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SIX DOLLARS

VOLUME XXVIII, Nos. 2 & 3

SUMMER/FALL 2002

THE
HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY
OF LOCAL ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVATION



MR. O'SHAUGHNESSY'S DREAM HOUSE

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Founded 1974

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Cover: Mr. O'Shaughnessy's Dream House.

Courtesy Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

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*The Historic Huntsville Quarterly
of Local Architecture and Preservation*

Volume XXVIII, Nos. 2 & 3

Summer/Fall 2002

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From the Executive Director

In December, the Historic Huntsville Foundation kicked off a capital campaign that has national significance. Late last year, the Foundation was notified that Harrison Brothers Hardware had been selected by the U.S. Department of the Interior as a *Save America's Treasures* honoree. This program, a pet project of First Lady Laura Bush, is designed to foster pride in America's heritage, to educate Americans on preservation problems facing the buildings, sites, and monuments that represent America's diverse cultural legacy, and to raise concern for the urgent preservation needs of this country's historic and cultural treasures. The store joins other *Save America's Treasures*' designees in the state —the Saturn V rocket at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, and in Birmingham, *Vulcan* and the *Sixteenth Street Baptist Church*—and elsewhere across the country such as Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water* in Pennsylvania and *Taliesin* in Wisconsin, the *Breakers* in Rhode Island, *Middleton Place* in Charleston, South Carolina, and the *Hermitage* in Tennessee.

With this designation came the opportunity to qualify for a \$100,000 federal matching grant. The operative word here is "matching." The Foundation must raise \$100,000 to receive the \$100,000 in federal money. A lesser amount won't do—we must match the entire sum or we will receive no federal funding. Furthermore, because the lowest bid for the preservation work was \$275,000, we must exceed the matching requirement of \$100,000 and raise an additional \$75,000 for a total fundraising goal of \$175,000.

Why was Harrison Brothers selected? This mercantile establishment has survived for more than one hundred years virtually intact. The stock has changed to a great degree, although the Foundation has strived to keep the appearance and feel of the east side (the hardware side) as close as possible to the way the Harrisons left it. But the building, fixtures, and furniture are original. In addition, the Foundation has demonstrated its commitment to the preservation of this national asset for almost twenty years. The designation demonstrates both the store's national significance and the belief that the Foundation will continue to exercise careful stewardship for many years to come.

If the Foundation is successful in raising the matching funds, how will they be spent? The Foundation has done very little to the building since assuming ownership in 1983. An air conditioner was installed on the first floor. Interior storm windows were added. There were minor electrical system repairs and the addition of electrical outlets. The roof was replaced, and the rope-operated elevator was repaired.

Because of the national designation, good stewardship requires that certain issues be addressed. Harrison Brothers has no fire suppression system. Plans call for the installation of a dry-pipe sprinkler system throughout the building. The mercantile store rests on a dirt foundation. A concrete base would provide a firm foundation and protection from termites. The addition of wider, safer stairs at the back of the building from the basement to the second floor would mitigate a safety hazard and provide greater access to the Foundation's warehouse and upper-floor storage space. There is only one extremely small bathroom. It does not meet building codes and has a sewer problem, so its use is discouraged. A handicap-accessible bathroom would provide for our staff, volunteers, and the public.

The addition of heating, air conditioning, and lighting on the second floor would allow for much-needed office space. Exterior and interior maintenance — repointing brick, glazing windows, stabilizing wood floors, and repairing plaster—are needed to properly preserve the structure.

When the Foundation contacts you, please consider a generous gift for the preservation and maintenance of Harrison Brothers Hardware. And remember the store when you plan your shopping trips! Store manager Raquel Tejan and her staff of friendly, helpful volunteers will be happy to help you. You will be delighted with the imaginative selection, and you will be helping to save one of America's treasures.

Lynne B. Lowery

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.*

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.

The McCormick House

Diane Ellis and Maureen Drost

If Michael O'Shaughnessy's involvement with Huntsville produced a grand mansion and brought new economic vigor to the city, Virginia McCormick's legacy would be largely philanthropic. The trust fund that in 1900 paid \$36,000 for the Kildare estate—one of four seasonal residences that the fund purchased for Virginia's use—provided her the means to entertain lavishly and to support many social activities and charitable causes in Huntsville.¹

One of five children born to Cyrus and Nancy Fowler McCormick,² Virginia suffered from emotional and mental instability that also plagued some of her siblings. Her mental difficulties left her, in Arthur Smith's words, "...incapable of administering her own affairs..."³ These were taken care of by Virginia's caring companion, Grace Walker. Despite what is known about Virginia's legendary largess, her passion for music, and her affection for children, the mysterious nature of her handicap renders her a shadowy figure in the history and folklore of the McCormick years. Grace Walker, on the other hand, emerges with clarity, and it seems reasonable to suppose that it was Grace who guided all of Virginia's activities and was the force behind her benevolent undertakings.

"The McCormicks introduced Huntsville to the trappings of wealth," writes architecture historian Robert Gamble.⁴ For the 30 some years that Virginia McCormick and her large household (a staff of 35; several full-time musicians; her own horses)⁵ wintered in Huntsville, she and Grace entertained like royalty, hosting elaborate parties for children and holiday celebrations on a grand scale. The fun began for the natives in autumn when the special McCormick train rolled into town for the season and "schools were dismissed to allow curious children to watch her entourage unload car after car of trunks, boxes, and other possessions."⁶ The entertainments that would follow in the coming months included Christmas parties for children, Easter egg hunts, and an annual May celebration to mark Virginia's birthday that included hundreds of excited children and featured a maypole.⁷

Other than the time she spent with children, Virginia McCormick rarely went out in public. Dorothea Snow, who grew up in Huntsville during the early 20th century, reminisced in 1980 about those days and wrote the following: “Another of our diversions was walking out into the country, now the corner of Oakwood and Meridian, and gazing in awe through the iron fence that surrounded the fabled and fabulous McCormick mansion and the deer that cavorted on its lush green grounds. To us, it was like gazing upon a real-life fairytale castle and we never tired of it. We never, however, laid our eyes on its princess, Miss Virginia McCormick... ”⁸



*Young Mary Virginia McCormick.
Courtesy of Arthur Smith.*



Grace Walker.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

The McCormick-Walker philanthropic efforts were numerous and varied and reflected an understanding of the community and its areas of need. Social service and civic organizations in Huntsville benefited from the McCormick years as did educational institutions and social and economic groups that might have been overlooked by other sources of support. Huntsville's mill communities and YMCAs in the city were two of the McCormick's special philanthropies. "[Virginia] took a particular interest in the living conditions of the several mill villages that had grown



Children gather on the lawn of the McCormick estate for annual May celebration of Virginia McCormick's birthday.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library, Monroe Collection.

up around the town (as a result of the O'Shaughnessys' initial efforts) and coerced the mill directors into providing better health care and recreation facilities for the operatives by offering matching funds for settlement houses and YMCAs.”⁹

The mill community in West Huntsville seems to have been an early recipient of McCormick money. Arthur Smith writes that Virginia funded a 15-room social community center in 1904, which would have been soon after she and Grace began their Huntsville sojourns.¹⁰ McCormick money and Walker inspiration sparked the development of the West Huntsville (“McCormick”) YMCA. “The success of this

community enterprise during its early years was due greatly to the personal interest shown by Mrs. Emmons Blaine¹¹ and Grace Walker as representatives of Miss McCormick.”¹² The McCormick YMCA, which was located at 8th Avenue S.W. and Triana Boulevard,¹³ “served employees and their families of the textile mills of the community, the Lowe Manufacturing Company, the Huntsville Knitting Company, and the West Huntsville Cotton Mills Company as well as the business element of the community.”¹⁴ The 1915 McCormick Y was auctioned in 1983 for use as commercial property.¹⁵ Currently, it houses Huntsville Restaurant Equipment, Inc. Virginia also provided other recreational and educational buildings for West Huntsville,¹⁶ as well as money for the Central YMCA, which was opened in 1912.¹⁷

Virginia’s association with the growth of Huntsville YMCAs clearly sprang from Grace Walker’s lifelong support of the organization in Canada and America. Through Grace’s work with one Y-related project, her name became forever attached to a renowned women’s service organization in Huntsville, the Grace Club. It was the Grace Club that put on the annual Easter egg hunts at the McCormick estate.

The Grace Club began in 1914 when a group of young women from Huntsville’s downtown churches formed the “Young Ladies Auxiliary to



The McCormick YMCA at 8th Avenue S.W. and Triana Boulevard, side view, photographed from Triana Boulevard.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

the YMCA No. 2” to raise money for the Y and increase interest in the organization. As charter member Elizabeth Doak recalled for the *Huntsville Times* in 1979, the auxiliary gave these sheltered young women who lived at home an opportunity for community service they hadn’t had. As time went on, the women expanded their service to other areas of the city¹⁸ and eventually adopted the name Grace Club in honor of Grace Walker. The club grew to include a Junior Grace Club for high school girls and later an auxiliary club for charter members of the original group. Eventually the Grace Club became Huntsville’s Junior League.¹⁹

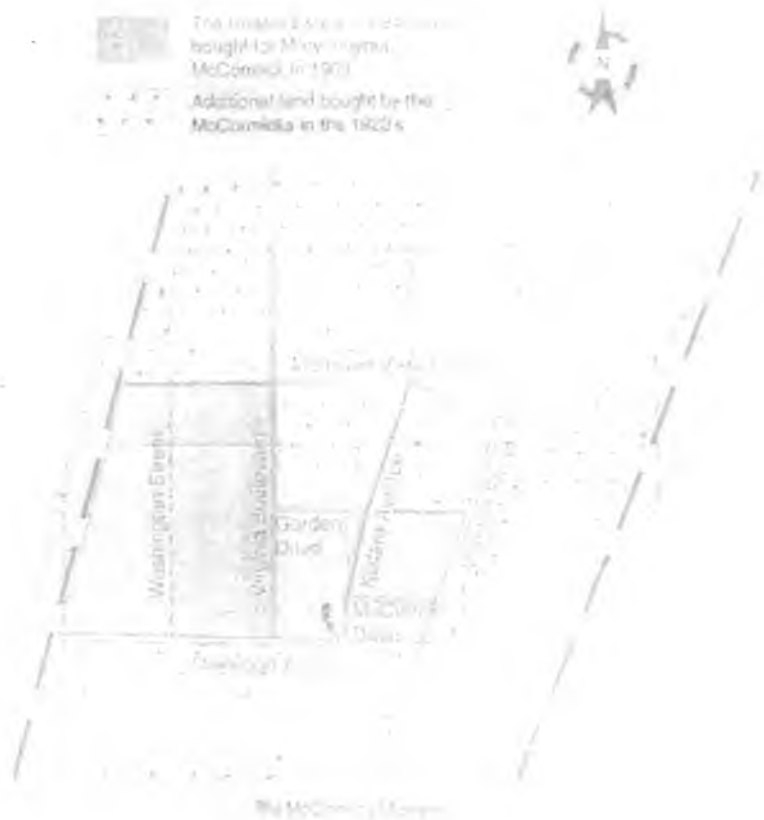
Virginia’s charitable giving also aided enterprises important to the city’s black citizens. She gave generously to what is now Alabama A&M University, financing a hospital on the campus, at a cost of \$10,000, and funding the school’s home economics building (\$19,000).²⁰ A *Huntsville Times* article says she built the “colored” wing of Huntsville Hospital and established a fund to aid blacks who were hospitalized.²¹

In its notice of Virginia’s death, the *Huntsville Times* wrote that “during her ownership of the *Kildare* estate, a fine dairy was maintained there, and the greater portion of milk from it was distributed free to underprivileged children.”²² She is said to have provided silver to the Episcopal Church of the Nativity for communion service.²³ According to former church historian, Mavis Daniell, the McCormick family donated an organ to the First Presbyterian Church. Virginia and Grace are credited with many other acts of generosity over the years.

As to *Kildare* itself, Arthur Smith asserts that “it was during Mary Virginia’s tenure that the house reached its zenith.”²⁴ Certainly it was the locus of many social events and an object of interest and fascination for years. Architecturally, Virginia appears to have made minimal changes to the O’Shaughnessy mansion. She added a one-story music conservatory to the large ballroom, as well as a porch, and possibly the north wing, and altered decorative elements of mantels and moldings in the ballroom and dining room.²⁵ The 71-acre “lush deer park”²⁶ that O’Shaughnessy purchased as the setting for *Kildare* was expanded by the McCormicks through land purchases they made during the 1920s.²⁷

Virginia ended her years of seasonal residency in Huntsville in 1931 and moved to California where she kept several houses.²⁸ She died at one of these estates—*Quelindo*, in Santa Monica—May 24, 1941.²⁹ The *Huntsville Times*’s notice of her death gave her age as 80.³⁰

The Estate bought for Mary Virginia McCormick & adjacent lands subsequently purchased by the McCormick Family.



Schematic of the O'Shaughnessy/McCormick estate at the time of sale in 1932.

Garden Drive is now called Swanson Drive. The extension of Washington through the Kildare estate occurred after 1932. Streets south of Oakwood are not shown.

Courtesy of Arthur Smith.

Grace Walker lived another 11 years. She died at her home in Pasadena, California, on her birthday, June 18, 1952. She was 86.³¹ The fragments of information we have about Grace Walker's life make one year for a full biography. Details about her connection with Huntsville are naturally more easily found for the local researcher, but Grace seems to have had an impressive life before and after her Huntsville

years. Materials at hand provide a few facts. She was a native of Canada and the daughter of a minister. She served on the national board of the YWCA of Canada for 25 years, and was a long-time member of the Housing Board of the City of Toronto.³² During her later years in Pasadena, in addition to participating in several women's clubs and civic organizations, she helped organize the Western Personnel Institute, and she supported the YWCA, the Neighborhood church, and a chapter of the American Association for the United Nations.

Regarding her Huntsville association, we find her referred to as a business manager, a business secretary for the wealthy McCormick family,³³ secretary of McCormick Estates in Chicago,³⁴ a caretaker, a companion. An undated newspaper scrap in the Heritage Room of the public library calls her a pioneer in the use of music therapy who "used her nurse's training and a gentle, loving nature to care for her mistress most of their lives." The *Huntsville Times* said she was "keenly interested in young people and was instrumental in assisting a number of them through college."³⁵

By all accounts, Grace Walker was an exceptionally inspiring and able woman whose life was an exemplar of service to others.

Curiously, although Grace Walker and Virginia McCormick's lives were inextricably linked, Grace is not mentioned in the newspaper article about Virginia's death and Virginia is not mentioned in the story about Grace.

When Virginia and Grace's winter stays in Huntsville came to an end, the fortunes of *Kildare*/McCormick House and its magnificent grounds took a turn for the worse. The McCormicks no longer used the residence, and family members overseeing the trust petitioned the circuit court of Madison County for permission to sell the estate.³⁶ Somehow it was decided to divide the property and sell it off in individual lots, a move that spelled the end of *Kildare*'s large lawn, the mature trees that Michael O'Shaughnessy planted and nurtured, and Virginia's beautiful gardens. Thus *Kildare* lost most of the grounds that provided an important setting for the mansion as well as a verdant buffer against encroaching residential and commercial development.³⁷ The breakup of the estate ushered in 40 years of misuse and abuse of the house that came to an end in 1975 when James Reeves bought the property and began the long task of restoring it to its original grandeur.

Endnotes

- 1 A.E. Smith, *The Lives, & Times of the McCormick Mansion, A Celebration of the Warmth, Charm, Hospitality & History, 1996-1999, of Southern Folks in Rocket City Alabama*, unpublished ms., p.110.
- 2 Ibid, p. 92.
- 3 Ibid, p. 110.
- 4 Chip Cooper, Harry Knopke, and Robert Gamble, *Silent in the Land* (Tuscaloosa: CKM Press, 1993), p.72.
- 5 Smith, p. 111.
- 6 Cooper, Knopke and Gamble, p.72.
- 7 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 8 Dorothea Snow, *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* (Winter 1980), p.7.
- 9 Linda Bayer Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.
- 10 Smith, p. 114.
- 11 Presumably Virginia's sister Anita Blaine.
- 12 West Huntsville Y.M.C.A., "Virginia McCormick Memorial Branch," James Record and Tom McDonald, editors and co-chairmen, "Commemorative Album" Celebrating our City's Sesquicentennial Progress (Huntsville Ala.), 1955, p.115.
- 13 *Huntsville Times*, 1983, no date.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Smith, p. 114.
- 17 Record and McDonald, p.107.
- 18 *Huntsville Times*, April 22, 1979. The article says that "Grace Club money usually went to projects recommended by cotton mill owners, most of whom were members' parents."
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Smith, p. 117.
- 21 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 22 Smith, p. 118.
- 23 Ibid, p. 112.
- 24 Ibid, p. 120.
- 25 Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.
- 26 Cooper, Knopke and Gamble, p.183.
- 27 Smith, p. 123.
- 28 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 29 Jeremy Brett, Wisconsin Historical Society, personal communication.
- 30 *Huntsville Times*, May 26, 1941.
- 31 *Huntsville Times*, June 22, 1952.
- 32 Ibid.

Endnotes continued

33 *Huntsville Times*, April 22, 1979.

34 *Memories, History of the Grace Club Auxiliary*, April 1989, p. 18.

35 *Huntsville Times*, June 22, 1952.

36 Smith, p. 122.

37 Smith, p. 126.

Rescue and Recovery

Maureen Drost and Diane Ellis

It's difficult for those of us who find cleaning out a closet daunting to understand what motivates someone to take the plunge of rescuing a nearly 100-year-old house that is teeming with restoration challenges. Thankfully, there are people who can see beyond the ravages of neglect to the true merit of a building and understand that, when it comes to laboring to preserve something of value, virtue is more than its own reward. Such a person is James Reeves.

The story behind James Reeves's purchase of *Kildare* is one of being in the right place at the right time. "In the spring of 1975, while having lunch with a friend, we met another friend who came to our table to say hello and to tell us that she was now in real estate," said James in an interview with Maureen Drost. The real estate agent told James to call her if he ever wanted to buy a house. "I said I didn't have plans to purchase a house, but what was the story on *Kildare*? I had noticed it was empty."

"Later that day I got a call from her saying *Kildare* was available. We set a time for the next day to view the house. A few weeks later I had purchased a project that would occupy me for the next twenty-seven years."

James remembers seeing "the mess" that the McCormick house had become over the years but he was determined to greatly improve its condition. The various owners of the house after Mary Virginia McCormick moved out in the early 1930s had changed it to fit their needs. After the house was sold on July 12, 1932 (Cyrus McCormick, Jr. sold the four-acre plot containing the house for \$12,000),¹ the new owners remodeled it and opened it as the Kildare Hotel. The Kildare Hotel drew special attention from the local press when it opened. A large newspaper ad accompanied by a photograph announced the grand opening of the hotel on October 2, 1932 (see page 24). Despite such optimistic beginnings, just two years later Cyrus McCormick, Jr., petitioned the court for foreclosure on the hotel after financial problems developed. The foreclosure after only two years was a bad omen for the future of the McCormick house. Over the next 40 years approximately ten owners would use the house as a boarding house, a setting for beauty salons and health spas, and even a brothel. Plans for other

ANNOUNCING FORMAL OPENING

KILDARE HOTEL

Sunday October 2, 1932

With all preachers and lawyers of Huntsville as complimentary guests of the new hotel for the opening Sunday noon meal.



VIEW OF KILDARE HOTEL OVERLOOKING SPACIOUS GROUNDS

Advertisement for the Kildare Hotel.

Courtesy of James Reeves.

uses, such as a restaurant, fell through and some owners ended up in bankruptcy or default. For about a year before James bought the house, it was vacant. As he was about to discover, over time the house had been vandalized, with architectural elements and furnishings removed for personal use or to settle claims.² Smith quotes a snippet of an article in the *Huntsville Times* of July 7, 1975, that described the McCormick house "...a gutted run down old house, merely a remnant of its former self."³

Not long after James Reeves bought the McCormick house, he began taking steps to restore it, though the labor would often prove to be a daunting task. "I wanted to return the house to its original condition and room configuration if possible," he said. "To this end, I took out remaining divisions in the various rooms and also the false ceilings. A number



James Reeves.

Courtesy of James Reeves.

of the original fittings had been removed over the years, such as hardware, stair spindles, doors, light fixtures, and stained glass windows.

“Some items I recovered through the intervention of friends, some I claimed through serendipity, and others I replaced with my own or others’ concept of what would have been the original scheme.”

John White, then an art teacher at Huntsville High School, helped James find a few of the original fittings. He came over to visit and said he had bought a mantel and spindle that he believed were part of the original house. James bought the items from John and some other fittings from a shop in Birmingham. James also dug up some hardware that was buried in the backyard and re-used some old lumber that he discovered on the grounds.



*Front entryway, exterior of McCormick house.
Courtesy of James Reeves.*

While James said he regrets not being a handyman himself, he and his wife, Marion, did strip some of the woodwork at the house, including the silver closet and the bedroom of their son, Cedric. Five other individuals played major roles in the restoration of the mansion.

Linda Burrows, who lived at the house five years, spent 8 to 25 hours every weekend landscaping the grounds, James said. She brought in truckloads of topsoil and planted dogwood trees and such flowers as roses and impatiens. Arthur Smith, who lived briefly at the house, completed a variety of projects when he wasn't working at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. His description for Maureen Drost of the work he did on his bedroom windows reminds us of the grinding hard work every detail of restoration requires, and of the rewards of one's labors.



*Front entryway, interior of McCormick house.
Courtesy of James Reeves.*



Ballroom.

Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.

The forest green paint and inner varnish had cracked, putty had fallen, and worse, several sash cords that hold the two hidden counter balance weights that keep the window as open as you wish needed replacing ... In the cool basement I toiled, ripping the paint off, sanding, repainting, varnishing and [doing] the rehanging. In restoration one tries to stay as original as possible and so James provided genuine sash cord, bemoaning how soon it failed. ... Something immensely satisfying struck when the first window that had been immovable was restored to free and easy opening. Over the years many windows were re-hung on polyester [cord]. Some, like the grand 70-pound one in the breakfast room, needed assistance from James. When it was hung, the cherry sides cleaned and polished and the window once again mobile, it was magnificent.

Two stained glass artists, Wayne Lumpkin and Robert J. Perrella, made significant contributions to the restoration. Wayne designed replacement stained glass windows for the kitchen. Robert, who worked for Lumpkin at times and at other times for himself, replaced ten glass



*Replacement stained glass window in ballroom.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*



*Ballroom mantel added by Virginia McCormick.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*

panels and restored several more. He said his work included an *art nouveau* stained glass window for a bedroom and all the replacement beveled panels, including a few transoms and the windows in the front door.

David Shippey, a math instructor at Huntsville High School, deserves the most credit, says James. He and Shippey shared a 25-year-long working relationship that began shortly after James moved into the house.

Cedric, now a senior at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, admires David Shippey, who worked on restoring the house until about a year ago. "When I was 15 or 16," said Cedric, "I worked with Mr. Shippey and we replaced a roof over the verandah." Cedric called David a character, someone who made plenty of jokes and loved to laugh, especially as he told stories about growing up on a farm, with his father who was a preacher. Shippey's trademark, Cedric said, was the floppy hat he always wore with his overalls. It was John White who introduced David Shippey to James, and James recalls the conversation well. "I know somebody you need to see," John told him. "He does projects in his garage, and you might talk to him about doing some woodwork."

James called David and what started as a repair of a screen door on the verandah grew into a commitment lasting a quarter of a century. "In fact," James said, "he did much of the restoration and, as much as any human being, he saved this house."

David, who is now retired from Huntsville High, said he spent untold hours after school, on weekends, and in the summer at *Kildare*. His projects are too many to list, but they included restoring a suite of three rooms in walnut on the second floor; building a kitchen on the first floor, complete with counters, cabinets, a new floor, new wiring, and appliances; repairing dozens of windows and all the doors in the house; replacing baseboards; and repairing the roof over the porch and plenty of leaks in the ceilings inside the house. David said the project he worked on with Cedric took an entire summer because the temperatures were so high that they were unable to work past 11 a.m. each day. They repaired the doors on the verandah, put in a new ceiling, and replaced the roof.



*Mantel in double drawing rooms.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*

Though the restoration of *Kildare* took so much of his free time over the years, David truly enjoyed his work and believed in it. “It was such a beautiful house inside,” he said. “I just felt sick about it rotting away.”

Today, James says, the house has 113 windows, including 8 stained glass windows, 9 beveled windows, and 8 beaded windows. There are ten exterior doors and twenty fireplaces. The total living space, including the caretaker’s house still on the property, is 17,000 square feet.

James’s determination to restore the house, supported by the talents and dedication of friends and helpers, was rewarded with *Kildare*’s listing in the National Register of Historic Places, in 1982, just seven years after he bought the property. The nomination noted that the mansion was “architecturally significant for its imposing scale, the high quality of its materials and workmanship, for being one of the finest examples of Queen Anne style domestic architecture in the state, *and for its excellent state of preservation.*”⁴ [Emphasis added.]

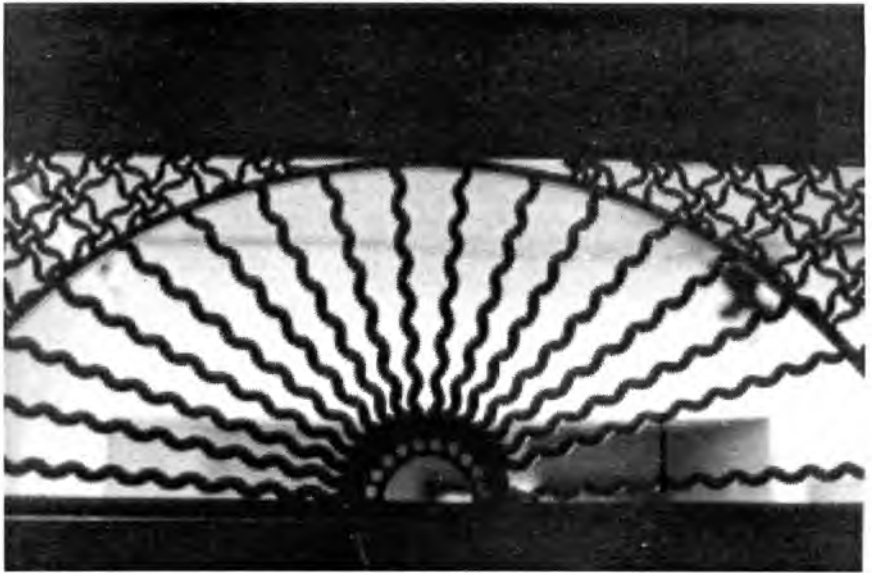
James has used *Kildare* as his home and as an antique shop. He and Cedric have fond memories of the many parties given at the house. “Our tenancy has been one of great joy, with birthday parties and lots of



*Dining room.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*



*Staircase to second floor.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.*



Spindle screen.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.



Original stove in basement.
Courtesy of Linda Bayer Allen.

cats and dogs. I moved into the house in July of '75 and that October I held a party for the [Southern Association of Sculptors] with dinner being served by the Greek Ladies Auxiliary for 315, and a slide presentation by a visiting artist.

"Later," James said, "we had a cocktail party for the contestants who were in Huntsville for the Maid of Cotton contest, the winner of which would complete for the title of Miss America." Other events included a series of parties for the Huntsville Chamber Music Guild, in the Viennese *Hausmusik* tradition. Historic Huntsville Foundation held its annual membership tea at the McCormick house in 1995.

Parties for family and friends, said James, included Easter brunches and Thanksgiving dessert parties for as many as seventy-five. "I remember when my parents would have parties here," said Cedric. He especially remembers his childhood curiosity about weddings at the house. "Sometimes my friends and I would crack the stained glass window at the top of the servants' staircase to the first floor and watch from below."

Cedric shares his father's love for art and antiques and recalls his father buying paintings for the antique shop or his own collection. "I was always sure I wanted to do business like my father," Cedric said. "I remember seeing him at his desk on the phone talking about business and going to meetings."

As for James, he says he never dreamed he would own such a house, calling it "a happy accident." "It has been a joy to live in this marvelous place, *Kildare*," he said, "and a treasure to share it with so many wonderful people."

Endnotes

1 Linda Bayer Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.

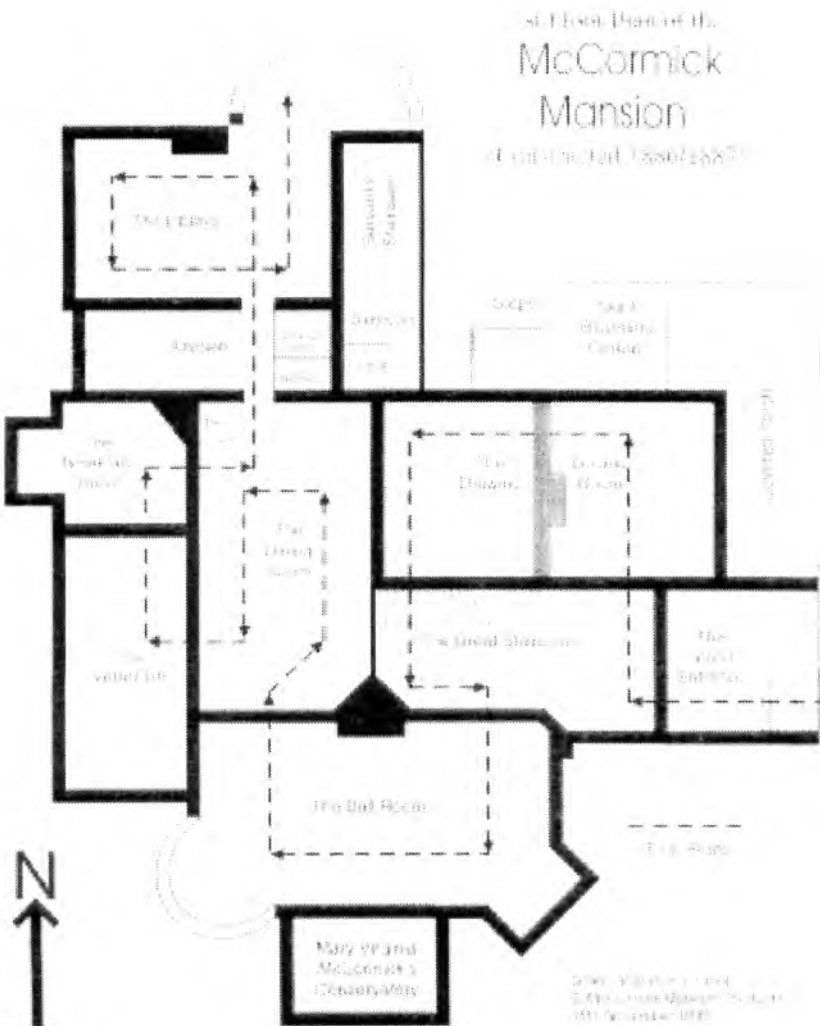
2 A.E. Smith, *The Lives, & Times of the McCormick Mansion, A Celebration of the Warmth, Charm, Hospitality & History of Southern Folks in Rocket City, Alabama*, 1996-1999, unpublished ms., p.131.

3 Ibid.

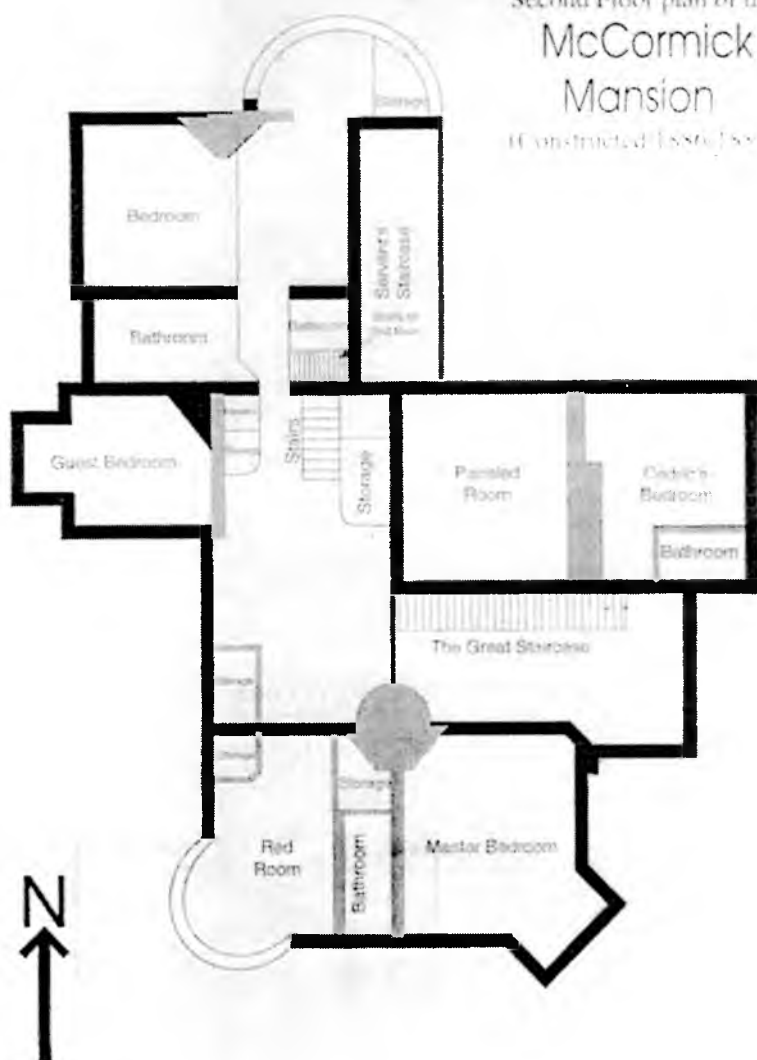
4 Allen, National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form November 1976.

Floor Plans of the McCormick House

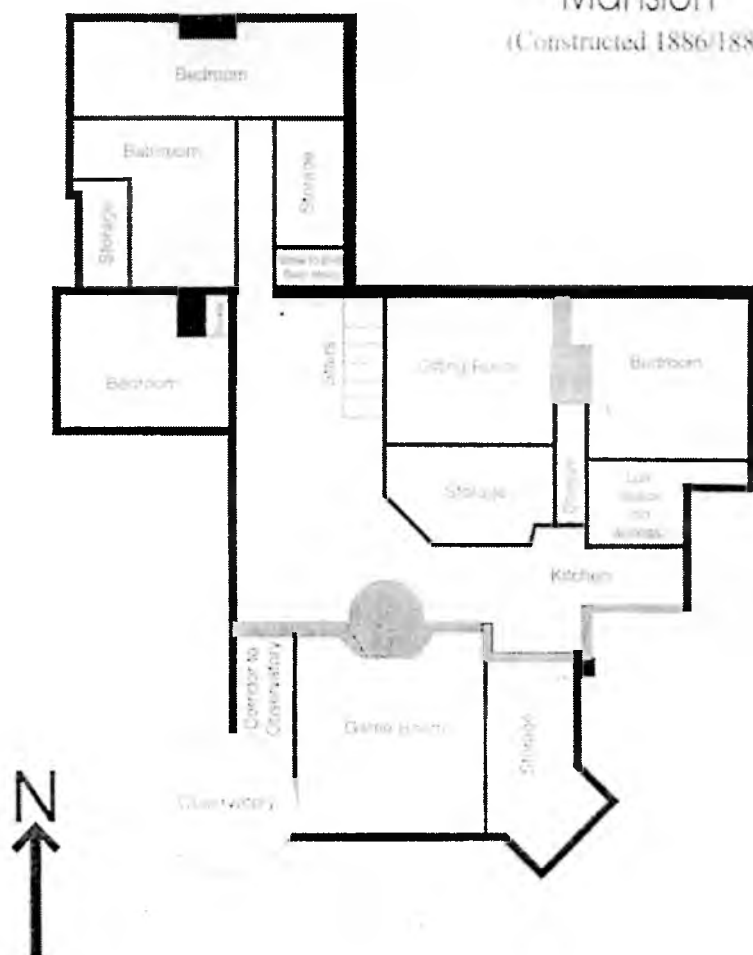
Courtesy of Arthur Smith

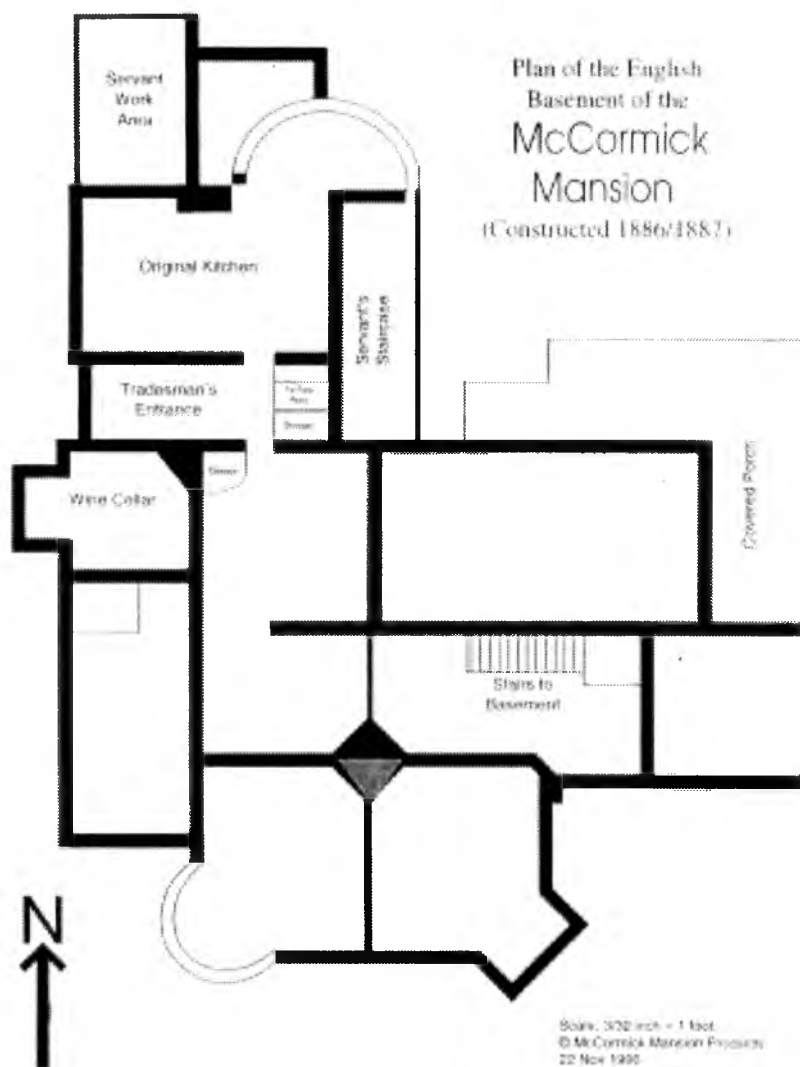


Second Floor plan of the
McCormick
Mansion
(Constructed 1886/87)



Third Floor Plan of the
McCormick
Mansion
(Constructed 1886/1887)





**Michael O'Shaughnessy
and
the North Alabama Improvement Company**

Patricia H. Ryan

Huntsville was fortunate indeed to have Michael J. O'Shaughnessy chart her history, both directly and indirectly, for over half a century. Through his connections and influence and that of his brother James, outside capital flowed into the city after Reconstruction to change Huntsville's economic base from a cotton-growing city into an important textile center.¹ By 1904 Huntsville had eleven cotton mills, which, in turn, spawned numerous cottage industries to revitalize the economy until the Redstone and Huntsville Arsenals again changed her future. The group that secured this capital was the North Alabama Improvement Company and later its successor, the Northwestern Land Association.

What attracted Michael O'Shaughnessy to Huntsville is unknown, but in 1881 he founded the Huntsville Cotton Oil Mills, perhaps due to the success of a similar plant he and James had operated in Nashville since the 1860s. Michael must have realized that Huntsville needed to attract capital for industrialization, and in 1886 the O'Shaughnessy brothers joined local citizens to form the North Alabama Improvement Company to promote the area. The incorporation papers stated the general purposes of the company:

The improvement and development of the material resources of North Alabama. The nature of the business it proposes is as follows, namely, to encourage, promote, procure, and secure immigration to North Alabama of the best and most skilled class of persons from all industrial pursuits, to own, buy, sell, lease or hire as the case may be and mortgage all kinds and descriptions of real and personal property, to mine coal, iron and other minerals, to act as commissioner agent in negotiating loans or mortgages as pledges of property on personal security, to own, buy, build, operate, and lease hotels and other improved real estate, to quarry rock, granite, marble and any other material, to sink oil wells, and to construct, buy, own, operate and lease in connection with any of said branches of business one or more railroads, tramways, turnpikes or canals.²



In contrast to the original antebellum four-story Huntsville Hotel, the North Alabama Improvement Company constructed the three-story stone addition pictured above.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

If wealthy capitalists were to visit Huntsville, they would certainly expect the finest accommodations. Therefore, one of the first projects of the North Alabama Improvement Company was the construction of the Monte Sano Hotel and the renovation of the Huntsville Hotel.

Architect John Rea of New York (also spelled Ray and Rae in the local newspapers) drew the plans for the Monte Sano Hotel in the Queen Anne style, often called the *bric-a-brac* style for its exuberance, asymmetry, and eclectic mixture of materials. Queen Anne architecture gained wide exposure in this country at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876; Rae's hotel may have introduced the local citizens to the emerging style.³



The Monte Sano Hotel closed about 1900 and was a private residence until it was demolished in the 1940s.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison Public Library.

The vast three-story structure of frame construction opened in early June of 1887. All 233 rooms featured mountain views and were furnished with the latest conveniences. Guests could amuse themselves with bowling, billiards, croquet or lawn tennis.⁴

In 1886 the North Alabama Improvement Company purchased the Huntsville Hotel with the intent of renovating it. The 1858 structure stood at the northwest corner of Jefferson Street and North Side Square. They refurbished the existing building and built an annex to the north.⁵

Of equal importance, the group realized the need for improved transportation to connect Huntsville with other cities. The company subscribed \$20,000 for a road between Huntsville and Guntersville, \$20,000 for a railroad between Huntsville and Gadsden, and \$25,000 to build a railway up Monte Sano to service the successful hotel.



*Once the Monte Sano Hotel became successful, the railway transported guests between Huntsville and the resort.
Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.*

One of the most far-reaching of the company's successes occurred in 1890 with the securing of the Dallas Mills. The company donated 50 acres for the site and took \$25,000 in stock, with the O'Shaughnessy brothers pledging an additional \$10,000 apiece. The principal product of the new mills was cotton sheeting. The *Huntsville Weekly Mercury* ecstatically predicted the following:

The mill will be the largest and most modern in all of its appointments in the entire South and will make a line of fabrics heretofore not manufactured in the South.... This mill will employ about 2000 hands, and we can readily see if the usual ratio is maintained, will increase the population of Huntsville thirty-five to forty-five hundred people.⁶

Despite early successes, the North Alabama Improvement Company was short-lived. For unknown reasons in 1892, the company essentially dissolved and sold its real estate to the Northwestern Land Association, a group of businessmen from South Dakota, that included the governor of the state, and William S. Wells, Williard I. Wellman, and



Dallas Mill.

Courtesy of Huntsville/Madison County Public Library.

Tracy W. Pratt, with the last three making their home in Huntsville. James O'Shaughnessy was also a charter member. The new group continued to promote Huntsville for many years.

Sadly for preservationists, the tangible successes of the North Alabama Improvement Company no longer remain. The chimney of the Monte Sano Hotel is all that remains of the once elegant structure, demolished for salvage in the 1940s. Fires destroyed the Huntsville Hotel in 1910 and 1911. The long-abandoned Dallas Mills burned in 1991. James O'Shaughnessy's frame Queen Anne-style residence on Monte Sano was destroyed by fire in 1890 and never rebuilt. Michael O'Shaughnessy spearheaded the investment of outside capital to industrialize Huntsville in the late nineteenth-century; it is fitting that his marvelously imposing mansion *Kildare* is his legacy.

Endnotes

1 Unless cited otherwise, the material for this article first appeared in the author's "Northern Dollars for Huntsville Spindles" (Huntsville Planning Department, 1983).

2 Madison County, Ala., Corporation Record 1, p.17.

3 Clem Labine and Carolyn Flaherty, eds., *The Old-House Journal Compendium* (Woodstock, N.Y.:Overlook Press, 1980), p.267. Since *Kildare* and James O'Shaughnessy's house on Monte Sano were both constructed in the Queen Anne style about the same time as the hotel, it is logical to assume they were also designed by architect Rea, although no documentation has been found to support this.

4 James F. Sulzby, Jr., *Historic Alabama Hotels and Resorts* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1960), p.182.

5 Ibid., p.155.

6 *Huntsville Weekly Mercury*, 4 June 1890, p.2.

HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION
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HUNTSVILLE, AL 35804

The mission of the HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE FOUNDATION is the preservation of historically or architecturally significant sites and structures in Huntsville and Madison County. The Foundation also works to increase public awareness of the value of these sites and structures.

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