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Early Huntsville: 1805-1825

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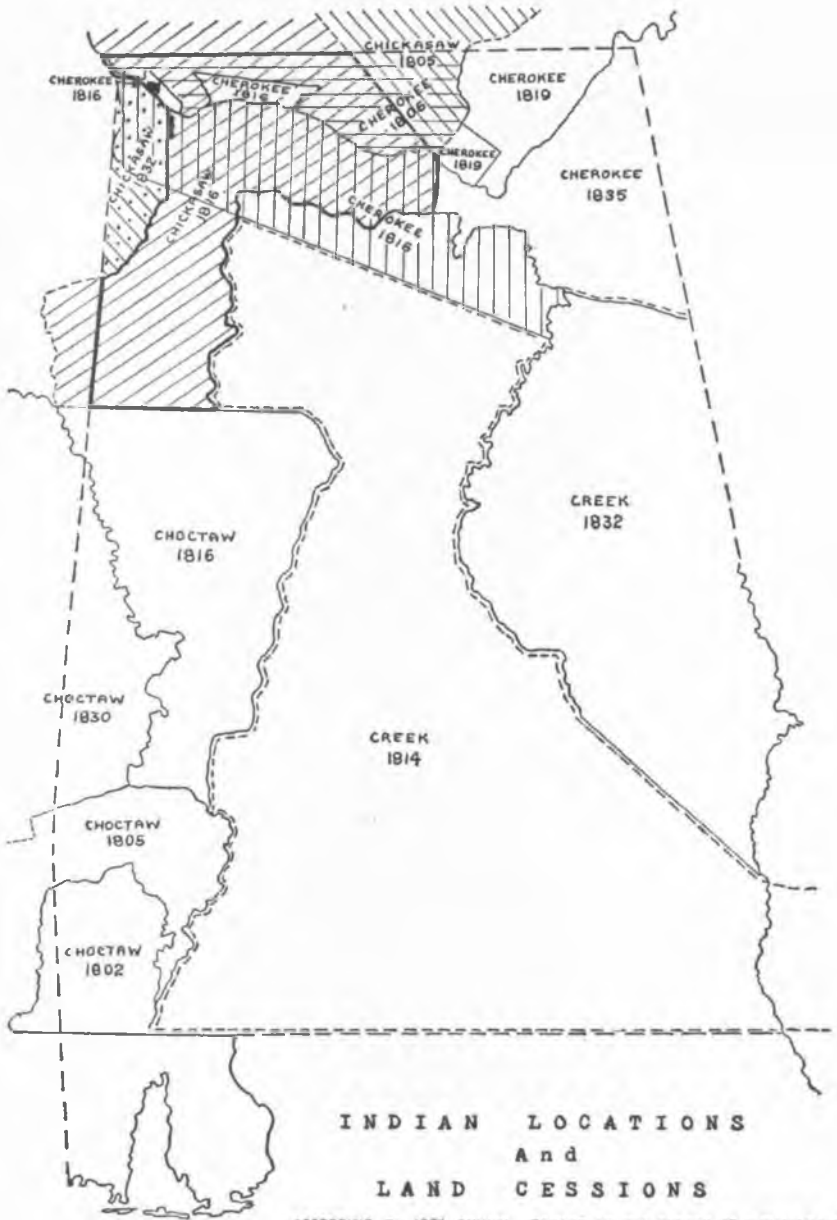
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Fisk: Early Huntsville: 1805-1825



Drawing by Sarah Huff Fisk
Alabama History for Schools
Charles Grayson Summersell
Colonial Press: Birmingham, AL
1957, p 162.

SARAH HUFF FISK

This article is the text of a talk made by Sarah Huff Fisk to the American Association of University Women on May 10, 1968 at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. The talk preceded their tour of antebellum homes in the Twickenham Historic District.

Before 1805, the rich lands in the Great Bend of the Tennessee River were claimed by the two Indian tribes, the Chickasaws and Cherokees. The Chickasaw land claims reached to the westward and into Mississippi; the Cherokees claimed to the eastward.

Ownership of the land where Madison County now is became a point of rivalry to the two tribes and this very rivalry was the opening wedge by which agents of the federal government were finally able to force the Indians to relinquish their rights to a triangular area in the Great Bend. These Indian cessions came in 1805 and 1807 and represented the first land relinquished by these two great civilized Indian tribes within the area that is now Alabama.

In 1804, even before the first Indian cession, two white men had explored the northeast section of what was to become Madison County. Isaac and Joseph Criner explored, liked what they saw, and stayed. They built a cabin on the Mountain Fork of Flint River and planted a crop.

The Criners were soon followed by a man, who though already past his middle years, had never conquered his urge to explore and settle new lands. John Hunt had helped to settle Tazewell, Tennessee and possibly other Tennessee towns, but he continued to move on toward new frontiers. His was certainly a wise and experienced eye, when he selected his new home in the land that was to become Madison County. His cabin site was near a majestic spring that flowed from beneath a great bluff—and this spring was soon to be known as Hunt's Spring.

Though the Criners and Hunt were probably the first to come, they were closely followed by many others. When the Indians gave up the land, it was as if the doors were thrown open to the people in the hilly country of eastern and central Tennessee and western Georgia. These people had already heard of the rich lands in the Great Bend of the Tennessee and were ready and waiting for their chance. They came across the border as frontiersmen, having no title to the land, but hopefully and bravely bringing their families. They chose a homesite, built a cabin, a barn, perhaps, and began to clear fields that they hoped one day to be able to buy. These first settlers were hardy pioneers who

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understood the trials and promise of settlement in a new land. They expected to work and to help each other. Many of the men had fought in the American Revolution and in expeditions against the Indians. These pioneers were not wealthy men; they were freedom-loving, hard-working, experienced in frontier life and within three years, they had cleared hundreds of acres of land and established seven villages about the area.

In 1808, 300 of these squatters' families applied to the federal government to buy their homesteads, as soon as the sale of lands was opened. (There was no homestead act at this time to guarantee the right to buy lands they had cleared and lived on for a specified length of time.)

On December 13, 1808, Madison County was created as a part of the Mississippi Territory. By August, 1809, the lands in the county had been surveyed and on the seventh day of that month a Public Land Office was opened in Nashville to handle the sale of Madison County lands. Settlers in the county who hoped to buy had to make the long trip by horseback to Nashville and wait until their section came up for sale. Then they had to compete by bid for its purchase. Sales were made to the highest bidder and many of the settlers who had cleared lands were unable to buy their homesteads.

Long before the land sale began, word of the richness of Madison County lands had reached into the older states of the Union, where there were planters with capital, who were looking for new rich lands, and other men, with large sums of money to invest, who were looking for land to buy on a speculative basis. These planters and speculators were able to buy the best land.

By 1809, quite a settlement had grown up around Hunt's Spring. Being almost in the center of the county, it seemed the logical place for the county seat, so bidding for the quarter section on which the spring was located, went very high. It was secured by LeRoy Pope, a wealthy planter of Petersburg, Georgia, and his associates of Nashville, Tennessee, who paid \$23.50 an acre for 160 acres. This investment paid off, for Hunt's Spring was chosen as the county seat. At the suggestion of LeRoy Pope, the name of the town was changed to Twickenham, after the English home of Alexander Pope.

The original plan of Twickenham consisted of twenty square blocks, with four half-acre lots to the block. This area was bounded by Holmes Street on the north, Lincoln on the east, Williams on the south, and Henry Street (now Gallatin) on the west. Pope and his associates sold most of the southeastern half of the town area, around 38 lots, to the town commissioners so that they could realize from the sale of lots to individuals enough to erect the public buildings—a courthouse and a jail.

On November 25, 1811, the town was incorporated, with the name changed again—to Huntsville. That year, the land office was moved here from Nashville. For the next eight years, this land office did a fantastic business. People poured in from all areas of the nation to invest in town sites and farms in the Tennessee Valley. Much of the land in southern Alabama and northern Mississippi was also sold at the Huntsville Land Office.

I think we might pause here to emphasize that the important attraction to Madison County was the rich agricultural lands in the valley and their proximity to the rivers, especially the great Tennessee River, for transportation of the agricultural product. The land here was well suited to the production of cotton, and after the invention of the cotton gin, this was the money-making crop. One reason for this—which we often forget in this day of fast transportation—was the fact that cotton did not deteriorate as did many other agricultural crops. After it was picked and ginned, it was baled (in bags or bales of about 300 lbs.) and loaded on wagons and hauled down the Flint River to the Tennessee, where only a large barge, enough water to float the barge across the Muscle Shoals, an honest boatman and crew, and a fair amount of good luck were required to deliver the cotton to the New Orleans market and to bring the proceeds back to Huntsville over the dangerous Natchez Trace or some other over-land route.

In 1819, within 10 years after the creation of Madison County, the statistical census showed the 69,638 acres of land had been cleared, and the total population of the county was 19,501 persons. During that year 17,795 bales of cotton were produced in the county and ginned in the 149 gins and presses located in various parts of the county. And though the route of cotton from the field to the New Orleans market seems a torturous and uncertain one, it was profitable and it was this profit, that in many cases was responsible for the beautiful old homes that you are about to visit.

Many of these homes were built by planters who could easily afford a home in town; some were built by men who made their money by speculation in cotton lands; others were built by merchants and professional men, who indirectly profited from the cotton economy. Whoever built them, these proud old homes were designed with style and grace and were built to endure. Today they stand in mute testimony of the kind of community that Huntsville had been from the beginning.

Here at an early date were found all the institutions that made a well rounded and complete community, many of them rarely to be found in a frontier town. You are, of course, familiar with many of the “firsts” of which Huntsville boasts, but I might mention a few. Huntsville had a

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newspaper in 1811, the second in the state; the first Library, in 1819, was located on the east side of Madison Street, in the middle of the block south of the square. In this same year, the Huntsville Book Store advertised for sale a great variety of books. There were a number of churches here very early. I might mention that the First Presbyterian Church, this year observing its 150th anniversary, is one of them. The town, by 1819, had a musical group, called the Haydn Society, an active and successful theatrical corps, several professional artists, a public schoolhouse and a number of private schools. The profusion and variety of merchandise offered in the stores here was perhaps not to be found anywhere else in a frontier town of this size. Due to the influx of land purchasers, the inns here did a thriving business very early. The Huntsville Inn, a three-story brick building erected on the east side of the square before 1817, was able to prepare on a few hours notice a seated dinner for 100 community leaders to honor the President of the United States, James Monroe, who made an unexpected visit to Huntsville in August of 1819.

It can readily be seen that men of the caliber to create such a community within a period of less than ten years could easily assume important political leadership. Madison County representatives were the most influential group in the Mississippi and Alabama Territorial Assemblies. When statehood for Alabama was contemplated in 1819, they were able to bring the Constitutional Convention to Huntsville. Here met the First Legislature of the new state and William Wyatt Bibb, the state's first governor was inaugurated. Next year, 1969, will be the 150th anniversary of these important events.

Some of the men who were politically prominent built homes that you will visit on your tour. In one area alone, the six blocks bordering Williams Street, these lived before 1850:

- 2 Governors of Alabama
- 1 Member of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature
- 3 Members of the First Constitutional Convention
- 2 United States Senators
- 2 Members of the U. S. House of Representatives
- 6 Alabama Supreme Court Justices
- 6 Members of the Alabama House of Representatives
- 1 Member of the Alabama Senate
- 1 Circuit Court Judge
- The Registrar for the Public Land Office
- The Receiver of Monies for the Land Office
- The President of the first bank in the state of Alabama
- The First Secretary of War of the Confederate States

The area of Huntsville, in which is concentrated the largest number of antebellum structures, is that area we call the Twickenham District, northeast of the Public Square, where an impressive 20% of the existing structures are antebellum. There are also many beautiful Victorian houses in this lovely unspoiled residential section.

I would like to call to your attention to an enlargement of an 1861 map of this area. I made this enlargement to the scale of the present city map so that in placing one over the other, it could be determined which houses were the same on both maps. This was helpful in authenticating the antebellum structures, which are marked on the map.

If you have specific questions about the map, the history of the houses, or the town, we will hope to hear them during our panel discussion later this evening. Time does not permit our discussing more recent eras now, but I would like to close by reminding you that since the days of Huntsville's founding there have always been among its citizens men and women who were willing to work beyond the call of duty to contribute economically, politically, and socially to its well-being and as long as that is true, our good community life will endure as have our beautiful homes.