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## The Elusive Past

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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. <sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.
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