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19th Century Dependencies: An Overview

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19th-Century Dependencies



The McCrary-Thomas property in Madison County exhibits one of the more intact rural landscapes standing today. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006

An Overview

The antebellum southern house was more than just a house, it was a whole assemblage of structures, scattered about the yard. The number, density, and variety of structures depended on the size of the yard, the wealth of the owner, and the number of activities undertaken on the property. The poorest families may have had just one or two small sheds in addition to the house, but at the other end were the major cotton plantations, a few of which had as many as a hundred structures, when all the workshops, sheds, and slave houses were counted. It was very much an agricultural world, and the preference was to have a separate structure for each activity, at least when circumstances permitted. Visitors to the South often commented on the clutter of structures observed on many homesteads; the preeminent architect Benjamin H. Latrobe even wrote that “outbuildings seemed to cluster around southern houses ‘as a litter of pigs their mother.’”¹

The first half of the 19th century is notable as being the last period in the United States during which life continued much as it had over preceding centuries, that is, as a sparsely settled, rural, handcraft, pedestrian society. In 1800 the young country had 5.3 million people of which almost 95 percent lived in rural areas and made a living by farming. Only New York and Philadelphia could boast of having more

than 25,000 residents; the country remained largely a vast wilderness broken occasionally by scattered villages or hamlets and by isolated farms.

This required the family to be the primary social and labor unit, and it was essentially self-sufficient, raising and producing its own food, clothing and shelter. Transportation was by foot or horse unless a navigable waterway was convenient. Communication was by letter or newspaper, both of which were dependent on the inadequate transportation systems; roads, where they existed at all, were dirt trails and impassible much of the year. As a result, contact with others was restricted and news could take weeks or months to be transmitted. The church formed the center of what community life there was, being the focus of gatherings for baptisms, funerals, worship, and socials. In small towns and villages, the bleakness of this existence could be relieved somewhat by the availability of a few staple consumer goods and by the presence of neighbors.

In the antebellum South, the relatively benign climate, the considerable dearth of infrastructure and technology, and the distinctive social division into free whites and black slaves merged to create a tradition of relegating household chores to the yard and to a variety of dependent structures. This system was made workable by the presence of one or many slaves who were primarily responsible for completing the chores under the supervision of an overseer or owner. As a result, convenience to and ease of work was not a prime consideration.

Obviously, a property owner's financial status and taste dictated the size and finish of his house and the extent of his land; the smaller his house lot, the fewer out-buildings there could be or the more they would need to be combined. In 1855, Huntsvillian George Yuckley advertised his three-room house for sale, which included a separate kitchen, negro house, smoke house, dairy, stable, and well, all located on one acre.² Presumably this was Mr. Yuckley's sole residence as he had all the requisite dependencies on his house lot. But many Huntsville residents also owned one or more plantations in Madison and neighboring counties. Even though these wealthy landowners had the largest town houses, they may have had fewer

dependencies as much of the food production and processing could be conducted at their country holdings where farming was the predominant activity. A traveling thespian, who spent several weeks performing in Huntsville, observed that the “wealthiest and best informed classes...resided not generally within the town limits, but from two to five miles around in the adjacent country...”³ In fact, many of the houses we now consider part of downtown were built outside the municipal limits, which extended only one-half mile from the center of the Courthouse Square until 1866.

A local advertisement in 1844, offering for sale the house at 621 Franklin Street, illustrates how extensive the premises of a town house could be:

a two-story brick tenement of nine rooms, a spacious two-story kitchen attached, a brick stable with eight stalls, carriage house and cow shed,



The house at 621 Franklin Street began in the 1820s as two rooms and a stair hall and was expanded during the later Federal period to nine rooms. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006

a brick smoke house and dairy, a well constructed ice house, with out houses for servants, a well of excellent water and a fine garden, with a choice variety of fruit trees and shrubbery, a meadow and other small lots, conveniently situated and embracing between eight and nine acres. ⁴

Even an exceptionally large and luxurious house such as this would have been heated by fireplaces and lit by candles or crude oil lamps. Water would have been carried from a well or hydrant in the yard and carried out again after being used, and the only refrigeration was that provided by the dairy or an ice house, which had to be filled each winter with blocks of ice cut from frozen ponds. There would have been no window or door screens to keep out flies and mosquitoes and no air conditioning other than what could be obtained by natural ventilation. Clothes, blankets, and linens were hand sewn of homespun fabric, laundry was washed with lye soap and pressed using sad irons that had to be reheated every few minutes at an open fire. Meat and poultry had to be raised or caught, killed, and cleaned before it could be cooked in the kitchen fireplace. Some meats and fish could be purchased at the city market house as could fruits and vegetables in season, but mostly they were home grown. Food not only had to be prepared for each day's meals but also preserved by smoking, salting, drying, or pickling for future use. A popular method of preserving corn was to convert it into corn whiskey, otherwise known as bourbon. A few staples could be purchased from the local grocer, but even these were limited to items such as coffee and tea, loaf sugar, spices, mackerel, bacon, flour, rice, salt, and, oddly, oysters.

The cluster of accessory structures necessary to accommodate all the chores required by daily life can be roughly classified into four categories: structures devoted to food storage and preparation; stables and barns for livestock and carriages; living quarters for slaves/servants; and that collection of small, but indispensable, structures—the well house or hydrant, the woodshed, and the necessary house, more commonly referred to today as the outhouse or privy.

The kitchen was the most prevalent dependency, often placed perpendicular to the



The house at 518 Adams Street is a notable example illustrating how the kitchen and servants' quarters were frequently attached to the main house. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006

rear of the main house to create an ell, and although these two structures typically were not physically joined until late in the century, they were frequently connected by a covered passageway. The rationale for moving the kitchen out of the house was based on preventing kitchen fires from damaging the dwelling; on keeping excess heat and vermin, such as flies and mice, from the house; and on a perceived societal need to express in physical form the relative relationship between owner and slave. The kitchen consisted of one room with a large fireplace where food was cooked, while a bake oven might be built into one side or located in the yard. More rarely, the kitchen was located in a basement room with an adjoining dining room.

It was common practice to combine the kitchen with quarters for the cook and house slaves; one or more rooms were frequently provided beside the kitchen or on a second floor above it. A real estate ad of 1834 for a local dwelling states that the property contains a brick smokehouse and a kitchen with two lodging rooms for servants.⁵ It was not uncommon for an owner to have the kitchen dependency built first so the family could live in it while the big house was under construction.

Surviving kitchen-and-quarters in Huntsville are predominantly of brick, one- or two-story with galleries along the front of each floor, and side gabled roofs that extend over the galleries. The quarters were commonly one room deep with each room having access to the gallery. A rare extant example of a frame kitchen-and-quarters structure stands behind Quietdale. Our under-

standing of these particular dependencies may be skewed by the fact that larger examples tend to survive better than smaller ones, and that brick outlasts wood. Because the surviving structures were usually of brick, substantial, and close to the house, many have been connected to the main house and converted to bedrooms, offices, and other contemporary uses, while a new, modern kitchen was constructed inside the dwelling.

Free-standing slave quarters took multiple forms; some were brick, a few clapboard, and many were log or plank structures. In town they often combined two or more rooms—one per family—in each structure with a porch across the front. Surviving examples of such dependencies are rare in town.

A smokehouse was also built adjacent to the house as it provided the most practical method of preserving meat, primarily pork, after slaughter. The aim was to expose hunks of meat, suspended from joists, to the smoke of a smoldering fire that was kept going in a central pit. To accomplish this, the house had to be relatively



In 1934, the 518 Adams house was documented in drawings and photographs by HABS. The two-story section on the far left provided living spaces for house slaves, the adjacent section without a balcony but with the largest chimney would have been the kitchen, and the taller two-story section on the right provided access to the house and dining room. Photograph by W. N. Manning for HABS, 1934



The importance of the smokehouse can be inferred by its proximity to the rear of the main house. This brick example from New Market illustrates a common local design with a vertical-plank door, diamond-patterned vents on each wall, and front gable roof. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

airtight so there were no windows and only one door. To keep the fire going and the smoke moving slowly past the meat without overheating it, small vents were installed in brick structures near the eaves; wooden smokehouses usually relied on the natural leakage between weatherboards for ventilation. Meat usually was cured in the smokehouse prior to smoking by placing it in salt in hollowed-out log troughs. Smokehouses were built in a variety of forms, including one- and two-story, brick or frame, with hipped or gabled roofs. Because the smokehouse contained the owner's yearly supply of meat, the keys to it were closely guarded. Today, most extant smokehouses appear to be used for storage.

Other food preservation facilities included cellars—small structures constructed partially underground without windows—where root crops, squashes, and canned

goods could be stored in an environment designed to remain cool and dark with low humidity and good air circulation. Other methods of keeping food fresh were dairies, also called milk houses, and springhouses. A dairy held cheese and butter and kept milk cool until the cream separated and could be churned to butter. Dairies were small, often square, structures with small latticed or louvered openings and deep sheltering eaves. Ideally they should be partially below grade and the walls well insulated. A similar structure was a springhouse



This extant smokehouse behind the house at 609 Adams was constructed in the 1870s, which may account for its reduced proportions. Although the main house was of frame construction, the smokehouse was brick and topped with a pyramidal roof and finial. Photograph by Doug Brewster, 2004

built over a spring of fresh, cool water or a running stream, which kept the interior cool; while springhouses were used in rural Alabama, they apparently were less common in Huntsville as they required the presence of an active spring or stream on the property.

A third related structure which Huntsville's wealthy incorporated was the ice house. Blocks of ice would be cut from frozen ponds in the winter and stacked in below grade or well-insulated structures, each block generously packed on all sides with sawdust, wood shavings, straw, or a similar material. Leaving the door open for several days prior to loading would allow the ground beneath the ice house to



This well house on Jeff Road was located just feet from the kitchen; its square shape, pyramidal roof and latticed walls are characteristic of many such dependencies. It and the house were burned in 2003. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2003

freeze, which prolonged its effectiveness. Properly installed, ice would still be available well into the summer months. The manufacture of ice and the mechanization of refrigeration in the second half of the 19th century slowly decreased reliance on the ice house, dairy, and springhouse, and they gradually disappeared from the urban landscape.

Food preparation was also dependent on the presence of a well-filled woodshed to provide fuel, not only for the kitchen fire, but to heat the dwelling in winter before coal became a readily available consumer product and the fuel of choice. The woodshed could be as simple as a gable roof supported on unmilled cedar posts to protect the firewood from precipitation.

Another essential structure was a shelter for the source of water. Huntsville had an early water system which placed hydrants in yards for private use or in each block for communal use. An 1829 notice in the *Southern Advocate* illustrates an early water problem.

Persons having Hydrants are requested not to permit the water from them to waste; and such as have milk houses supplied with water from them, are requested to dispense with their use for the present at least, as in consequence of the scarcity of water in the Spring and the immense and useless waste from Hydrants, many families are at present deprived of the use of theirs. Such as give this request their immediate attention, will confer a favour on me, and at the same time be doing an act of justice to others— Those persons who do not, may expect to have their hydrants plugged up without further notice. S. D. MORGAN ⁶

People who could afford the expense had a private well dug on their house lot, which was sometimes supplied with a pump. The well opening usually was surrounded by a three-foot-high wall, either square or round, to prevent people and animals from falling in. A roof, frequently pyramidal, was placed over the well and walls would be left open or filled with lattice. If the well had a pump, it might be located inside the kitchen structure or on a porch; but until the installation of city sewers, all used water still had to be carried back outside for disposal. Surviving well structures today tend to accommodate overflow possessions if they are even partially enclosed.

Bathing was not as popular then as now; without heated running water and drains, many people just sponged off in their rooms. A few of the wealthier citizens had a private bath-house, probably similar to the one near Cahaba that was described as being “an immense cemented pool through which flowed a constant and continuous stream of gushing water from the artesian well”;⁷ but the majority of residents did without or patronized the public bath which opened in 1825.



This Jackson County privy, still standing but abandoned, illustrates a primitive example of a necessary house; a sloped roof to keep off rain, one small window for ventilation, and an opening in the bottom of the rear wall to facilitate cleanout. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2005

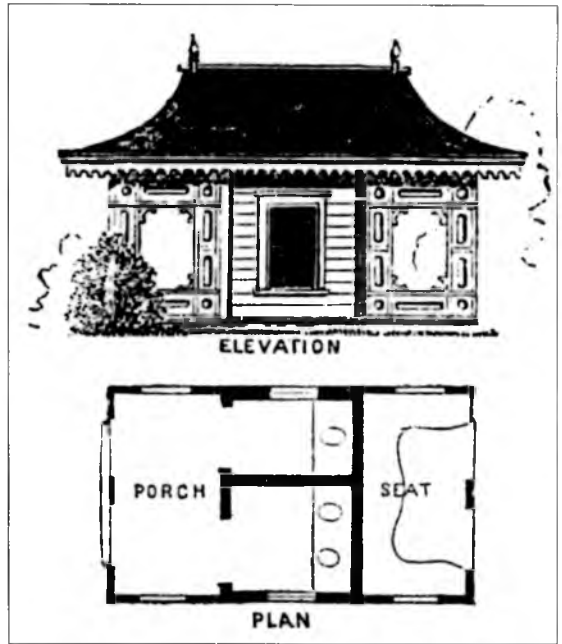
Huntsville Bath—The Subscriber respectfully informs his customers and the public generally that the BATH is in operation. He hopes from unwearyed diligence to give general satisfaction to those who may favour him with their calls...For bathing during this season, to be paid in advance – \$5.00; single bath, warm – 25¢; single bath, cold – 12 1/2¢; single shower – 12 1/2¢. Benjn. W. Hall. ⁸

Service dependencies not related to food were stables for horses, perhaps a barn or cow pen (to lock her up at night as livestock was permitted to run loose during the day, even in town), a carriage house, and some equipment or storage sheds. While food processing facilities were normally convenient to the main house, structures

connected with animals and transportation were placed to the rear of the lot. Few barns and stables in town have survived, partly because they were allowed to fall into disrepair when the auto nudged aside the horse or because their location at the far end of the lot made them prime sites for infill housing in the latter part of the century.

Seldom mentioned in real estate ads of the 19th century was the privy, delicately referred to as the necessary house and by numerous other euphemisms. It was small and could be exceedingly primitive or con-

structed of brick and detailed to match the big house. It could have single or multiple holes; or there could be several facilities designated for separate populations, such as women and children, men, and servants. The most important issue was placement of the privy; in the hot summer, its odoriferous aspect made it desirable to locate as far as possible from the living areas. During the cold winter months, convenience to the house was preferable. In an age that did not understand the connection between sanitation and health, the siting of the privy could be dangerous if its contents filtered into the water supply or were used to fertilize the family's vegetable garden.



Privies could be quite sophisticated as Calvert Vaux, the renowned 19th-century architect, demonstrated in 1864 with this "Design for an Outbuilding," which incorporated porches at either end in addition to inside and outside seating. Villas & Cottages reprinted by Dover Publications, 1970, page 174

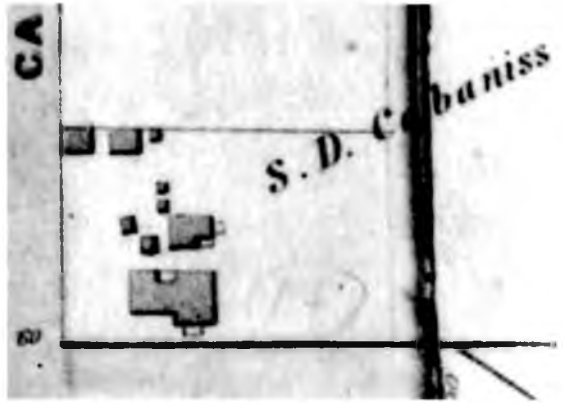
Cleaning the privy pit was simplified if the structure was easily moved; some had a hinged lower section on the rear wall to facilitate access for emptying, which had to be done regularly. Cities had scavengers who, for a fee, traveled the alleys at night removing and disposing of the privy contents, leading to the term night soil. In the later 19th century, the process could be completed using a hose and pump rather than a shovel. By the late 1890s, the Huntsville City Council became serious about extending both water and sewer lines throughout the city, which greatly enhanced daily life and community health. By 1924, the city code required that all places of residence and employment be provided with a sanitary water closet and that it be connected to a public sewer main. It was a misdemeanor to use a privy not fitted with a catch receptacle, and where no sewer service was available, the owner was billed by the city for weekly cleaning and disinfecting of such receptacle. The code



The Cabaniss house today located at the northeast corner of Randolph Avenue and Calhoun Street. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006

then went into two pages of exacting specifications for construction of a sanitary privy.

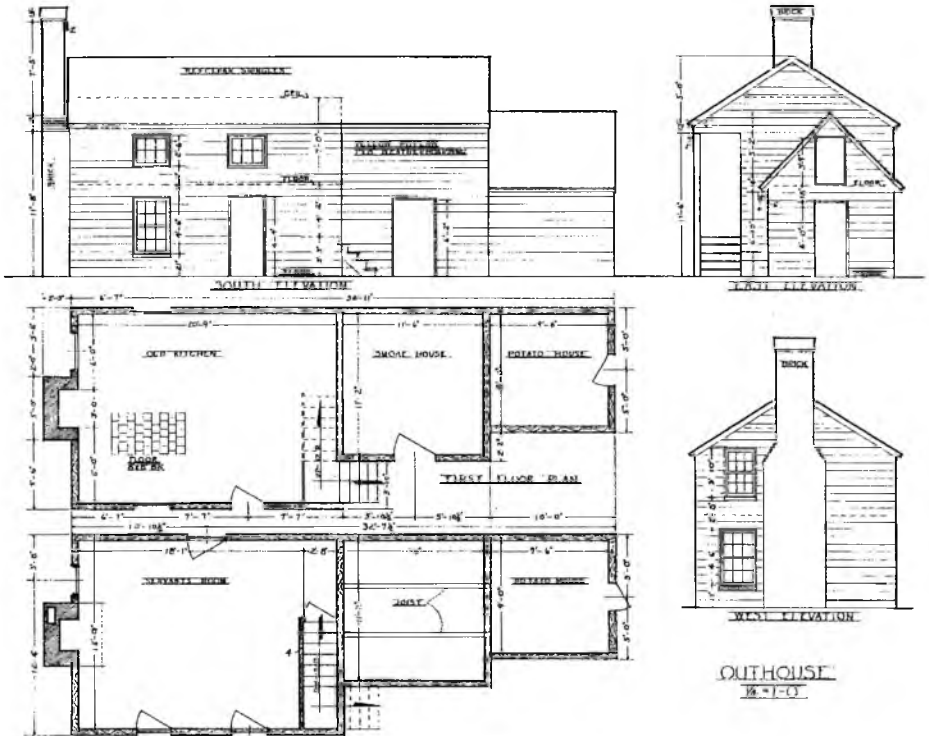
The Cabaniss house at 603 Randolph Avenue illustrates how multiple accessory structures could be combined on a town lot. The 1861 Hartley & Drayton map and the 1913 Sanborn insurance map of Huntsville reveal that the



The 1861 Hartley & Drayton map of Huntsville shows the number and arrangement of dependencies in the rear yard of the Cabaniss property.

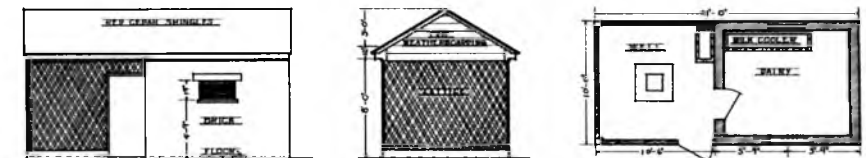
rear yard contained one large structure immediately behind the house and four small ones scattered to its side and rear, while two larger buildings were placed along the rear property line, one fronting on Calhoun Street, which likely would have been a stable, and the other, some type of workshop or storage space. By 1935 when the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) documented this property, the only dependencies extant were the two closest to the main house.

The larger of the remaining dependencies was a two-story frame building, sited parallel with the house, containing on the ground level a kitchen (approximately 15 feet by 20 feet) with a brick floor, three 6/6 windows, and an exterior door. Connected to the kitchen, but smaller and not accessible from it, was the smokehouse, which had no windows and was open for its full two-story height with two joists midway up to hold the meat for smoking. On the one-story end of this complex was an even smaller room, also lacking windows, labeled the potato house. The second floor above the kitchen was a single room of equal size, accessible from a side-entry stairwell through the kitchen; this would have provided housing for the cook and possibly the house servants. A fireplace and four windows provided heat



The primary Cabaniss dependency combined the kitchen, servants' quarters, smokehouse, and potato house. Demolished. HABS drawing by B. F. Coles, 1935

in winter and cross ventilation in summer to these quarters. The whole complex had yellow poplar weatherboarding, red cedar roof shingles, and a massive brick chimney. From the kitchen, servants would have carried prepared food into the



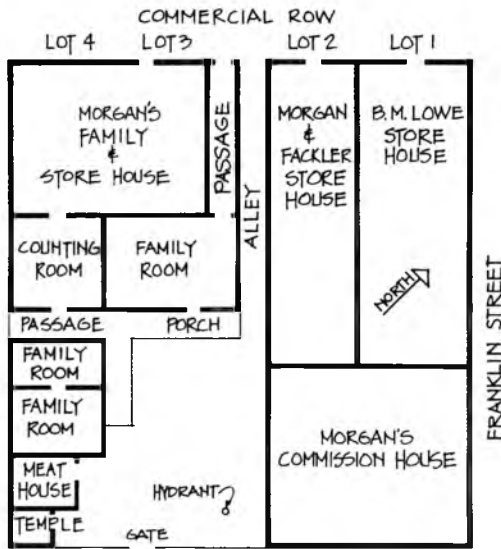
HABS drawing of the combined well house and dairy behind the Cabaniss house. Demolished. Drawing by B. F. Coles, 1935



A rear view of the Cabaniss outbuildings as they appeared in 1935. The small brick structure on the right contained the dairy and well house; the larger two-story frame structure was the kitchen, slave quarters, and smokehouse. Demolished. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

basement of the main house and up to the dining room. The Cabaniss house had a second kitchen and dining room in the basement; the HABS drawings identify the detached kitchen as the old kitchen, but it may be that it was the summer kitchen, and the basement kitchen and dining room were used in the winter.

The other surviving outbuilding, which sat perpendicular to the larger one, was a combination well house and dairy of one story, the two parts distinguished by differing construction materials. The well house was of frame construction with three latticed walls; in one corner was a rectangular stone trough, used to cool perishable foods. The dairy, which shared the cedar-shingled roof, had brick walls on all sides with access only from the well house. Two 19-inch-tall louvered openings on opposite walls provided ventilation. A second larger trough located on the north wall



The layout of Luther Morgan's combined store and home located on South Side Square prior to 1835 when it was demolished. Harrison Brothers Hardware now occupies this property. Redrawn by Ralph Allen, 2006

of the dairy was used to keep milk and other dairy products chilled.⁹

Not all houses in town had a lot spacious enough for even this compact arrangement. Some people lived on the Courthouse Square in structures that combined a store with a dwelling either behind or above it. An ad from 1847 offered for rent a dwelling house and store rooms on the corner of the Public Square containing ten or twelve rooms in the dwelling part of the house and in the yard a well of excellent water with necessary outhouses, stables, cow yards, etc.,¹⁰ demonstrating that even in the very center of town, life maintained a distinctly rural atmosphere. A

second example, on South Side Square (then known as Commercial Row), had a store fronting the sidewalk and behind it a counting room and a family room, the latter accessed by a separate passageway from the Square. These two rooms had a porch across the rear that connected to two smaller family rooms, followed by a meat house, and ending with a "temple" on the rear lot line. The back yard was fenced and contained a hydrant, but no mention was made of the necessary house.¹¹

Significant houses located away from town were usually the center of a large agricultural operation. These houses would need the same facilities as a town house, to which would be added a variety of farm-related structures, including various animal pens or houses, numerous barns, multiple storage sheds, gin houses and press, weaving houses, corn mill and crib, perhaps a still or two, rows of slave cabins for field hands, and workshops for use by the coopers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and



*As the sun sets on it, this barely standing Huntsville privy marks the passing of an era.
Photograph by Linda Allen, 2000*

other mechanics employed in maintaining the farming operation. Other structures that might be included on large plantations were churches and infirmaries.

The formal yards of both city and plantation houses (as opposed to the work yards adjacent to the dependencies) might be adorned with flower and vegetable gardens and fruit orchards. The custom then was to fence animals out, rather than in as is the custom today, so the house and its outbuildings were enclosed by wooden fences or, more rarely, brick walls. Also commonly found on plantation grounds was the family cemetery, but these graves often have been removed or simply lost when the tombstones were vandalized.

Today, little remains of these service dependencies. They were commonly constructed in the most economical manner and of the cheapest materials to serve a specific need; when electricity, plumbing, heating and cooking stoves, and mail-order catalogs became widely available, the need for this clutter of accessory buildings vanished, as did they.

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House, The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 77.
- 2 *Southern Advocate*, 21 October 1855.
- 3 Lucille Griffith, *Alabama, A Documentary History to 1900* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 315.
- 4 *Democrat*, 11 December 1844.
- 5 *Southern Advocate*, 4 November 1834.
- 6 *Southern Advocate*, 16 October 1829.
- 7 Griffith, 294.
- 8 *Southern Advocate*, 6 May 1825.
- 9 Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Cabaniss House, Survey No. ALA-431, May 1935.
- 10 *Southern Advocate*, 18 December 1847.
- 11 Chancery Court Record v. K, June Term, 1841, Madison County, Alabama, 561.