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Thomas Bibb: Town and Country

Thomas Bibb (1782-1839) acquired great wealth as a planter in Huntsville and Limestone County. A distinguished politician, he was a representative at the state constitutional convention of 1819 and was elected president of the senate when Alabama became a state. In this capacity he became the state's second



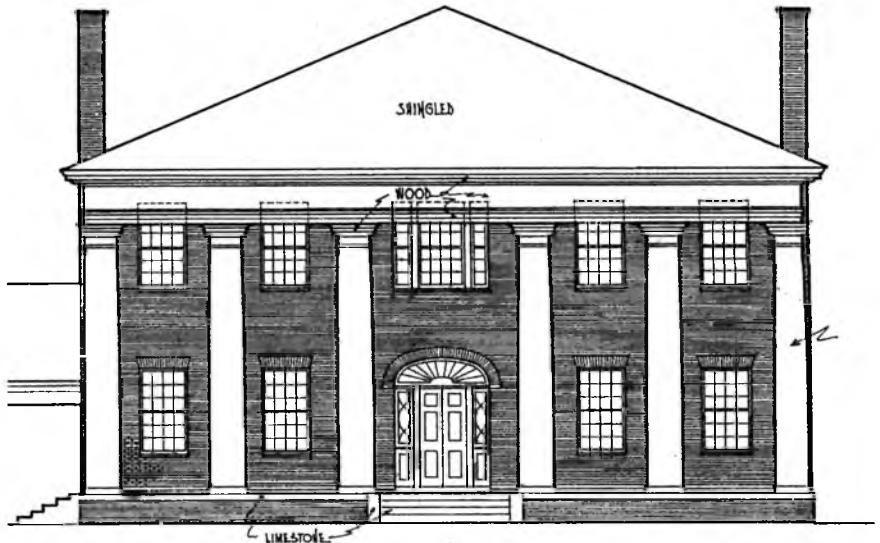
The Bibb-Hutchens house at 300 Williams Avenue as photographed in 1934 by W. N. Manning of the HABS team

governor when his brother, William Wyatt Bibb, died in office. By the time of Thomas Bibb's death, he owned three plantations in southern Louisiana and four city lots in New Orleans, as well as property in Arkansas and Mississippi. ¹ Befitting his planter status, he built two elegant houses for his family: his Huntsville residence at 300 Williams Avenue (the Bibb-Hutchens House) and his plantation home, Belle Mina (Belmina), on Mooresville Road in Limestone County.

Both structures were built in the late 1820s and mid-1830s in the newly fashionable Greek Revival style. Architectural historian Robert Gamble called Belle Mina "one of (the) earliest and most sophisticated of Alabama plantation mansions." ² Perhaps this was the Greek prototype for North Alabama. Certainly by the time the Williams Avenue home was built in the mid-1830s, Bibb had a deeper understanding of the style and produced a stately and even more sophisticated Greek residence. No architect or builder is associated with either building; perhaps they were patterned after homes of Bibb's colleagues or those he saw on his travels. The growing

popularity of the Greek style was often disseminated through both the rural and urban South by the builder's handbooks, a compendium of various architectural elements, such as doors or staircases, from which a planter could design his own residence, often to be built by his slaves.³ Gamble writes that the Huntsville house's façade "was skillfully adapted, in its entirety, from the pages of Chester Hills' *The Builder's Guide*, published in Hartford, Connecticut in 1834."⁴ In any case, both houses are brick with the same heavy massing, although stylistic differences occur in the colonnades. However, the outbuildings for each house reveal the diversity between the urban and plantation setting.

For unknown reasons, in 1835-36 Bibb moved to Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, and advertised both homes for sale in the *Southern Advocate*. For the Williams Avenue property, the 1836 listing was simple enough: "FOR SALE. THE subscriber offers



The front façade of Belle Mina facing Mooresville Road as delineated in 1934 by L. A. Wingo of the HABS team

for sale his New Splendid Family RESIDENCE, (now nearly finished,) on Williams street. Terms, liberal.”⁵ In contrast, the necessity for self-sufficiency in the rural environment is clear.

BELMINA FOR SALE. THIS valuable estate, situate in Limestone County, on the road leading from Huntsville to Decatur, 21 miles from the former, and 7 from the latter, and immediately adjoining the village of Mooresville is now offered for sale. The whole tract, (including the Jackson place lately offered for sale separately,) contains 3,190 acres, and will be sold entire, or divided, as may best suit purchasers. The Jackson place lying immediately on the North, containing 1,120 acres, and a tract containing 360 acres, lying on the South, and adjoining the village of Mooresville, both in a compact form, will be sold separately. This will leave attached to the Belmina tract, 1705 acres, with the Mansion House, a large and elegant two story brick building, with 12 or 14 rooms, and a 15 foot passage thro’ the centre, and a colonade the whole length of the front, a kitchen and the requisite accommodations for servants, smoke house, ice house, &c., all except the latter, of brick, and conveniently arranged. Also, a large brick stable and carriage house, and the yard and garden substantially enclosed with a brick wall full six feet in height. There is also upon the premises a Mill with two pair of stones, one for wheat; a Saw Mill, Cotton Gin and Press, all propelled by water. These are situated on Limestone Creek, a fine stream which waters the Eastern portion of the tract. An orchard of Peaches, Apples and other choice fruits. The negro quarters located upon the bank of the creek about a mile from the Mansion House, sufficient for the accommodation of 150 to 200 slaves, are of the most comfortable description, each with a brick chimney and plank floor. There are several Cotton Houses situated at convenient distances from each other. The Mansion House and all the improvements attached are new and in perfect repair, the whole having been erected within the last 7 years.

The place has been uniformly healthy, and when the quality of the soil, and the comfortable, if not elegant style of the improvements, are taken into view, may certainly be considered one of the most desirable in North Alabama. Should the purchaser prefer it, from 30 to 40 slaves will be sold with the land. There are about 2000 acres of cleared land; the cleared land on the tract, as proposed to be sold separately, bearing, perhaps, about an equal proportion to the quantity cleared in the entire tract. The whole is well enclosed—a part with cedar posts and plank.

The Jackson place has upon it an Overseers house, a new Gin and Gin house, and good quarters for 60 or 80 slaves. This place as well as the Belmina tract, is watered by Limestone which affords an abundant supply of stock water and some fine Grass land. ⁶



The kitchen wing, as seen in this 1934 HABS photograph, extends to the side of the main house and was originally connected to it by a covered passage, now enclosed. This wing survives today but has been renovated for contemporary use while retaining the cooking fireplaces and the full-length gallery along the front, the roof of which is supported on brick columns that echo on a reduced scale the dominant columns of the main house. The kitchen structure was of solid brick construction and had limestone lintels over the doors and windows to further accent its importance and its connection with the big house. Photograph by W. N. Manning



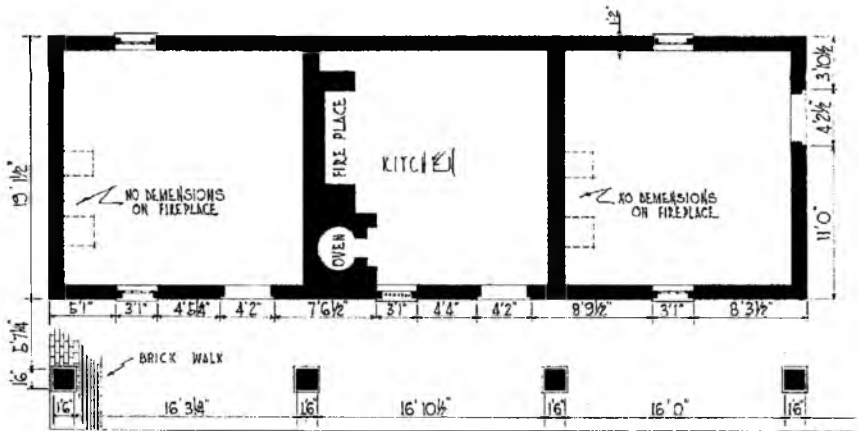
In contrast to the kitchen/servants' wing, the minor accessory structures were of much cruder construction. The two surviving structures, a well house and a storage building (in addition to one slave cabin, much altered), are simply built of massive squared log planks, topped by a gable roof and having dirt floors. It was common for the big house to be of superior materials and workmanship while all other structures, particularly in the country, were of log construction. The majority of small, single-purpose dependencies were built to the same rectangular shape, which meant they were quick and easy to erect and could function for a variety of agricultural uses. The whitewashed well house (opposite top) stands in the front yard near the road, and although no longer in use, it had been electrified in the 20th century. The other remaining service structure (above) stands a short distance behind the main house. Photographs by Ralph Allen, 2006

Today, four of Belle Mina's antebellum structures survive. The kitchen was originally connected to the south side of the main house by a porch. It comprised three rooms, most likely living quarters for the cook and house servants on either end with the kitchen with its large fireplace and rare bake oven in the middle. Today it serves as a family room and study. The other three buildings are identified by their similar

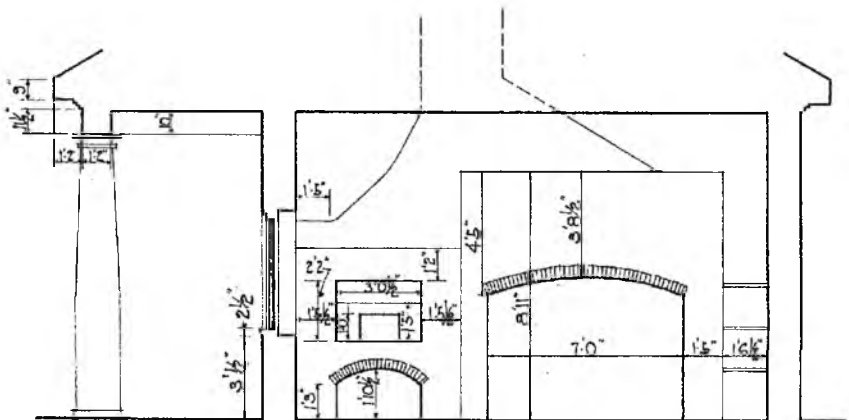


The minor surviving dependencies at Belle Mina have walls of squared log planks measuring roughly 18 inches wide and 4 inches thick square notched at the corners. All had dirt floors, and any openings other than the one wooden door consisted of a wooden shutter that could be opened outward for light and ventilation. The slave cabin was of similar construction but contained a brick fireplace and would have had a plank floor and a plain porch on the front. A former slave from Marysville, Alabama, later recalled that the “log cabins...was daubed with clay to keep the rain and wind out, and the chimneys was made of clay and sticks. The beds was homemade and nailed against the wall with legs on the outer side.” It is unknown how many such cabins would have existed at Belle Mina. Photograph by Ralph Allen, 2006





The brick service wing as drawn in 1934 shows the kitchen in the center room with a servant's room on either side. Apparently food had to be carried from the kitchen along the covered gallery to the dining room. L. A. Wingo, delineator for HABS



This section through the kitchen depicts the arrangement of the cooking fireplace and the bake oven, both of which have been retained and restored. Most cooking was done in the large arched fireplace, but a fire in the smaller arched fireplace to the left heated the expansive, brick-floored oven directly above it for baking breads and cakes. L. A. Wingo, delineator for HABS, 1934

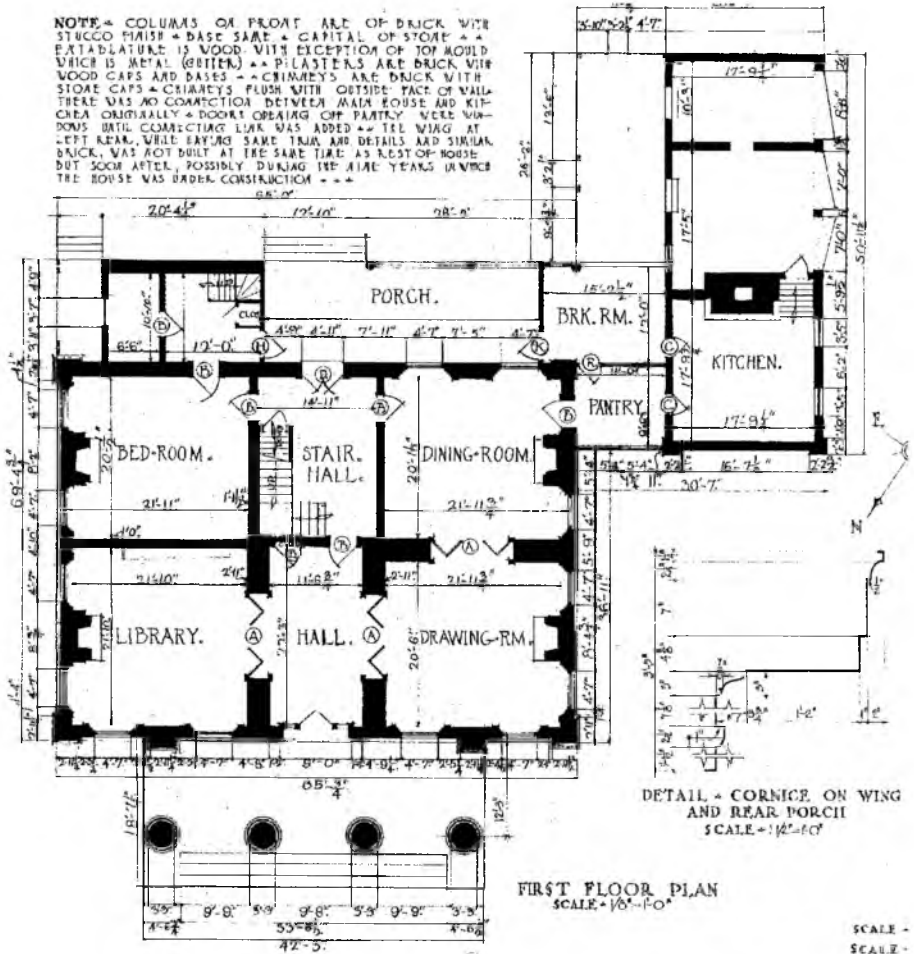
construction of massive hewn log planks joined at the corners by square notching. One structure stands near Mooresville Road and was a well house. Another, at the rear of the house, is unidentified. Both are currently used for storage. The most recognizable structure, a slave cabin, is located some distance from the house above Piney Creek. This location provided easy access to water for the field slaves. At present the cabin is under renovation, and its solid beams will provide the framework for a new residence. The Bibb Cemetery, comprising thirty-four stones when it was surveyed in 1990, lies south of the house.

By comparison, in Huntsville with stores for supplies and the Courthouse Square only a few blocks away, the Williams Avenue home needed only a few outbuildings. The 1861 Hartley & Drayton map of Huntsville and the 1894 Sanborn insurance map depict a two-story brick kitchen and servants' house connected to the southwestern corner of the house by an open porch. Another porch connected this wing with a two-story smokehouse. In 1861 there were three small unidentified buildings near the house and a few others near the rear property line. By 1894 a coalhouse stood near the kitchen wing and a barn was located on the back of the lot.⁷

Currently only the kitchen wing survives. In the 1920s the original kitchen was incorporated into the main house by enclosing a porch and is still in use today, although its large fireplace has been removed. The two upstairs rooms are used for storage and retain much of the original woodwork. The foundation of the other two rooms on the ground floor was lowered for use as a garage and tool room.

Today, both Belle Mina and the Williams Avenue home stand as a testament to Thomas Bibb's affluence and taste. The outbuildings depict southern society in the 19th century and offer insight into its planter caste system.

PATRICIA H. RYAN



This HABS plan of the first floor of the Bibb-Hutchens house drawn in 1934 clearly illustrates the relationship of the separate kitchen wing to the dining room in the main house. Presumably the two were originally connected by a covered passage, which has now been enclosed. Wilfred R. Van Valkenburgh, delineator for HABS.



A view of the southwest corner of the Bibb-Hutchens house reveals the still standing, although modified, antebellum service wing which contained the original kitchen (located behind the two windows at the far left) and the servants' quarters. A columned porch along the east side of the service building also survives. In the 20th century, this building was modified to create two garages, and the open connection with the main house was enclosed to create a breakfast room and an indoor passage between the kitchen and the dining room. A smokehouse located directly south of this building has been lost. Photograph by Ralph Allen, 2006

Notes

- 1 Thomas McAdory Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Spartanburg, South Carolina: Reprint Co., 1978), 3:147; Will Book 5, 439-443, Limestone County, Alabama, typed facsimile.
- 2 Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalog, Historic American Buildings Survey, A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 260.
- 3 Bibb's will, dated February 14, 1839, mentions his slave Anderson, a bricklayer. It is likely he owned other skilled workmen. Will Book 5, 439-443, Limestone County, Alabama, typed facsimile.
- 4 Gamble, 12.
- 5 "FOR SALE," *Southern Advocate*, 9 August 1836; William Stubno, Jr., *A Report Concerning the Construction Date of the Governor Thomas Bibb Mansion, Located in the Twickenham Historic District, Huntsville, Alabama* (Huntsville: unpublished), 5. In 1836 Governor and Mrs. Bibb sold the home to their son-in-law James Bradley. Unfortunately, Bradley's financial instability brought about the sale of the property to Andrew Beirne in 1844, and it remained in the Beirne family until 1920. In 1927 the home returned to Bibb descendants and remains in their ownership today.
- 6 "BELMINA FOR SALE," *Southern Advocate*, 1 March 1836; Stubno, 10, note 10. For whatever reasons, Belle Mina did not sell, and Bibb descendants retained ownership until about 1940.
- 7 "City of Huntsville, Madison County, Ala." (Louisville, Ky.: Hartley & Drayton, 1861); "Huntsville, Alabama" (New York: Sanborn-Perris Map Co., 1894), sheet 6.