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Tradition of Research and Preservation

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A Tradition of Research and Preservation

The Elusive Past

Researchers investigating the past are no strangers to speculation and guesswork and are used to revising interpretations or changing conclusions when new information comes to light. An archaeologist's understanding of the past, for example, may be altered by the discovery of inscriptions on an ancient tablet. Or new clues can emerge to challenge assumptions made in the course of historic preservation research. Sometimes information turns up that simply confounds rather than clarifies. It is just such a case that leads us to take another look at a property



The Chapman-Johnson house on Dairy Lane. Photograph by Harvie Jones, 1970

featured in the previous *Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2006), which examined the outbuildings of several notable antebellum city and county houses, among them the Chapman-Johnson house on Dairy Lane.

A letter written in 1955 by Elizabeth Humes Chapman (1884-1967), a former resident of the Dairy Lane house and the author of *Changing Huntsville, 1890-1899*, has surfaced, which describes the home place as she remembers it and heard about it from relatives.¹ Based on physical evidence, the Chapman-Johnson residence has been assumed to be of late 1830s-1840s construction and built by Allen Christian, an early settler and farmer who “acquired joint ownership of a 159-acre tract in

1820 with Lemuel Mead.”² In 1835 the two divided the land equally between themselves. The Christian property changed hands at least twice before Philip Woodson purchased it in 1849. Chapman writes that her cousin Ellen White Newman told her that Woodson bought the “place” as a wedding present for his daughter Mary (and son-in-law Augustine Withers). “He built the house,” writes Chapman. If so, Allen Christian wasn’t the house builder and the presumed construction dates are off a bit, or there wasn’t yet a dwelling on the property. Mary Woodson and Augustine Withers were married in 1834; if Woodson’s purchase was intended as a wedding gift, it was a belated one.³

So, Christian or Woodson? Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson, the property’s current owners, believe that Allen Christian did indeed build the house and live in it with his family, but they speculate that Woodson might have built over the early dwelling. They note the discovery of a hidden transom over the house’s back door that was covered up by a staircase in addition to other minor construction quirks that suggest the possibility of changes made to an earlier structure. That Christian built and lived in the house after acquiring the property is also supported by the will he made shortly before his death in September 1836 affirming his Madison County citizenship, bequeathing “the plantation on which I now live,” to his wife, and referring to a Jackson County farm he also owned that was managed by his son, whom he entreats to come live on the referenced plantation. The Johnsons also note that they have always heard about the Christian family’s burial ground, although they haven’t found it. Chapman writes that, “There was an old graveyard a little above a wet weather brook nearby on the Underwood [neighboring property] line.” And Allen’s widow Margaret Christian dictated in her 1842 will that her executor “have the family burial ground enclosed with a brick wall in a neat & substantial manner.”⁴ It seems likely that the Christian family would choose a site near their house for the family cemetery.

The *Quarterly* also focused on a two-room outbuilding referred to as a servants’ quarters, noting that the National Register nomination described it as a “c. 1870



Above: The 1870s office/boys' quarters/servant quarters?

Below: Smokehouse. Photographs by Diane Ellis, 2006

saddlebag” structure, and that the Johnsons understood preservation architect Harvie Jones to date the building’s two fireplace mantels to the early 19th century. Josephine Gaboury Chapman (1896-1980), who moved into the house in the late 1910s with her husband Reuben Chapman IV, told the Johnsons that the family’s cook had lived in the building for years. But Elizabeth Chapman writes that the William B. Matthews family moved to the Dairy Lane property about 1891 and “The house back of the main building was built for Mr. Matthews’ office, and for a room for his sons.” Perhaps the cook lived there for some time after 1894, when the Matthews family left the property. Where the early mantels came from is still a mystery.

Finally, there’s the smokehouse, dated late 1800s by Harvie Jones. Elizabeth Chapman writes that, “The old smokehouse was there originally.” We don’t know whether by “originally” she meant before Woodson’s 1849 purchase—which again would suggest the presence of a dwelling on the property before the one thought to be built by Woodson—or at the time the Matthews family moved to the property—which would correspond to Harvie Jones’s dates.

Elizabeth Chapman's letter, with its delightful, charming and informative reminiscences and anecdotes about black and white Huntsvillians in earlier times, will be of keen interest to researchers when it becomes available at UAH. Like many such documents, the letter raises some questions and answers others, leaving room for further investigation into the history of a fascinating community.

DIANE ELLIS

Notes

- 1 Chapman wrote the letter to Dr. Frances Cabaniss Roberts, who was preparing material about the Chapman place for *Glimpses Into Antebellum Homes, Huntsville, Alabama*, a publication of the Huntsville Branch of the American Association of University Women. Dr. Roberts died in 2000, and her papers are being sorted and arranged for eventual deposit in the Department of Archives/Special Collections of the M. Louis Salmon Library at the University of Alabama in Huntsville by Nancy Rohr, a Huntsville historian and researcher. Rohr made a copy of the letter for Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson, present owners of the property and long-time researchers into its history. And thus it came to us.
- 2 National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Withers-Chapman Home, prepared by W. Warner Floyd, executive director, and Ellen Mertins, Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, Alabama, August 17, 1978.
- 3 Copies of deeds in Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson's possession; Madison County Marriage Book 4, 213.
- 4 Copies of deeds in Walter and Dorothy Scott Johnson's possession.

From the Beginning

Less than a year after the Historic Huntsville Foundation was created in April 1974 the first *Historic Huntsville Quarterly* was published in early 1975. The ten-page publication was edited by Claire Johnston and printed free of charge by Kent Lee Holloway and the Credit Bureau of Huntsville. Lynwood Smith was the Foundation's first chairman.

From the beginning, the *Quarterly* was speaking up for the preservation of Huntsville's remaining historic architecture. Front page headlines of that first issue were "HHF Resolution Ignored by Chamber," and "Weeden Home Restoration Shaping Up." According to the first article the board of directors of the Huntsville Chamber of Commerce had approved "a controversial Plan for the Improvement of Downtown Huntsville, Alabama." The plan, drawn up by architect Edward Arnold for the chamber's Downtown Improvement Committee, was critical of the historic restoration movement downtown. It stated that downtown Huntsville

should communicate solidarity as a vigorous financial center, government seat, and major shopping district. The quaint, remodeled village square does not answer this set of criteria. We need high quality contemporary buildings.

It claimed that the majority of redevelopment to date had "consisted of the historic restoration of facades of existing buildings," and stated "as works of architecture, the old facades along downtown streets are neither historically significant nor of high architectural quality."

According to the article, Harvie Jones had presented his critique of the plan to HHF board members with a "point-by-point evaluation of erroneous data and conclusions." The Foundation board passed a resolution asking the chamber to not forward Arnold's document to the Huntsville City Council but send it back for further consideration, pointing out that the "so-called plan was not really a plan but rather an expression of sentiment." Jones' critique was appended to the Foundation's

resolution, which was “hand-carried to the chamber’s executive vice-president.” However, when the plan was brought before the full chamber at its November 1974 meeting, the Foundation’s resolution was not included. According to the *Quarterly* article, “the chamber’s board subsequently approved the plan and sent it on to the city council. Nothing has been heard of it since.”

From 1976-78 Henry Marks served as editor of the *Quarterly*, followed by Linda Bayer [Allen]. It was during her tenure that the name was changed to *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation* and the journal assumed a more scholarly character and sophisticated format. By the summer of 1980 Lynn Jones was appointed associate editor. Mickey Maroney assumed editorship with the Fall/Winter 1983/1984 issue, serving admirably through the Summer 1989 issue. All these editors volunteered their time and produced many wonderful issues, doing research, writing, editing, and what was once laborious layout all by themselves. Also, as the *Quarterly* moved from its original ten stapled pages to a book format with many more pages and photographs, printing services were no longer donated, adding to the cost of publication.

After Maroney, when no volunteer could be found to carry on such an enormous task, the Foundation was, for the first time, forced to pay for editing. Elise Stephens was the first paid editor, followed by Margaret Vann, Heather Cross, and others. During this time several of us served on an editorial oversight committee, helping to find writers, choose topics, and taking on more and more actual writing tasks. In 2002, after having several guest editors, the Foundation was not able to find a suitable editor who would take the job for the amount it was able to pay. The editorial oversight committee was also becoming more and more dissatisfied with the printing quality, particularly the photographic reproductions.

It was then that Diane Ellis, Pat Ryan, and I volunteered to be the editors without pay on the condition that the board of directors investigate the possibility of paying for a professional layout and redesign of the *Quarterly*. Bruce Hiles of Designwise made a presentation to the board and was subsequently hired. We have been more

than pleased with the new design and the care Bruce has taken to do a good job of layout. White Tiger has been doing the printing, and we have been happy with them as well. Linda Allen joined us in the writing/editing process several years ago, and has been a tremendous help.

The editorship is a big job, requiring knowledge of architecture, local history, photography, and of course the ability to write well and search out other good writers. The editors have thoroughly enjoyed the work, which has taken us in many interesting and often unexpected directions. We have learned a lot. But, we feel it is time for us to rest and time for someone else (or several someones) to bring new blood and new ideas to the *Quarterly*. It is our hope that the tradition of a scholarly publication will be continued as one of the main benefits of membership in the Foundation.

LYNN JONES