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The Cox-White House

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The Cox-White House

Period newspaper advertisements offering antebellum properties for sale provide a rich source of information about the era's houses and their associated service buildings, helping to date the buildings while providing excellent descriptions of the property. On September 1, 1835, for example, the following advertisement appeared in the *Southern Advocate*:



A 1996 photograph of the Cox-White house and the north wall of its service building located at 612 Eustis Avenue taken by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, Department of Archives, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville

I offer for sale the house and lot I now occupy situated at the extremity of the avenue that leads to the Female Seminary [then called Maiden Lane, now Eustis Avenue]. The dwelling is in first rate order and the out houses consisting of a Kitchen and Smoke-house, stable, Bath-house etc. are all new, and the lot of 4 acres of ground (part of which will make a good bldg. lot) is enclosed with a new fence. The house stands on a commanding elevation...Geo. Cox

In 1838 Elizabeth and George Cox, Jr., sold the property at what is now the southwest corner of Eustis Avenue and White Street—612 Eustis Avenue—to John R. H. Acklen for \$6,000, who sold it in 1844, six years later, to Thomas White. The property remained in the White family until 1994. Thomas White, a planter, came to Huntsville in 1839. In 1840 he married Susan Bradley, and they had 12 children.

White owned a plantation on each side of the Tennessee River at Whitesburg, and the house on Maiden Lane was the family's town house. White was elected mayor of Huntsville in 1881 and 1882.¹ Major additions to the house were made about 1844; in 1894, according to Susan White's diary, the c. 1844 small Greek Revival entry portico was moved to the rear entry and the present ell-shaped Victorian front verandah was added. The following are the 1894 diary entries:



This undated photograph of the Cox-White house was taken before the small Greek Revival entry portico was moved to the rear entry in 1894 and the present ell-shaped Victorian verandah was added. Courtesy Dr. Rhett and Melanie Murray

Oct.1. Yesterday was one of the very hottest days of the summer, but this morning is cool enough for a fire, with a heavy fog. Mr. Brockus is moving my front porch to the back door.

Oct. 10. My front door and sash have come. I don't know whether I am glad or sorry for everything around me will be so changed. ²

According to information that preservation architect Harvie P. Jones provided the current owners, Dr. Rhett and Melanie Murray, the Cox-White house was built in the Federal style and was a “half-house,” consisting of a side hall on three levels (basement, plus two floors) adjoining two large rooms on each of the three floors, with a small “trunk room” at the north end of the second floor hall. Separate service buildings (six are shown on the 1861 Hartley & Drayton map of Huntsville) contained the kitchen, servants’ quarters, stable etc. Today, Jones noted, “the house is an eclectic evolvement of three major periods of growth and change: Late Federal (c.1836), Greek Revival (c.1844) and late Victorian (c.1894). This casual mixture is its charm.”³

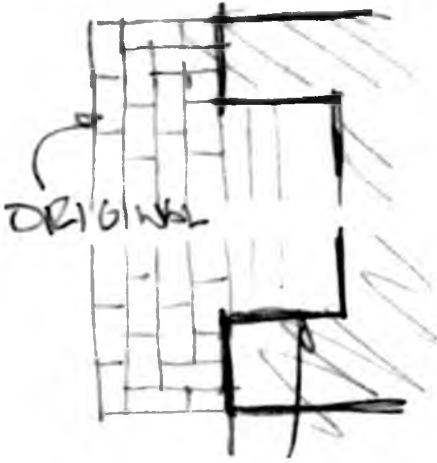
According to Jones, in 1844 “the house was almost doubled in size by the addition of two large rooms (plus the hall extension) on floors 1 and 2 to the rear and a large wing to the east containing two large rooms and a dressing room. Up-to-date Greek Revival trim was installed in most of the interior rooms.” The mantels are

similar to those found in several other c. 1850 houses in this area and were probably installed in the c. 1844 remodeling.⁴

Although the 1861 map shows six separate outbuildings on the grounds, only one of these, a substantial two-story brick structure, remained when the Murrays made their purchase of the two-acre property in 1994. In his report to the Murrays, written October 27, 1994, Harvie Jones noted that “the servants’ rooms were plastered on the interior walls and the ceilings.



The south end of the kitchen building contained the smokehouse and displays a typical diamond-shaped ventilator in the end wall required for proper smoking of meats. Photograph by Lynn Jones, 2006



The fireplace hearth located in the breezeway had bricks laid in this pattern as sketched by Harvie P. Jones, FAIA; he further noted that the side walls of this fireplace were perpendicular to the back wall to retain the heat in the fireplace for cooking (rather than throwing it out into the room), which was a typical feature of fireplaces intended for food preparation. Courtesy Architectural Collection of Harvie P. Jones, Department of Archives, M. Louis Salmon Library, University of Alabama in Huntsville

They were originally heated by stoves rather than fireplaces, a feature not noted [by Jones] in any other pre-1860 service building. Stoves were common in commercial buildings in this period, however.”⁵

A tall brick smokehouse with traditional diamond-shaped vents is located at the south end of the building. A partial second floor dividing the space was added later, probably for storage when the smokehouse was no longer used for smoking meats. Jones also described a breezeway connecting the smokehouse with the servants’ quarters and housing “a rare covered open-air kitchen with its original brick hearth laid in the typical Federal Period pattern where each row of bricks ‘turns the corner,’ with the bricks laid on sand and with no mortar in the tight butt joints.”⁶ There was no evidence that there had been a cooking fireplace in the basement of the house; either this open-air kitchen in the breezeway was the only one, or there was an earlier separate structure that contained a kitchen.

The house and especially the service building were in a very dilapidated condition when the Murrays bought the property. The new owners oversaw a sensitive restoration. In remodeling part of the service building for use as a guest house, as much of the original material as possible was retained. While an outdoor grill was built into the cooking fireplace opening, the original brick hearth remains. The exterior of the smokehouse was repaired and concrete poured over the dirt floor, but the rest of its original interior was left intact. An early carport at the back of the



This HABS photograph illustrates the condition in 1935 of the primary dependency containing the smokehouse, kitchen and five servants' rooms, two down and three up. An early 20th-century garage had been appended to the south end and is now removed. This structure sat perpendicular to the main house and apparently was not connected to it. Photograph by Alex Bush

smokehouse was removed.

Finding useful purposes for service buildings that were once a necessary part of living in the early 19th century, both in town and on large plantations, has resulted in many of them being saved from demolition. Those that remain are an important part of the living history we are privileged to be able to observe, study, and learn from today.

LYNN JONES

Notes

- 1 Thomas McAdory Owen, LL.D., *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921), v. 4, 1758.
- 2 Susan White's diary, unpublished, in private collection.
- 3-6 Harvie P. Jones, FAIA, Notes and preservation recommendations presented to Dr. Rhett and Melanie Murray in a letter of October 27, 1994.



The kitchen dependency is seen here after its renovation by Rhett and Melanie Murray. The exterior cooking fireplace referred to is located in the ground floor breezeway which is visible here beneath the upper gallery. Photograph by Lynn Jones, 2006