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The McCrary-Thomas House

The McCrary-Thomas house is tucked away in an area that until recently was devoted largely to agriculture. Located several miles from a major road, the house nestles near the Mountain Fork of the Flint River in a serene unspoiled rural setting. Unlike some landowners, Thomas McCrary, its builder, lived on his plantation and did not own a separate town house. Its remote location made it necessary for this family farm to be self-suf-

ficient. What is unique about the property today is the number of outbuildings that remain, even though they were built of wood. In his 1989 nomination of the property for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, Robert Gamble of the Alabama Historical Commission wrote the following:

The land surrounding the house has been cultivated by the same family since a decade before Alabama entered the Union: first as a cotton plantation with slave—then tenant—labor; today, as a diversified and mechanized farm.

With satellite structures that include a log smokehouse, a commissary, a



A side view of the McCrary-Thomas house illustrates three separate phases of construction, with the oldest, two-story section in the center, the replacement house dating from the late 19th century on the right, and the most recent, a frame addition, on the left. Photograph by Ralph Allen, 2006

carriage house, and crib, the McCrary house comprises what is, for the area, an unusually intact 19th-century farm complex.

The present owner, Miss Alice Thomas, is a fourth generation descendant of Thomas McCrary, who, on November 2, 1809, purchased some 480 acres from the Federal Government Land Office in Nashville, Tennessee. McCrary, born in 1789 in South Carolina, became one of the first settlers in the north-eastern part of Madison County. The land on which he was to build his house lay on the west side of the Flint River in a promising cotton-growing area. Over the years he expanded his holdings to include thousands of acres. Besides farming, McCrary operated two tan yards and other mercantile interests. The 1859 Huntsville Directory shows that he was also a member of the firm McCrary,



This view along the driveway on the McCrary-Thomas land shows part of the complex of accessory buildings that once dominated the landscape. In the foreground is the commissary, next is the carriage house, and beyond it is the small barn. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006

Patterson, & Sprague—cotton factors, grocers, and commission merchants. Miss Thomas has the large family Bible, which lists Thomas McCrary's numerous slaves and their birth dates. The 1850 county census shows 89. Miss Thomas was told that the slaves were housed in small brick buildings farther away from the house. Apparently these quarters were demolished. According to Miss Thomas, each slave was taught a trade, so that there was a community of weavers, shot makers, tailors, blacksmiths, etc., living and working there. In the National Register nomination, Gamble discusses the original structures that would have been on the land.

Exactly when McCrary built the first permanent residence on his Flint River place is unclear. Federal period woodwork reused in the present



The McCrary-Thomas property still retains two barns, which probably date from the late 19th century. This is the smaller one and like the smokehouse has had a small shed added to each side. It continues the tradition of building farm dependencies to a rectangular plan with gable roof and entries under the gables. This is the smaller of the two barns and was once whitewashed. Photograph by Ralph Allen, 2006

house when its predecessor was demolished would seem to indicate a date no later than the 1820's. Whatever its date of construction, McCrary's early house was a two-story brick structure with a central hall. There was a cellar beneath, while the kitchen was located in a separate building to the rear. Some years after completing the main block of the house, Thomas McCrary added a raised ell at the southeast rear. Stylistic evidence suggests that this occurred about 1840.

Subsequent changes to the house included replacing the original residence with a one-story structure, probably about 1873. Only the ell-addition remains of the earlier house, a two-story brick structure. The kitchen was still connected only by

an open passage beyond the south end of the ell until about 1909. Porches were also added to the front and east side of the house at the turn of the century.

The house and the 500 acres surrounding it were inherited by Miss Alice McCrary Thomas in 1970 and she continues to live there today. Miss Thomas is the daughter of John R. and Mamie (McCrary) Thomas. In 1980 Miss Thomas called on preser-



The McCrary-Thomas smokehouse is a rare surviving wooden example. Raised slightly off the ground, it has generous sheltering eaves projecting over the entry side and features board and batten siding over the log construction. The deep eaves on the front provided a place to hang the pig while it was being butchered prior to moving it inside. The door is constructed of vertical boards, and the sloped-roof shed on the left is a later addition. Both have been whitewashed, which was a standard treatment for farm structures. The importance of the smokehouse to antebellum life becomes clear when one realizes that pork was the primary meat consumed in the South, and that there were no commercial processors; it has been estimated that a small plantation of twenty slaves would need to preserve and store some two tons of meat each year. Photograph by Ralph Allen, 2006

vation architect Harvie P. Jones to design a keeping room with a kitchen and sitting area to replace the old kitchen behind the ell.

Existing dependencies include a log smokehouse, possibly dating from the early 19th century, now covered with siding. A “shop” abutting the smokehouse may be nearly as old, according to Gamble. Inside the smokehouse are two large hollowed logs for salting meats, and a sunken fire pit in which a large iron pot would have been placed to contain the smoking fire. Several of these pots can be seen lying outside. Nearby is a later frame commissary that once served tenant families, and a beautifully proportioned frame carriage house. A large 19th-century “crib,” or barn, and a 20th-century gambrel-roofed barn immediately west of the



Even more rare is that inside this smokehouse one finds the facilities still in place for preserving meat. Prior to smoking, the meat would be placed in a salting trough, made from a hollowed out tree trunk (top), which began the preservation process with a dry salting that could last up to six weeks. The next step was to suspend the pig parts from rafters above the pit in the middle of the floor (bottom) where a fire was kept smoldering day and night for a week to produce the smoke that would permeate the meat with a specific flavor determined by the choice of fuel. The preserved meat was then allowed to hang in place until needed, which converted the smokehouse into a storage building for much of the year. Photographs by Ralph Allen, 2006



This small rectangular structure was the commissary. Presumably its use as such dates from the post-Civil War period when it was common for owners to make available certain goods for purchase by their sharecroppers. Like the smokehouse, it has a gable roof with door and windows in the gable end and is sided with board and batten. The windows were simply openings with exterior, diagonal board shutters, and the double-leaf door also was constructed of diagonal boards; both doors and shutters are decorated with an overall pattern of nail heads similar to that seen on the door of the Chapman-Johnson smokehouse. Inside, crude shelves still line the walls where goods once were displayed. Photograph by Linda Allen, 2006

crib complete the picture. Until 1980, a well house stood just south of the keeping room wing. Most of these outbuildings are whitewashed and kept in good condition by Miss Thomas. This 19th-century farmhouse with its collection of service buildings, still in its unspoiled rural setting, and still under McCrary ownership, offers a rare opportunity to broaden our knowledge of early North Alabama plantation life. It is important that it continue to be preserved if at all possible.

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Sources

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Conversations with Miss Alice Thomas.