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Cotton Hill: A Rediscovered Treasure

LAKIN BOYD

In 2001, Cecil Armstrong bought Cotton Hill, a two-story Federal brick house that would look more at home in Southside Virginia than atop a knoll in southeastern Limestone County. The house is located just east of Athens, facing south and overlooking a long driveway that proceeds through a stately pecan grove to Brown's Ferry Road. It is surrounded by some of the best cotton land in Limestone County. One of the most architecturally significant antebellum houses remaining in the county, Cotton Hill was photographed in 1935 as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). By the time Cecil Armstrong bought the property, Cotton Hill needed a complete restoration. To supervise what would be an ongoing project to revive the property, the owner hired two master craftsmen, Wayne Kuykendall, a local preservationist, and Paul Tennison.

Background

Cotton Hill was constructed near the end of the Federal period of architecture, and it displays the characteristics of that period as they were transplanted from Virginia by settlers moving into the Tennessee River Valley. With a few notable exceptions, upscale Federal houses constructed in North Alabama during the first few decades of the 19th century retained the Georgian Colonial house form that had become traditional in the United States during the 18th century, that is, a rectangular box, two stories high and one or two rooms deep, with three or five symmetrically placed openings across the façade on each level. In the southern version, chimneys were usually located on the side walls, and the whole was completed with a side gable roof lacking dormers. The layout of such houses often featured a central hallway with two or four rooms per floor, with the second floor echoing the first floor arrangement.

The Federal label is sometimes used synonymously with the terms Adam style or

Adamesque, a late-18th-century style that originated in England with the brothers Robert and James Adam, whose designs were distinguished by a taste for lighter and more delicate details than were common in Georgian Colonial construction. The Adam style relied on attenuated columns, and curved, arched and elliptical designs for both room shapes and their décor. In America, examples of full-blown Adamesque houses were erected in the major cities and seaports; but in rural areas, houses tended to retain the boxy, right-angled spaces of the previous century, which could be dressed up with a few Adamesque details such as fanlights and sidelights at the front door, classical swags, reeding and sunburst patterns on mantelpieces, door and window moldings, and molded chair rails. While the Adamesque style was widely accepted in the United States, it appeared primarily as interior details and as enlarged but refined interpretations of Georgian features. The majority of stylish early-19th-century houses, especially in rural areas, did not embrace the full Adam style and are more accurately identified as Federal to distinguish them from those structures that did more closely follow the English models.

Cotton Hill nicely illustrates how the Federal style integrated the boxy Georgian shapes and strict symmetry of arrangement with Adamesque fanlights, mantelpieces of delicate proportions decorated with classical patterns, and a projecting and pedimented Palladian portico (now missing) to achieve a distinctive new architectural style.

The construction of Cotton Hill is attributed to William Parham (born 1792), a master craftsman and builder, who immigrated to Limestone County from southern Virginia and settled in the Cambridge community. Little is known about Parham other than that he worked as a builder, was married four times, and fathered many children. According to Chris Edwards and Faye Axford in *The Lure and Lore of Limestone County*, he built Cotton Hill in the early 1830s, although whether he was responsible for the brickwork as well as the carpentry remains unclear. A brick dated 1824, recently found during repair of the upstairs west fireplace, might indicate an earlier date, but no other evidence has yet been found to support

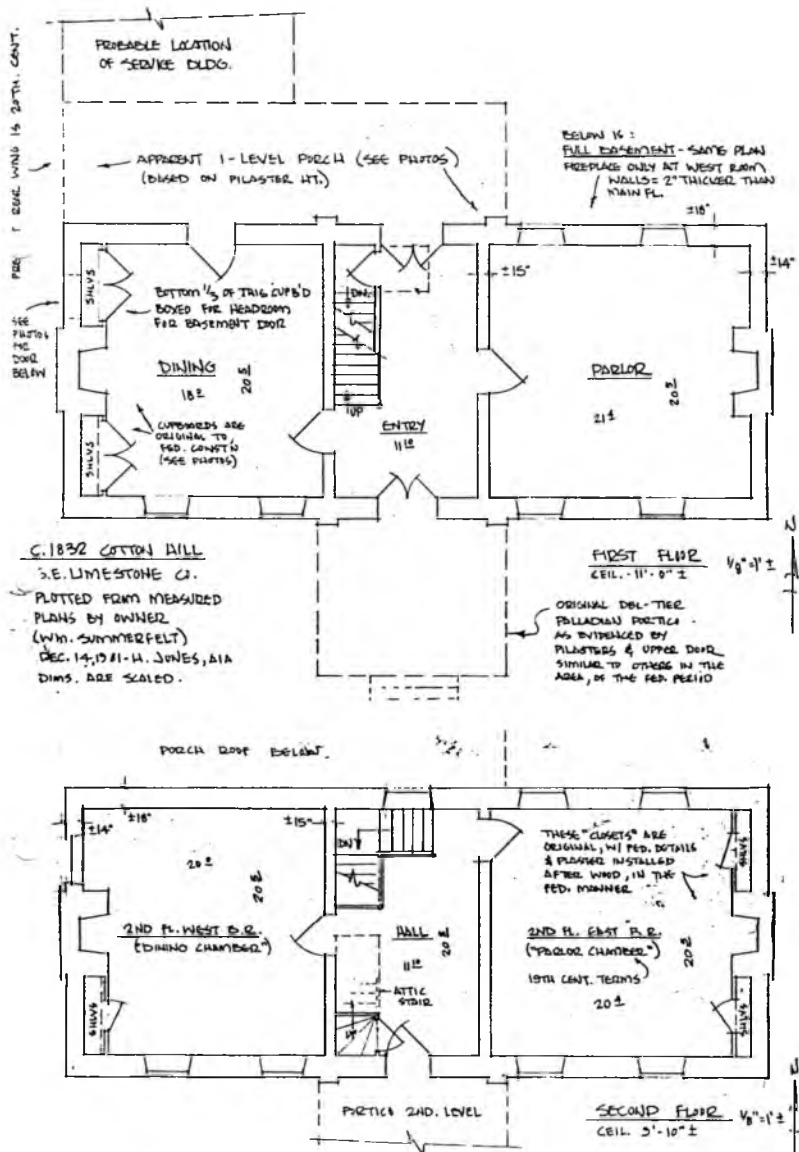
that possibility. Parham's own house, located nearby, was of frame construction and of much less imposing design than Cotton Hill and the other stately brick houses that have been attributed to him, only one of which, the nearby John Girault Gamble house, is extant.

The original owner of Cotton Hill was Luke Matthews (1796-1875), who also emigrated from southern Virginia in the early years of the 19th century and purchased acreage in the Cambridge area close to other transplanted Virginians. Samuel Matthews, one of Luke's brothers, also came south and built a substantial house closer to the river before relocating to Huntsville. Luke operated a thousand-acre cotton plantation of which Cotton Hill was the center. Luke married twice, both times to women descended from prominent Virginia families, and had twelve surviving children, many of whom married into Huntsville families. Not long after his second marriage, he left Cotton Hill and moved to Oakendale, his plantation in Madison County, before eventually settling in Huntsville on Adams Street in a house owned by his brother-in-law Samuel Peete. In 1868 Luke purchased the house on McClung Avenue where he resided until his death seven years later.

Exterior

Cotton Hill as originally constructed was a two-story brick house with a full basement, a side-gabled roof, interior end chimneys, and a central hall plan. It is called a five-bay house because there are five openings across the façade on each level. The present roof cornice and fascia boards on the façade and back are not original. They were probably replaced when the house lost its original two-story Palladian porch or when the roof was replaced. A mid-20th-century owner added two roof dormers but they have since been removed.

The HABS photograph of the back of the house indicates the "ghost" of a one-story porch that covered the double doors at the back of the entrance hall and connected the door of the dining chamber to a service ell. Undoubtedly, this ell housed the original kitchen, as the one basement fireplace in the west basement chamber isn't



Floor plan of Cotton Hill as built. Drawings by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville



Cotton Hill in 1935 showing the north-facing rear and east side elevations. Historic American Buildings Survey, Alex Bush, photographer, May 21, 1935

a cooking fireplace, and there is only one basement window on the west end of the back wall, suggesting the practicality of the builder. Why place a basement window under a porch? A one-story frame room was constructed after the date of the HABS photo, but it has been replaced by a later owner with a two-story brick ell that is visible in the 2004 photograph that appears on the cover.

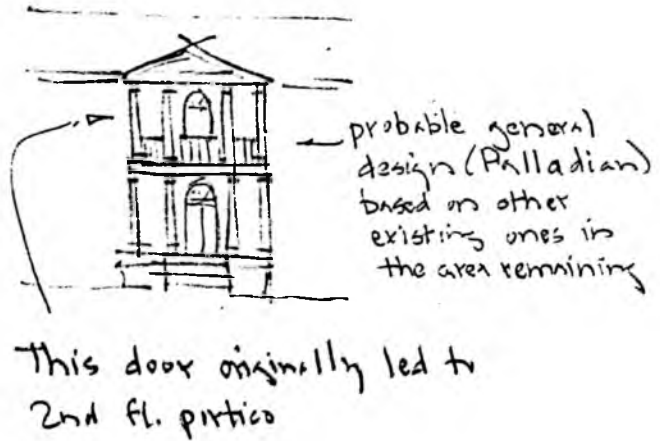
Architectural evidence shows that Cotton Hill was constructed all-of-a-piece, whereas many of the area's surviving Federal-period houses started with just two rooms. These starter houses had one room on each floor, and various later additions increased them to their present size. Thus, Cotton Hill must have been unusually ambitious for frontier Limestone County in its initial conception and was certainly

ambitious in the refinement and extent of its woodwork.

The house was originally entered through a pair of six-panel doors set in a deep paneled reveal crowned with a fanlight. Physical and historical documentation strongly support the original presence of a double-tier, pedimented portico sheltering both the main entrance and the single door on

the floor above it, which also is crowned by an arched transom. Such porches were inspired by the work of the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), whose designs were popularized in England by Inigo Jones in the 1720s and included the projecting two-story porch and the three-part Palladian window, which were widely adopted in the United States where they became associated with the Federal style. At Cotton Hill, existing brick pilasters flanking the front entrances, as well as traces of white paint on the wall between the pilasters, provide evidence of the dimensions of the portico, since it was traditional to paint white both the portico and that portion of the wall sheltered by it. The current owner intends to replace the porch as closely as possible to what is believed to be the original configuration.

Cotton Hill's brickwork is exceptional. The front is laid in Flemish bond with common bond used on the sides and rear, which was the Federal practice. A holdover from Georgian tradition is evidenced by a convex molded brick water table that



Probable design of Cotton Hill's original front porch. Drawing by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville



Front entry fanlight and brickwork of Cotton Hill; doorway infill is not original. Photograph by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville

provides an elegant transition from the main wall to the thicker foundation wall. Tapered lintel bricks, as well as the arched bricks over the front entry and the door above it, are gauged and rubbed.

The double-hung sash windows with twelve panes (or lights) in each sash (12/12) that were used on the first floor and the 12/8 sash configuration used on the second (removed by a previous owner) have been replaced with exact reproductions by Larry Jaynes, who did much of the restoration work on Belle Mont in Colbert County. Belle Mont (ca. 1828) dates

from the same period as Cotton Hill, probably shares a Virginia provenance, and displays a fine (restored) example of a Palladian double portico.

The wooden elements of Cotton Hill exhibit pegged mortise and tenon joints except in the attic where there is an unusual ridge board rather than the usual lapped and pegged ridge joint. According to preservation architect Harvie Jones, only this house and the now demolished Kelly house (pre-1830) in Madison County have been found to have a ridge board. The present roof deck is 20th-century pine on 19th-century pit-sawn (hand-sawn) framing members. The original roof deck would have been constructed of 12-inch to 24-inch wide slab planks spaced 2 to 6 inches apart; handsplit and drawknife-smoothed wooden shingles would have been nailed to these. The nails used in Cotton Hill are square-cut of various sizes made by machine; by the late 1700s, most cut nails were made by either water- or steam-powered machines.

Cotton Hill originally had exterior blinds, not shutters as we call them today. Blinds have blades with openings between them, whereas shutters are solid-paneled to exclude light and air when closed and were used primarily on commercial buildings for security purposes. In contracts of the early 19th-century, blinds are referred to as “Venetian blinds” and functioned to block the sun and discourage the entry of insects without blocking cooling breezes. Blinds also provided security to a house with open windows. In the 1935 HABS photographs of the house the hardware for the blinds can be seen on some of the windows.



*Cotton Hill's convex molded brick water table.
Photograph by Lakin Boyd, 2004*

Interior

The glory of Cotton Hill is its interior woodwork, which is almost completely intact. The entry hall retains its original stairs, chair-rails, baseboards, flooring and interior doors; only the front entry doors are missing. One of these original entry doors, found in the basement, will serve as a model for the missing exterior doors, including the one that led to the second floor portico. The newel posts of the stairs are beautifully turned, and the stair rail is roughly circular in cross section to fit the hand. The stair balusters are small and rectangular in cross-section, a feature that is common to many surviving houses of the period in this area. One unusual feature is the landing balusters that pass through notches cut in the floorboard of the second floor hall.

The edges of the stair risers are decorated with scroll brackets. Doors on the north wall that opened to the back porch are original, as is the door under the stairs that opens to the basement. All walls, except those in the basement, and all ceilings,



Stairs on west side of entry hall. Historic American Buildings Survey, Alex Bush, photographer, May 21, 1935

including those in the basement, were plastered. Laths (strips of wood) were nailed to ceiling joists to provide groundwork for the plaster. The stairs are boxed and plastered in this manner.

The door into the parlor is centered on the east wall of the entry hall. The parlor is surrounded by a three-piece chair-rail like the ones in all the rooms except those in the basement. Fluting and repeated reverse slanted reeding decorate the mantel, as the photo illustrates.

The splayed window jambs and heads are also reeded in this room. No crown molding at the top of the walls is found in Cotton Hill, nor in any known Federal-period house in this area. The baseboards in the house have no small shoe molds at the floor since shoe molds were a later device.

During the Federal period, the baseboard bottoms were scribed to fit any irregularities at the floor, creating a much neater detail than tacked-on shoe molding.

A door at the bottom of the stairs opens to the dining chamber. This room has built-in cupboards on either side of the chimney. These cupboards are original and fitted with shelves and have never been painted on the inside. The doors are made like Federal-period furniture, with the beveled faces of the panel facing inside. The tops of the cupboards are decorated with reeding made of separate glued-in panels

similar to decoration in the 1819 Weeden House in Huntsville. The bottom third of the cupboard on the north side of the chimney is boxed to create headroom for the exterior basement door. The mantel in this room is the most elaborate in the house. It is decorated with a reeded sunburst and “i” dentils, ornaments composed of a row of dentils with a pierced hole above, thus simulating in appearance the letter “i,” primarily a Federal-period motif. Window jambs are splayed and paneled in this room. On the north wall a door led to the original dependency.

The floors throughout the house are six-inch heart pine laid directly on the floor joists without a sub-floor. The floorboards have tongue-and-groove joints and appear to have never been varnished or scrubbed with lye water to a gray finish like most floors of early 19th-century houses. Prior to the Civil War, wooden floors were periodically scrubbed to keep them a light bleached color. Varnishing was a post-Civil War fashion.

The flooring was mechanically sawn by water-powered sash saws, as was all of the wood except for the large framing members, such as floor joists, which were ax-hewn and pit-sawn. Pat Jones writes in a 1935 *Huntsville Times* article on the Rowe home, as Cotton Hill was then known, that the lumber for the building was provided by Rev. James Rowe, who operated a sawmill in Madison County. Rev. Rowe was an early circuit rider and was for a time pastor of the First Methodist Church in Huntsville. On March 1, 1879, his son Andrew Jackson Rowe bought Cotton Hill and approximately 200 acres from John B. McClellan, who had purchased the plantation from Luke Matthews in 1873.



Landing balusters that pass through notches cut in the floorboard of the second-floor hall are an unusual feature. Photograph by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville



Detail of parlor mantel showing fluting and reeding. Photograph by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville

The second-floor hall is lit by a window in the north wall and a fanlight over the door that originally opened to the second-floor portico. A door in the boxed stair on the south wall leads to the floored attic, which is lit by a pair of four-pane windows flanking each chimney. The east bedroom has an original cupboard with shelves on either side of the mantel. This mantel, which is similar to the one in the parlor, still retained its original black paint when photographed for HABS in 1935.

All of the upstairs windows have plain splayed jambs. In the west bedroom the mantel is reminiscent of the 18th-century Georgian style rather than Adamesque. Flanking the mantel on the left is another built-in cupboard, and on the right, a window. There are no windows in the north wall, which indicates an intent on the part of the owner to add a two-story ell at a later date. It was a common practice to construct houses in sections over time as funds and/or space needs increased, a practice that was greatly facilitated by the prevalence of a more or less standard house configuration.

Future

The restoration of an old house is a daunting and expensive task if it is done correctly. Fortunately, Cotton Hill is being restored by an owner who understands the meaning of historic preservation. The house was graciously opened to us to encourage other preservationists to carry on in spite of the many problems encountered during restoration. Cecil Armstrong is aware of the delicate balance between maintaining the historic integrity of the structure and providing the necessary modern



Mantel and flanking cupboards in second-floor east room. Historic American Buildings Survey, Alex Bush, photographer, May 21, 1935

conveniences that allow maximum use by present and future owners. Aspiring restorers who share his appreciation for the work of earlier architects and builders should be encouraged by Cecil Armstrong's continuing efforts at Limestone County's Cotton Hill.

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Detail showing reeded sunburst and “I” dentils on the dining room mantel. Photograph by Harvie Jones, F.A.I.A., 1981. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, University of Alabama in Huntsville

