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Patricia H. Ryan

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Go Slow, Do It Right: Restoration Progress at Cotton Hill

PATRICIA H. RYAN

During our June visit to Cotton Hill, Wayne Kuykendall noted some of the restoration steps the team has taken to return the house to its former Federal elegance. Despite a recent addition containing a kitchen/family room and bedrooms, Cecil Armstrong, the owner, and Wayne Kuykendall, a preservationist and builder, are committed to preserving the house's architectural integrity in meticulous detail. Work has progressed over about a year and a half, with hopes for project completion in several years. Wayne, who has a "real job," can only work on Cotton Hill in his spare time.

The restoration of the interior is continuing in various stages. Windows, millwork, and hardware will be replicated to match the original where needed. The wiring will be run behind the baseboards to be inconspicuous. Heart pine floors, trim, and doors will be stripped. Split-system heating and cooling units will be installed. In the dining room, the woodwork will be painted its original dark green color. One fascinating detail pointed out by Wayne was the brick-sized wood blocks that had been installed as part of the original brickwork to provide places where millwork, such as mantels and baseboards, could be attached without damaging the bricks.

Upstairs, attention to detail is exhibited most clearly in a bedroom, the only room to be completed and occupied. The floor had been painted and the joints caulked by a previous owner. To avoid sanding and removing the patina and raised grain, the wood was stripped and cleaned about four times with tools akin to brass toothbrushes. It was then buffed without stain and waxed.

The next major project is the replacement of the two-story portico. By the time HABS documented the structure with photographs in 1935, the portico had been removed. Architectural evidence reveals that such a portico existed, and the owner would like to duplicate it as closely as possible. If anyone reading this knows of the existence of a photograph of the original portico, please notify the Historic



Cecil Armstrong (right), owner of Cotton Hill, and Wayne Kuykendall, restoration contractor. Photograph by Ralph Allen

Huntsville Foundation, 124 South Side Square, Huntsville, Alabama 35801.

If a photograph of the portico is not found, the replacement will be based on research and physical examination done by the late preservation architect Harvie Jones and Robert Gamble, senior architectural historian with the Alabama Historical Commission. It will be similar to that of Belle Mont near Tuscumbia in Colbert County and other extant period houses. Cecil and Wayne envision round columns connected by a thin balustrade on the upper and lower levels. The

original door to the upstairs portico will be replicated for use at the lower level. Once completed, Cotton Hill, with its elegant façade and delicate interior detailing, will proudly reflect Cecil and Wayne's commitment to a sensitive restoration for a modern lifestyle.



*Luke Matthews (1796-1875), original owner of Cotton Hill.
Courtesy Johnny Crutcher and Dr. John Ennis.*