

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 31
Number 1 *Cotton Hill*

Article 3

3-20-2005

Preservation Effort Revives a House and Inspires a Family Gathering

Lynn Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly>



Part of the [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Lynn (2005) "Preservation Effort Revives a House and Inspires a Family Gathering," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 31: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol31/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Historic Huntsville Quarterly by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

Preservation Effort Revives a House and Inspires a Family Gathering

LYNN JONES

Last year, when the *Quarterly's* editors learned that Cotton Hill, an antebellum plantation house, was being restored, we immediately wanted to investigate. The architectural significance of Cotton Hill, a long neglected and almost forgotten rural Limestone County jewel, had been recognized by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) team in the 1930s and was photographed by the survey in 1935 as part of the Alabama collection. Already more than 100 years old by that time, the house, though still occupied, appeared in the photographs to be in a very dilapidated condition.

Cotton Hill's current restoration is a cause for celebration. According to Bob Gamble, senior architectural historian with the Alabama Historical Commission, the Alabama HABS collection is one of the largest of all the states' collections. Sadly, due to abandonment, neglect, vandalism, and other causes, by 1985, 40 percent of the documented structures had disappeared. Today that percentage would be higher still. Researchers Lakin Boyd, Bill Stubno, Jr., and Linda Bayer Allen followed the trail of Luke Matthews, the presumed builder of Cotton Hill, from Virginia to Limestone County and ultimately to Madison County, where, after the Civil War, he and his large family would weave themselves into the fabric of Huntsville. The trail proved interesting, and to our surprise, it also led to a Matthews family reunion at Cotton Hill in June, as well as a tour of some of the prominent homes in Huntsville that were once owned or occupied by members of the family.

Luke Matthews of Campbell County, Virginia, was in his mid-twenties when he migrated to Limestone County about 1822 with his mother and several siblings. His father, Luke Matthews, Sr., had died the previous year, leaving a sizeable estate to his wife and children. Apparently Luke was one of many migrants who at the time was lured from more settled regions by the possibilities of accumulating greater

wealth in the frontier states of Alabama and Mississippi, with their cheap fertile land and new opportunities for adventure. Writing in *A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama 1732-1840*, Judge Thomas Jones Taylor said, “It appeared as if all Virginia was moving Southward.” (p.45)

Architectural history writer and publisher Mills Lane, in his book *Architecture of the Old South: Mississippi & Alabama*, describes the migration this way:

Many Virginians made their way to northern and central Alabama by way of Tennessee and Kentucky. Though they were not the most numerous settlers, the Virginians, because of their wealth, education and prominence, made contributions to Alabama’s early architecture far greater than their numbers. In 1834 Henry Watson, a New England lawyer, wrote from Greensboro, Alabama: “The country about is now settled by emigrants from Virginia and the Carolinas...[and] is thus filled with much more intelligence than you would have expected.” (pp. 37 & 41)

The story of Cotton Hill illustrates the blend of mystery and discovery that often accompanies historic preservation projects, stimulating the interest of workers and researchers and, we hope, readers as well.

Sources

Mills Lane, *Architecture of the Old South: Mississippi & Alabama* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989).

Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, *A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama 1732-1840*, eds., W. Stanley Hoole and Addie S. Hoole (University: Confederate Publishing Company, 1976).



Cotton Hill in 1981; the two dormers were added after 1935 and have since been removed. Photograph by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, F.A.I.A., Department of Archives/Special Collections, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, Alabama