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Kildare

Diane Ellis and Maureen Drost

A handful of the privileged few, drawing on architectural talents as far afield as New York and Philadelphia, commissioned houses that in their sophistication of design largely transcended regional boundaries. Robert Gamble, Silent in the Land.

Just off Oakwood Avenue, about a block northwest of that busy thoroughfare's intersection with Meridian Street, stands a grand 19th-century mansion considered to be one of the finest Queen Anne-style residences in Alabama. This extraordinary three-story house¹ was built in the 1880s for northern businessman Michael O'Shaughnessy (see photograph, page 6), who was moving, with his wife and five children, from Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's family home in Nashville to pursue business ventures in Huntsville.² O'Shaughnessy named his new house and the property's 71 acres *Kildare*, in honor of the Irish county where he was born in 1833.³

From the beginning, *Kildare* drew widespread interest from local newspapers and the public. In October 1886 the *Huntsville Democrat* reported on the building's construction, observing that "Major O'Shaughnessy's residence on the Meridianville Pike is progressing finely, already its proportions are beginning to show up handsomely, the walls of one story being nearly completed."⁴ A few months later the rival *Huntsville Mercury* declared that "In every detail, no residence in the county will surpass [the house]."⁵

And when the mansion was completed in 1887, a reporter for the *Huntsville Independent* toured O'Shaughnessy's new house and described what he saw: "A week ago we had the pleasure of going through the summer residence built here by Mr. O'Shaughnessy, and we could not but admire the taste displayed in the furnishings. . . . The parlors, dining room and bedrooms are nicely but richly furnished, and the modern conveniences prove that wealth has been scattered with a lavish hand. For miles in every direction, broad drives are being laid off."⁶

Three years later, *The Huntsville Independent* was still singing the praises of the O'Shaughnessy mansion when one of its reporters compared *Kildare* to an ancient castle because of its massiveness.

Perhaps as fine a home as a gentleman of culture and artistic taste could desire is the home of Major M.J. O'Shaughnessy in the suburbs of Huntsville. The floors, casements, stairways, molding, and wood finishings of the house are of native wood that the Major has picked during the past eight years, and the sawings, dressings, and molding are of his own design and under his personal supervision. In the forty rooms, each is furnished in exquisite taste in the native Alabama timber of different kind and grain.

In the basement are the breakfast rooms, pantry, kitchen boiler room, and smoking [room]. On the first floor are parlors furnished in ebony and gold; another room is a symphony in brown. The ceiling decorations of hand painting and the stained glass of special shades all unite to add pleasure to the senses. The upper floor is conveniently arranged in bedrooms, billiard rooms, and observatories.⁷



*Family photograph with Kildare under construction.
Courtesy of James Reeves.*

If the newspapers of the day engaged in unabashed boosterism and were inclined to worship at the altar of wealth and power, *Kildare* nevertheless merited their enthusiastic approval. O'Shaughnessy's decision to build his dream house in the Queen Anne style was a highly unusual choice for his time and place. The mansion that resulted from that decision was a unique design marvel, "...hardly the sort of Victorian-era residence one would have expected to see in the rural Deep South of the late 1880s," as architecture historian Robert Gamble has observed.⁸ One can understand how interest in *Kildare*—and in the man who could envision and afford such a showplace—kept pace with the construction of the mansion as it took shape in late 19th-century Huntsville.

"Queen Anne" as a term applied to building design in our country is something of a misnomer. Architecture historian John J.-G. Blumenson, who gives the years between 1880 and 1900 as the style's heyday, explains that the style "...as manifested in America has little if anything to do with the architecture of the English Queen's time. It is the first thing that comes to many peoples' minds when a 'Victorian mansion' is mentioned."⁹

For many people, Queen Anne architecture continues to hold a special fascination. Part of this attraction lies in the nostalgic familiarity of large Queen Anne houses that recall the settings of favorite children's stories, especially ones set in English mansions with nannies, secret passageways, and things that go bump in the night. At an adult level, it is the Queen Anne style's complex harmony of varied designs and materials that engages the imagination. Intriguingly busy buildings, they nevertheless project a serious wholeness that commands respect. Reactions to Queen Anne houses may be as varied as the designs and materials of the houses themselves: amusement, astonishment, bewilderment, delight—but never indifference.

Blumenson calls the Queen Anne "...a most varied and decoratively rich style. The asymmetrical composition consists of a variety of forms, textures, materials and colors. Architectural parts include towers, turrets, tall chimneys, projecting pavilions, porches, bays and encircling verandahs. The textured wall surfaces occasionally are complemented by colored glass panels in the windows. Elements and forms from many styles are manipulated into an exuberant visual display."¹⁰

Modern visitors to *Kildare* are indeed rewarded with an exuberant visual display, the product of a happy marriage between stately yet spirited design and superb application of diverse building materials. Queen Anne houses, hardly the shrinking violets of the architectural styles garden, have staying power, and *Kildare*, a superb representative of the style's qualities, can still inspire the kind of respect and admiration it received more than a hundred years ago.



By the time it was completed, Michael O'Shaughnessy's dream house cost \$65,000,¹¹ included approximately 40 rooms,¹² and contained approximately 17,000 square feet of living space.¹³ "The sprawling Queen Anne-style mansion with its massive porte-cochere was probably the finest Victorian-period country house in Alabama," says Robert Gamble, "girded about with walls of rough-faced limestone, brick, and half-timbered pebble dash, and covered by a complex roof of patterned slate."¹⁴

With such grandiose features as a ballroom, a library and a third-floor billiard room, noted Gamble, "... *Kildare* smacked more of Gilded Age commerce and industry than traditional southern agrarian life."¹⁵

The builder of such a house in 1880s Huntsville had to have been a man with big ideas and a checkbook to match. Michael O'Shaughnessy was such a man. One of a long line of entrepreneurs, doers, and dreamers who came to Huntsville over the years, profited by their experience here, and in turn altered their adopted community, O'Shaughnessy was entrepreneur, doer and dreamer all in one.

O'Shaughnessy's educational background included enrollment in Dublin's Royal Academy of Design at the age of ten, which suggests that he exhibited design talents at an early age, and, in America, study at St. Xavier's College in Cincinnati [now Xavier University]. He was working in his uncle's business at the start of the Civil War and joined the treasury department under President Lincoln, eventually becoming chief accountant and earning a military title. When the Civil War ended, he entered into business with his brother James in Nashville. He became president of a cottonseed factory they owned, one of the first such mills in the country. O'Shaughnessy's business expertise led the brothers to create a trust that combined the operations of their cottonseed mills located in several Alabama cities.¹⁶

When the O'Shaughnessy brothers came to Huntsville, then a small town of approximately 5,000 people,¹⁷ they leased four acres of land that included the site of the machine shops for the Memphis and Charleston Railway. They built the Huntsville Cotton Oil Mill on this property.¹⁸ About the time *Kildare* was completed, Michael and James O'Shaughnessy, along with a group of Huntsville businessmen, organized the North Alabama Improvement Company. Eventually, the O'Shaughnessy brothers would play a major role in Huntsville's economic life by securing investment capital for Huntsville enterprises. They would be largely responsible for renovating the Huntsville Hotel, building the Monte Sano Hotel, and ensuring that Trevor B. Dallas would establish his mill in Huntsville.¹⁹ While *Kildare* remains a visible monument to the energy and vision he brought to building a magnificent estate, O'Shaughnessy's real impact on Huntsville was economic.



A combination of health problems and financial reverses eventually forced Michael O'Shaughnessy to return to Nashville. In 1900, *Kildare* was sold to a trust fund established by Cyrus McCormick, inventor of the reaper, which purchased the estate for use as one of several residences for McCormick's handicapped daughter, Mary Virginia.²⁰

Michael O'Shaughnessy brought a rare combination of talents to his enterprises in Huntsville. A sense of possibility colored his projects, whether it was building the grand *Kildare* estate or attracting much-needed financial investment to the city for new business ventures. When he died in Nashville in 1906, the Nashville *American* headlined his obituary: "Life of remarkable type is suddenly closed." A sub-head continued with the following: "Inaugurator of the Great Cotton Seed Industry and Man of Unusual Gifts in Art, Literature and Handicraft."²¹

With the arrival of Virginia McCormick and her companion, Grace Walker, a new chapter in the history of *Kildare* began. Michael O'Shaughnessy's dream house and Huntsville would provide a seasonal home for new travelers who came to the city and influenced the community in many important ways during their years of residence.

Endnotes

- 1 Some writers describe the house as having four stories because of its full basement, variously called an English basement, a daylight basement, or a raised basement. *Kildare's* basement—according to the 1976 National Register Nomination—contained the kitchen, smoking room, wine cellar, and boiler room. The Nomination notes that many rooms featured fine woodwork.
- 2 A.E. Smith, *The Lives, & Times of the McCormick Mansion, A Celebration of the Warmth, Charm, Hospitality & History of Southern Folks in Rocket City, Alabama.*, 1996-1999, unpublished ms., p.20.
- 3 Nancy Rohr, "The O'Shaughnessy Legacy in Huntsville," *Historic Huntsville Review* (Spring/Fall 1994), pp.4-6.
- 4 *Huntsville Democrat*, October 27, 1886.
- 5 *Huntsville Mercury*, March 2, 1887.
- 6 *Huntsville Mercury*, March 23, 1887.
- 7 *Huntsville Independent*, May 2, 1890.
- 8 Chip Cooper, Harry Knopke, and Robert Gamble, *Silent in the Land* (Tuscaloosa: CKM Press, 1993), p. 183.
- 9 John J.-G. Blumenson, *Identifying American Architecture, A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms 1600-1945*, rev. ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1981), p.63.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Linda Bayer Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Allen, personal communication, October 2002.
- 14 Cooper, Knopke and Gamble, p.183.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Smith, p.19.
- 17 Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.
- 18 Smith, p.22. According to Linda Bayer Allen of the City of Huntsville Planning Department (personal communication, October 28, 2002), the railroad machine shops were located on the east side of Church Street, across from the present Cleveland Street intersection. The cottonseed buildings were built against the north side of the railroad shops. For several years they existed side by side, but gradually the shops disappeared. The area is now undergoing construction for new city offices and is in the right-of-way for I-565.
- 19 Patricia H. Ryan, personal communication, October 2002.
- 20 Smith, p.110.
- 21 Smith, p.51.