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Diane Ellis

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A fragment of Huntsville's 19th-century landscape

Backyard Adventures: In Search of Historic Outbuildings

Diane Ellis

With this issue of the Quarterly, we inaugurate a series of occasional articles about outbuildings in Huntsville and Madison County, beginning with those from the antebellum period and, we hope, moving on to 20th-century structures. The topic has been on our to-do list for some time, assuming greater priority with our recognition of the buildings' growing vulnerability to demolition by neglect or intent. Happily, as we were brainstorming about how to get started finding, photographing and interpreting examples of our subject, Frank J. Nola, Jr.'s important study of the Lowe House dependency appeared, and we were on our way.

Frank's architectural analysis, Sarah Huff Fisk's historical research, and Robin Denson's archaeological discoveries at the site offer a tantalizing peek into the past life of the property and its occupants. But it's still only a peek. The function of the smokehouse is obvious, for example, but how the rest of the dependency was used when it was attached to the early main house, or later, when it became a separate outbuilding, remains a matter for speculation.

Seeking information on antebellum outbuildings, we turned to John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House, The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*.¹ Vlach's book is a fascinating study in text, photograph and drawing of the kinds, numbers, styles and configurations of outbuildings found in antebellum agricultural life and the interaction of slaves and slaveholders that created the architectural landscape. As you would expect, outbuildings on a self-sustaining, income-producing plantation were many and varied. A quick look at the plantation architecture heading in Vlach's index finds page references for well houses and water towers, dovecotes and blacksmith shops, cotton presses, rice mills, smokehouses, slave quarters, granaries, and barns.² And that's a partial list of the structures discussed in the book.

But what about outbuildings in a town setting? Certainly many needs of town dwellers matched those present in rural life: living quarters for the property owner

and the servants; food sources, and food storage and preparation areas; laundry facilities; arrangements for domestic animals and carts, wagons or buggies; and privies. Concerning living quarters in cities, John Michael Vlach writes in his article “The Plantation Tradition in an Urban Setting, The Case of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina” that “urban slaves usually worked as servants for wealthy whites, but many worked as artisans in their owner’s shops. In either case, slaves were usually housed in their masters’ homes. Such arrangements, which put blacks and whites under the same roof, were quite different from the common plantation experiences where slaves inhabited separate quarters from their owners.” Wealthy property owners with several slaves did build separate slave quarters, on the side or at the back of the house lot, in a more plantation-like arrangement.³

The functions and activities of daily life might be carried out on a smaller scale in urban communities, but dependencies were still a part of the household setting. In a 1980 article written for the *Quarterly*, the late restoration architect Harvie Jones noted that in the early Federal period in Huntsville—1805 to 1835—most houses “began as essentially two-room, two-story houses (one room per floor) with perhaps two service rooms (kitchen and servants’) in a detached structure in the rear, and frequently a small room about eight feet square at the front of the upper stair hall. Other household needs called for appropriate outbuildings, which Jones said would usually include “a smokehouse, shelter for horses and conveyances, a well-house, the ‘necessary,’” and perhaps others.⁴

Over time, rising land values in cities, population growth, changing fashions in building and landscape design, and the ever-present urge to modernize have taken a toll on old outbuildings in urban communities. Rural outhouses, unused barns and forgotten sheds might be ignored and allowed to settle into old age on relatively spacious farmland, but city dwellers on smaller lots would be more likely to see the virtue in removing “eyesores” from their back yards. This phenomenon, and the tendency in the past to overlook the rustic in favor of the refined, and thus to record in picture and word grand residences rather than the essential workaday buildings

that sustained them, mean fewer examples of urban outbuildings left for us to interpret.

Savannah and Charleston have the largest collection of extant urban dependencies, according to architectural historian Robert Gamble. But a modest sampling of representative urban dependencies can be found closer to home, in Huntsville's historic districts. A stroll through Twickenham, for example, reveals slave quarters—frequently adapted for use as guesthouses—kitchens, smokehouses, and a few outbuildings of unknown purpose. We look forward to prowling through other people's backyards to investigate and document these remaining survivors of a fast-fading architectural landscape.

If you know of an historic outbuilding that fits our project, please call Lynn Jones, 256/534-6671.

Notes

- 1 John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House, The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Mr. Vlach relied heavily on images from the Historical American Building Survey (HABS) for his book. Many example plantations in the book are Alabama plantations, and several of these were restoration projects undertaken by the late architect Harvie P. Jones, FAIA, and his Huntsville firm, Jones & Herrin Architects. The editors used Harvie Jones's personal copy of Mr. Vlach's book, which is now part of the Harvie P. Jones Architectural Collection of the M. Louis Salmon Library at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. His copy includes personal notes, including the following observation written in 1993 on the title page: "Excellent book. The only one on this subject I've seen, & well-written, too."
- 2 Vlach, 256.

- 3 John Michael Vlach, “The Plantation Tradition in an Urban Setting, The Case of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina,” *Southern Cultures*, 5:4 (Winter 1999): 52-53.
- 4 Harvie Jones, “Federal Period Residential Architecture,” *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture & Preservation*, VII:1 (Fall 1980): 4-9.

Further Reading

Mr. Vlach also recommended the following resource, which the editors were unable to obtain in time for publication: John Michael Vlach, *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture VI*, edited by Hudgins and Cromley (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities, The South 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).