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Gene Ezell

Frances Robb

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The Cabaniss-Ezell House Renewal

Gene Ezell and Frances Robb

Preface

The Cabaniss-Ezell log house was built prior to 1890 as a 2-story double pen dogtrot (fig. 1). It faced Old Donegan Road, which ran along the edge of the bluff, past James Donegan's house around to the Monte Sano Hotel. In the late 1920s, "modern" conveniences were added: dining room, attached kitchen and bathroom, and two concrete slab porches. The dogtrot was closed in. The style of the addition was that of farmhouses of the era. Electricity and telephone were brought in at that time by the Monte Sano Construction Company.

The land was retained by Robert Fearn, one of the founders of Viduta, when that community was first laid out in 1833. James B. Cabaniss, Chancery Court Registrar, acquired it from Fearn's estate.

According to Huntsville's premier historian Dr. Frances Cabaniss Roberts, James' twin brother Willis had the house built and lived there; a dedicated naturalist, he loved the mountain. After his twin's death in 1890, J.B. Cabaniss mortgaged the property. In 1896 he signed the mortgage over in default to Nellie Shelton.

Nellie Shelton sold the log house to Carrie Gilliland of Shelby County, Tennessee, who obviously was the source of the 1902 Memphis newspapers found stuffed between some of the logs. Ira Terry acquired the property in 1924, registering it in trust for his daughter Mary Alice.

Following World War II, living space was scarce in Huntsville. Drywall was installed throughout the house and propane heaters were installed over the sheet metal-covered fireplaces so that Mary Alice and Bobby Yarbrough could occupy it more comfortably. Numerous tenants later lived in the house through the space boom years of Huntsville, until the log house was all but abandoned about 1970.

In 1945 Old Donegan Road was vacated by Madison County and a driveway was built from Lookout Drive. Access today is thus to what

was historically the rear of the house. When the Ezells bought the house, a low stone wall marked the boundary of the abandoned bluff road, and they found an old brick walk, buried in the yard, leading from the old road to the house. Many of the stones from the boundary wall found their way into the stonework of the Ezell's refurbishment.

The Ezells approached the renovation with the idea of making the house livable in modern terms with modern materials, but preserving the historic character, i.e., "adaptive reuse"(fig. 2, page 20). An example is provided in the southern yellow "heart" pine of the floors. The wood used to supplement the original flooring came from the old Merrimack Mill on Triana Boulevard. The Craftsman-style entrance doors and staircase were built from the same wood. The Ezells have enjoyed the support of many friends (and a few doubters) and for the most part some very good subcontractors throughout this project, but they would particularly like to thank David Ely of Jones and Herrin Architecture/Interior Design for encouragement and serving as final arbiter of appropriate details.

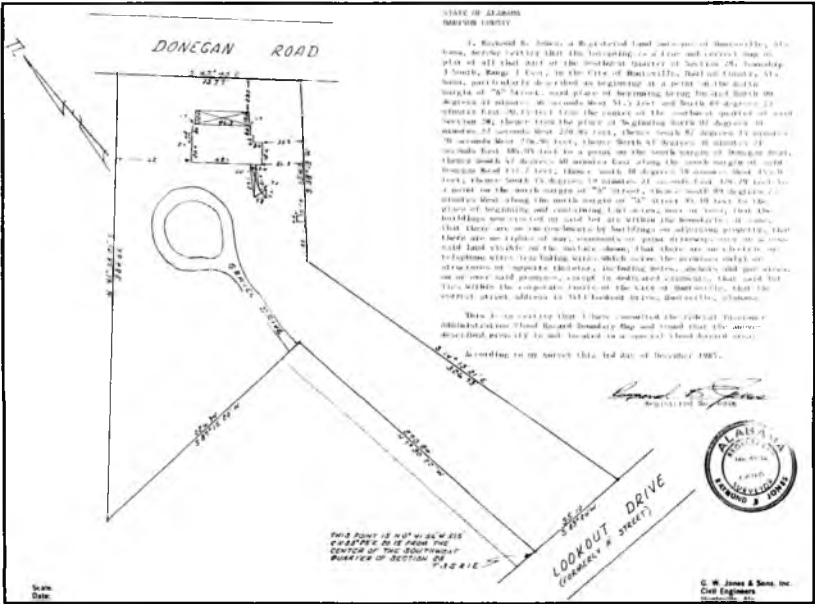


Fig. 3 Surveyor's map of Ezell property, Monte Sano, 1985. Raymond B. Jones, G.W. Jones & Sons, Inc., Huntsville, Ala. Courtesy Mary Ann and Gene Ezell.

Gene and Mary Ann Ezell bought the old log house on Monte Sano in December 1984. They set to work immediately. On February 26, 1998, they moved in.

Fourteen years is a long time to invest in a project, even if it is compelling, the end result alluring, and even if there are small steady rewards along the way.

When their interviewer first met Mary Ann and Gene Ezell, it was June 1, 1998, and they gave her a private house tour. She touched the old shaped timbers, as Gene pointed out which ones are chestnut, poplar, and cedar. She admired the new bathrooms.

She was shown the original virgin heart pine floor boards, the purchased heart pine that supplements the originals, and the stone floors of the additions, additions that follow the footprints and the slant of earlier additions: porch, kitchen, and covered walkway to the well. She walked the concrete-floored breezeway that covers the long dried-up shallow well and leads to the new garage beyond.

She noted a thoughtful and pleasing clarity, inside and out. This is a house that has been lived in, loved, enhanced, repaired, and neglected throughout its long life. Dozens of families have lived here, some for a short time, others for years.

When the Ezells bought the property, the land was densely overgrown, the house decrepit (fig. 3). The seller offered to demolish the old house so they could begin anew.

The Ezells had another idea. From the first, they intended to rescue the old log structure and give it renewed life as a family home. Today, they are delighted to share the house and their experiences of it, to show photographs of each part of the work, and to talk about the slow tedious tasks, danger, difficulties, solutions, and triumphs.

They are also eager to explain what they have learned about the house's history and how that history was expressed in the original structure and its additions. They determined to adapt the house so that it would survive, not as a museum piece but as a family home.

At the same time, they have rehabilitated the original structure and respected the plan and footprints of later additions. As a result of what they learned, Mary Ann and Gene have helped the house tell its own history. Differences in construction and materials simplify a complex history into three main epochs: early (the original 2-story dogtrot log house), later (mostly early 20th century additions), and now (the Ezells' recent modifications).

Now, the Ezells sit at the kitchen table with their visitor, telling her about the house and their work on it. She begins to understand the complexities and problems, the careful analysis and demanding physical activity, their vision and their adaptability, their temperaments and experience, and how these came together to produce so pleasing a house and so clear a history.

In the 1970s, the Ezells were working full time (she as an educator, he as a physicist) and living with their sons in a split foyer 1960s house. They spent some of their spare time looking for land—ten acres or so—“out somewhere” in the woods and hills and among wildflowers.



Fig. 4 **Cabaniss-Ezell House**, 1984, before renewal.
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

Their youngest son had a friend who lived on Monte Sano. This brought them casually to the mountain, where in 1984 they saw a sale sign, scrubby wilderness, and in the distance a decrepit house (fig. 4).

On closer inspection, the house was a two-story log house with a green 1950s asphalt roof, a screened porch across the front and an open back porch. From the kitchen in the far right corner, a covered walkway slanted off to a shallow dry well.

In 1984 the owners were Bobby Yarbrough and his wife Mary Alice Terry. They were well connected to Monte Sano's history, for Mary Alice's father, Ira Terry, had been secretary of the Mountain Heights Development Company, involved with the mountain's real estate. When the Yarbroughs decided to sell, they bulldozed a stable and horse shed—both past repair—dug a hole and buried the debris.

The Ezells bought the property in December 1984, planning to fix up part of the house and move in, perhaps within the year—a schedule that soon changed. An ice storm that winter felled trees and heaped debris in the yard; they spent their first six months as owners cutting down eleven badly damaged trees and severely pruning twenty-five others. With the help of their teenaged sons, Ben and Curt, Mary Ann and Gene did most of this work themselves.

The Ezells then turned to the house itself, ripping out the drywall that covered the crumbling whitewash of the interior walls and then moving to the more difficult tasks of straightening the wall and floors, then rebuilding the chimneys that were riddled with holes. The inside wall of one chimney had collapsed into the firebox. Gene tied himself to the roof and tossed the chimney's top stones down into the yard, then pulled the chimneys down so that they could be rebuilt.

Gene described the next task: stripping the interior walls of the decayed drywall (added by the Yarbroughs in the 1940s), so that the logs could be cleaned and the crumbling chinking replaced before new drywall was installed. He told of the unexpected and hazardous discovery of scores of brown recluse spiders in the mud, newspaper, and scrap board infill they were removing from the walls.



Fig. 5 Cabaniss-Ezell House, view of corner damage, late 1980.
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

Vertical boards at one corner of the exterior turned out to cover huge and hideous gaps: where the log ends had once fitted tightly, up and down the corner, there was a 6-inch gap where they had rotted away (fig. 5). When that began to happen, the massive 20-foot logs could no longer hold their “true,” and they began to bulge outward, away from vertical, and dropping six inches besides. Each log had to be lifted to level, pulled back into place, shimmed, and refastened. A 50-foot water level made out of a garden hose indicated progress with Gene’s ingenious system of come-aways and jacks. Nevertheless, even with the photographic documentation before her eyes, this seemed to the interviewer an impossibly difficult task: one false tug and the entire wall might collapse!

These were, Gene judged, the most dangerous tasks they performed on the old house. The Ezells wanted to do as much of the work as they could themselves, but both explained that, even if they had wanted to hire out many tasks, they could have found no willing or experienced workers. As a result, they planned each task, devised the materials and devices needed to carry it out, then worked each weekend until the task was accomplished.

By now the interviewer understood that Gene had a physicist's ability to analyze a task and then take pleasure in devising appropriate machinery to carry it out successfully. She was not surprised that the chimneys came down, just as predicted, in the planned locations. Gene explained that he had also had early experiences with carpentry; his father had been a "moonlight carpenter" in Clarksville, Tennessee, where Gene grew up.



Fig. 6 Cabaniss-Ezell House, closeup of corner, repair in progress, late 1980s.
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

Mary Ann Ezell's background was different. The child of an old Tennessee family, she had grown up in Nashville, where, if her father needed something done to the house, he simply hired someone. Her contribution lay in her steady vision of the end result, her cheerful enthusiasm, her patience (which she says improved during the fourteen years of the project) and her sense that an important goal is not gained in a day, but step by step, often over a period of years: a useful attitude for a teacher. However, Mary Ann learned new skills too, pitching in with sawing and nailing down subfloors, staining siding, and smoothing caulking.



Fig. 7 Exterior of Cabaniss-Ezell House,
late 1980s.

Courtesy Gene Ezell.

Gene and Mary Ann began to work on cleaning the exterior logs and removing the old mortar. The mortar had at some time been covered over with concrete, cured in place around rows of nails. The hardness of the concrete meant that it had to be pounded out in 6-inch chunks, nails and all. Removing the old material, straightening walls and floors, reinking and daubing the exterior took three years of slow and steady work, interspersed with getting the chimneys rebuilt and building a garage.

A stonemason from Grant rebuilt the chimneys about a year and a half apart. The sequence was repair the first pen (one-half of the log structure), rebuild the first chimney, repair the second pen, and rebuild the other chimney (fig. 7).

While the first chimney was rebuilt, something new was also going up: a garage—a “first” for the property—that could serve as a workroom and storage space for the duration of the project (fig. 8). That, comments Gene, was the easiest part of the project. They made their plans, purchased the materials, and he, Mary Ann, and their sons put it up, uneventfully and on schedule.



Fig. 8 Gene and Mary Ann Ezell and sons in front of new garage, Cabaniss-Ezell House, late 1980s.
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

When the cracks between the logs were open and clean, the Ezells stuffed the openings with fiberglass insulation and installed screen wire ~ of an inch in from the final surface of the infill. Applying the latex-based caulk was slow and tedious, given the size and number of the openings and the small size of commercial caulking guns. Gene devised an ingenious air-driven tool, made of 4-inch plastic sewer pipe and an inner bellows of flexible clothes dryer duct, that could hold two quarts of caulk and deliver a wide swath (fig. 9). With Gene operating this giant gadget and Mary Ann following behind to smooth the caulk and remove the excess, the work progressed faster.

Even so, with so many openings to fill, even with Gene's ingenious tool, the pace of the project seemed, to their interviewer, excruciatingly slow. She asked the Ezells if they went home at the weekend with the feeling of accomplishment. "Yes, we did," Gene replied. "Every weekend, we could say we had cleared so many running feet of concrete or stuffed so much fiberglass insulation into the openings or renewed so many feet of mortar. With that measurement, we could just move on to the next log, the next crack."



Fig. 9 Gene Ezell and his air-powered caulking tool.
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

Gene reminded the interviewer that repetitive and arduous physical tasks have their own rewards, especially for people whose professional work made such different demands. She began to see how this couple could return each weekend to the mountain with enthusiasm and leave with the sense of tasks well done.

The Ezells proceeded to the next slow and tedious task. They took up all the floors, board by board. “We numbered each board,” commented Mary Ann, “not realizing that that would not be useful.” The floors had been painted blue, and the simplest solution to returning them to their original appearance was having them remilled. This process also showed up boards that had been damaged by beetles. Since the Ezells lost about fifty percent of the original floorboards from damage and remilling, the Athens firm that remilled the boards made new flooring from old boards to complete the reflooring project.

Meantime, with the boards up, the Ezells began the hot, musty, cramped task of removing hundreds of buckets of earth from beneath the floors. Organic matter had not been removed when the 20-foot by 50-foot log house was built, causing a musty smell in the house in damp weather. Besides, a crawl space was necessary. The dirt had to be dug and carried out by hand, because power equipment could not be fitted in. Fortunately, at least, the dirt was soft. Between the first-floor ceilings and second floors, generations of squirrels had nested and filled the 10-inch space with expended nutshells (more hundreds of buckets of debris!). Even a mummified rodent was found.

That done, the Ezells had work space to level the joists that were so uneven that the old floor had “waved like a potato chip.” Once the joists were level, the Ezells laid a subfloor.

The year 1991 saw a big breakthrough. With the exterior repaired and sealed, new windows installed in place of the dilapidated old ones, subfloors in place, and the walls bare to the original logs, the Ezells hired a contractor to frame in the replacement and expansion of the old 1920s addition and install a new roof. “Hiring out routine work was something we always intended to do,” they explained. “We did the rough work and the work we couldn’t find anyone else to do.”

They also framed in a new entry, incorporating the concrete flooring of the back porch as a footprint. An enlarged dining room, kitchen, and master bath overlaid the footprint of the original. Following the angled line of the 1920s covered walkway that led in the direction of the new garage, the Ezells framed in a workroom/laundry and a corridor from the kitchen to the new breezeway (overlying the concrete slab that covered the old well) and the new garage.

Installing the new roof was a job made more difficult by the height and steep pitch of the roof, several days of driving rain, and problems coordinating the work of the crew's supervisor and the crew. Historical aspects again showed up as three earlier roofs came to light: the original cedar shingles, one of red asphalt, and a recent green one.

Mary Ann and Gene put up siding, and Gene installed the windows. After the addition was complete on the exterior, a plumber roughed in new plumbing. The Ezells put up furring on the interior of the log rooms for new drywall. Gene installed the hallway, stairwell, and garden room (built over the original back porch). Drywall was put up and the flooring relaid by specialist contractors. The Grant stonemason laid flagstones: kitchen, bathroom, and garden room floors and a walkway outside.

By 1995, the Ezells explained that, with the dry wall completed and the floors in, the house had begun to look as if it might one day be a home. Nevertheless, they took each task at its own pace and though frustrated did not give up when it took two years to get the stairs built in the old dog-trot space. It took a while to find someone who could saw the staircase lumber from huge 20-foot salvaged heartpine beams. And then they found two woodworkers from Gurley who built the staircase (twice interrupting the project to work on other jobs). They had previously built the four exterior doors of wood from the same source.

The final major project was the kitchen cabinetry and counters. Mary Ann had already adapted the ingenious over-the-sink window design of the Terrys' 1920s kitchen. An Athens cabinetmaker who offered computer-aided design was hired to implement Mary Ann's unique cabinet concept and to install the cabinets (fig. 10).



**Fig. 10 Kitchen of Cabaniss-Ezell House,
before and after, 1987.**
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

They were then ready to install the countertops: an unusual black composition of minerals and Portland cement called Fireslate, the sort of material normally used for countertops in chemistry laboratories. After they read about this surface in a magazine, they got in touch with the manufacturer in Maine, and the countertops were ordered and installed by Gene. He then installed the kitchen appliances. The Ezells hired wall and trim painters. They explained that they could have done this work themselves but wanted to hurry the work. They could sense that moving-in time was at hand.

Patience, analytical skills, ingenuity, experience, an enjoyment of different kinds of physical labor, a love and respect for history and building materials, enthusiasm, and the ability to work together and to find a sense of accomplishment in slow, incremental progress: these qualities the Ezells possess in abundance.



Fig. 11 Cabaniss-Ezell House ready for move-in day, 1998.
Courtesy Gene Ezell.

They are surely essential qualities for anyone interested in turning a decrepit old building into a modern home. But, perhaps, the most essential quality is the sense of vision, of the inviting home that one old house might become (fig. 11).

Move-in day was February 20, 1998. Although Gene recalls that doom and gloom was forecast, the moving company supervisor felt optimistic, and the weathermen once again proved inaccurate. The Ezells had a good omen: as they stood at a second floor window, a bluebird alighted on the porch roof in front of them!

Gene Ezell is a physicist. With his wife Mary Ann, he has spent the past fourteen years renewing a late 19th century log house on Monte Sano. Frances Osborn Robb is an art and cultural historian and an occasional contributor to the Quarterly.





Fig. 1 Hollingsworth-Allen House, New Hope, Madison County, November 1994.

Courtesy Jan Allen.

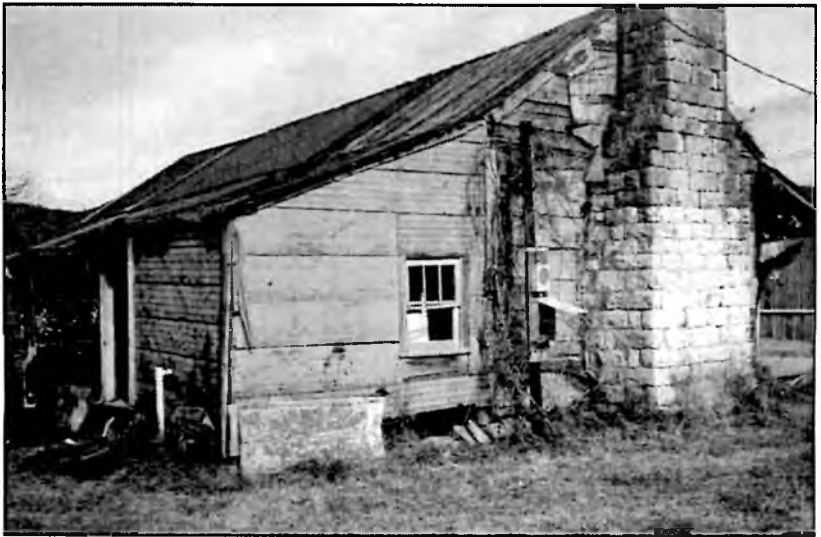


Fig. 2 Hollingsworth-Allen House, New Hope, Madison County, November 1994.

Courtesy Jan Allen.