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## The Lewis-Clay House

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## The Lewis-Clay House

Tracing the time of construction of most antebellum outbuildings is usually based on conjecture. The task is especially difficult for researchers documenting structures that no longer exist, as in the case of the now-demolished outbuilding that was formerly located just to the west of the Lewis-Clay house at 513 Eustis Avenue. Fortunately, public and private documents help us fill in some of the gaps about what was once part of the homestead.



*The Lewis-Clay house today located at 513 Eustis Avenue. Photograph by Ralph Allen, 2006*

The c.1830 house itself was built on 2.8 acres of land adjacent to the Huntsville Female Seminary, which was known as the Steward's lot because the house served as both the steward's home and a boarding house for teachers and out-of-town students. It was advertised in the January 13, 1831, *Huntsville Democrat* as follows: a "Boarding House under the superintendence of Mr. & Mrs. Leech & at which the Teachers will board, is attached to the Seminary..."

On the first page of the *Democrat*, August 23, 1836, however, the Seminary property was offered for sale and now included two large two-story brick tenements, "one of which has hitherto been occupied as the boarding house and has a kitchen, smoke house, servants-house & other out-buildings with a well of fine water.... To be auctioned Sept. 5." Deed records show that Preston and Agnes Yeatman purchased



*This HABS photograph from 1934 shows the arrangement of the two buildings, the main house and its equally big dependency. The accessory structure is not connected to the house and is located perpendicular to and slightly behind it with its gable end facing the street. The effect was to create a partially enclosed courtyard behind the house. Photograph by W. N. Manning*

the property for \$5,100 in September of 1836. Two years later it was sold to John H. Lewis for the same amount. <sup>1</sup>

John H. Lewis, a man of means with a growing family, soon felt the need for a new outbuilding. The approximate date of the addition is found in a letter from his wife, Mary (Betts) Lewis, to her daughter Mary Lewis, who was in Paris. While this newsy letter from home is undated, it was written after the newest Lewis baby's birth on April 24, 1844. In the letter Mrs. Lewis describes the functions and quality of the new building.

While I write to you in a neat little office I had fitted up for Pa in the new outbuilding which also serves as a dressing room adjoining and entering into a neat little bathing room which you will like, our sweet little babe whom we call "the little white lady" for she is as snow or Pearls rather is lying near me on a lounge...

Sally is careful with her children and as neat in the making their clothes and dressing them every day as I am, and they are as well behaved as necessary for any young children. They all have much finer and better built rooms than we have. Pa has taken down the old buildings and put up a very handsome two story row of rooms numbering 12 and they occupy 6 of them. <sup>2</sup> [emphasis added]



*The north and east walls of the Lewis-Clay dependency show a major, two-story brick structure having inset galleries on both floors facing the back yard, supported by two-story, square brick columns. The scale, construction, and details indicate that this structure was intended to serve as more than a kitchen and servants' quarters. Demolished. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935*



*This photograph of the back yard of the Lewis-Clay house is interesting for its uncommon view of the rear of the house and the placement of the service building. One sees life being lived—with clothes drying on the line, a rocking chair and swing set, and what appears to be a puppy sitting at one end of a child's seesaw. Landscaping is minimal, indicating that this was more of a work yard than a showplace. Photograph by W. N. Manning for HABS, 1934*

In the 1935 HABS narrative attributed to Pat Jones we find the following information.

John H. Lewis: A Virginian, married Mary Betts. Added brick out house which contained kitchen, servants quarters, smoke house and wine cellar, and contained more rooms than the dwelling itself.<sup>3</sup>

The new building's cost is also traceable. According to *The Old Mahogany Table Tales* published in the *Huntsville Democrat* on December 8, 1909, John H. Lewis lost a bet in the 1844 presidential election when James K. Polk, a Democrat, won and Lewis's candidate, Henry Clay, a Whig, lost. "John H. Lewis lost and paid \$7000 for a brick kitchen building with thirteen rooms instead of \$3500 if Henry Clay had been elected."<sup>4</sup>

Deed records indicate that in 1869 the property was sold at auction to Clement

Claiborne Clay for \$500, and in 1870 was deeded to J. Withers Clay, his brother, “for ‘love and affection’ ” in trust as a homestead for J. Withers Clay’s wife and children. It remained in the Clay family until 1935, when it was sold to Walter L. Humphrey for \$5,000. The Clay children had apparently fallen on hard times, as the property had dwindled to less than half an acre. <sup>5</sup>

John Withers Clay was the son of Clement Comer Clay, who had been governor of Alabama and a member of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. After practicing law for two years with his father, John Withers Clay became editor of the *Huntsville Democrat* and remained editor of that paper for forty years. <sup>6</sup> Following his death in 1896, two of his daughters, Virginia Clementine Clay and Susannah Withers Clay, edited the *Democrat*. In order to make ends meet, the sisters also ran a private school, using both the house and the outbuilding, where they taught dancing, French and other subjects. Dr. John Rison Jones, a distinguished local historian, remembers that his father took dancing lessons there. Sanborn insurance maps from 1898 to 1908 show the entire property listed as Miss Clay’s Private School. In 1913 the outbuilding was listed as “Store Ho.”; in 1921 as “Storage”; and 1928 as “vacant.” It is not known when the outbuilding was demolished, although it was still standing in 1935 when HABS photographers documented it.

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## Notes

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- 1 Deed Book Q, 121; Deed Book Q, 483, Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Nancy M. Rohr, *An Alabama School Girl In Paris* (Huntsville, AL: Silver Threads Publishing, 2001), 182, 183.
- 3 Pat Jones, a local historian, wrote anecdotal stories for the *Huntsville Times*.
- 4 *The Old Mahogany Table Tales* by Susannah Withers Clay and Virginia Clementine Clay, granddaughters of John H. Lewis, was a regular column in the *Huntsville Democrat* for a number of years.
- 5 Deed Book BBB, 122; Deed Book BBB, 123; Deed Book 144, 521, Madison County, Alabama.
- 6 Thomas McAdory Owen, LL.D., *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921) v. 3, 343.