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Lang: The McCrary Homestead

The McCrary Homestead By Chris Lang

The McCrary homestead and its contents provide a rare glimpse of a working plantation with a history that dates back to the early nineteenth century. The farm, located in northern Madison County near the Three Forks of the Flint River, has been continuously owned by the same family since its settlement. This continuity in ownership has helped preserve many family possessions in the home and on the farm. The surviving collection of furniture and artifacts provide clues about the lives of antebellum Alabamians who settled and developed Madison County. This collection of furniture and buildings contains a wealth of information that sheds light upon the life of these early Alabamians, many of whom followed similar patterns of movement from the Atlantic seaboard to the interior of the new country.¹



Down a long gravel driveway with a high hedgerow on the right and cotton fields on the left, the approach to the McCrary home retains a rustic setting. The dwelling, surrounded

¹ For a comparison of contemporary inventories with the McCrary estate, Lee W. Rahe's essay "the Furnishings of Early Alabama Homes, 1819-1870" p. 32-47 from *Made in Alabama, A State Legacy*, published by the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama, 1995.

by huge trees and ancient boxwood, is nestled in the brow of a slight hill. Located on a working farm, the home has practical features such as working fireplaces in each room, windows on opposing walls, and transom windows over the doorways for light and ventilation. For almost two centuries the structure has grown and changed to meet the needs of its occupants.

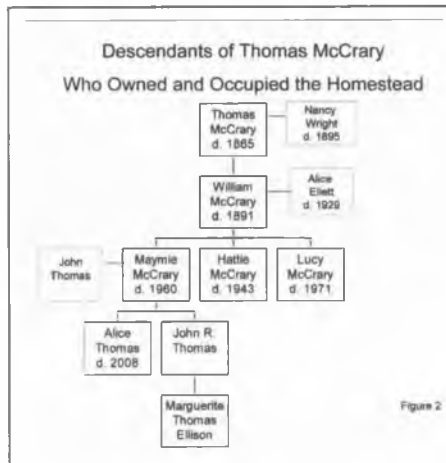


Madison County was established in 1809 as part of the Mississippi Territory. The federal government had recently opened up former Indian land for sale. Coming into an inheritance, Thomas McCrary followed his future father-in-law, Daniel Wright, from Laurens County, South Carolina, to this new territory. On November 2, 1809, McCrary purchased two quarter sections of rich farmland and a year later another section for a total of over 480 acres.² He persuaded his younger brother, William Wright of Surry County, North Carolina, to resettle here as well. The Wrights, an old family from Virginia, were related to

² Federal Land sale papers of the Mississippi Territory.

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George Washington through marriage as second cousins and once owned the land where Mount Vernon stands.³ Both Wright brothers bought tracts of land adjoining those of Thomas McCrary and all three would develop strong interlocking family ties. In 1812, Elisabeth (Betsy) Wright, daughter of Daniel Wright, married McCrary, and the young couple built a home on his property and began to raise a family. The oldest section of the house included a cellar where the family canned and prepared food. On the main floor, rooms extended off the west side with an entrance hall located in the middle of the structure. Elements of this home are still at the core of the existing structure.⁴



The House

In 1821 Betsy died, leaving Thomas to care for their three daughters and the farm. Two years later Thomas married Betsy's

³ *The Heritage of Madison County, Alabama*, Heritage Publishing Consultants, Inc. Clanton, Alabama, 1998 p.492.

⁴ In 1982 the property was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was prepared by Architectural Historian, Robert Gamble, of the Alabama Historical Commission.

younger cousin, Nancy, the daughter of William Wright. Nancy's parents died shortly afterward, forcing Thomas and Nancy to adopt her younger siblings. They in turn had two sons of their own, Thomas and William Wright, the latter becoming the sole heir of the property after the death of his older brother. During the 1830s McCrary built a separate two-story building to the south side of the house to accommodate his growing family.



The woodwork and hardware on the doors date to this period.⁵ He left a breezeway between the two structures. This space, now called the gallery, is enclosed with louvered shutters to keep the elements out and provides access between rooms and additional living space during warm weather. The new building consisted of a partially below grade room, corresponding to the cellar of the older structure, with wooden bricks or blocks of

wood with the end grain exposed for the floor, a construction feature found in other Alabama houses of the same era such as Oakleigh Place in Mobile. The ceiling, less than eight feet high, is considerably lower than in other parts of the house. Four windows provide ample light and are in the same location as in the upper room. Both rooms can be accessed from the outside

⁵ In his field research book #64, architect and historian Harvie Jones notes that the doors in this part of the building have two panels and “Walker Improved” locks with an Eagle stamp typical of the 1830’s. He is of the opinion that this is when this addition was built. The Harvie Jones collection is held in the library at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

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wooden stairs from the gallery and sandstone steps on the opposite exterior side.



Thomas McCrary

Thomas McCrary ran a profitable farm and purchased additional land in the nearby community of Deposit. Besides being a landholder and cotton merchant, he also was involved with a number of local businesses. In the 1850 census he owned eighty-nine slaves. McCrary family Bibles and other documents

show that the family ultimately owned over 300 slaves.⁶ Many were trained on the plantation in skilled trades including carpentry, blacksmithing, tanning, and weaving. Evidence of their work survives in the buildings and other artifacts. The *Huntsville City Directory of 1859-60*, listed Thomas as a partner in the law firm of McCrary, Patterson, and Sprague. The firm operated a cotton mill, grocery store, and rope factory. He also owned stock in the Madison Turnpike and the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, which had just been completed.⁷



Though Huntsville, the county seat of Madison County, was spared during the Civil War, those years and Reconstruction proved to be disruptive to the local economy. Union troops seized the train depot and occupied the town. With the end of slavery and no capital, Thomas McCrary was in financial ruin and eventually passed away heavily in debt. In the September 9, 1865, issue of the *Huntsville Independent*, a notice of liquidation for the law firm McCrary, Patterson, and Sprague

⁶ Dorothy Scott Johnson has compiled a list of the persons in slavery by the McCrarys. Sources include *The Holy Bible* published 1827 by Kimber & Sharpless, Philadelphia, *The Holy Bible* published 1841 by Lane & Sanford, New York, and *The Life of George Washington* by John Marshall Vol. 1 published 1804 by C. P. Wayne, Philadelphia. The earliest person listed is "Negro Jerry" born 1787 while the last entry is an unnamed child born 25 September 1864. Eighteen children born in slavery listed during the Civil War period suggest that they did not leave the plantation until after the war. Miss Alice Thomas adds that according to family tradition only one slave left the plantation once the war ended.

⁷ Probate Book 27 p.386 At his death, Mr. McCrary owned 50 shares of the Madison Turnpike worth \$1200. Probate Book 30 p.439. He also owned 256 shares of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad worth \$6400.

appeared. For several years court records indicate that his family sold land, property, and stock to pay off outstanding debts. Fortunately for Nancy, who lived another thirty years, the estate administrators spared the house and its contents, noting “there is nothing more in the house or kitchen than is necessary for the comfort and convenience of the family and I would therefore set apart for the use of the widow all the household and kitchen furniture . . . Taylor and Humphrey”⁸ The succession law of Alabama permitted the provision of economic support and basic furnishings for a widow from her husband’s estate, and therefore the McCrary homestead was allowed to remain in the family.



Furnishings

Thomas McCrary’s estate inventory provides a detailed look into the contents of his house, stables, and outbuildings. (See Appendix A)⁹ The most costly item of the estate proved to be a half interest in the tan yard stock with vats worth \$500. Two of these bath-tub sized vats still remain in a field near an old stable and are used as water troughs.¹⁰ Leather, tanning tools, and forty-

⁸ Probate Records, Madison County Court House, Probate Book 1860-8 p. 358.

⁹ Probate Records, Book 27 pp.324 -See Appendix I.

¹⁰ These vats were also used for butchering hogs. Large cast iron vats up to seven feet in diameter were produced at the Tannehill Ironworks situated along the old Huntsville Road on route to Tuscaloosa. For more information about the iron industry in Alabama consult *Old Tannehill* by James R. Bennett, published by the Jefferson County Historical Commission, Birmingham, Alabama, 1986.

eight pair of brogan shoes were also mentioned in the inventory. Almost half the list is devoted to farming equipment and livestock. Even crops in the field were included in the estate inventory. Moreover, the household items and furniture were listed by room and a sense of how the place looked can be recreated. Private bedrooms, communal areas such as the parlor and dining room, and workspace such as the kitchen were listed and are easily distinguished from each other. At least half of the listed items can still be attributed to pieces used in the home today. Other items, such as the carpenter tools, can be traced to relatives who acquired them over the years.

Kitchen Furniture

The estate inventory contains several types of furniture typically associated food storage and preparation. The sugar chest, valued in the estate inventory at \$5, is made of cherry and poplar secondary woods.¹¹ The upper dovetailed chest is divided into three compartments. The lower stand with tapered legs has a drawer with a scribed bead around the edge and a brass bail pull. The strap hinges are identical to those of a cherry blanket chest valued at \$2 with common dovetails along the sides and extended bracket feet. The lock is offset because of a central dado, though the divider is missing. The \$25 sugar mill indicates that some sugar refining was done on the plantation. The biscuit block board at \$6.50 consists of a large piece of stone 30 inches by 24 inches and 2 ¼ inches thick used for preparing biscuits, which is housed on a



¹¹ The sugar chest belongs to Nancy Morris, a descendent who resides in Memphis, TN.

sturdy square frame table with hinged lid.

Two plain pie safes are located in the gallery. One measures almost five feet wide, made of poplar but stained to resemble



cherry. The frame construction is reinforced with pegs and the corner stiles are rounded. The two front doors have locks. The eight tins are punched with a Star of David surrounded by a heart and diamond pattern. The other safe, also of poplar, is smaller with a dark finish.

The frame construction has a bead molding that runs down the tapered legs. Below the pair of doors is a large drawer. The twelve tins are punched with a central diamond and circle pattern. A small press of poplar with the same dark finish has a square front. The top and apron are flat while the two doors are of frame and panel construction. The rounded apron has bracket feet with dovetailed corners. The shelves are missing though three



back support rails remain. The inventory lists both a \$5 refrigerator and a \$2 freezer. The refrigerator is a large insulated chest that has a painted faux-grained exterior and sits on ball feet. The interior is divided in two zinc-lined compartments, the smaller used perhaps for potable ice.



Seating

Scattered through the farm and listed in the inventory are various types of rustic chairs: three log chairs valued at \$7, a lot of chairs at \$5, a \$3 settee, four windsors at \$1 apiece, and four shuck bottom chairs at \$2. Though more utilitarian in nature, some of these chairs survived and are still in use. Others have been relegated to storage, including several painted common chairs with caned bottoms and several late style windsor chairs made of oak and poplar with a curved crest rail over fancy turned spindles. These chairs are similar to a set of chairs signed by Chesley Williams of Eagleville, Tennessee, circa 1850-60.¹² Another windsor chair made of maple and hickory has bamboo turned front legs and three arrow back spindles to the medial slat. Small details such as the ball turning below the seat are just like a set of



chairs attributed to Pleasant Bagwell, a furniture maker and

¹² *The Art and Mystery of Tennessee Furniture and Its Makers Through 1850* by Derita Coleman Williams and Nathan Harsh, published 1988 Tennessee Historical Society and Tennessee State Museum Foundation, p.257, figure 362 See photo of cherry pie safe.

cooper in Montgomery County, Tennessee circa 1820-30.¹³ The arrow back settee of hickory and poplar measures almost five feet long, but there is evidence that the seat has undergone various alterations. The plank bottom has had insect attack, and traces of green paint are underneath. Of the six turned legs with cross stretchers, the pair on the right has through holes indicating that the settee originally was longer. The rough-sawn edge of the seat corroborates this



observation. An intriguing Gothic bench, which may have been a church pew, is made of poplar with a dark stain. The center of the back rail comes to a spire with a fleur-de-lis finial. Hinged doors on the sides provide access to a cabinet under the seat. This bench was given to the family by the Battle family, another plantation owner whose descendants moved to Texas.



¹³ *Tennessee Furniture* p.255, figure 357.

Bedchambers

The private bedchambers contain furniture for personal hygiene and grooming, including washstands with pitchers and bowls, toilet glasses or mirrors, four chamber pots, and a bathing tub. Family history attributes two washstands to slave craftsmanship. A walnut stand with almost a two feet square top has a lower shelf and tapered legs with a slight splay. The other



stand of poplar has a small splash rail on the back and sides. The drawer has large cut dovetails. The legs taper and both stands have mortise and tenon joinery reinforced with pegs. Elsewhere in the inventory a lot of wood, including cherry, as well as carpentry tools are listed, suggesting that woodworking was being done on the premises.

Scroll brackets of walnut support the largest dressing mirror in the house. It stands five and a half feet tall but the rectangular base has casters. The smallest toilet or shaving mirror has turned supports and a three-drawer base

decorated with fancy mahogany veneers. Four beds and three cradles are listed in the inventory. Some of these items remain. Though many children were raised here only one cradle from which the rockers have been removed is still in the



house. Made of cherry, the post and spindles have decorative turnings. A narrow bed, listed as a lounge, is constructed of walnut with octagonal legs, ball finials, and turned feet on casters. The headboard echoes the design of the legs on a horizontal plane. A large four poster bed with naive turnings had pegs on the rails, which have been cut off. One may surmise that

the master bedroom contained the most expensive bed, linens, and draperies valued in the estate inventory at \$50. The tester bed, made of walnut and decorative veneers, has a pediment shaped headboard and square tapered columns with egg and dart moldings used at the capital, base, and center





elements. This bed shares similar features with a signed bed by the cabinetmaking firm of Mitchell and Rannelsberg of Ohio. Advertisements in local newspapers indicate that imported furniture transported on the Mississippi and Tennessee Rivers was sold by merchants in warerooms situated in the larger communities in North Alabama. J. S. Bridges and Company, for example, placed a

notice in the *Alabama Republican* in 1821 that reads:

Respectfully inform the citizens of Huntsville and the adjacent country, that they have now lying at Ditto's Landing an elegant assortment of Fancy and Windsor Chairs, of the best quality, together with a variety of Bedsteads, Bureaus, Tables &c. which they offer for sale on the most accommodating terms. Specimens of which may be seen at Messrs. Morgans Cash Store.¹⁴

Transported Family Pieces

Believed by the current owner to have been brought here by the Wright families from the Carolinas or Virginia, a \$5 desk

¹⁴ The Heritage room at the Huntsville Madison County Public Library has several local vintage newspapers on microfilm dating back to 1816.

in the master's bedroom and a small \$4 bureau listed elsewhere are some of the oldest furniture in the house dating back to the early Federal period of the late eighteenth century.¹⁵ Constructed of walnut and yellow pine, they share many design and decorative details. Both pieces have four drawers with string inlay and kite escutcheons at the keyholes. The pulls are stamped brass. The cases have flat sides and the tops extend several inches on the back to close the gap left by chair rail molding.¹⁶ The desk has a slant top that contains a nest of small



drawers and a secret compartment. Evidence of a ghost line and nail holes on the lower rail suggest the lower skirt or base molding is missing. The skirt of the small bureau has a graceful swag; this, however, is a replacement. The bureau was retrieved from the chicken coup where it had been covered with many coats of paint and grime. Evidence of white wash exists on some of the backboards. This was not the only piece of furniture to undergo such treatment.

¹⁵ The family history and recollections of the furnishings were recorded in a series of taped interviews conducted during the fall of 2002 with Ms. Alice Thomas. She undertook the restoration of several pieces of furniture, which are discussed in this paper.

¹⁶ Though the McCrary house does not have chair rails, this was a practical feature in older houses when rooms were multipurpose and furniture was constantly moved or placed against the walls when not in use.



Though significant pieces of surviving furniture match up to the inventory, certain items currently in the home appear not to have been listed. Most dramatic omission is a large handsome cherry corner cupboard measuring eight feet tall and over four



feet wide. One would think it hard to overlook such a piece, but like the bureau, this piece had also been used in the outbuildings and covered with many coats of white wash, perhaps even at an early date. Simple yet elegant in the Federal style, the cupboard was too tall to fit in the dining room located in the below grade part of the 1830s addition to the house. Once recognized and restored, however, delicate inlays of vines and ovals were discovered near the cove molding of the cornice.

At a certain distance the motif resembles a rope and tassel. The flush panel doors are outlined with a fine string border of holly. A wide band of walnut visually separates the lower and upper cabinets, though the case is integral. The backboards run the full height of the piece. Another walnut band outlined with holly stringing runs at the base where the skirt has

a wonderful undulated pattern. The style of the cupboard is similar to several others attributed to East Tennessee circa 1815-25.¹⁷

The Parlor and Dining Room

The parlor became the most formal part of the house and would have been used for guests and entertainment. This room contained the most expensive items, all of which can be accounted for: a \$30 secretary and bookcase, \$75 piano forte, \$8 mantel glass, \$10 pair of candle sticks, \$20 marble slab center table, \$15 sofa, \$5 large rocking chair, ten cushioned chairs at \$40, and a Brussels carpet at \$75. Although expensive, such furnishings were not uncommon among the gentry.¹⁸ The piano



tapered legs typical of the Victorian era. The Baltimore firm Knabe and Coin made the instrument in 1859. But the piano was imported and sold by a local store: to the left of the keyboard, a small silver plaque

reads- “Logeman & Hallenberg Piano, Music, & Jewelry Store Huntsville Ala.” The gilt mirror over the fireplace mantel is

¹⁷ Tennessee Furniture pp.180-181.

¹⁸ “Black Belt Elegance: Late Antebellum Alabama Parlors” by Lee W. Rahe, *Alabama Heritage*, published by the University of Alabama, AL Winter, 1997 pp.34-44. Dr. Rahe’s study of over three hundred estate inventories of antebellum Black Belt planters shows similarities with other parlors in Alabama.

almost five feet long. The rectangular shape is divided into three sections with ornamental turnings. Gesso decorations consist of



leaves and flowers. A cherry square tilt top table with rounded corners, baluster pedestal, and tripod arched feet with scroll terminals bears certain similarities to various candle stands of Tennessee origin during the 1830s.¹⁹ The marble slab table with an oval shape almost four feet long was, according to the



inventory, placed at the center of the room. Constructed of mahogany and poplar with decorative veneers, the base has a Gothic style post with flying arches and S-brackets. The scroll feet sit atop casters. The camelback sofa of mahogany and poplar

¹⁹ Tennessee Furniture pp. 120-122.

secondary wood uses S-scrolls in the design of the arms and feet, which roll on casters. A fancy Lincoln rocker of mahogany sits by the window. Of the ten cushioned chairs, four klismos of mahogany with slip seats survive. The underside of the rails are stamped with numbers 33, 37, 42, and 48, suggesting that they came from an even larger production of chairs. Evidence of the Brussels carpet is shown in the pattern of nail holes in the floor.



The secretary and bookcase highlight the parlor, and bear many similarities to the sideboard listed at \$20

elsewhere in the inventory. Both pieces are constructed from a variety of woods including cherry, mahogany, poplar, and pine. When closed the desk and bookcase appear to be married. However, the desk is in the Empire style with side columns and the doors of the bookcase have Gothic arched windows with a Federal style cornice. Yet if made separately, the bookcase has



been with the desk for a long time because the inventory clearly places them together. The two parts also share strong aesthetic and physical links. When the secretary desk is open a series of drawers and pigeonholes made of tiger maple are revealed. Four of these compartments have pointed arches, which echo the Gothic windows above. A highly decorative feature of the desk and bookcase is the carved blocks above the column supports. A

tulip like flower with a wavy stem and multiple leaves emanates from a classical urn. This rich somewhat Germanic carving is set against a stippled background.

The cornice of the bookcase with the central plinth block also echoes the sideboard's top back rail. The desk and sideboard share many other decorative and construction features that are also identical to an Empire chest of drawers from the old Pruitt farmhouse located by Maple Hill Cemetery in Huntsville. This piece was acquired by the Burwell Foundation and donated to Burritt on the Mountain. Contrary to family history that such elaborate pieces were imported, this group of furniture seems to have been produced by

a local cabinet shop. The turned and carved elements on each of these three pieces such as the turned feet, the spiral rope columns, and the Ionic capitals with a row of v-shaped leaves atop are almost identical. The difference is that the desk and sideboard have detached columns whereas the bureau has





engaged split columns. The pieces have a massive base frame that supports a dust panel in the desk and chest and a lower shelf for the sideboard. Many of the drawer construction techniques are also the same. The dovetails have the same shape and size and the drawer bottoms are fitted in dado grooves with additional glue blocks. The extended top drawers have banding around the edges. The other drawer fronts are pine decorated with mahogany veneers and cock beading.



Tables

The dining tables circa 1820, listed in the inventory at \$10, consist of a pair of cherry gate leg tables with D-shaped

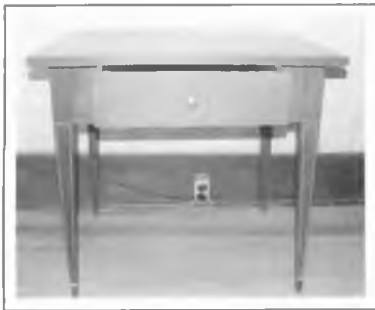


tops. The conforming aprons are made of poplar and covered with cherry veneers. The turned legs terminate with ball and spade feet. Another cherry table with rounded corners and a drawer with a brass bail pull probably was used as a server. Federal in appearance, the square legs are thin and tapered. The rectangular top is secured simply with wood pegs through to the rail below. Only a few other dining artifacts of the family remain. A small japanned tea caddy, probably English, constructed of papier-mâché and pewter lining, belonged to



Nancy Wright McCrary. There is an assortment of coin and sterling silver tea spoons -- seven marked Murray & Smith, six marked Jos. S Voss & Son engraved with a fancy “h” on the handles, two serving spoons marked R & W Wilson engraved “TMW”, four dessert spoons, and three engraved “EM”. Found in the smokehouse were several pieces of transfer printed ware including a well-and-tree platter and a gravy boat.

Numerous Federal and Sheraton period side tables of the early nineteenth century made of cherry and poplar are found throughout the house. A most attractive table has the top pegged



to the rails and all the mortise and tenon joints pegged as well.

Light wood stringing accents the drawer, skirt, and the square, tapered legs. A compass point is evident by the curves of the inlay showing how the grooves were laid out. An unusual feature, the dovetailed drawer is not the full width of the front rail. Another

side table has square, tapered legs. A scratch bead around the drawer and a walnut oval inlay at the keyhole are simple decorative touches. Ghost rings around the knobs suggest that

they are replacements. A side table has slender turned legs with decorative rings and ball and spade feet. A stamped brass pull opens the dovetailed drawer.



Another side table, circa 1830, with turned legs and double ball feet has two dovetailed drawers each with a pair of wooden knobs. Though not an original family piece, Ms. Alice Thomas purchased this table during the Great Depression from Mr. Braggs, a local furniture dealer, for \$15.²⁰



A slightly larger table with a drawer of cherry and poplar may have been used as a desk. The turned legs have a stacked ball or ring pattern all the way to the feet. Circular saw marks on the underside of the top suggests a mid nineteenth century piece. Stack ring turning was a popular feature used by cabinetmakers in the Huntsville area and several

pieces have surfaced.²¹ Another example of this decorative

²⁰ *Antiquing for Fun and Profit During the 20's and 30's* by Lula Strong Powell and Anna Watts Rosborough. The stories recounted by these two authors, descendants of early settlers in Madison County, show that during the Great Depression many country folks were forced to part with family heirlooms. Fortunately the McCrary family was able to hold on to their prized possessions. In fact Ms. Alice Thomas sees this as her duty.

²¹ *Made in Alabama* "Mortised, Tenoned and Screwed Together: A Large Assortment of Alabama Furniture" by E. Bryding Adams pp.213-214.

technique at the McCrary home is found with an Empire chest of drawers. Constructed of cherry and poplar, the chest stands high on turned ball and spade feet. Detached columns with multiple ring turnings support the extended top drawer. A scratch bead around each dovetailed drawer frames the curly grain.

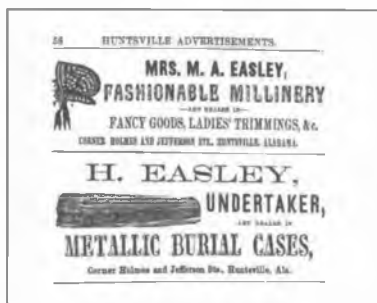


Work of Hugh Easley

Thomas McCrary appears to have acquired an entire suite of bedroom furniture from Hugh Easley who worked in the nearby city of Huntsville.²² One of the many young cabinetmakers that settled in northern Alabama, Easley had an interesting and varied

²² "Hugh Easley, Alabama Cabinetmaker" by Christopher Lang, Antiques Magazine. Brant Publishing, Inc. New York , NY May, 2002.

career.²³ Born in Georgia in 1810, he apprenticed in cabinetmaking. After completing his training in 1832, he married Margaret Murrell and moved to Madison County. In 1841 he relocated his shop near his home on Holmes Street in downtown Huntsville. Despite upheavals in the economy he seems to have adjusted well. In *William's Huntsville Directory-City Guide and Business Mirror 1859-60*, Easley advertised himself as an undertaker and dealer in metallic burial cases and his wife as a proprietress of a fashionable millinery shop with fancy goods and ladies' trimmings. By the 1860s he had also purchased a hotel as well as other property.²⁴ According to the *Huntsville Directory of 1859*, McCrary's business office and firm was located across from the Easley store and hotel. Undoubtedly, McCrary visited the neighboring shops across the corner or further up Holmes Street where he would have purchased Easley furniture firsthand.



²³ David W. Whitehorn has compiled a partial checklist of over 75 cabinetmakers located in northern Alabama during the antebellum period, printed in the *Limestone Legacy*, Limestone County Historical Society, Athens, Alabama. Besides Hugh Easley, Andrew Hentz also of Huntsville, and William Davis of Decatur had produced signed pieces of furniture that have come to light in recent years. The Burritt on the Mountain, a living history museum in Huntsville, received a gothic style dressing bureau made by Hentz, which descended in the family. The Birmingham Museum of Art acquired an Empire style dressing bureau made by Davis.

²⁴ From the probate records we find a drawing locating the Easley hotel and other stores at the corner of Holmes and Jefferson Streets. We can also view the buildings from the aerial map of Huntsville of 1871.

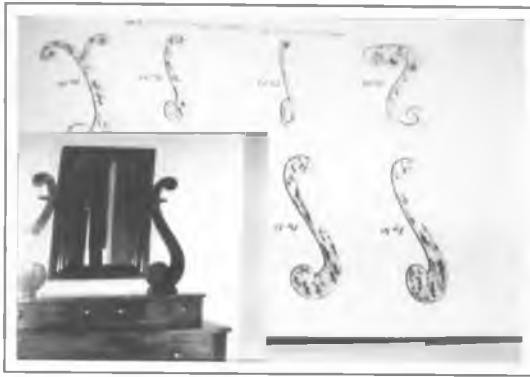
In another private collection, a high style Empire dressing bureau of mahogany with poplar secondary wood, and drawers book matched with mahogany veneers, is his only signed furniture found to date, and provides a touchstone for attributing similar pieces to Easley.²⁵ The ogee molding of the bracket feet is carried up either side of the lower case, which contains four graduated drawers. A smaller recessed compartment contains two drawers. On the bottom of one of these drawers, a stencil reads “H.



EASLEY. cabinetmaker, Huntsvill, ALA.” For inspiration, Mr. Easley seems to have had access to *The Cabinetmaker’s Assistant* by John Hall published in Baltimore in 1840. The book promoted simple Greek revival “Pillar and Scroll” designs. Plates 10 and 11 illustrate patterns for scrolls and consoles that, according to Hall, could also be adapted for any other job. Easley, in fact, turned figure 51 in the plates upside down to create the lyre shape form for the mirror stand of his bureau.



²⁵ The dresser was found by Tracey Parks, editor of *Tennessee Furniture*, in an antique store in Nashville and is currently held in the private collection of Jackson P. Burwell of Huntsville, AL.



The group of furniture attributed to Easley is made with similar materials, construction techniques, and design elements as the signed bureau. The pieces descended in the McCrary family and were all listed in the inventory. These items include a dressing or toilet bureau valued at \$25, two wardrobes at \$15 and

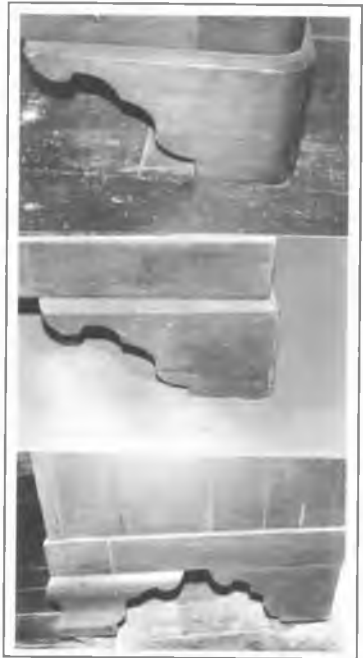
\$20 each, a hat rack at \$5, a poster bed at \$30, and a fancy wash stand at \$20. The slightly smaller dressing bureau has three instead of four drawers in the bottom case, and a marble top.



The drawers have the same book matched mahogany veneers, and the dovetail joinery is



identical to the labeled Easley bureau. The turned acorn finials with threaded ends used to support the mirrors can be interchanged among both bureaus. The foot bracket with beveled top has a distinct scroll design and the rounded corner runs all the way up the front of the case. Rather unusual are two large, practically identical, wardrobes. Most homes in Alabama only



had one such piece.²⁶ The cases of walnut and poplar have very similar construction, with a dark finish, flat sides, paneled doors, and an overhanging cornice. The designs of the bracket feet are identical to the marble top dressing bureau. The front bracket feet of the slightly more elaborate wardrobe, on casters, are ogee

²⁶ *Made in Alabama*, Lee W. Rahe p.38.



shaped and flat at the back. Yet, with the same profile a unique pattern jig was used for all three pieces. The interiors both wardrobes are fitted with brass hooks with acorn tips. The hat rack, constructed of walnut, has the same dark finish as the two wardrobes. From a central post on a square base emerge six curved arms with a scroll pattern, which echo the lyre motif of the bureaus. Attached to each arm are double brass hooks with the same acorn design as in the wardrobes. A walnut bed with



four octagonal posts shares similar features. The posts have wonderful turned acorn finials. The headboard has a double scroll with a carved fan at the center. Tilted in a horizontal position the scroll design is again from John Hall's book.

The wash stand with two paneled doors, a drawer, and a marble top has similarities to the other Easley pieces. Made of poplar and covered with mahogany veneers, the drawer has dovetail construction consistent with the drawers in the other



bureaus. The front feet have a similar ogee bracket design. Another wash stand that belonged to a relative, but is now a part of the McCrary collection shares many similarities. The poplar case is covered with rich mahogany veneers. The replacement walnut top may have been originally marble. The ogee molding on the drawer front has been reversed. The ogee bracket feet molding carried up

the front sides is a treatment similar to that of the dressing bureau signed by Easley.

House Alterations

Upon the death of Thomas McCrary, his son, William Wright McCrary and William's wife, Alice Ellett, whom he married in 1858, moved into the house with the widow Nancy



Wright McCrary. They began raising their own family. During this time the oldest section of the house was renovated. Owing to structural reasons the second story was dismantled and various

internal improvements were made.²⁷ Of particular note are two built-in closets with walnut frame and panel double doors, which measure four feet wide by six feet high. Inside against the wall, peg boards were used for hanging clothes. In one room the doors were painted the same white color as the adjoining mantelpiece. The other



closet has a faux-grained finish done with a comb, similar to several of the other doors throughout the house. The mantel in this second room has been painted black with some traces of red veining done with a feather to simulate marble. Another door in the house is faux grained in a very convincing manner with crotch

²⁷*True Tales of Madison County* by Pat Jones. The essay about the McCrary residence p.16 describes a six room, two-story mansion with four brick columns and terraces. The Greek Revival style developed in the 1840's, however, would not be correct for the original house that Thomas McCrary built. Such an elaborate description seems to be based on the notion of a grand antebellum plantation and there is no physical or archeological evidence to back it up. Questions how the original home looked remain unanswered.

patterns on the panels. These elements reflect the work of an accomplished ornamental painter.²⁸

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a front porch as well as a screen porch on the east side were added to the house. Also, a practical bath-laundry room was added in the mid twentieth century at the end of the gallery. Several granddaughters remained single and would in turn inherit the property -- Hattie Sallie, then Lucy Macon. The photographs below are from the family album, and in it are Alice Ellett (left) and Hattie and Maymie with a friend, Burt Hampton. The subsequent occupant and owner, Alice Thomas, was the great granddaughter of Thomas McCrary. Leaving the older sections of the house intact, she extended a new wing in 1971 to the south side. Called the "Keeping Room", this area includes modern amenities such as a private bathroom, kitchen, and a carport. The original limestone steps descend to a comfortable sitting area.



²⁸ One such local artisan, Francis LeCoq, was trained in Europe. He arrived in the *Alabama Republican* on May 1821 "House Painter, Decorator, and Gilder in all kinds of work... Mantels. Coats of Arms, rooms in the first European style." His shop in Huntsville was located on the north side of the Courthouse square.

Outbuildings

Several old if not original outbuildings, covered with many coats of white wash, surround the house.²⁹ Near the keeping room, the smokehouse is an old log cabin covered with twentieth century siding. Inside, hand-hewn beams are filled in with chinking and mud daub. A large pit at the center of the floor was for the fire. From the joists blackened with soot dangle string that once held meat. Various artifacts remain. Two large



troughs carved from solid tree trunks, one measuring over three feet wide by twelve feet long, still hold salt used for curing meat. Tilted upside down, iron cauldrons and an empty coal bucket sit on the floor. A millstone props up a corner of the building's foundation.

Along the drive, the carriage house made with machine sawn lumber dates to about 1900. Stored away are various parts

²⁹ Further descriptions of the house and out buildings are provided in "The McCrary-Thomas House" by Lynn Jones *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* Vol. 32 Numbers 1-2 spring/summer 2006 pp.56-61.



of riding gear including harnesses, reins, and bits. An attached lean-to with pit-sawn rafters has ends with a 30-degree angle. This roof slope is typical of buildings from the early nineteenth century and the roof may have been salvaged from the first section of the house when it was remodeled after the Civil War.³⁰ Further down the drive, the commissary store was moved here from other property Thomas McCrary owned in Deposit, Alabama. The board and batten siding cut with a rotary saw is of the 1870s. The front door, comprised of overlapping diagonal

³⁰ Harvie Jones Book #64. Mr. Jones has carefully recorded the buildings with photographs, drawings, and observation notes. The Harvie Jones collection is held in the library at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

boards, is reinforced with a profusion of old stud nails. A thin mail slot in the upper part of the right door and a security bar across the entrance are other intriguing features. A late nineteenth century stable and a newer twentieth century barn further out in the fields testify to the continued use of the property as a working farm. Today a tractor may be seen, instead of a team of plow horses.



The Significance of the McCrary Collection

Placing the McCrary homestead in a broader historical and geographical context, northern Alabama was part of the backcountry of the antebellum South. The territorial period and early statehood of north Alabama experienced rapid growth. The United States Census of 1820 showed Madison County as the most populated in the state with close to 20,000 inhabitants. As settlers moved along the “Great Wagon Road” west, the diagonal formation of the Appalachian Mountains channeled them to these new lands. The census of 1850 continued to indicate heavy migration to the south. Though the Tennessee River generated strong trade and commerce, it was only navigable certain times of the year. Even with favorable conditions the port of New Orleans took months to reach by boat. With no direct route the furnishings of the local inhabitants were obtained from a variety of sources. Some of the Federal era furniture was brought in wagons when the settlers arrived. On the larger plantations,

skilled slaves made practical items such as washstands and worktables. Luxury items such as the piano were imported via the waterways. But as towns became quickly established during the first half of the nineteenth century, a vibrant local cabinetmaking community with a large base of clients and patrons was situated here in the Tennessee Valley. Ultimately, the arrival of the railroads, and the disruption of the Civil War would herald in the industrial age.

The combination of historical documents, family history, and surviving furnishings make the McCrary homestead an important source for understanding how life looked during the period when Alabama was a territory through and beyond the Civil War. Not a museum house, the building has been lived in by five generations of the McCrary family who have carefully preserved their exemplary heirlooms.

Captions to Photographs

1. The McCrary house, south façade. Madison County, Alabama.
2. The Gallery with assorted rustic chairs.
3. Sugar chest with large strap hinges.
4. Biscuit block, ca. 1830's. Poplar with white wash finish.
5. Pie safe with eight tins.
6. Pie safe with twelve tins.
7. Refrigerator with zinc lined compartments.
8. Windsor chair with arrow back spindles.
9. Settee (left): Washstand (right), ca. 1820. Poplar.
10. Gothic bench with a fleur-de-lis finial.
11. Shaving mirror (top), ca. 1820. Mahogany, veneers.
12. Cradle, ca. 1827. Cherry with fancy turnings.
13. Tester bed (left), ca. 1840. Walnut, mahogany veneers.
Blanket chest (right), ca. 1815. Cherry, poplar.
14. Slant top desk, ca. 1800. Walnut, yellow pine.

15. Chest of drawers, ca. 1800. Walnut, yellow pine.
- 16.a. Corner cupboard, ca. 1800. Cherry, poplar.
16. b. Detail of cupboard with inlays of walnut and holly.
17. Square grand piano. Made by Knabe and Coin, 1859.
Rosewood and veneers. Note the lyre-shaped fret board and foot peddles.
18. Parlor mantel with three-part mantel glass (above), ca. 1810. Gesso and gilt frame; Tilt top table (right) ca. 1830. Cherry.
19. Marble top table (right), ca. 1840. Mahogany, poplar.
Camel back sofa (left), ca. 1840. Mahogany, poplar.
20. Lincoln Rocker made of mahogany.
- 21a. Desk and bookcase, ca. 1830. Cherry, mahogany, poplar, pine.
- 21.b. Detail inside desk with tiger maple drawer fronts
- 21c. Detail desk and bookcase, ionic capital with tulip carving above.
- 22.a. Sideboard, ca. 1830. Cherry, mahogany, poplar, pine.
- 22 b. Detail sideboard, carved ionic capital.
23. Empire chest of drawers, on display in the mansion of the Burritt Museum.
24. Dining table, ca. 1820. Cherry, poplar. Server in corner.
25. Collection of pewter spoons belonging to the family. Tea caddy top right.
26. Side table, ca. 1800. Cherry with fancy inlays and stringing.
27. Side table, ca 1820. Cherry with slender turned legs.
28. Side table, ca. 1830. Cherry, poplar.
29. Chest of drawers with multiple ring column turnings, ca. 1830. Cherry, poplar.
- 30.a. Dressing bureau signed by Hugh Easley, ca. 1840's.
Mahogany, poplar.
- 30.b. Detail of drawer bottom with stenciled decal of local cabinetmaker.

31. Detail of plate 11, figure 51, from *The Cabinetmaker's Assistant* by John Hall. Published in Baltimore, 1840. Insert (left) of Easley bureau.
- 32.a. Marble top dressing bureau attributed to Hugh Easley, ca. 1840's. Walnut, cherry, poplar, pine.
- 32.b. Detail of acorn turned finial.
33. Hat rack (left), ca. 1840's. Walnut. Wardrobe (right), ca. 1840's.
Both pieces attributed to Hugh Easley.
- 34.a. Detail of bracket foot of dressing bureau.
34. b. Detail of bracket foot of first wardrobe.
34. c. Detail of bracket foot of second wardrobe.
- 35.a. Detail of hooks inside wardrobe.
35. b. Detail of hooks on hat rack.
- 36.a. Bed attributed to Easley.
36. b. Detail of acorn finial on bed post.
37. Marble top washstand attributed to Easley, ca. 1840's. Cherry, walnut, poplar.
38. Wash stand with replacement top.
39. Mantel with adjacent built-in closet. Over painted with white.
40. Mantel with adjacent built-in closet. Both with original paint.
41. Door, faux-grained.
42. b. Detail of charred beams.
42. Outbuildings with whitewash façades. (left to right) Commissary, carriage house, stable.
43. Detail of Commissary door.

Appendix A

Inventory Perishable Property belonging to Estate of Thomas McCrary deceased as appraised by order of the Hon. Probate Court of Madison County by John M. Humphery, S. I. Stone and Middleton Fanning on the 3rd day of November 1865. (The notes in the left side margin are of the author to suggest location of the artifacts and other property)

Barn

1 Gin Head and Band	\$ 75
1 Cotton W----	\$ 5
1 Horse Mill	\$ 30
1 Lot of plows & Harnesses	\$ 10
1 “ “ Doubletrees Singletrees etc.	\$ 4
1 Hoe old Iron etc.	\$ 5
1 Hoghead Boxes and Bands	\$ 4
Bar Iron supposed to be 1200” @15c	\$180
1 Broken Kettle	\$ 1
1 Set old log Irons	\$ 15
1 Ox Yoke	\$ 1.50

Farm Animals

1 Brindle Cow & calf	\$ 30
1 Pided Cow	\$ 15
1 Stump tail Cow	\$ 20
3 Brindle Bulls	\$ 30

Out Buildings

1 Yoke of Oxen	\$ 40
5 old Wagon wheels	\$ 10
1 Grind Stone	\$ 1
1 Lot Carpenter Tools	\$ 4
old Cradles	\$ 3
1 Loom	\$ 5
1 set Blacksmith Tools at Plantation	\$ 30

1 Lot old wheels at Blacksmith Shop	\$ 1
1 “ “ Plows & harnesses	\$ 20
1 set Blacksmith Tools	\$100
1 Lot Old Iron	\$ 10
½ Interest in Tan yard stock in Vats	\$500
½ Do “ Leather on hand	\$150
Tan Yard Tools	\$ 20
2 Stoves	\$ 10
3 spinning wheels	\$ 3
Farm Animals	
29 head Sheep @ 25c each	\$ 77.50
1 Pided Heifer	\$ 3
1 Brindle Cow	\$ 15
1 Black Do	\$ 30
1 Brindle Do	\$ 30
1 Red Do	\$ 25
1 Big Black Cow	\$ 30
1 Black Cow and Calf	\$ 35
1 Brown Heifer	\$ 20
1 Brindle Cow	\$ 25
1 Black Yearling Heifer	\$ 5
1 Red Cow	\$ 20
1 Red Cow & Calf	\$ 35
1 Red Heifer & Calf	\$ 25
2 Yearlings	\$ 10
1 Yoke Oxen	\$ 40
1 Do	\$ 40
1 Sorrel Colt	\$ 75
1 Do Do one eyed filly	\$ 40
1 Black Mare Polly	\$ 40
1 Mule Jim	\$ 80
1 “ Redtom	\$ 95
1 “ Joe	\$ 10

Lang: The McCrary Homestead

Barn

1 Cutting Knife	\$ 8
1 Wheat Fan	\$ 10
1 Lot Boxes Barrels etc.	\$ 2
1 Corn sheller	\$ 2
4 scythes & cradles	\$ 4
1 Straw Cutter	\$ 1
1 Ox Wagon & Bed	\$ 30
1 Ox Wagon & Bed	\$ 20
1 Horse Do “	\$ 35

Carriage Shed

3 Log Chairs	\$ 7
1 Large Harness	\$ 2
1 Buggy Harness	\$ 70
1 Carriage Harness	\$ 50
1 Wheat Fan	\$ 25
1 Lot of Chairs	\$ 5

Out Buildings

1 Bathing Tub	\$ 2
1 pair stretchers	\$ 5
1 Sugar Mill	\$ 25
2 Large Stock Kettles	\$ 20
5 Kettles & 1 Pot	\$ 18
1 Lot of Plows	\$ 10
1 Horse Cart	\$ 5
2 Old Wheels	\$ 2
1 Lot of Cherry Lumber etc	\$ 10
1 pair Balances	\$ 3
15 Pork Hogs	\$250
8 stock do	\$ 25
1 Lot Slave Tools etc.	\$ 15

House

1 Mantel Clock	\$ 40
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Bed Room

1 Globe Lamp	\$ 3
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1 Wash Stand Pitcher & Bowl	\$ 4
1 Dressing Table	\$ 3
1 Desk	\$ 5
1 Toilet Glass	\$ 5
1 Bedstead Bed & furniture	\$ 50
1 Ward Robe(#1)	\$ 15
1 pair Brass Irons	\$ 3
1 Shovel Tongs & Poker	\$ 3

Parlor

1 secretary & Book Case	\$ 30
1 Piano Forte	\$ 75
1 Mantel Glass	\$ 8
1 pair Silver Candle Sticks	\$ 10
1 Marble Slab Center Table	\$ 20
1 Sofa	\$ 20
1 Large Rocking Chair	\$ 5
10 Cushion Chairs	\$ 40
1 pair Parlor And Irons	\$ 8
2 Spittoons	\$ 1
1 Brussels Carpet	\$ 75
4 pairs Window Curtains	\$ 20
2 Fire screens	\$ 2

Hallway

1 Hat Rack	\$ 5
1 Side Board	\$ 20
1 lot of Glass ware	\$ 20
1 small Cherry Table	\$ 3
1 Settee	\$ 3
1 Self Waiter	\$ 2
1 " China	\$ 30
4 Candle Sticks	\$ 2

Bed Room

1 small Bureau	\$ 4
1 Toilet Glass	\$ 1

Lang: The McCrary Homestead

1 Lantern	\$ 1
1 pair And Irons	\$ 1
1 Lounge & Furniture	\$ 20
1 Candle stand	\$ 3
2 Vases	\$.50
1 pair small And Irons	\$ 2
1 Toilet Bureau	\$ 25
1 Fine Wash Stand Bowl & Pitcher	\$ 20
1 Feather Bed Bolsters & Pillows	\$ 30
1 Ward Robe etc (#2)	\$ 20
1 Broken Looking Glass	\$.50
1 Rocking Chair	\$ 3.50
1 Trunk Counterpanes etc	\$ 40
1 Reel	\$ 2
48 pairs Brogan shoes	\$ 80
4 Chambers (pots)	\$ 4
straw Matting	\$ 2
1 Stove	\$ 15
Bed Room 3	
1 Bureau	\$ 10
1 Broken Toilet Glass	\$.50
1 Bed stead & Furniture	\$ 35
1 “ “ “	\$ 40
1 Wash Stand Bowl & Pitcher	\$ 3
Dining Room	
1 Carpet	\$ 20
4 Window Curtains	\$ 4
4 Windor Chairs	\$ 4
1 Tin Safe	\$ 5
1pair Dining Tables	\$ 10
4 Shuck Bottom Chairs	\$ 2
1 Cane bottom Rocking Chair	\$ 3
1 Sugar Chest	\$ 5
1 Chest	\$ 2

1 Refrigerator	\$ 5
1 pair Cast And Irons	\$ 1
1 shovel & Tongs	\$ 1
1 Tea Bell	\$.50
1 Lot Table ware etc	\$ 30
1 Fine Canton	\$ 20
9 Silver Table Spoons & Dessert Do	\$ 25
13 “ Tea “	\$ 10
1 Lot Knives & forks	\$ 25
1 Tea Tray	\$ 1
3 Do “ small	\$ 1
8 Table Cloths & Napkins	\$ 10
Out Buildings	
1 Lot Sundries in dairy	\$ 2
1 Water Can & Pail	\$ 2
1 Freezer	\$ 2
1 pair Counter scales	\$ 2
2 Skimming Machines	\$ 25
1 Flax Wheel	\$ 1
1 Lot Barrel Boxes etc	\$ 2
1 “ Leather	\$ 27
1 “ Hog skins Tanned	\$ 3
1 Man’s Saddle	\$ 10
1 Lot Oil Cans	\$ 1
1 “ Carpenter Tools & sausage Grinder	\$ 6
1 Loom Equipage 6 meal sacks	\$ 16
3 spinning wheels 1 set cards	\$ 6
1 Reel 1 Lot Marking letters	\$ 2
Kitchen	
1 Cooking stove and Large Pot	\$ 45
1 Lot Pot Cooks etc	\$ 1.50
1 Brass Kettle and 3 sad Irons	\$ 6.50
4 Ovens & 3 Pots	\$ 10
1 Lot Tubs Buckets etc	\$ 4

Lang: The McCrary Homestead

1 Biscuit Block Board Trays etc	\$ 6.50
1 Oil Can Oil etc	\$ 10.50
1 Lot old Barrels old Pots etc	\$ 6
4 Lard stands	\$ 4
1 Poplar Table	\$ 2
Crops	Lot of Cotton to be divided
	Corn in the field \$5 per BBL
	Fodder “ “ \$1 “ 100 th
	Cotton Seed 25c Bu...

		Amount	Book	from	Page
1	\$ 533.50	“	“	“	“
2	\$1314.50	“	“	“	“
3	\$ 688	“	“	“	“
4	\$ 746	“	“	“	“
5	\$ 346.50	“	“	“	“
6	\$ 290	“	“	“	“
7	<u>\$ 199</u>				
T o t a l	\$4117.50	-	-	-	-

The above is the correct Inventory of the
Perishable Property belonging to the estate of Thos. W.
McCrary