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Linda Bayer Allen

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Luke Matthews in Madison County

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Luke Matthews's impact on North Alabama was not confined to his magnificent Limestone County plantation house, Cotton Hill. He spent the end of his life in Madison County, where he maintained a second, even larger, cotton plantation until the capture of Huntsville during the Civil War when he moved into town. And his numerous descendants, many of whom married and stayed in the city, continued to play vital roles in Huntsville's history.

As early as 1845 while still residing at Cotton Hill, Luke began acquiring an existing cotton plantation and house in Madison County. His initial purchase consisted of 1,233 acres, for which he paid \$12,900. Five years later he made a second purchase of 1,062 acres adjoining the first, for which he paid \$21,519. A third tract, bought in 1856, completed the assemblage of his Madison County plantation, called Oakendale, which contained approximately 2,400 acres. Part of this land had previously been owned by James Manning, Sr., who built the large, magnificent house, now demolished, known as The Grove, once located on the west side of Gallatin Street atop the knoll west of Manning Drive in downtown Huntsville. Indications are that Manning also constructed a large house on his plantation prior to Luke's purchase of it in 1845. Luke's second wife, Lucy Ann Spottswood ("Spottswood"), was from Huntsville, and perhaps this explains his willingness to leave his Cotton Hill plantation and make Oakendale his home. At any rate, they resided at Oakendale for almost twenty years and raised eight children in addition to the four surviving from Luke's first marriage to Judith Peete.¹

Oakendale plantation was located on both sides of the Memphis & Charleston Railroad (M&C) tracks and along the west side of what is now Rideout Road, which leads to Gate 9 of Redstone Arsenal. In the 19th century, this area was known as Elko Switch, a stop on the M&C line where people could catch the train into Huntsville or load their cotton for shipping, although it had no physical facility.

Today Luke's plantation is occupied primarily by Redstone Arsenal and Thornton Research Park. The house itself was sited southwest of the intersection of the railroad tracks and Rideout Road. Family legend relates that General Ormsby Mitchell, on his way to occupy Huntsville, stopped at Oakendale, presumably to confiscate Luke's cotton. Luke must have suspected Mitchell's intent and had 120 bales destroyed. In return, an irate Mitchell forced Luke and Lucy to abandon Oakendale and move into Huntsville, where they resided at 528 Adams Street (which was owned by Luke's brother-in-law from his first marriage) during the years of the Civil War. Luke stayed on in Huntsville after the war, and in 1868 he purchased the house and four acres at 416 McClung Avenue, where he and Lucy Ann resided until their deaths, hers in 1874 and his in 1875.²

After the Civil War, Luke continued to acquire Madison County acreage up to the year he died at age 79. His second rural tract consisted of approximately 1,200 acres located at the northeast corner of Pulaski Pike and Bob Wade Lane, which has recently been developed by Toyota as a major manufacturing facility for the production of truck engines. In 1871 he assembled a third rural tract of 750 acres located roughly between South Memorial Parkway and Huntsville Spring Branch on what is now John Hunt Park and the Huntsville Municipal Golf Course.³

But not all his transactions involved rural land. In Huntsville he purchased at auction a one-third interest in a building on East Side Square (now known as the Schiffman building). Another commercial property owned by Luke was the east side of what is now Harrison Brothers Hardware, which he purchased in 1868 for \$6,000. The executors of his estate sold this property in 1881 for \$2,025. The Harrison brothers paid \$1,500 when they acquired it in 1902, following a fire that began in a nearby feed store and spread to adjoining buildings. The Harrisons had previously located their store in one of the damaged buildings. After the expansion, they hired a contractor to repair the two structures, connect them, construct a unifying façade, and build an addition on the rear of their original store. The result of this project was the Harrison Brothers Hardware business that remains in



416 McClung Avenue was owned and occupied by Luke Matthews from 1868 until his death in 1875; the yard contained four acres and extended down to Adams Street. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

operation today on South Side Square under the ownership of the Historic Huntsville Foundation.⁴

Luke may have bought Madison County land as an investment, but what seems more likely is that he recognized the precarious economic conditions that prevailed at the end of the war and was desirous of leaving his large brood of offspring land rich. The value of his own holdings must have been considerable before the war to be able to sustain the loss of more than 100 slaves in Madison County alone and still be able to purchase property in the down years of the late 1860s

and early 1870s. From 1845 to 1856 Luke bought only two properties, the Schiffman building and Oakendale; but between 1865 and 1875 he bought nine additional tracts, for which he paid a total of \$63,530. In addition, he retained ownership of both the Cotton Hill and Oakendale plantations until 1873.⁵

In March of 1873 he divided the majority of his Oakendale plantation among three of his sons by his second marriage: James Pleasant Matthews received 700 acres lying on the south side of the M&C tracks which included the “dwelling and houses”; Elliott Robertson Matthews was deeded 600 acres which were already in his possession; and John Nathaniel Matthews became the owner of 596 acres lying on the north side of the railroad on which he was residing. Confusion exists about John’s date of death, which his tombstone in Maple Hill Cemetery shows as 1871; however, his father deeded him land in 1873 and his last two children were born in 1872 and 1874. It appears that John actually died in 1874, especially in light of Luke’s final



527 Franklin Street was the home of Luke’s daughter Maria Dance Matthews and her husband Dr. Albert Russel Erskine; Maria sold the house in 1912. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library

family deed, which was made in May of 1875, conveying the remaining 462 acres of Oakendale to the five children of John.⁶

Luke's fourth surviving son by Lucy Ann received 833 acres where the Toyota plant now sits; and just months before his death Luke deeded his one-third interest in the Schiffman building to his daughter Maria Dance Matthews, who had married Dr. Albert Erskine. The Erskines lived in the house at 527 Franklin Street, which Luke had deeded to his daughter in 1874, nine years after buying it from her husband. Maria retained possession of this house until 1912 when she sold it to Laura Mae Powell.⁷

Having doled out the largest tracts of his land to his youngest sons, Luke left a peculiar will directing his executors to "distribute all my estate, real and personal of every description between my children according to the laws of said state which govern the distribution of real and personal estates of persons dying intestate...." However, he had kept a record of what he had previously given each child, and those gifts were to be considered as part of his estate in the distribution of his remaining assets. Both Luke and Lucy Ann Matthews were buried in Maple Hill Cemetery; Judith Peete, Luke's first wife, was probably interred on the Cotton Hill property, but her stone has not been found.⁸

When Luke moved to Madison County from Cotton Hill he was obviously accustomed to living in a large, stylish house. All available evidence indicates that the Oakendale house still stands, although in a different location and in a disastrously altered condition. When the U.S. Army condemned land for the establishment of what became Redstone Arsenal, there were two large plantation houses still extant. One, called the Chaney house after its then owner, was located on the Oakendale land and was believed to have been constructed circa 1835, which would have coincided with James Manning's ownership.

Although no 19th-century photographs of the house are known, pictures taken in 1955 when the house was relocated demonstrate that it was one of the county's

outstanding antebellum structures. Of a slightly unusual design for Madison County, it was a large, rectangular box under an overhanging hipped roof, having a symmetrical, three-bay façade and four huge rooms flanking a wide central hallway on each of two floors. Unlike most local antebellum houses of its size, it had one set of paired 9/9 windows on either side of the centered front entry and three sets across the second floor front, a fenestration that was repeated on the rear where the double-leaf doorway with transom was still visible. Also uncommon, although not unique in the county, are the double exterior brick chimneys on either side wall separated by two 9/9 windows per floor and flanked by a single 9/9 window at each outer edge. The wood-sided house had been stuccoed and the front entry altered, obscuring the design of the original entry and porch. The house was twice the size of Cotton Hill, and the Oakendale plantation had twice the acreage of the Cotton Hill plantation.⁹

Nellie McAnally, who lived in the house for several years during the 1920s, recalled in a 1989 interview that the land was

rented out to tenants who grew cotton and corn and bought their supplies from a commissary located in the old kitchen at the rear of the house. A drive lined with cedar trees led to the front door. The house was clapboard then, and had a small porch in front and a larger, screened porch in back. Each room had its own fireplace. There was no electricity and the only running water came from a tap in the kitchen. ‘There were big folding doors between [the front room] and the dining room at the back, so they could open them and make a ballroom. There was a fireplace over there, with columns all the way to the ceiling, and mirrors. It was beautiful. It makes you wonder why they would want to change it all. . . This was our kitchen. . . we had cabinets along here, and on this wall a door led out to our screened porch where we ate during the warm weather. There was a water faucet in here, but no sink. That was the only running water in the whole house, and there were no bathrooms.’¹⁰



421 McClung Avenue was the home of Luke's daughter Lucy and her husband D. Irvine White who built it in 1888; the house was occupied by family descendants until 1983. Photograph by Linda B. Allen

After the house was moved eleven miles across the arsenal in 1955 it was again “modernized.” The only fireplace remaining was faced in pink marble, and a second staircase in the back was removed, as were three of the massive chimneys and the stairs to the attic. Both floors were partitioned into bedrooms, baths, kitchens and closets. The exterior was faced with yellowish brick and a two-story, columned porch added. A 1982 historical buildings survey reported that “although this ante-bellum house represents pre-military land use, it retains little of its original integrity.

The house has been extensively renovated and moved from its original site, and therefore possesses little architectural or historical significance.” Following the move, the army renamed it the Goddard house.¹¹

The Matthews retained possession of the 700-acre tract containing the house from 1845 until 1892 when it was conveyed out of the family. By the time the army began acquiring land in 1941, the only Oakendale property still owned by the Matthews family appears to have been 308 acres owned by Luke’s granddaughter Carrie Tardy Matthews. It was taken by eminent domain.¹²

The deaths of Luke and Lucy Ann, however, did not end the Matthews family connections with Huntsville houses and development. Luke had deeded his town house at 416 McClung Avenue to four of his children, and two years after his death, the house was sold to Lucy B. Matthews, Luke’s daughter-in-law and the wife of James P. Matthews. It remained in her ownership until 1902 when her widowed hus-

band and daughter sold it to Alberta Taylor.¹³

Lucy, one of Luke's daughters, married David Irvine White who built the towered brick Victorian house at 421 McClung Avenue in 1888. Lucy lived there until her death in 1939, at which time it was willed to her son Addison White on the condition that he pay each of his four brothers \$2,000. This house is a slightly modified copy of a house in Richmond, Kentucky, built by Irvine White's uncle Shelby Irvine, who, according to family tradition, sent him a copy of the plans.¹⁴



601 Franklin Street was bought in 1875 by Henrietta Matthews, widow of Luke's son John Nathaniel. Two of her daughters inherited the house, which stayed in the family until 1944. Photograph by Linda B. Allen

John Nathaniel Matthews, Luke's son who died early, was survived by his widow Henrietta and five children. In 1875 Henrietta purchased 601 Franklin Street, although family lore relates that Luke (and possibly her father) put up the money so she and the grandchildren would have a home following the death of John. Henrietta willed the house to her two unmarried daughters; it stayed in the family until 1944 and provided a refuge for other family members through the years.¹⁵

One of Luke's brothers, Samuel Matthews, purchased the house at 413 McClung Avenue in 1857 and his family resided there during the war years, selling it in 1870. Samuel had also built a large frame mansion in southern Limestone County near the Tennessee River about 1840; it was relocated by TVA and then severely damaged in 1974 by a tornado.¹⁶

William Edwin Matthews, Luke's son who inherited the farm now occupied by Toyota, was unable to hold onto it, eventually losing it and moving to Gladstone

Place (the antebellum home of Governor Reuben Chapman) in 1889, where he operated Monte Sano Dairy and raised Lily Flagg, the 1892 champion Jersey butterfat producer.¹⁷

In the next generation, one of Luke's grandsons Benjamin and his wife Olive, along with their two sons Oliver Kennedy and Luke, Jr., constituted the entire board of directors of the Spring City Milling Company in 1921. The mill was located as early as the 1890s on the south side of West Clinton Avenue, where the downtown post office now stands. In 1926, Luke Jr., changed the business of the company from a grinding and feed mill to a large cotton warehouse complex, which he constructed on the same site and named it the Dixie Warehouse and Storage Company. At the same time the warehouse for the Spring City Milling Company on the north side of West Clinton became Matthews Brothers Feed Company. Luke, Jr., and his wife, Marjorie, operated the Dixie Warehouse, while Luke Jr.'s brother Oliver Kennedy Matthews and his son apparently took over the feed business, eventually converting it to a building supply company.¹⁸

The Matthews family also contributed to the development of Huntsville through



Dixie Warehouse and Storage Company on West Clinton Avenue was established in 1926 by Luke's great-grandson Luke, Jr. and his wife Marjorie; it ceased operation about 1977. Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library



In 1909 The Democrat reported that “Mr. and Mrs. E. R. Matthews have moved out to their home, Bide-A-Wee, at the foot of Monte Sano. It was the old home, Oak Place, built and owned by the late Mr. George Steele. The house and surrounding grove is one of the handsomest old residences in this vicinity.” Historic American Buildings Survey, ALA, 45-HUVI. V, 1-2

subdivisions of land that they had acquired. The College Hill Addition of 1928 platted lots south of Big Cove Road, east of California Street and along both sides of Lee Highway (Governors Drive). This development opened Westmoreland, Lytle, Gill, and Matthews streets, thereby creating a permanent marker of the Matthews family passage through Huntsville.¹⁹

In 1947, brothers Luke, Jr., and O.K. Matthews split a large tract of land lying on the north side of Big Cove Road just east of California Street. Luke Jr.’s lot consisted of 43 acres that he subdivided into 106 residential lots in 1950, which was the beginning of a new neighborhood that assumed the name of Luke Jr.’s subdivision: Blossomwood. Luke, Jr., and Marjorie lived on the north side of Big Cove Road for



*Elliott R. Matthews III (1920-2004)
great-grandson of Luke Matthews, in 2001.
Courtesy Johnny Crutcher*

years in a lovely stone bungalow. Luke, Jr., died in 1956 and his son Ben continued operation of Dixie Warehouse and Storage until its close, about 1977.²⁰

O.K. and Marie Matthews subdivided their 40-acre parcel on the east side of Blossomwood subdivision in 1955 as Windy Hill, which consisted of eleven lots along the north side of Big Cove Road, and, in 1956 added Windy Hill, Second Addition, containing 46 lots lying south of Blossomwood School along the new streets of Woodmont, Olive and East Olive.²¹

Another of Luke's grandsons, Elliott Matthews, Jr., married Margaret Burns, who in 1908 had bought Oak Place, the home built by architect George Steele (circa 1840) on Maysville Road. The following year she deeded the house and surrounding 169 acres to her new husband, but in 1919 they lost the property when they were unable to make the mortgage payments. From then on the family lived in rental quarters, including many of the houses along Franklin Street and McClung Avenue where they had numerous relatives. Elliott Matthews III related that when his mother purchased Oak Place it had been vacant for years and hay was being stored in the downstairs. The Matthewses called the house Bide-A-Wee, a name that recurs on the subdivision street south of it that was not platted until 1956.²²

Margaret and Elliott Matthews, Jr., had six children, but Elliott III was the one who made the most recent and perhaps most significant contribution to the city by donating to The Land Trust of Huntsville and North Alabama a life estate in his 130-acre farm of pasture and woodland in Limestone County. Although Elliott was born in Huntsville and lived here for much of his life—even working in the City of Huntsville finance department for 14 years—his love was the land, and he became depressed when he saw it being destroyed by rampant development. Elliott believed that Alabama had been good to him and he wanted to repay it by preserving his piece of land for the enjoyment of future generations. Elliott Robertson Matthews III died in January 2004 at age 83, having left a living legacy of the Matthews family for all the families in North Alabama.

Postscript

This abbreviated narrative of the Matthews family and its impact on Madison and Limestone counties would not have been possible without the various writings and interviews left by Elliott R. Matthews III, who treasured his family's history and tried to keep alive its legacy by retelling the stories heard in his youth in Huntsville and through dedicated research into the lives and times of his ancestors. Especially helpful was the interview with Elliott taped by The Land Trust of Huntsville and North Alabama in June 2002. Special thanks also go to other Matthews descendants who assisted our research by generously sharing family stories, genealogies, and photographs.

Notes

- 1 Deed Book V, p.255, Deed Book Y, p.197; Deed Book AA, p.420, Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Deed Book JJ, p.145, Madison County, Alabama.
- 3 Deed Book OO, p.200; Deed Book RR, p.382, Madison County, Alabama.
- 4 Deed Book X, p.513; Deed Book JJ, p.253; Deed Book FFF, p.228; Deed Book 90, p.169; Deed Book 637, p.860, Madison County, Alabama.
- 5 1856 Madison County Tax Assessments.
- 6 Deed Book VV, p.504; Deed Book VV, p.506; Deed Book VV, p.507; Deed Book ZZ, p.495, Madison County, Alabama.
- 7 Deed Book ZZ, p.504; Deed Book ZZ, p.565; Deed Book EE, p.36; Deed Book XX, p.173, Deed Book 105, p.277, Madison County, Alabama.
- 8 Will Book 1, p.544, Madison County, Alabama.
- 9 www.redstone.army.mil/history/goddard/welcome.html.
- 10 Pam Rogers, *Goddard House serves as reminder of pre-Army days... Redstone Rocket*, 25 October 1989, pp.10-11.

- 11 www.redstone.army.mil/history/goddard/welcome.html.
- 12 Plat Book 1, p.176, Madison County, Alabama.
- 13 Deed Book ZZ, p.466; Deed Book BBB, p.273; Deed Book 90, p.192, Madison County, Alabama.
- 14 Deed Book XXX, p.213; Will Book 5, p.516, Madison County, Alabama.
- 15 Deed Book YY, p.483; Will Book 4, p.576; Deed Book 166, p.375, Madison County, Alabama.
- 16 Deed Book BB, p.98; Deed Book PP, p.612, Madison County, Alabama; Chris Edwards and Faye Axford, *The Lure and Lore of Limestone County* (Tuscaloosa: Portals Press, 1978), pp.168-169.
- 17 Elizabeth Humes Chapman, *Changing Huntsville, 1890-1899* (Huntsville: Historic Huntsville Foundation, 1989), pp.63-65.
- 18 Corporation Book 2, p.473, Madison County, Alabama; Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps 1913, 1921 and 1928; Huntsville, Alabama, City Directories 1931-1932 and 1940.
- 19 Plat Book 1, p.91, Madison County, Alabama.
- 20 Plat Book 1, p.209 and p.225, Madison County, Alabama.
- 21 Plat Book 1, p.264 and p.323, Madison County, Alabama.
- 22 Plat Book 1, p.318, Madison County, Alabama.



Luke Matthews descendants at Cotton Hill, June 2005. Bottom: Jim Shackelford, Dr. Harry Porter, Jr., Eleanor Streit, Ben Matthews IV; Middle: Dr. John Matthews Ennis, Cissie Chrisco; Top: Michelle, Troy and Ross Shackelford.



Dr. Harry Porter, Jr., Eleanor Streit, and Cissie Chrisco pose with a faux Lily Flagg at Gladstone Place, the dairy where Lily Flagg was raised in 1892. Photographs by Ralph Allen.