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## Three Generations of Early Yeomen's Houses in Madison County Alabama

Debra Miller

Between 1800 and 1850, settlers poured into North Alabama. The earliest settlers were trappers and traders who built temporary cabins and usually stayed only one or two seasons in one location. Many settlers married Native Americans and became influential in the state's history. However, according to a 1975 survey of Alabama folk houses published in 1975 by Eugene Wilson of the Alabama Historical Commission, their homes have long disappeared.

Many dwellings survive from later immigrants who moved into the territory that would become the state of Alabama. Among these slightly later immigrants were merchants, doctors, and lawyers. However, the overwhelming majority were agriculturalists. Some of the latter were wealthy planters seeking fresh land and younger sons of planters seeking their own estates.

However, the overwhelming majority were yeomen farmers. Research data indicates that more than 77 percent of southern immigrants were yeomen. For our purposes, the term *yeomen* refers to farmers who owned no more than five slaves; for most historians, the term *yeomen* includes farmers who owned a few slaves.

These early immigrants were, to a large degree, culturally homogeneous. Case studies of several families support Thomas Perkins Abernethy's claim that the majority of North Alabama settlers emigrated from Tennessee (Abernethy 40). However, for many, their roots lay in the established southern states along the eastern seaboard. Of seven families researched, all originated in England, although one had a Scots branch.

Like other settlers, yeomen came to the area seeking economic advancement. Despite hardships, they never quit striving for economic prosperity.

These early farmers owned the land they farmed or hoped to own it. They had few other financial resources. This is reflected in their houses. Although wealthy planters built grand houses in the area that is now Madison County (fig. 2), the yeomen built simpler dwellings.



**Fig. 2 Echols Hill, the Col. Leroy Pope House, begun 1814.**  
Courtesy Huntsville Madison County Public Library.

Although some yeomen settled in lower elevations, historians note that yeomen congregated in the hills. In North Alabama, these hilly areas are part of the *upland South*, according to scholar Henry Glassie (39). Two historians, Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton and Monroe Lee Billington, offer diverse theories to explain this. Hamilton suggests that the gummy soil of the lowlands required a high amount of initial labor to harvest the first crops. Yeomen, with limited resources, could not afford to wait more than one growing season to harvest a crop. Therefore, Hamilton claims, the yeomen selected the sandy soil of the mountains, where they could clear the land, plant their crops, and construct a shelter all within a growing season (Hamilton 11). On the other hand, Billington suggests that the planters used the yeomen to test the soil. When the soil proved rich, they bought the yeomen's land and forced them to move to less desirable or remote lands (Billington 32).

[An alternative explanation is more in keeping with the author's economic thesis. Yeomen practiced animal husbandry and lived off the bounty of streams and uncleared lands. The hills of north Alabama were well suited to their small, relatively self-sufficient family farms.

Early 19th century agriculturalists required fertile soils and access to navigable rivers. The Tennessee Valley's rich coves, with their relatively easy access to river transport, were highly desirable.

During the early decades of statehood, when cotton dominated Alabama's economy, fine, relatively long staple cotton could be produced on the flatlands of Alabama's coves and command relatively high prices. The uplands could grow short staple cotton, but it was more difficult and tedious to deseed by hand and with the earliest machines, and it brought less on the market.

Hence, flat cove land was expensive because of its potential productivity, which in a cotton-dominated economy could be translated into wealth. The uplands, viewed as less valuable, sold for less and hence were available to yeomen's thinner purses.

Editor's note: FR.]

Today, remnants of the settlement period remain in the Alabama Uplands. Engene Wilson's 1975 survey of Alabama's folk houses located many such dwellings, including typical settlers' dwellings. He classified the houses he studied into three generations of buildings.

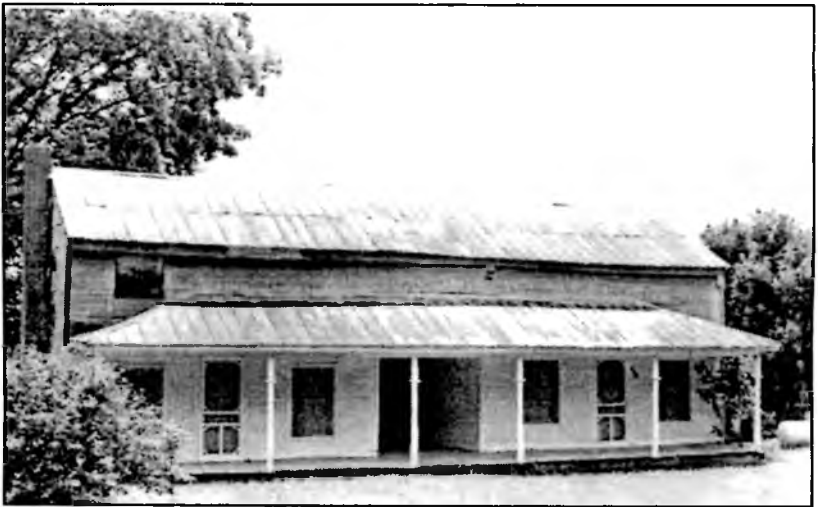
Included in his first generation are houses constructed entirely of logs. These houses were symmetrically proportioned, with small windows, if any. Most were one and a half stories tall (Wilson 25).

Most commonly, these early log houses had two end chimneys. Others had a single massive chimney in the middle; their shape explains their nickname: *saddlebag* houses (see fig.3, page 8). Many had one room; they are called single pen houses.

Some were double pen houses, comprising two rooms (fig. 4, page 8). Some of these double pen dwellings were dogtrots, consisting of two rooms connected by a roofed central walkway. [Editor's note: The Old English word *pen* refers to a small enclosure; it survives in the word *pigpen*.]



**Fig. 3 First generation saddlebag house, modernized,  
Poplar Ridge Road, south of Cherry Tree Road, Madison County.  
Courtesy Debra Miller.**



**Fig. 4 First generation dogtrot house, modernized,  
Poplar Ridge Road, between Martin Lane and Cherry Tree Road,  
Madison County.  
Courtesy Debra Miller.**



**Fig. 5 First generation log house, modernized, Ray Road, near Sharpe's Hollow, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



**Fig 6 Second generation dogtrot house, modernized, Upper Hampton Road, Limestone County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.

Later, as manufactured goods became available to settlers, houses became a mix of logs, milled lumber and manufactured hardware: second generation houses (Wilson 25). While similar to houses of the first generation, second generation houses used fewer handworked materials and had less hand craftsmanship in them; they are typically one story (fig. 6, page 9; also see fig. 1).

Houses constructed entirely of milled lumber belong to Wilson's third generation of folk houses (figs. 7 & 8). These houses retained many features of first and second generation houses, but had larger windows (Wilson 26).



**Fig. 7 Third generation house**  
**Section Road, Gurley, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



**Fig. 8 Third generation house,  
Church Street near Second, Gurley, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



**Fig. 9 Yeoman's house, corner of County Lake and Hurricane  
Creek Roads, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



At first glance, the three generations may be difficult to distinguish (fig. 9, page 11). Later additions—clapboard siding, for example—may make it difficult to assign a house to a specific generation. While stone chimneys are common in the older first and second generation houses, and brick chimneys are common in the third generation, chimney fabric is not, by itself, a reliable indicator of the generation to which a house belongs. The early house sleuth looks for signs of the log structural members that characterize first and second generation Alabama folk houses (figs. 10, 11 & 12). In log construction, beams project under the roof soffit, indicating that logs are under the siding (fig. 13, page 14).

Early folk houses have symbolic associations. Politicians celebrated the log house in its simplest form. For politicians like Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, birth in a log cabin symbolized their rise from humble beginnings and their connection to the common man (Bealer 10).



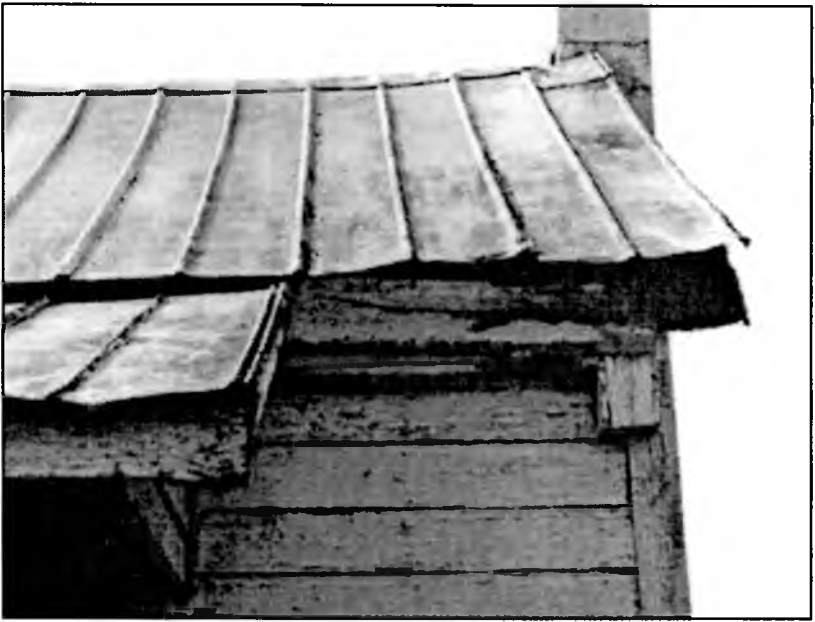
**Fig. 10 Chimney detail, yeoman's house, Oran Whitaker Road between Nebo and New Hope-Cedar Point Roads, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



**Fig. 11 Chinking detail, yeoman' house,  
Paint Rock Road, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



**Fig. 12 Chimney base and joinery details,  
yeoman's house, Paint Rock Road, Madison County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.



**Fig. 13 Detail showing beam projecting under soffit, yeoman's house, Upper Hampton Road, Limestone County.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.

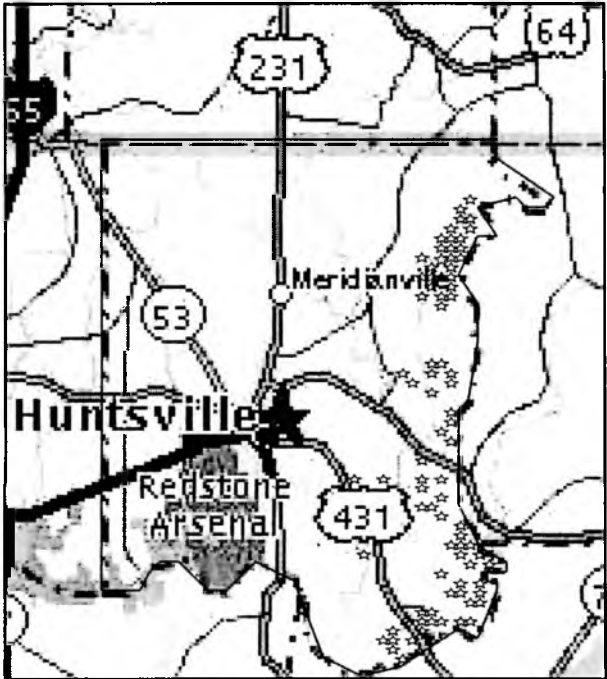
Some yeomen may have expressed their upward mobility in clapboarding their log houses and adding architectural ornament, when these materials became available. Others may have realized that the planters' large, symmetrical, central-halled, and porched residences grandly echoed the plan that could be seen in their own log dogtrot houses.

Unfortunately, North Alabama's early log houses are rapidly disappearing. Neglect, ignorance, and vandalism are taking their toll on them. Some have been abandoned. Others are used as barns or storage buildings. Others have been covered with vinyl or metal siding that can trap moisture and hide worsening structural problems.

Preservationists view the relocation of historic properties as a last resort, since it separates dwellings from their contextual settings (see "Log House Restoration", page 37). Nevertheless, many log structures are moved arbitrarily to backyards and suburbs. The buildings

are often stripped of the original wood siding that protected the underlying log structure. When this happens, the oldest wood is exposed to the elements, inviting accelerated deterioration. Finally, some people replace the chinking with a cement-based material, not understanding that the chinking must expand and contract to prevent structural damage.

Madison County contains many fine examples of first, second, and third generation folk houses (fig. 14). Despite their decreasing numbers, enough of these dwellings remain to suggest their prominent role in the region's history. These yeomen's log houses attest to the craftsmanship, determination, and aspirations of the 19th century settlers of Madison County.



**Fig. 14 Map showing approximate locations of early houses, Madison County, located by Debra Miller.**  
Courtesy Debra Miller.

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Fig. 1 **Cabaniss-Ezell House**, 1998, after renewal.  
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

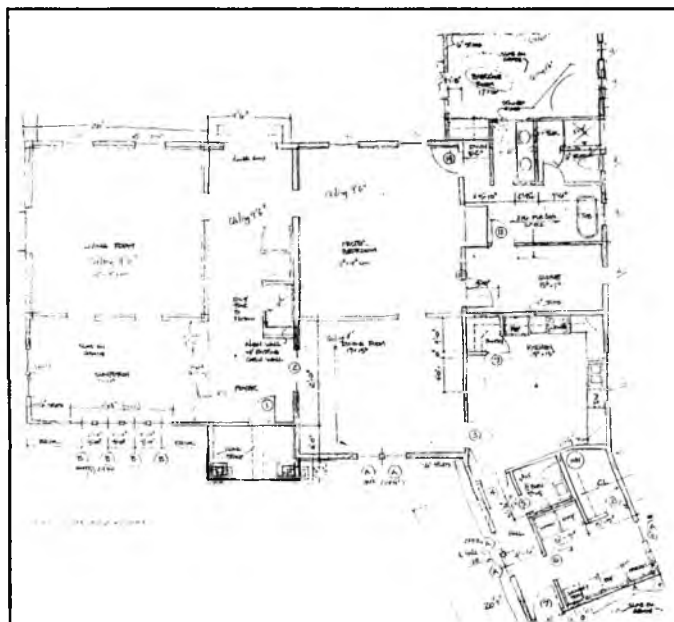


Fig. 2 **First floor plan of Cabaniss-Ezell House**, late 1980s.  
Courtesy Gene Ezell.