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Introduction

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Introduction

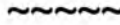
Maureen Drost, Diane Ellis, Lynn Jones, Patricia H. Ryan

This double issue of the *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* is about a house closely linked to three primary owners: the first two, families from other areas of the country, the last, a Huntsville native. Entrepreneur Michael O'Shaughnessy, from Ireland via Cincinnati and Nashville, with a stint in Washington, D.C., came to Huntsville because of the town's potential for commercial development. He changed the course of Huntsville's economic fortunes and built a grand residence, *Kildare*, before personal and financial troubles caused him to return to Nashville.

Mary Virginia McCormick, daughter of the inventor of the reaper, was the next resident of *Kildare*, when it was purchased for her seasonal use by a trust established to care for her. One of four residences used by Virginia, the McCormick House, as it was next called, was a magnet of interest for Huntsville's citizens over many years. The grandness of the house and setting was an attention getter, but added to that were the social activities and philanthropic work done by Virginia and her companion, Grace Walker. Many individuals benefited from their charity, and Huntsville institutions still bear the imprint of the McCormick generosity.

After the McCormick trust sold *Kildare*, the property declined, with the grounds greatly reduced by subdivision, and the house given over to a series of inappropriate uses. Somehow it survived these indignities, clinging to life until James Reeves rescued it 40 years later.

It was not until James Reeves's preservation gene kicked in and led him to purchase the property that *Kildare* began to revive and return to its former glory. Under the patient care and hard work of its third primary owner and his wife, Marion, a house that was part of Huntsville's post-Civil War economic growth, that saw the changes brought to the city in the early years of the 20th century, and by the Depression and World War II, that was an official air raid shelter during the Cold War, and that withstood the pressure of surrounding commercial development was saved.



Today, *Kildare* faces an uncertain future. James Reeves is selling the house, with the fervent hope that someone with his passion for preservation will fall in love with it as he did. *Kildare*'s demonstrated staying power combined with a caring owner like James Reeves could mean that this Huntsville treasure will be around for a very long time.



Exploring *Kildare*'s history makes for fascinating research, but the house and its first two owners are entangled with enough gossip, speculation and folklore to frustrate the most intrepid investigator. Records of an earlier era are not always easy to locate and comparisons of information reveal discrepancies. Inconsistencies in the newspapers of earlier days can confuse rather than illuminate. Mary Virginia's long, though intermittent, tenure especially generated many anecdotes that fall into the category of hearsay and as such can be difficult to verify. Still, that the O'Shaughnessy, McCormick, and Reeves families have been faithful stewards of a house that is a marvelous work of architecture and an important part of Huntsville's history is not in question

The contributors are indebted to James Reeves, who provided Maureen Drost a tour of the house and access to his photographs, newspaper clippings, and other memorabilia. Both James and his son, Cedric, shared memories and anecdotes in personal interviews. James also put us in touch with his friend Dr. Arthur Smith a research physicist at Oxford University, who had lived as a guest at the McCormick house while working at the University of Alabama in Huntsville as a NASA contractor from October 1991 until January 1997. Arthur was so charmed by the house and intrigued by its fascinating history that he was inspired to research and write a book about it: *The Lives, & Times of the McCormick Mansion, A Celebration of the Warmth, Charm, Hospitality & History of Southern Folks in Rocket City, Alabama*. He let us use the third and close-to-final draft of the book, which he hopes to have ready for publication in the next few years.

While Arthur acknowledges the help of many people who assisted him in his research, he is particularly grateful to Mary Jean Childress Voegtlin of Atlanta, and Tybring Hemphill of British Columbia, descendants of the O'Shaughnessy family, who provided him with hitherto unknown materials and information about the family.

Finally, the contributors wish to thank Raneé Pruitt and Annewhite Fuller of the Heritage Room of the Huntsville/Madison County Public Library, and Linda Bayer Allen of the City of Huntsville Planning Department for their considerable help with this issue.



*Michael O'Shaughnessy outside Kildare.
Courtesy of James Reeves.*