

6-21-1997

Governor Thomas Bibb House, Belle Mina, Limestone County, Alabama

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Recommended Citation

Historic Huntsville Foundation (1997) "Governor Thomas Bibb House, Belle Mina, Limestone County, Alabama," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 23: No. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol23/iss2/5>

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Governor Thomas Bibb House Belle Mina, Limestone County, Alabama

Architectural Description:

This plantation house has a front portico with six widely spaced Doric columns. The one-story wing, consisting of slave quarters and kitchen, is joined to the side of the house. In Alabama these are usually separated from the main house and lie off to the rear.

The slave quarters and connecting colonnade are of unusual design and suggest the island type of architecture.

A brick wall originally surrounded the plantation house, but has disappeared. The fireplace mantels and the interior trim show hand plowed mouldings, done by the slave labor of the time.

Source: E. Walter Burkhardt, District Administrator, HABS.
Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, Alabama.

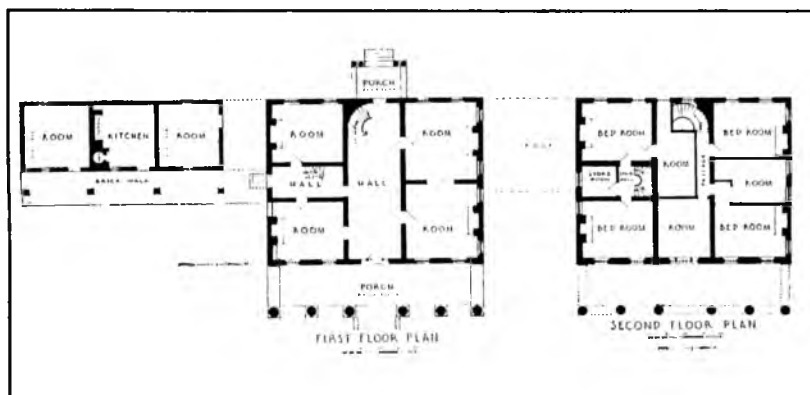


*Front view showing Portico.
From "Ante-bellum Mansions of Alabama."*

Belle Mina Gov. Thomas Bibb House

Brick (Flemish bond), 60'0" (5-bay front) x 60'0" including portico, also semidetached ground-level 3-room service wing (72'6" x 26'0") on east side, two-stories (service wing 1-story), hipped roof originally surmounted by balustraded deck, 4 exterior end chimneys, full-height hexastyle Tuscan portico across front with brick-paved stylobate, fanlight doorway with triple window above, small predominated entrance portico at rear, covered passage along north front of service wing; center-hall plan with side hall and secondary stair, exceptionally fine Federal period woodwork including spiral stairway, Adamesque mantels, paneled reveals. Built ca. 1826–35 for Thomas Bibb (1783-1839), planter, lawyer, and second governor of Alabama. House and grounds formerly surrounded by 5' brick wall (razed during Civil War); rooftop deck destroyed and other damage in tornado of 16 July 1875. Renovated 1941, including installation of wall paneling in southeast first-floor room: E. B. Van Keuren of Birmingham, architect; again renovated 1967, including construction of kitchen wing and carport, installation of raised paneling above chair-rail in main hallway, other minor interior modifications. Name also spelled "Belmina" in 19th century. One of earliest and most sophisticated of Alabama's plantation mansions.

From: HABS on Microfiche, Huntsville Public Library



*Above: Original floor plans.
From "Ante-bellum Mansions of Alabama."*

Belle Mina: Belle Mina, Alabama

Ralph Hammond
from *Ante-bellum Mansions of Alabama*.
Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc. 1951.

“Thomas Bibb—1826” These are the words, hand-tooled upon the brass knocker, which greet you even today as you call at the transom-lighted door of Belle Mina, the plantation home of Thomas Bibb.

And a baby’s footprint also welcomes you. The builder of Belle Mina took his baby girl, Eliza, to the kiln on nearby Limestone Creek where slaves were making the brick, and upon one of the soft red squares was imprinted the outline of her foot. The brick was then placed in the porch floor directly in front of the main entrance. This very human episode must have given the father much joy as years later he showed the impression to visitors.

Thomas Bibb came from one of Alabama’s great families—the one which more than any other shaped the early destinies of the state. Elected presiding officer of Alabama’s first senate, which was organized at Huntsville in 1819, Thomas Bibb automatically became governor when his brother, William Wyatt Bibb, was thrown from a horse at Coosada and killed, only eight months after he had become Alabama’s first governor.

Even though the new state capital was at distant Cahaba in the south central part of the state, Bibb spent much of his time on his great 2,500 acre plantation of rich red clay land at Belle Mina in Limestone County.

Bibb was born in Amelia County, Virginia, in 1783, and made his first trip to the Tennessee Valley in 1808, via Mobile and the inland river transportation system. The pioneer region appealed to him greatly and he soon returned to Alabama and brought plantation land other than that at Belle Mina, but the latter he was forever to call home. He is recorded in history as the largest pioneer land owner in all north Alabama.

Bibb was two years building his grand mansion which was in keeping with his social, political and economic status. He approached the task with perseverance, improvising and changing plans whenever materials demanded, though never at a sacrifice of quality workmanship. Bibb knew that there was no sawed wood, no ready made brick, no skilled artisans on hand. These handicaps he faced with the same determination as he did the task of making Alabama into a state to take its place alongside Georgia, Tennessee and the Carolinas. He set about building a sawmill, a brick kiln, and carefully searched the slave markets until he found a highly skilled mason to oversee the brick making—years later in his will Bibb mentioned this slave mason as possessing valuable skills—and an expert carpenter to supervise the sawing and cutting. But Bibb himself was the coordinator, the man with the ideas.

It is interesting to note that so many of the slaves were trained in the artistic manner. As is pointed out elsewhere in this book, some of them built spiral staircases which until this day draw admiration from designers and architects.

Bricks were made by the tens of thousands. The walls of the house are three feet thick. Then there were the slave quarters, the kitchen and numerous auxiliary buildings and sheds. But probably more bricks than everywhere else combined, went into the building of the massive wall, six feet high, around the entire two-acre tract where the mansion and garden stand. During the Civil War, Federal troops who were camped nearby, used a portion of the bricks from the wall for building purposes. Then when peace came, the Bibb's gave what remained to hard pressed neighbors for the building of homes.

With customary precision, he built the mansion on a rising hillock in the dead-center of his plantation, and it is said that the land extended one mile in every direction. Bibb was master of all his eyes beheld. He had already accumulated a fortune, as well as a family of nine children, when he moved into his new mansion. It is a house which hews severely to the simplicity of the Doric order. And it might be noted here that the Tennessee Valley mansions built in the 1820's follow more closely the Jeffersonian advocated

Doric and Ionic orders, than the mansions which were built during the two following decades in central Alabama, where much of the Corinthian and Composite is to be found.

The six great Doric columns are said to have been made each from a poplar log, surrounded with specially designed brick, and plastered. Adding further to their magnificence is the spacing. The span between the two center columns is wider than between the others, thus making a broader opening for the handsome entrance.

The entablature, too, is severely plain, and the hipped roof above drops pleasingly and not too abruptly to the front. Windows across the entire portico are rigidly plain and without overhead decoration—all harmonious with the entire Doric unity. Only the doorway, with its leaded sidelights and sunburst transom, offers a delicacy which suggests the elaborateness that lies within.

Not until 1941, when it was purchased by Dr. and Mrs. Berthold Kennedy, did Belle Mina leave ownership of the Thomas Bibb family. By then the once proud mansion had suffered greatly from the wear of time and the weather and the neglect of upkeep.

But the Kennedys have done nothing short of a miraculous job of restoration and repair. Ceilings were lowered for easier heating, as well as to hide the newly added plumbing and lighting fixtures installed for modern convenience. Rooms and halls were painted and papered throughout; floors were refinished, and furniture of the period and of



exceptional quality and refinement was moved in. Much of the antique furniture had been in the New York apartment of the Kennedys, Mrs. Kennedy having been an ardent antique collector for years. Belle Mina is today one of the most beautifully furnished ante-bellum mansions in all

Alabama. Every piece of furniture and every item of decoration, whether it be sets of prismatic lustres, Victorian sofas, or candelabra, seems to fit exactly where it is placed.

The library is one of the few paneled rooms in the state. Painted a soft sea green, it is indicative of the culture and refinement which Thomas Bibb brought with the years to Belle Mina.

The chandeliers throughout the house add a lustrous, sparkling finish to the entire appointment. The spiral staircase of carved cherry wood is of major interest. A fanlighted transom over the door leading into the garden, brightens the rear of the great hall.



Belle Mina is one of the state's very finest plantation-type mansions. Regrettably though, its statesman builder was to live there but thirteen years. He died September 20, 1839—age 56, ending what might have been many more years of useful and worthy service to his family and his state. He was buried in the family cemetery on the plantation, but twenty years later was moved to the Bibb plot in Huntsville's Maple Hill Cemetery, where he rests near four other Alabama governors: Clement C. Clay, Samuel Moore, Reuben Chapman, and David P. Lewis.