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The Old Stones of Monte Sano

*Adapted from material by
Jane Barr*

“A place without old buildings
is like a person without a memory.”

—Timothy Cantwell, British town planner

The U-shaped crescent of Monte Sano Mountain rises nearly 800 feet above the city of Huntsville. Its ancient limestone slopes—enriched with clay and silicates after millennia spent as an undersea plateau, then thrust upward by the violent geological upheavals of the lower Appalachian range—have given rise to a lush, forested landscape.

The Huntsvillians who make their homes on Monte Sano embrace its natural beauty and its heritage. Formed nearly a decade ago, the Monte Sano Historical Association is dedicated to preserving the remnants of that heritage, protecting what remains of the mountain’s early homes and other structures. Unfortunately, the past century—easily as tumultuous as those eons-old geologic upheavals—has left all too little behind to commemorate Alabamans’ early stamp on the region.

Among the remains are some noteworthy stone structures, a few of them dating back almost 200 hundred years. These examples of pre- and post-Civil War stonework are all that is left of once-proud homes, wells, entranceways and property dividers, a school, even a magnificent hotel that once catered to America’s rich and famous. Apart from those few historical sites denoted by landmark plaques scattered across the mountaintop, almost nothing else remains to mark the people and progress that once turned Monte Sano Mountain into a flourishing center of life, recreation, and economic pride for northern Alabama.

But stone remembers, and even its ruins tell something of the tale...

Early Settlement

Historical records show that Charles Cabiness is credited as the first land owner on Monte Sano, staking his claim on Sept. 18, 1809.

Another gentleman, Thomas Martin, purchased land on Jan. 3, 1814.

But it was Dr. Thomas Fearn and his brothers, Robert and George, who are generally considered the founders of the earliest white settlement on Monte Sano Mountain.

In 1827, during a terrible epidemic of yellow fever, malaria and cholera, the Fearn brothers were drawn by the cool air and medicinal springs to establish a small colony on the northern section of the mountain Thomas would later dub *Monte Sano*, which is Spanish for “mountain of health.” In 1833, the Fearn family officially founded the town of Viduta (derived from the Spanish word *vida*, meaning “life”), which included an inn, a number of summer homes for valley dwellers, and the Monte Sano Female Seminary.

The Rowe Seminary

The Monte Sano Female Seminary, an institute of education and spiritual instruction, was opened in 1830 by Reverend James Rowe and his wife Malinda, Ohioans who migrated south in search of healthier living. Situated on what is now Lookout Drive, the seminary may have been the first major stone structure erected on Monte Sano Mountain.

According to a letter written by Malinda Rowe in Oct. 1831 to her family back in Ohio: “We have a boarding school. We have now on hand a stone house intended for the school and other uses, which is 56 feet long and 45 wide” (Barr 8). The building, a two-story structure (according to a brochure for the seminary distributed in 1832), was of Federal design, as was popular in the early 1800s among southerners influenced by the wealthy Charleston elite. Based on classic Roman design, the Federal-style structure would have featured a shallow relief design and likely would have included brick and cut-stone lintels and quoins.

Tragically, Malinda died in 1833, just as interest in the seminary was growing. Her grieving husband buried her in a small cemetery on the property, closed the school, and took their two young sons back to Ohio. The seminary building has since passed out of public record, suggesting it may have been destroyed in the Civil War. A historical marker stands on the site of the seminary, but it is perhaps no better a record of the Rowes’ lives and work during their brief stay on Monte Sano than the pair of weathered granite obelisks which still indicate the resting place of Malinda Rowe.

Influx of Residents

Already, more homesteaders were coming to Viduta, including farmhands and miners who bought cheaply, worked hard and lived on



3618 Fearn—Random range rubblework on a solid stone wall home. The stone window sills are sloped away from the window and contain a drip edge (a shallow groove underneath the front edge) so that water drips to the ground instead of running back toward the stone where it can wear away mortar. Photo by H. Cross.

Monte Sano year-round, as well as wealthier Huntsvillians who built comfortable summer homes on the mountain in order to escape the valley's blistering heat waves. It's not surprising that many builders chose stone for their homes and structures. Limestone was readily available thanks to the mining operations throughout the area, and stone—which cooled interiors during the sweltering summer months and retained heat during winter freezes—provided an effective and temperate natural alternative to other building materials.

One such builder was Arthur Hopkins, a member of the 1819 State Constitutional Convention. In 1836, Hopkins erected a stone house and extensive garden on what is now Monte Sano Blvd. and Lookout Drive. Like the Rowe Seminary, no record exists to explain what happened to the house, though it too may have been put to the torch by Federal soldiers as the Confederacy crumbled. Unlike the site of the Rowe Seminary, however, others would build here again...

Century's End

By the end of the post-war Reconstruction, local commerce was again booming, expanding from resource-harvesting (timber and minerals) to

entertainment. In 1887, the North Alabama Improvement Company and local entrepreneur Col. James O'Shaughnessy built the 223-room Hotel Monte Sano, a health resort that became a haven for industrial giants including the Vanderbilts and the Astors. Closed in 1900, the hotel was converted into summer residences and finally demolished for salvage in 1944. All that remains is the brick chimney on Old Chimney Road and a historical landmark plaque on the corner of Old Chimney and Monte Sano Blvd.

The lure of improved health also drew the military to Monte Sano Mountain. In 1888 and 1889, soldiers from Ft. Barancas, Fla. were stationed at Camp Monte Sano to recover from malaria and yellow fever contracted during the Spanish-American War.

James O'Shaughnessy had embarked on an ambitious building project in what is now known as Monte Sano State Park. He intended to erect a sprawling, Queen Anne-style home complete with stone gates and fencing and an ornate wooden gazebo. But the economic downturn that shut down the hotel and railroad at the start of the new century forced him to abandon his dream home as well. It was demolished in the years that followed.

The intricate stone architecture O'Shaughnessy had planned for his home could be seen in the earliest completed elements: the fence and well-house. The stone fence boasted a three-rail crest and a wrought-iron gate between stone piers, believed by researchers to match the limestone *porte cochere* of the house, of which no images have survived. The stone well-house at the front gate had a single door, a stone font and a conical roof with wooden fish-scale shingles, a popular late-19th century motif in which the exposed edge of the shingles is rounded like the scales of a fish.

The Legacy of the Hopkins Site

In 1892, ground was broken again at the site of the former Arthur Hopkins home, but with no more promising results than Hopkins himself had enjoyed. It was the intention of Mrs. Lucy Beirne Matthews to erect an Episcopal chapel on the site in memory of her late daughter, Eliza Gray Matthews. Six-foot high stone walls were built of fieldstone—heavy rocks and boulders pulled from fields during plowing or site clearing, stacked and supported by large mortar joints—but

then the project was inexplicably scrapped. Local homesteaders Carl and Edith Murphy completed the structure that same year, converting the intended chapel into a new home. The rectangular, one-story stone structure had a three-bay front with recessed side wings, a hipped roof, vine-covered wooden porch columns (which were later replaced with limestone blocks), a lovely interior chimney with rock mantle, and a trap-door in the kitchen which led to a concealed basement.

The Murphys did not remain long in the home either; the death of a boarder before the turn of the century may have been a case of murder stemming from an uncovered love triangle. Whatever the cause, the unhappy legacy of the site was no match for the lure of “the mountain of health,” and in the early 1900s, a couple named Charles and Molly Hutchens took up residence in the home. Local rumor suggests the property may have served as Prohibition-era “speakeasy” in the 1920s and early ‘30s. It remains standing and in use as a home today.

Interestingly, one of the stones from the original Episcopal chapel project remains on view at the Monte Sano Methodist church. The three-sided stone, which is approximately 24 inches by 25 inches, includes inscriptions on each side. On the first: a Celtic cross with three flowers on a common stem and the words, “Jesus Christ The Chief Corner Stone. The second side reads: “May 30th A.D. 1892, Suffer The Little Children To Come Unto Me And Forbid Them Not For Of Such Is The Kingdom Of God.” The third side is inscribed with the words: “The Church Of The Holy Innocents. Out Of The Mouth Of Babes And Sucklings Thou Has Perfected Praise.”

Century’s Beginning

The economic pitfalls that caught up with the nation between the conclusion of the Spanish-American War and the start of World War I had caught up with Monte Sano Mountain as well. Fewer of Huntsville’s privileged kept their summer homes, while the year-round families endured by tending small gardens, and perhaps a corn patch or fruit trees. Many kept chickens and a hog or two; some even had a milk cow. Goats ran wild across the mountaintop.

It was around this time that the Huntsville Times’ editor and publisher, a Mr. Pierce, lost both his newspaper and his intended new homestead on the mountain, which was situated at what is now 3021 Panorama.

Dr. Pierce and his family had been living in a temporary log house on the property, preparing to build a permanent home. The only part of it Pierce managed to complete was a well-crafted stone stairway and rock patio leading up to the house. Here, before he fell on



3021 Panorama—Stone steps and wall surrounding the patio from the Pierce house as they exist today. New construction of a frame home sits behind the stone structure. Photo by H. Cross.

hard times, Pierce reportedly held Sunday afternoon parties, complete with a local orchestra of black musicians. The log house remained in use for nearly a century after the Pierces moved on, and was demolished in 1998. Only the stone steps and the patio remain.

The Roaring '20s

Another flurry of development exploded on Monte Sano in the 1920s, as post-war prosperity brought back jobs, wealth and security to the nation and likewise to the Huntsville area. As the so-called "Florida Route" (which would later become Highway 231/431) became a major travel route between Huntsville and Guntersville for truckers and tourists alike, local builders tackled new projects across the mountain, including a planned community center, hotel and other recreational facilities—and most importantly a new road cutting directly across the plateau. Monte Sano Blvd. opened on Independence Day, 1927.

The Monte Sano Construction Company, which spearheaded the new growth on the mountain, issued a brochure that same year, spotlighting homes on the mountain to encourage new homesteaders and investors to leave the valley below. Among the properties depicted in the brochure were several noteworthy stone homes, including that of S.S. "Sam" Thompson, a bungalow with a hipped roof, stacked limestone pillars supporting a broad porch and *porte cochere*, and an enclosing stone fence. Demolished at some point in the mid-1900s, the house was situated at what is now 5510 Panorama Drive. The surviving stone

fence was renovated for the current owners in 2000 by architect John G. (Gerry) Simpson.

Other properties on display in the brochure included the J.E. Sanford and C.B. Orendorff homes. The Sanford home was a stone-crafted combination of Tudor and Romanesque influences; unfortunately, it was destroyed sometime after 1930. Orendorff's two-story, Arts and Crafts-style stone home, however—with an expansive front porch supported by stone piers and exposed wood timbers—remains intact and occupied today at 1711 Monte Sano Blvd.

Another notable survivor is the S.W. Judd home, an Arts and Crafts/Craftsman-style stone dwelling situated at 1733 Monte Sano Blvd. A Tennessee native, Searcy Judd was a professional photographer and a widower who came to Huntsville in 1903. He built his stone retreat on Monte Sano almost entirely by himself on weekends in the years that followed, and completed it in the late 1920s.

The one-story horizontal design was intended to blend into the land, neatly integrating the home with the surrounding woodlands. The



1711 Monte Sano Blvd.—The Orendorff home is an Arts and Crafts two-story stone and wood structure that incorporates random range ashlar on the main home and rubblework with slight coursing for the piers that support the porch and front steps. Photo by H. Cross.

home had a tiled roof and sash windows. While its interior—including informal room arrangements and a rough, stone-faced fireplace—seems in



keeping with Judd's widower status, he was a stickler for detail to the exterior's Arts

1726 Monte Sano Blvd.—The Judd home displays rubblework with thick, irregular mortar as well as rough stone window sills and lintels. Also note the flagstone path from the front door. The tile roof no longer exists and evidence of modern plumbing can be seen to the right of the door. Photo by H. Cross.

and Crafts style: a long gable to cover the side porch, stone accents carried over to the steps, terraces and garden walls, and ornate wrought iron topping the low stone wall that fronted the property. Though the back part of the structure was lost to fire in the middle part of the century and had to be rebuilt, the tornado that ripped through the property in 1974 and felled nearly every tree in sight did only very minor damage to the Judd home—attesting to the strength and durability of its stone construction.

But once again, the prosperity of the period was not to last long. Just as the Monte Sano Construction Company was clearing brush on the south plateau, preparing to initiate construction on the 100-room Monte Sano Manor hotel, the Great Depression cast its pall over the nation.

The Work of the Civilian Conservation Corps

In 1931, determined to break the nation out of its crippling economic paralysis, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps. More than two million young men and war veterans joined the Corps in the next four years, devoting themselves to building roads, bridges, cabins, shelters, dams, water systems and other critical facilities for the country's state and national parks systems.

On Monte Sano Mountain in 1935, the Corps was represented by the 3486th Company of State Park 12 and 13 District D, 4th Corps. Dozens of Corpsmen bunked in military-style, prefabricated barracks on the south plateau, which officially became “Camp Monte Sano.” There, they were tasked with building Monte Sano State Park, including all necessary roads, structures and landscaping requirements.

The 3486th, which contained a number of skilled stonemasons, built a number of Arts and Crafts-style stone cabins, using native rock quarried right on Monte Sano Mountain. They cut the exteriors and carefully chiseled the interiors of each stone to build the 20-foot-by-28-foot cabins, which included an exterior end stone chimney with stone hearth; accentuated wooden structural members; rectangular, spreading rooflines; and a low-pitched, single broad gable roof. Some included open terraces overlooking the bluff.



The CCCorps camp wall—Composed of stone piers with a stone wall between, the wall flanks the intersection of Highland and Monte Sano Blvd. The wall contains stone that has been surface dressed to maintain the slope of the piers but otherwise left in irregular shapes. Photo by H. Cross.

The Corps also erected the low stone wall at the camp’s entrance, which—like the cabins—remains intact to this day. In addition, they erected a one-story stone structure with ell projections and gables that would originally serve the Corps as a lodge and tavern and later would become a home for the park rangers. This

structure burned in the early 1990s; in recent years, Huntsvillians have begun talks to have it rebuilt.

After three years of the Corps’ steady labor, the “Showplace of the Tennessee Valley” opened to the public on Aug. 25, 1938. For Monte Sano Mountain, as for the rest of the nation, President Roosevelt’s plan

to put Americans to work—and to provide the country with valuable natural natural attractions and environmental preserves—had been an overwhelming success.

Path to the Present

The advent of World War II in 1939, the creation of Redstone Army Arsenal in Huntsville, and the start of the space program in the early 1950s, which further changed the economics of the area, signaled the end of an era for Monte Sano Mountain. In 1954, the Monte Sano Civic Association was formed, and the mountain was re-zoned as a residential-only area, causing all farming to cease and livestock to be banished to the valley below. The following year, all of Monte Sano, including Viduta township, was annexed into the City of Huntsville. And while the people of Monte Sano enjoyed the benefits of a modern era—including an elementary school, grocery stores, churches, a fire station, and community recreational facilities—many of the legacy structures of the past were razed to make way for that modern era. Steps have been taken to prevent those losses from continuing. The formation in 1992 of the Monte Sano Historical Association led to the Viduta Historic District being listed two years later on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.

For their part, the stones—what few remain—stand in memory. The worn tombstone of Malinda Rowe holds silent sway over what was once a place of spiritual growth and education. The salvaged stone from Lucy Matthews' failed Episcopal chapel still cries out over the loss of a child, and of all such children. Mr. Pierce's stone patio still grows warm in sunlight that on Sundays past might have glinted off brass instruments as they belted out a ragtime tune. And the stones laid in Monte Sano Park welcome the great-grandchildren of the men who cut and placed them, who may never need know work of that nature, born out of that necessity.

As much as anything can be, the stones *are* our memory.

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Civilian Conservation Corps Camp Wall—Corner of Highland and Monte Sano Blvd. camp wall pier. Photo by H. Cross.