

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 31
Number 1 *Cotton Hill*

Article 6

3-20-2005

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Recommended Citation

Stubno, William J. Jr. (2005) "Luke Mathews of Cotton Hill," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 31: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol31/iss1/6>

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Luke Matthews of Cotton Hill

WILLIAM J. STUBNO, JR.

The great highway from Virginia to Alabama during the years 1818-1819 was more like the route of an army of occupation than an ordinary public highway, and travelers Northward asserted that they would sometimes journey for many days with out being out of sight of emigrant wagons, accompanied by long files of Negro slaves steadily tramping southward.

Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, *A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama 1732-1840* (pp. 49-50)

Cotton Hill is located in Limestone County, Alabama, along the Huntsville-Brown's Ferry Road, west of the intersection of that road and Cambridge Lane that runs north to U.S. Highway 72 West. The homesite is further described, for the purpose of historical analysis, as being within the Southeast Quarter of Section 36, Township 3 South, Range 4 West of the Huntsville Meridian Line in Limestone County, Alabama. Consisting of approximately 160 acres, this quarter section is located in an area known for a soil and climate favorable to the growing of cotton.

The section was originally a part of the lands west of Madison County in the Alabama Territory, on both sides of the Tennessee River, which the federal government offered for sale in 1818. At that time, the country was experiencing a period of great inflation, brought about by the changes in the nation's economy as a result of the War of 1812. During the war, foreign trade decreased, necessitating expanded domestic manufacturing to satisfy America's need for war goods. The government borrowed heavily to pay for those goods, which put more money into circulation. The borrowing put a strain on bank reserves of specie (money in coin) held against paper currency or notes. Eventually the pressure led to a suspension of specie payments, which resulted in an increase in note issuance, credit expansion, and rising prices. When the war ended, cotton became more expensive, not only due to the

resuming of foreign trade, but also to the abundance of inflated currency.¹

By 1818, the price of cotton rose to an all-time high, prompting land speculators to rush to buy the Tennessee Valley lands offered for sale at highly inflated prices with currency of dubious backing. Some of those speculators used Yazoo script, also known as “Mississippi stock,” as part of their down payment. That script or stock, redeemable only in payment for land, was issued as compensation to those individuals swindled in the Yazoo Land Fraud.^{2 *}

On February 9, 1818, Robert Taylor of Orange County, Virginia paid one-fourth of the purchase money, consisting mostly of “Mississippi stock,” for the land where Cotton Hill would eventually stand. The price of the land was highly inflated at \$17.56 an acre, and the remaining payments were due in three annual installments, as indicated in his Certificate of Purchase.³

On May 10, 1819, Robert Taylor gave power of attorney in the Orange County Court to John M. Taylor of Huntsville, Alabama Territory, where the local land office was located, to sell “or assign” the certificate that also relieved him of the obligation to make the remaining payments. Shortly thereafter, Theopolius Thomas of Limestone County purchased the certificate and the payment obligations associated with it. Unfortunately, he bought the property at a time when the Bank of the United States was launching a program of monetary contraction to ensure that all notes in circulation were backed by specie. This return to solvency resulted in a rash of bankruptcies, falling prices in cotton and other commodities, and business failures that became known as the Panic of 1819. The monetary contraction also increased the purchasing power of the dollar, forcing Thomas to pay the remaining

*The Yazoo Land fraud developed in the late 18th century when Georgia still claimed most of the land that now comprises Alabama and Mississippi. Corrupt Georgia legislators were bribed to sell much of this land to four land speculating companies at a ridiculously low price. The fraud was discovered, the legislators removed, and the enabling law rescinded, but the scandal and ensuing legal uncertainties added further confusion to existing land and currency instabilities. In 1802 Georgia ceded its western lands to the federal government, and Congress assumed financial responsibility for settlements following an 1810 Supreme Court decision that validated the Yazoo claims.



*Lucy Ann Spottswood Matthews (1816-1874), Luke's second wife.
Courtesy Johnny Crutcher and Dr. John Ennis.*

debt on his land in dollars worth considerably more than before the panic. Thomas, like many other individuals, was not able to make the payments on land purchased from the government under these circumstances.⁴

The inability of so many individuals to make the remaining installment payments on their land prompted Congress to pass a relief act on March 2, 1821, that enabled Thomas to spread his payments over an eight-year period, beginning on March 31, 1822, and ending with the final payment on March 31, 1829. He made the arrangements for making these payments on August 30, 1821, and received a Certificate of Further Credit at that time from the Huntsville Land Office. If Thomas failed to make these payments, the land would revert back to the United States three months after the final installment was due.⁵

During a recent renovation at Cotton Hill, a brick inscribed with the date of 1824 was found in the west upstairs fireplace, raising a question as to the possibility that Thomas built the house on the quarter section sometime after receiving further credit from the land office. If Thomas were the builder, he would have undoubtedly been aware that he would lose the house—a fixed improvement—as well as the land on which it stood, for failure to meet his payment obligations. In any event, he eventually forfeited the land for nonpayment, effective July 4, 1829.⁶

On March 31, 1830, Congress passed a law that enabled individuals to buy lands “sold on a credit, and on which a further credit has been taken, under any of the laws passed for the relief of purchasers of public lands, and which have reverted to the United States, on account of the balance due thereon not having been paid or discharged agreeably to said relief laws...”⁷

Luke Matthews of Limestone County took advantage of the first section of the law by obtaining pre-emption (the right of a settler on public land to purchase it at a fixed price to the exclusion of any other applicant) over the land previously held by Thomas until July 4, 1831, contingent upon full payment in cash at the minimum price per acre. On November 30, 1830, he made the payment well within the

deadline at \$3.50 an acre, whereby he received a Final Certificate entitling him to a patent. The United States issued the patent, or official title to the quarter section, on August 1, 1831.⁸

Various sources, including the records of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), credit William Parham with building Cotton Hill for Luke Matthews around 1831. Sources state, moreover, that Parham was a master builder and craftsman who built several other homes in the vicinity, including the John Girault Gamble House. Parham had originally immigrated to Limestone County from Virginia around 1818. Matthews, also from that state, arrived a few years later.⁹

Born in Campbell County, Virginia on September 10, 1796 (his tombstone gives September 20 as his birth date) Luke Matthews, or “Mathews,” was the son of Luke Matthews, Sr., and his wife, Judith. He had seven siblings, namely, John (his twin), Samuel, Edward, Washington, Nathaniel, Nancy, and Susan. During the War of 1812, he served as a private with Captain William Cock’s Troop of Cavalry of the First Regiment of the Virginia Militia (Campbell County) between August 30 and September 20, 1814. Prior to coming to Alabama, he was employed as a clerk in Lynchburg, Virginia.¹⁰

Around 1822, Luke Matthews, his widowed mother and other family members left Virginia and moved to Limestone County. On March 8, 1826, he married Miss Judith Peete, daughter of Benjamin and Ann Blunt (“Blount”) Peete, and eventually had eight children, four of whom lived. The children, however, were left without a mother upon her death in January 1842.¹¹

On January 26, 1843, he married a second time, to Miss Lucy Ann Spotswood of nearby Huntsville. She was the daughter of Elliott and Sarah Dandridge Spotswood. In addition to her new role as stepmother, she would in the course of time become a mother to eight children of her own.¹²

In 1846, Matthews moved with his second wife to Madison County, where he had purchased a plantation near Elko Switch, a stop on the Memphis & Charleston rail

line southwest of Huntsville near the Limestone County line. Although he was now a resident of Madison County who would eventually move into Huntsville, Matthews continued to hold on to his Cotton Hill plantation, containing approximately 1,092.40 acres, until he sold it to John B. McClellan in 1873.¹³

Records reveal that in the years following his move from Limestone County, Matthews bought and sold various properties in the county as well as in Huntsville. One such property, purchased in 1868 for use as a residence, was the house and lot in town at 416 McClung Avenue. Perhaps due to age and declining health, he transferred title of this residence to four of his children (James, Betty, Lucy, and Susie) in 1874, the year his second wife died. Matthews continued, however, to live at the residence until his death on August 1, 1875.¹⁴

At the time of his death, Matthews was survived by nine children, including Mrs. Nancy (Mary) Jane Robertson of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Mrs. Maria D. Erskine of Huntsville; Mr. Benjamin L. Matthews of Marshall County, Alabama; Miss Elizabeth R. Matthews of Huntsville; Mr. James P. Matthews of Huntsville; Mr. William E. Matthews of Marshall County, Alabama; Mrs. Betty M. Watkins of Huntsville; Miss Lucy Matthews of Huntsville; and Miss Susie Matthews of Huntsville. He also left property consisting of a storehouse at Number 2 Commercial Row (the east side of what is now Harrison Brothers Hardware on South Side Square), a vacant lot on Locust Street, and the Sivly Place, located three miles from Huntsville.¹⁵

In regard to the later owners of Cotton Hill, John B. McClellan divided the property and sold the house with 212 acres in 1879 to Andrew J. Rowe, the son of Rev. James Rowe, who had founded the Monte Sano Female Academy in 1830. The homesite, further reduced to 100 acres after Rowe purchased it, eventually passed into the hands of his son, George, who conveyed the 100-acre tract to his brother-in-law, J.E. Hardiman, in 1930. In 1973, the Hardiman family sold the old plantation house with only 25 acres to William and Betty Summerfelt, a retired couple from Michigan. With intentions of restoring it, Cecil Armstrong purchased Cotton Hill with its remaining 25 acres from Mr. Summerfelt in 2001.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Thomas P. Abernethy, *The Frontier Period in Alabama, 1815-1828* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1965), pp. 64, 66-67; Murry N. Rothbard, *The Panic of 1819* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 1-58.
- 2 Abernethy, *Frontier Period*, pp. 64-68.
- 3 Certificate of Purchase Number 1790, Land Entry Case File Number 108, Record Group 49, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Tract Book Records, General Land Office, Springfield, Virginia.
- 4 Daniel Feller, *The Public Lands in Jacksonian Politics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 22; Power of Attorney, Land Entry Case File Number 108; Rothbard, *Panic of 1819*, pp. 1-58; Abernethy, *Frontier Period*, p. 69.
- 5 “An Act for the relief of the purchasers of public lands prior to the first day of July, eighteen hundred and twenty,” *Statutes at Large* 3, pp. 612-614 (1821); Feller, *Public Lands*, p. 35; Tract Book Records, General Land Office; Certificate of Further Credit, Land Entry Case File Number 108.
- 6 Interview with Lakin Boyd, Art and Architectural Historian, Huntsville, Alabama, 10 May 2005; Tract Book Records, General Land Office.
- 7 “An Act for the relief of the purchasers of public land, and for the suppression of fraudulent practices at the public sales of the lands of the United States,” *Statutes at Large* 4, pp. 390-391(1830).
- 8 Final Certificate, Land Entry Case File Number 108; Tract Book Records, General Land Office; “An Act for the relief of the purchasers of public land, and for the suppression of fraudulent practices at the public sales of the lands of the United States,” p. 391.

- 9 Records of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Chris Edwards and Faye Axford, *The Lure and Lore of Limestone County* (Tuscaloosa: Portals Press, 1978), pp. 182-184.
- 10 *Virginia Militia in the War of 1812*, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2000), p. 235; Pauline J. Gandrud, *Alabama Soldiers, Volume 19*, 1997, pp. 79-80. William L. Hopkins, *Campbell County, Virginia Wills and Inventories, 1782-1847* (Richmond, Virginia: By the Author, 1989), pp. 65, 72, and 76; *Campbell County Virginia Marriage Bonds, 1781-1854* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Genealogical Society of Utah, November 1937; reprint ed., Salem, Massachusetts: Higgonson Book Company, no date), pp. 71 and 154.
- 11 Deed Book I, pp. 93-94, Madison County, Alabama; Gandrud, *Alabama Soldiers*, pp. 80-81; Edwards and Axford, *Lure and Lore*, p. 183.
- 12 Gandrud, *Alabama Soldiers*, pp. 80-81.
- 13 Deed Book 15, p. 235, Limestone County, Alabama; Deed Book V, pp. 255-256, Madison County, Alabama; Edwards and Axford, *Lure and Lore*, p. 183.
- 14 Edwards and Axford, *Lure and Lore*, p.183; Deed Book JJ, p. 145, Madison County, Alabama; Deed Book ZZ, p. 466, Madison County, Alabama; Maple Hill Cemetery Records, Huntsville, Alabama.

“In the summer of 1820, the United States Public Land Office reported that of the \$21,173,489.87 which would be due the federal government at the end of the year from purchasers of public lands, \$11,220,685.55, or nearly 53 percent, was due from the single state of Alabama.”

Hugh C. Bailey, *John Williams Walker, A Study in the Political, Social and Cultural Life of the Old Southwest* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1964), p.151.

- 15 Probate Record Book 34, pp. 155-156, Madison County, Alabama; Probate Record Book 35, p. 308, Madison County, Alabama; Deed Book RR, pp. 382-384, Madison County, Alabama; Edwards and Axford, *Lure and Lore*, p. 183.
- 16 Deed Book 19, p. 21, Limestone County, Alabama; Records of the Tax Assessor's Office, Limestone County, Alabama; Edwards and Axford, *Lure and Lore*, pp. 183-184; Pat Jones, "Rowe Home," *Huntsville Times*, 23 June 1935, p. 3.



Above: Front façade of Oakendale, Luke's Madison County plantation house, prior to being moved. The house had previously been stuccoed and the front entry modified.

Below: Rear elevation revealing the clapboard siding and location of the kitchen wing, as it was being relocated on Redstone Arsenal in 1955. U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command's Historical Function, Secretary of the General Staff, Redstone Arsenal Historical Information Web site.