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LEROY POPE'S POPLAR GROVE PLANTATION

By

John Rison Jones, Jr.

When the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society placed an Alabama Historical Association marker at the LeRoy Pope mansion on Echols Avenue in 1999, there was much concern that the residence was called "Poplar Grove Plantation" on the marker. No one could remember the residence as having a name. In the absence of any other distinguishing characteristics, if one referred to the house, it was generally understood to be "Echols Hill." However, the Echols ownership of the property dated from 1866 when Mary Beirne Patton Echols inherited the property at the death of her father, Dr. Charles Hays Patton. The residence itself dates from 1814. So, how did the discovery of "Poplar Grove Plantation" develop?

Among the by-products of research in preparation for the first volume recording the monuments and inscriptions in Maple Hill Cemetery¹ were the many legal transactions involving the disposition of the real estate of William H. Pope, the son of LeRoy Pope. About eleven years before his death, LeRoy Pope transferred his land holdings to his son, William. This move was an effort to prevent a foreclosure against the LeRoy Pope estate. Consequently, when LeRoy died in 1845, the lands were protected from that legal action. Among the principal debtors was Dr. Rene LaRoche, a noted Philadelphia physician, who married Mary Jane Percy, the sister of Thomas George Percy who married LeRoy's Pope's youngest daughter, Maria Pope.²

With the death of William H. Pope at his plantation in Washington County, Mississippi, near Greenville, on March 22, 1848,³ legal suits against the estate swiftly followed. The residence was purchased by Dr. Charles Hays Patton⁴ and the remaining property was divided into smaller segments of up to eleven acres that could be sold at public auction. In preparation for the latter sale, Elijah Hansborough, the Surveyor of the County and Justice of the Peace, prepared a plat of the Pope holdings. The original map was in Chancery Court records, but that volume disappeared some time during the early twentieth century. Fortunately, a duplicate of the original map of February 3, 1849, was discovered in Deed Book 114 of 1917.⁵

A second important document was a deed, dated February 5, 1849, in which LeRoy Pope Walker, as Administrator of the Pope estate and a nephew of Mr. Pope, the son of his sister, Matilda Pope Walker, transferred certain lands of the estate to William Robinson, Thomas S. McCalley, Thomas W. White and William J. McCalley. This document specified that because of a suit by Rene LaRoche and others against the Pope estate, Chancellor D. G. Lyons rendered a judgment that the Pope lands had to be sold at auction. This document identifies the Pope estate as "Poplar Grove Plantation."⁶



THE ESTATE OF WILLIAM H. POPE

"Surveyed for LeRoy Pope Walker, Administrator of the Estate of William H. Pope, deceased. The lands and lots embraced in this diagram shaded in red. The Field Notes of which together with their several contents are herein and above set forth."

February 3, 1849

Elijah Hansbrough

That the name should have been a surprise in 1905 may be attributed to the passage of time as well as the fact that another principal source for the name was simply forgotten, or, at best, misinterpreted.

With the purchase of the residence by Dr. Patton in 1848, no immediate members of the Pope family were henceforth connected to Huntsville except for the descendants of John William Walker and his wife, Matilda, the eldest Pope daughter. William H. Pope's wife, Frances Ann Erwin Pope, and her son, Erwin Pope, went to live with her father, Alexander Erwin at War Trace, Bedford County, Tennessee. Maria Pope Percy died in Nashville in 1847. (Her husband, Thomas George Percy died in 1841.) LeRoy Pope, Jr. was a resident of Memphis, Tennessee. Alexander Pope lived in Florence, Alabama, while Willis Pope resided in Columbus, Mississippi.

The new owner of "Poplar Grove" was Dr. Charles Hays Patton, a graduate of Yale University and the Pennsylvania Medical School. He was a surgeon during the Mexican War of 1848 and lived for a time in Texas. He was the son of William Patton, an early settler of Madison County, who with his friend Andrew Beirne, built the original Bell Factory near the Three Forks of Flint River on the Winchester Road in the County. Andrew Beirne's daughter, Susan Plunket Beirne, and Dr. Patton were married on September 12, 1833, uniting two powerful Huntsville families. Following William Patton's death in 1846 and that of Andrew Beirne, Dr. Patton and his wife became the major owners of Bell Factory which was the main source of their wealth.

With Dr. Patton's death in 1866, the residence was inherited by his eldest daughter, Mary Beirne Patton who married William Holding Echols V in 1859. Major Echols had entered West Point in 1854 and graduated 8th in his class in 1858. Following service in the Confederate Army, Major Echols became a civil engineer with the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, and with his wife's inheritance of Bell Factory stock, he served as Secretary-Treasurer and General Manager of the Company from 1869 until its closure in 1885. He then became President of the First National Bank, serving from 1899 to 1909.⁸

With the death of Major Echols in 1909 and his wife in 1924, the property passed to their only daughter, Susan Patton Echols who married Robert Elias Spragins in 1886. It is important to note that when the *Daily Mercury* reported their marriage in its December 29, 1886, issue, it was stated that the ceremony took place at the bride's home "on Reservoir Hill."⁹ This seems to indicate that "Echols Hill" was not a common term of identification. In 1924, in order to access the Spragins property to the east of the residence between McClung Avenue to the south and Eustis Avenue to the north, a new street called Echols Avenue was cut into the property. This may be the origin of "Echols Hill." Certainly in that year, "Poplar Grove" was an unknown term.

With the death of Susan Patton Echols Spragins No. 1918 and her husband, Robert Elias Spragins in 1935, the residence was inherited by their only daughter, Susan Echols Spragins who married James Foster Watts in 1934. Their children were the last owners of the property until it was sold out of the family to Mr. And Mrs. Danny Wiginton in 1998. This ended 150 years of loving ownership of the Pope residence by the Patton-Echols-Spragins-Watts families.

The second source for the verification of "Poplar Grove" as the name of the LeRoy Pope residence comes from Anne Newport Royall. In 1818, Mrs. Royall came to Alabama from Virginia. She was to spend over four years in the Tennessee Valley, principally at Melton's Bluff, Florence, and Huntsville. In 1830, she published a series of letters she had written to her friend, Matt, an as-yet unidentified lawyer in Monroe County, Virginia. This volume, *Letters from Alabama*, contains among the earliest recorded descriptions of Huntsville and the men of eminence Ann Royall met, or in the case of LeRoy Pope, attempted to meet during her stay in north Alabama.

In the last letter of the volume, dated June 8, 1822, Mrs. Royall quotes a letter she had received from the elusive LeRoy Pope, apparently in response to her letter to him. That letter is headed by the words, "Poplar Grove, January 25th." Earlier efforts to discover where "Poplar Grove" was met with little success and some historians thought it to be a now non-existent small town. No one associated the name with the Pope residence.

But Mrs. Royall was determined to meet Col. Pope. That was to occur after July 1, 1823, as she prepared to return to Virginia to reclaim her inheritance when the courts overturned the will of her husband, Col. William Royall, and awarded the estate to other Royall descendants.

The opening chapter of Anne Royall's *Sketches of History, Life and Manners in the United States*, published in 1826, contains an important description of her visit to the Pope residence and also explains the name "Poplar Grove."

"After resting a few hours, I sallied out to refresh myself with a walk and meeting with Col. Pope, accepted an invitation to spend the night with him. Col. Pope is among the wealthiest men in the state of Alabama, and lives in princely style. If any man is to be envied on account of wealth, it is he. His house is separated from Huntsville by a deep ravine, and from an eminence overlooks the town from the west; on the east lies his beautiful plantation, on a level with his house. Although the ascent to it is considerable, yet when you are there, it is a perfect plane. He has, however, injured the beauty of his exterior, by surrounding it with Lombardy poplars. If I admired the exterior, I was amazed at the taste and elegance displayed in every part of

the interior, massy plate, Poplar, plain, ware, plates, sofas and mahogany furniture of the newest fashion, decorated the inside.

To those unacquainted with the wealth of this new country, the superb style of the inhabitants, generally, will appear incredible. Mrs. Pope is one of your plain, undisguised, house-keeping looking females; no ways elated by their vast possessions, which, I am told are the joint acquisition of her and her husband's industry. Report says, she is benevolent and charitable, and her looks confirm it. Next morning found me in one of my splenetic fits: I resolved to shake it off in the stage, and set off in it, accordingly, for the sweet springs.¹¹

With the preparation of the historic marker for the Pope mansion, it was appropriate to reintroduce the name LeRoy Pope bestowed upon this exquisite example of Federal and Greek Revival architecture. The great portico designed by George Steele for Dr. Patton in 1849 lends great dignity to the façade. The original builders are unknown. Perhaps it was the work of Thomas and William Brandon, the earliest builders in the city. It is fitting that the Wigintons have retained the original name of the house so that "Poplar Grove" continues to be one of the outstanding examples of early Alabama architecture.

ENDNOTES

¹Robey, Johnson, Jones and Roberts. *Maple Hill Cemetery, Phase One*. Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, 1995.

²Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *The House of Percy. Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family*. Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 98-99

³Gandrud, Pauline Jones, *Marriage, Death and Legal Notices from Early Alabama Newspapers, 1819-1893*. Southern Historical Press, 1981, p. 454.

⁴Dr. Charles Hays Patton was the son of William Patton and Martha Hays. His sister, Jane Ramsey Patton, first wife of William H. Pope, was born on April 29, 1810, and died January 31, 1832, with her infant son, Wyatt Pope. It should be noted that on the William Patton marker in Maple Hill Cemetery, Mrs. Patton is listed as Martha Hays. Dr. Patton's middle name is listed as Hayes on his tombstone. Robey, et al, *op. cit*, p 41, 115.

⁵Madison County Public Records, Office of the Probate Judge, Deed Book 114, pp. 636-640. In order to access the Pope property, two new streets were created: White Street adjacent to the Thomas W. White property on Maiden Lane (now Eustis Street) and a second street starting at the Section Line (now Wells Avenue) to accommodate the public cemetery

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which the City Council had purchased from LeRoy Pope in 1822. This
new street was called California Street, probably in recognition of the
Gold Rush of 1849.

⁶Madison County Public Records, Office of the Probate Judge, Deed Book X, pp. 521-22.

⁷Gandrud, *op. cit.* See notices regarding Alexander Pope, p. 454; Willis Pope, p. 571; LeRoy Pope, Jr., p. 328; and the death of Maria Pope in Nashville, p. 490.

⁸Spragins, William Echols, et al. *A Brief History and Brief Genealogy of the Andrew Beirne, William Patton, William Echols V, and Robert E. Spragins Lines.* Privately printed, Huntsville, AL 1956. This volume is difficult to use without an index. Although there are often conflicting data, nevertheless, this remains an invaluable source for these families.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁰Royall, Anne Newport, *Letters from Alabama.* Washington D.C., pp. 161-165. This work was reprinted in 1969 by the University of Alabama Press as edited by Lucille Griffith.

¹¹Royall, Anne Newport, *Sketches, History, Life and Manners in the United States by a Traveller.* New Haven, printed by the author, 1826, pp. 1-3. Also see Jackson, George Stuyvesant, *Uncommon Scold. The Story of Anne Royall.* Boston, Bruce Humphries, Inc. Publishers, 1937. Anne remains one of the most elusive figures in early American journalism. An up-to-date biography is much needed to resolve the enigma created by this fascinating traveler.