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## Northeast Huntsville Neighbors: The Chapman-Johnson and Robinson-Jones Houses

Amid familiar elements of modern life—increasing traffic, road expansion, real estate development—the Chapman-Johnson house on Dairy Lane, and Quietdale, the Robinson-Jones home on Quietdale Drive, survive as important examples of 19th-century Madison County homesteads.\*

The older of the two properties, the Chapman-Johnson house, was built sometime in the late 1830s to 1840s, according to preservation architect

Harvie P. Jones, who based his conclusion on the house's Greek Revival mantels and doors, as well as saw marks and nails. The builder was an early settler named Allen Christian. At one time it was co-owned with another settler, Lemuel Mead, and was surrounded by more than 800 acres of land. <sup>1</sup>

Over the years the plantation home has been known by a several names: the Withers House; Woodgreen; Monte Sano Cottage; Gladstone Place. The property passed through various hands until 1873, when Reuben Chapman II, Alabama's 13th governor (1847-1849), bought it. Known locally then as the Withers place (see



*The Chapman-Johnson house "...is a good example of the smaller house constructed in North Alabama during the early 19th century and is one of the few known intact Madison County examples of a one-and-one-half story frame cottage of the period."* <sup>2</sup> *The house is seen here in a 1970 photograph by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, Department of Archives, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville*



*The servants' quarters, described in the National Register nomination as a "c. 1870 saddlebag" structure, is situated slightly northwest of the main house. The clapboarded building has a side-gabled roof continuous over an inset porch with chamfered posts. The house rests on limestone piers and features a central limestone chimney between two rooms. There are two four-panel doors in front, and one window bay each on the east and west end walls.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that Allen Christian's family lived on a nearby site in an early version of this 1870s structure. Dorothy Scott Johnson understood Harvie Jones to say that the building's two fireplace mantels date from the early 19th century, years before the presumed c. 1830-1840 construction of the main house. Moreover, the Chapman family told the Johnsons that the servants' quarters had been moved from "The Grove," an area east of the main house. The move to the present site would have come sometime after 1884 as the plat of that date shows a structure in The Grove location, but not one on the present site.<sup>4</sup> Photograph by Diane Ellis, 2006*

plat p. 38), it had been owned for 24 years by Philip Woodson and occupied by his daughter and son-in-law, Mary and Augustine Withers, who called it Woodgreen.

Woodgreen was a 342-acre plantation at the time of Governor Chapman's purchase.

Chapman had owned a plantation nearby, west of what is now Maysville Road, which was confiscated during the Civil War and used by Union troops to billet a black regiment. A Freedmen's Bureau and a prison camp for captured blacks also located there. Barracks were built to accommodate the groups and that area became known as Barracks Place (see plat). Chapman's plantation house on Barracks Place was burned in November 1864. Some years ago, part of the house's foundation was discovered underneath a modern residence on the old property.<sup>5</sup>



*The tall one-story frame smokehouse, dated late 1800s by Harvie Jones, with its nail-studded door, is slightly northeast of the main house. It appears in its present location on the 1884 plat. The Johnsons added a stable to the back of the smokehouse for two horses they once owned. A privy is believed to have been located somewhere on the rise of land behind the smokehouse. Photograph by Diane Ellis, 2006*

Although Governor Chapman never lived on the Dairy Lane property, the homestead was continuously occupied by succeeding generations of the Chapman family until July 1971, when the house and two acres were sold to Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson. The house and farm have been the site of some well-known Huntsville history. In 1889, Milton Humes, brother-in-law of Reuben Chapman III, and William E. Matthews\*\* established the Monte Sano Dairy, home of Signal's Lily Flagg, the Jersey cow famous for record butterfat production. The dairy changed owners in 1894 when the Matthews family somehow lost the place, but Rosalie Chapman, widowed since Reuben III's death in 1891, moved back into the house with her children and continued the dairy business.

The foundations of a limestone springhouse, built in the Christian-Mead era and said by a Chapman descendant to match the stonework of Governor Chapman's early Barracks Place plantation house, remain in the modern Gladstone Place subdivision near the Dairy Lane property, along with portions of two Monte Sano Dairy buildings. The Chapman-Johnson property was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. <sup>6</sup>



*Batten door of Chapman-Johnson smokehouse. Smokehouse doors were often reinforced to deter unauthorized entry. The nail pattern seen here would have discouraged attempts to saw through the door. Photograph by Diane Ellis, 2006*

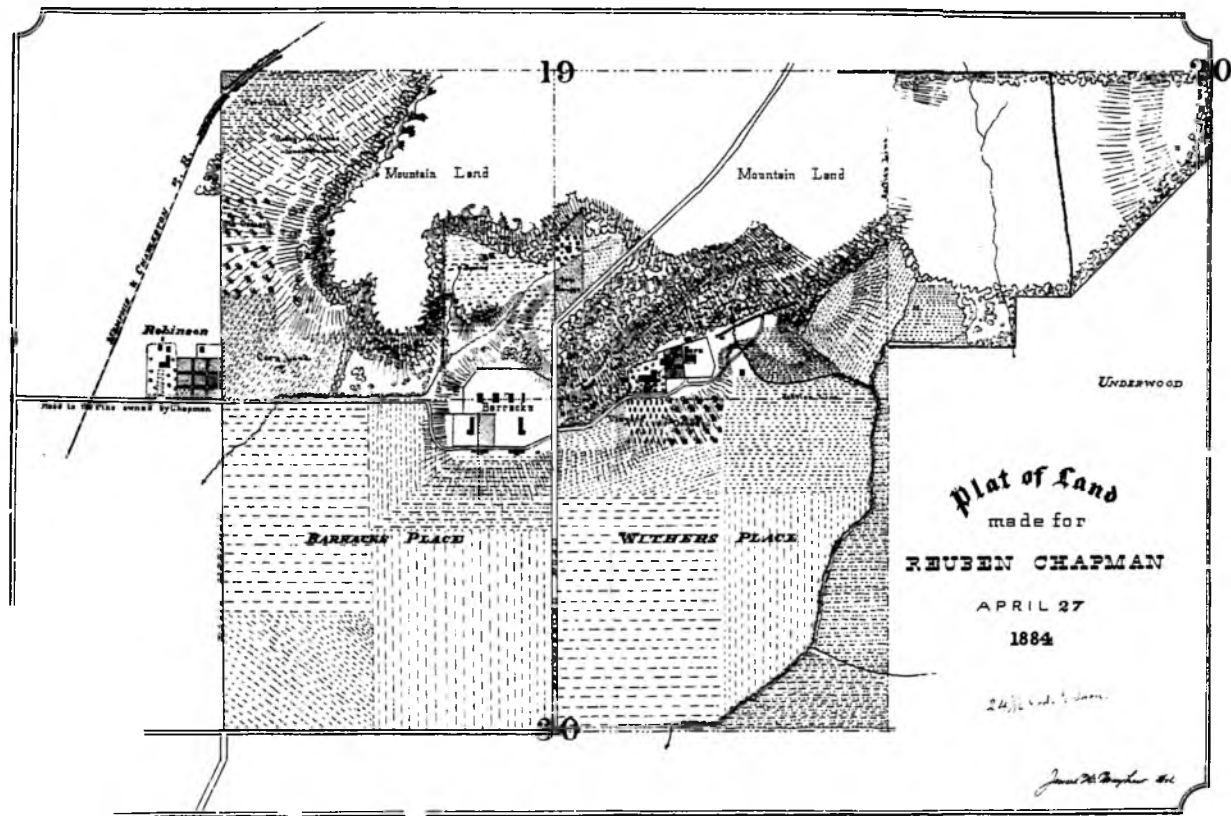
## Notes

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- 1 Dorothy Scott Johnson, personal communication, 2006; Micky Maroney, “The Withers-Chapman-Johnson House: A Plantation Cottage,” *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, Vol. XV, No. 3, Spring 1989, 10-11; Huntsville Branch, American Association of University Women, *Glimpses Into Antebellum Homes of Historic Huntsville, Alabama* (Huntsville: Completely Revised Ninth Edition, 1999), 71.
- 2 National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, Withers-Chapman Home, Prepared by W. Warner Floyd, Executive Director, and Ellen Mertins, Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, Alabama, August 17, 1978.
- 3 NR; Maroney, 8.
- 4 Johnson, pc, 2006.
- 5 Maroney, 14-16; Johnson, pc, 2006, citing Nancy Rohr, *Incidents of the War: the Civil War Journal of Mary Jane Chadick* (Huntsville, AL: Silver Threads Publishing, 2005), 228; Johnson, pc, 2006.
- 6 Johnson, pc, 2006; Maroney, 16; Maroney, 18; Johnson, pc, 2006.

\*Former *Quarterly* editor and writer Micky Maroney devoted the Spring 1989 issue of the publication to the Chapman-Johnson house, and a good part of the 1983 Spring/Summer *Quarterly* to the Robinson-Jones home. This writer has relied heavily on Maroney’s work for the two brief historical summaries appearing here.

\*\*For information on William E. Matthews and his family’s activities in Limestone and Madison counties, see *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, Vol. 31, Numbers 1-2, Spring/Summer 2005. Copies of *Historic Huntsville Quarterly*s are on file in the Heritage Room of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.



The ell-shaped Chapman-Johnson residence and the smokehouse are shown on what was then called the Withers Place. A structure located in the wooded area east of the house, conjectured to be the original slave/servants' quarters, is visible on the larger original plat. Across Brownsboro Road (now Maysville Road) is Governor Chapman's Barracks Place. Slightly north and west is the Robinson property, now called Quietdale. In the "road to the Pike owned by Chapman" notation, "Pike" refers to the present Meridian Street.



*Quietdale, south front, a house that preservation architect Harvie P. Jones described in his Quietdale photograph book as showing “3 period influences in one: Fed. shape; Greek Revival interior details; Italianate porches (not original).” Slave quarters partially visible at rear. Photograph by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA. Courtesy Ira and Billie Jones*

Not far over the mountain slope from the Chapman-Johnson house is Quietdale, the home since 1985 of Ira and Billie Jones. (see “Robinson” notation on plat p.38) Quietdale is a plantation residence constructed on a grander scale. It was built sometime between 1853 and 1858 by the widow of William Robinson, “one of the most prosperous landowners and businessmen in the county,” who acquired the land during his tenure as Madison County’s “high” sheriff (1842-52). During those years, Robinson obtained lumber and other

materials for the house he carefully planned but died before it could be built. His widow, Caroline, saw that it was constructed to her husband’s specifications, using the labor and expertise of their numerous slaves. Although Robinson purportedly owned an early brick manufacturing company in the area, he chose to build a frame house.<sup>1</sup>

The Robinson property had been owned by a succession of early Huntsville and Madison County residents, including John Williams Walker, John F. Newman, William Fleming (who sold it to Lemuel Mead—co-owner for a time with Allen Christian of the nearby Chapman-Johnson property)—and Erskine Mastin.

Uncertainty surrounds not only how and when Sheriff Robinson came to own the land, but also what was on the land before Caroline had the house built. Maroney notes that the property “... is known to have had earlier dwellings and outbuildings constructed on it.” Adding to the mystery of the land’s earlier history is “an inscription reading ‘Quietdale 1840’ located in the cement top step of a brick stairway





*Nearby carriage house/barn showing alterations for changing uses over the years. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2004.*

leading down to the root cellar under the slave quarters/kitchen building.” Perhaps a previous owner called the plantation Quietdale before the Robinsons acquired it. It’s also possible that the present six-room slave quarters (five rooms plus kitchen) located next to the house was built on the site of a previous structure.<sup>2</sup>

Quietdale’s exterior and interior reflect a mix of transitional architectural and stylistic trends circulating in the mid-19th century. The house has been described variously as Georgian, Federal, and Greek Revival—terms that involve matters of scale, according to Linda Allen. Whichever term one prefers, Quietdale, says Allen, “... retains the classical symmetry to which more stylish ornaments have been attached.” Stylish ornaments seen in the house’s main porch, for example, illustrate the blended borrowings of Quietdale’s design influences. Allen describes the details of the porch as “Gothic-inspired,” noting “octagonal columns supporting shallow Tudoresque arches,” and Italianate-influenced pilasters and “small, scroll-cut porch brackets.”

Allen further noted that “both the Gothic and Italianate revivals were part of the same romantic movement that began circulating in Alabama in the 1850s. At the start, people seldom constructed a full-blown example in the revival style, but rather selected decorative elements for inclusion in a traditional structure; and since both Gothic and Italianate arrived more or less together, they tended to be intermixed. Hence we get vernacular building. I suspect that Quietdale was built in the late 1850s during this transitional period and probably over several years, allowing time for various stylistic features to be included as work went along.”<sup>3</sup>



*Large barn, possibly 1920s. Courtesy Ira and Billie Jones*

An icehouse, a large smokehouse, a later greenhouse, and a well house are known to have been on the Robinson-Jones property. A root cellar was located under the slave quarters and its covered entry can still be seen in the Judd photograph. Quietdale was a busy working farm up to the 1940s, says current owner Ira Jones, and a large barn, which Jones believes was built in the 1920s, is still there. There is also a nearby

carriage house/barn of unknown date, and, next to the house, the notable large kitchen/slave quarters built for the house slaves.<sup>4</sup>

The slave quarters is a two-story structure with a porch running the length of the building on both levels. Originally each floor had three doors alternating with three windows on the porch side. Each level was one room deep and three rooms across. Evidence indicates that the rooms were interconnected. Maroney notes that the kitchen was most likely located in the ground floor's south room. Unusual for slave rooms are the plastered walls and ceilings. The ceiling of the upper porch was also plastered. Door transoms with four lights, and windows with nine lights in the



*West facade of slave quarters at Quietdale, with covered entry to old root cellar. The “Quietdale” stone was found here in a partially excavated area that Ira Jones believes might have been the foundation of an early cabin. Photograph by S.W. Judd, “one of Huntsville’s most renowned photographers,” according to photographic historian Frances Robb. Born in Tennessee, Judd was in business in Huntsville by 1903, locating first in the present Harvie Jones building on South Side Square until about 1920, then at a studio at 208 Eustis Avenue. He died in 1960.<sup>6</sup> Courtesy Ira and Billie Jones*

upper sash and six in the lower provided ventilation and natural light. The quarters and the main house show similarities in their brick foundations, air vents, beaded weatherboarding of exterior walls, and post-and-beam timber frame construction.<sup>5</sup> According to Ira Jones, sometime before the 1930s the slave quarters and the main house were connected by a second-story walkway and exterior stairs. That modification was eventually removed. Quietdale was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

## Notes

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- 1 Micky Maroney, "Quietdale," *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, Vol. IX, Nos. 3 and 4, Spring/Summer 1983, 4; National Register of Historic Places nomination, prepared by Robert S. Gamble, Architectural Historian, Alabama Historical Commission, n.d.; Maroney, 4.
- 2 Maroney, 4, 5, 3.
- 3 Linda Bayer Allen, personal communication, 2006.
- 4 Huntsville Branch, American Association of University Women, *Glimpses Into Antebellum Homes of Historic Huntsville, Alabama* (Huntsville: Completely Revised Ninth Edition, 1999), 68; Maroney, 15; AAUW, 68.
- 5 Maroney, 15-16.
- 6 Diane Ellis, "Staying Power: 128 South Side Square Withstands the Tests of Time," *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3, Fall 2000, 12.