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Joseph M. Jones

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The McCrary Farm Enters Its Third Century **By Joseph M. Jones**

In Madison County's "Three Forks of Flint" community, the Thomas McCrary farm has entered its third century. With its nineteenth-century dwelling and attendant structures, it appears to be the oldest such establishment in Alabama, that is, still owned and operated by the family of the original settler who bought the land from the United States government soon after the Cherokees and Chickasaws relinquished their claims.

It was 1809 when Thomas McCrary, a bright, young, single Carolinian with growing ambitions, moved into the Great Bend of the Tennessee, and bought a promising half-section of fertile land on which to cultivate cotton and a future. The next year he added an adjacent quarter section, 480 acres in sum. More than 200 years later his descendants still live on and operate that farm, still growing cotton in addition other crops and beef cattle.

Its principal owners today are two cousins, the eldest a great-grandson of the original Thomas McCrary who bears the exact name of his ancestor: Thomas McCrary, 98, who lives in nearby New Market. The other main owner until recently was a first cousin, Miss Alice McCrary Thomas, who died May 30, 2008, at age 98 and was buried "at home" with earlier McCrary generations. The land has been handed down through numerous McCrary generations, and the residence, which dates from about 1824, has been altered substantially by three of them.

Miss Thomas's successor is Mrs. Marguerite Ellison, a widowed niece of hers who is raising four children on the farm. Miss Thomas, a retired school principal and a renowned authority in area historical and genealogical research--a past president of the Huntsville/Madison County Historical Society--was a major source of this article, which was written with her assistance and reviewed by her prior to her death. The story, therefore, is allowed to stand with only minor revisions.

Alice McCrary Thomas was the last of the generations which substantially altered the old domicile, which was built of bricks made on the premises by slaves. When she inherited title

in 1971 she built on the rear a “keeping room,” essentially a modern apartment, in which she largely lived, but she slept at night in the old portion of the house in a canopied four-poster where her grandparents and great-grandparents had slept. The house is filled with antiques, many of them dating to the establishment of the residence, and even earlier. In the immediate area sloping down toward the Flint River are archaic outbuildings including a carriage house and a commissary used to provision slaves and later tenant farmers.

In the course of its 200 years, the property has been divided among heirs and reconsolidated. Today all except twenty acres of the original 480 acre farm is held by McCrarys, the twenty acres released to a medical doctor, Dr. Joseph S. Macon, in the 1890s “as payment for medical bills and in appreciation for friendship,” according to Miss Thomas. The residence and attendant farm buildings now belong to Mrs. Ellison, whereas the farm lands are held by Mrs. Ellison, and the present Thomas McCrary and his daughter, Miss Rosemary McCrary.

It is, according to the 1981 application by which it was added to the National Register of Historic Places, “an unusually intact 19th century farm complex.”

When the farm was settled Alabama was not yet settled and would not be for another decade. The area was in the Great Bend of the Tennessee River, in the eastern part of the Mississippi Territory, a most favored part with flat and rolling terrain, well watered, rich soil, auspicious climate – everything just right for growing cotton, the magic fiber that was taking the country, now that the cotton gin had been invented and was in common use, and abundant labor was available.

The first Thomas McCrary was twenty years of age and not without means when he received the land. He was among the first to make application to the government for the purchase of land in the area of the even-then renowned Big Spring, around which the town of Huntsville was later built. Soon after the government land office in Nashville opened August 5, 1809, for the sale of land in the locale, he obtained title to 320 acres, paying cash, no doubt derived from his father’s estate in Laurens County, South Carolina., where the McCrary family had prospered for two or three generations as people of the soil.

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In 1810, he added more acreage and began a gradual elevation to a position of major farmer, cotton factor, manufacturer, public official, and merchant. His finally owned more than 2,000 acres before the Civil War, a majority of it two miles eastward near the Deposit community.

Many, maybe most, of the landed gentry of the Huntsville vicinity had extensive farming operations outside the town but resided themselves in Huntsville. Not so with McCrary. He stayed in the countryside where his fortunes were. He did later establish a substantial business interest in the city, but he continued to live in the county.

It is noteworthy also that perhaps four-fifths of the newcomers were subsistence farmers, so in that sense McCrary was not typical. The very first Madison County settlers, Isaac and Joseph Criner of New Market, arriving in 1804-5, were clearly yeoman farmers, whereas in a few years moneyed farmers and speculators came en masse. When land sales began in 1809, a census of the Madison County area (somewhat larger than the present county) dated January 1809 showed there were 2,223 whites and 322 slaves in residence, squatters all. An early historian, Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, wrote in 1883 that of the early 1809 population "not a man had a title to a foot of land and many of them had been anxiously awaiting an opportunity to secure the home they had located in the new country." Eventually most of them did become legal owners, thanks to a benevolent government, many buying "on credit" at \$2 per acre.

The Thomas McCrary place is located ten miles northeast of the settlement first known as Twickenham and later Huntsville, in a section known locally as the "Three Forks of Flint," somewhat of a misnomer to some in that it is merely the confluence of Briar Fork and the Mountain Creek Fork of the Flint. A mile or so north of the confluence, he was in historic territory, where the first bridge spanning the Flint and a grist mill were built, and the famous five-story brick Bell Factory was established in 1832 as the state's initial major manufacturer of cotton goods.

Coming into the virgin cotton country with McCrary was Daniel Wright of Surrey County, N. C, who was followed two years later by his brother Williams Wright, sons of a prominent

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Virginia family with both blood and property ties to soldier-aristocrat George Washington. The Wrights bought land on either side of McCrary and were both to become, in turn, father-in-law to McCrary. Daniel Wright, a Revolutionary War soldier, had a daughter named Betsy, whom McCrary married in 1812. They had three daughters and a son (the latter dying in infancy) before Betsy succumbed in 1821. Thomas McCrary, then 34, married Betsy's first cousin, 17-year-old Nancy, the daughter of Williams, in 1823. That union endured and prospered for 42 years, as did the fortunes of McCrary. It is through Nancy that the present McCrary line runs—she mothered the prevailing family, outliving her husband by thirty years.

It is not clear that McCrary brought slave labor with him when he came to the region, but he likely did have minimal assistance. After five years the tax records show that he had nine slaves, a number which at maximum grew to eighty-nine. An existing family Bible reveals that he owned a cumulative total through the years of more than 300.

What is clear is that he deliberately engaged his workers in diversified trades. Of course they cleared land and raised cotton, which was the king of all enterprises. He also operated, with "servant" help, two tanneries for making shoes and other leather goods, a blacksmith shop, a brick manufacturing operation, and a small sugar refinery—the latter indicated only by a court record at the time of his death, about which nothing else is known, although it is assumed they grew cane to support that operation.

It was with his own slave-made bricks that he built his two-story residence, probably in 1824, replacing a less permanent wooden structure he built upon arrival. Although there is no physical evidence of a brick "factory," family and community lore seems to make that a certainty. He also built about the same time a number of brick "cabins" for his slaves. The late Alice Thomas said her mother quoted her father, Williams Wright McCrary, as saying there were five such cottages. Another source lists the number as eight.

Here, an oddity appears. There is strong circumstantial evidence that McCrary, of a Presbyterian background but apparently never an active churchman, also had a major role in

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building at this time a small brick Baptist church in the open countryside on what is now Moores Mill Road, about two miles west of his farm. Enon Baptist Church had been formed in 1809, near the present Meridianville. In 1825, one year after McCrary's own brick house is thought to have been built, a small brick church house appeared; Enon voted unanimously, with no prior hint of such an activity in its official record, to quit its log building and move into the new brick meeting house. Both of McCrary's fathers-in-law were important members of Enon and had roles (indicated in court records, not church minutes) in raising funds for a new meeting house, and it is assumed they employed McCrary's demonstrated brick-making capability, assisted perhaps by his considerable labor force, to erect the new building. But church records are silent in this regard. Enon, the oldest missionary Baptist church in Alabama, later moved to Huntsville and became the city's First Baptist Church, now celebrating its 200th year. It is the writer's supposition that McCrary's in-laws prevailed upon him to assist in building a new meeting house, and he, having bricks and labor, complied.

And what a spectacle that must have been--a brick church in raw open country otherwise known for its cotton, timber, and modest (mostly log?) homesteads. The new church house, much closer to the McCrary-Wright home places than the old log Enon, became a landmark, cited even in land deed descriptions.

McCrary's residence, never palatial but a substantial masonry home, was expanded significantly in the 1830s when, upon the untimely death of Nancy's parents, Thomas and Nancy McCrary assumed the responsibility of rearing Nancy's young siblings, several in number. The house has been altered again at least twice, including the deletion of a separate kitchen and incorporation of an in-house kitchen. When she added her "keeping room" apartment in 1971, Miss Thomas retained the hand-hewn limestone steps that allow access to the bed chamber used by her progenitors for nearly two centuries.

The tall bed is one of scores of relics of the past, some of them built on the farm by black laborers, some purchased from an accomplished cabinet-maker in 19th century Huntsville, and some brought back from New Orleans by McCrary on his trips there as a cotton factor. An exception is a massive, square grand

piano which bears a silver plate indicating it was bought in Huntsville, of Baltimore manufacture, in 1859. The original house has thick exterior walls, transoms over interior doors for light and ventilation, fireplaces in every room, and other indicators of long-ago construction.

Of the nineteenth-century outbuildings, they are still standing but mostly in a frayed condition, little used now and certainly not for the original purposes. The carriage house was converted to a garage for a Model-T Ford almost a century ago. No living McCrary can remember the commissary being used for its initial purpose, the provisioning of farm families. The smoke house that once accommodated the carcasses of ten or more hogs at a time has long been unused. The barns, host in 1850, according to a tax inventory, to 15 mules, 14 work oxen, 16 milk cows, 360 hogs and 50 sheep, now mostly contain hay and a modern tractor used to dispense it to a herd of Angus cattle. Much of the farm is given over now to beef cattle operations, along with small grains, and the growing of cotton --still the main crop -- is done by an outside large-scale farmer on a share basis.

In the middle 1800s, Farmer McCrary developed major interests away from the farm. An 1859 Huntsville directory lists him as a partner in the firm of McCrary, Patterson, and Sprague; advertised as grocers, ropemakers and cotton-goods manufacturers. He bought and sold cotton. He purchased stock in the Madison Turnpike as well as the Memphis and Charleston Railroad which connected Huntsville with the outside through steam engines rather than horses. He became a Madison County commissioner, serving 1856-59. Then came the war, at the end of which he was devastated financially and without a work force. He died at war's end, August 31, 1865, at age seventy-six, without a will and insolvent. The court administered the estate, leaving the home place as well as a portion of the more distant land intact but heavily in debt.

Recent owners have had no long-term separation from the land from infancy. Miss Thomas owned the residence and outbuildings as part of her almost 200 acre total, now bequeathed to Mrs. Ellison. The present Thomas McCrary owns an adjoining 190 acres, and two cousins, Rosemary McCrary and Marguerite

Ellison, own the remainder. The present Mr. McCrary actively oversees farming operations of the whole—as well as of more than 500 acres he owns nearby, which includes another beef cattle operation. His ninety-eight years do not thwart his role as manager as well as active doer—he's abroad every day in his pickup, directing hired help, and operating farm machinery as he has done for eight or more decades, himself baling hay, combining wheat, and feeding cattle. His farm service was interrupted briefly by World War II military service.

Miss Thomas taught school in Huntsville and Madison County for most of her professional life; her last position was as principal of the lower grades of Huntsville's prestigious, private Randolph School. She was a teacher/administrator throughout except for a six-year period around World War II in which she lived in the nation's capital, working for the FBI and later U. S. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia. Until death she was in reasonable health and vibrant personality, bothered mainly by failing eyesight.

The McCrary plantation "home-place," named "McVilleville" by a possessor (Aunt Hattie) many decades ago, is reached by traversing a half-mile of lonely, picturesque lane through fields and woods, well separated from the heavily-traveled Riverton Road that provides access, passing the site of the now-gone mule-powered cotton gin the first McCrarys operated but which is remembered by later McCrarys only as a delightful place for childhood romps. In recent years the quiet pastoral scene was interrupted momentarily by the construction of a spacious new residence near the original home place where Marguerite Ellison cared for Miss Alice while rearing her four children. Mrs. Ellison's father, John R. Thomas, was the twin brother of Miss Alice. He, a Huntsville lawyer, died at age 58 in 1968. Mrs. Ellison's early professional life was as a federal court reporter.

In today's Huntsville area phone book the rather uncommon name of McCrary appears eighty-five times--almost always belonging to an African-American descended from McCrary slaves, their having taken the name following emancipation. They are mostly not blood kin to one another but they share an ancient bond their forebears having been in bondage to the first Thomas McCrary. Although he bears a

different name, one such progeny is Willie Jay Walker, 79, who, like his father, grew up on the place. He is immediately on call from a few miles distance, a jack-of-all-trades to fix whatever needs fixing, to work in the yards, or to befriend the seemingly indestructible English boxwood hedges bordering the front walk that Williams Wright McCrary and his wife Alice Ellet planted soon after their marriage in 1858. Willie Jay's wife, Maggie, was a part-time helper to Miss Alice, and continues so to Mrs. Ellison.

With the post-Civil War financial ruin and the end of the patriarch's life in 1865, the survivors required years, and the patience of a sympathetic justice system, to satisfy debts and retain the main farmstead and much of the detached acreage. The generations passed, and with that the necessity of assigning bestowals from the departed to surviving family members. There seems to have been through the two centuries a strong family attachment to the land and a determination to keep it together.

Of the outlying acres to the east of the core farm, the present Thomas McCrary has been able to keep much of that ancient original tract together. Through industry, foresight and an allegiance to perpetuity, as heirs there have desired to sell through the years he has been able to repurchase the acreage from his kinsmen, to the point that he individually owns more than 500 acres in the off-site location, all but nineteen of which are of the original McCrary holdings.

Although pieces of the core farm have been divided by title several times, its segments have been owned by family members who were unusually unified and of a single purpose--honor the forebears by holding on to the land, and keeping it a single unit. It continues today as one entity, under one McCrary manager, providing an extraordinary tapestry of Alabama farm life from the present stretching back 200 years to the taming of the wilderness.

FOR THE RECORD

This article, written in March 2008 and revised later, was prepared with the careful collaboration of Alice McCrary Thomas, Thomas McCrary and Marguerite Ellison. All have read it for accuracy and signified acceptance. The writer, Joseph M. Jones, is a former Alabama newsman, the first news chief of the Huntsville's NASA-Marshall Space Flight Center, and later its director of public affairs, now retired. JMJ

