Elk River, the Elk connecting to the Tennessee River, Old Salem's flatboaters met up with Huntsville's hearty mariners near Florence and made their way to New Orleans. Richard W. Anderson, one of Huntsville's legendary figures, whose monument in Maple Hill is the tallest and also the marker for the Huntsville meridian, foot-raced it back to Huntsville just as Peter Simmons, John R. Patrick and Dick Holder did to Old Salem.

Fertile fields and rising demand led to the creation of cotton gins and grist mills to serve a growing population with names familiar to us: Beans, Russells, Hunts, Larkins, Cowans and Crocketts. A Frenchman added his name, W. A. Rachielles, to the mix when he took over the direction of the milling machinery and wool cards run day and night at the original Mann and David Mills, predecessors of Falls Mill. This early French connection is only one Dr. Gammill is fond of recalling. The fact that his home, built circa 1810–1830 (letter, Nov. 27, 1995) is located on the Old Stage Road or the Winchester-Huntsville Road, connecting stagecoach travel from New Orleans to Philadelphia suggests a New Orleans/French connection that Dr. Gammill has elaborated throughout his home by the placement of wrought iron. He laughingly refers to the house's condition as being "over-wrought."

The house would not have been the only thing over-wrought, if that nice Tennessee patrolman had given me a ticket for speeding. On my latest visit with Dr. Gammill, Harvie Jones accompanied me. I'm sure it was his presence in my automobile that dissuaded the highway patrolman from giving me a ticket. I knew then, though, that we were probably in for an adventure. Sure enough. The Door to Nowhere was leading to somewhere. Harvie knew of the old Lipscomb house and wondered if Dr. Gammill knew how to find it. Lo and behold Dr. Gammill could not only find it, he could tell us all about it, as it turned out to have been the ancestral home of his Aunt and Uncle, Anne and Lipscomb Noblitt.

A short ride and an invigorating hike through a field surrealistically dotted with 1940's and 50's filling station gas pumps, huge rubber tires, and abandoned pieces of farm machinery brought us to the gate of the property. Once over the gate, we found ourselves surrounded by cows and generous helpings of their patties. Picking our path carefully, we wound by a 1940's Chevrolet truck rooted to its place with a tall tree growing out of its hood. I couldn't help but think of William Christenberry, a photographer worthy of this wonderful landscape.

The Lipscomb House sits on a rise so that it commands all that it surveys, even if it is now in what can only be called a cow pasture. The house is in awful shape, flooring is gone, windows out, just a remarkably durable, thick-walled, barn-backed, bovine-haunted edifice remains. Yet we were struck by its stark beauty, compelling symmetry and aura of past respectability. This noble structure cries out for restoration. It is not too late.



Harvie exclaimed that this is an excellent example of a tidewater-type cottage. His surmises, including the approximate age of the house, were later confirmed in a letter from Dr. Gammill which included the following information he had secured from his esteemed Aunt. Lipscomb family records reveal that William Lipscomb, son of Thomas and Mary Smith Lipscomb, married Ann Day Cooke, daughter of William and Ann Nelson Cook, in Louisa County, Virginia, on December 20, 1796. About 1826 William moved to Franklin County, Tennessee and purchased 468 acres of land for \$3,740 in 1828. On this land he built a seven-room, brick house “following closely the architecture of the early Tidewater, Virginia houses.”

A later stroll through the family cemetery located within earshot of the house brought forth more family history. Both William Lipscomb and his wife were buried there. William's stone tells us that the date on which he was born also marked his death, January 17, 1774– January 17, 1829. Tomb stones also tell us that N. J. Lipscomb, daughter of Jno. and Sallie Lipscomb, born July 17, 1832 married Robert Newton Mann on October 30, 1851. N.J. (Nannie) died Dec. 29, 1895. Robert Newton, born March 1, 1825 died Nov. 23, 1903. This Robert Newton Mann partnered with Azariah R. David to build the three-story brick mill at Factory Creek which became known as Falls Mill. What at first appears as ironic, that the road to Falls Mill leads to a quiet family cemetery is no more so than that the Door to Nowhere leads to Manure Manor. Old Salem is a magical place. As Deborah Roop wrote in a May 12, 1988 Huntsville *Times* article about Falls Mill, "Drive 40 miles north of Huntsville and end up about 100 years in the past."

Dr. Gammill's letter accompanying the family's data breathes more life into the facts:

"I had Thanksgiving dinner at my sister's & brother-in-law's house in Tullahoma. My aunt and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. H. Lipscomb Noblitt were also there. At my request, my aunt went to considerable trouble to look up her notes on the Lipscomb house which we visited (alas, it could now be called "Manure Manor.") in Beans Creek. . . Probably my uncle's great-great-great grandfather had a nostalgia for a family home in Louisa County, Virginia. If the dates are correct, poor man, he must have died when the house had barely been completed or else was under construction. His widow, according to what was handed down through generations to my uncle, was a very pious lady and walked, as in Biblical times, each Sunday to the Beans Creek Church."

Dr. Gammill concluded his charming letter with the following whimsical gesture which I fully endorse!

"Perhaps meantimes you and Mr. Jones could find some rich Alabamian to buy and restore the old Lipscomb house in Beans Creek, and Mrs. Jones could receive truck loads of good Tennessee manure for her garden!"

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