

## **Three Visits To Huntsville Before The Civil War**

*By Robert S. Davis*

John Hunt moved his family to Big Spring in 1806, some months after he had located it in 1805. In time, Hunt's Spring became the settlement of Twickenham that the state legislature renamed as Huntsville in 1811. For information on the beginnings of the city that became Huntsville see Edward Chambers Betts, *Historic Huntsville from Early History of Huntsville 1804-1870* (1909); Daniel S. Dupree, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800-1840* (1997); Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, *A History of Early Settlement: Madison County Before Statehood 1808-1819* (2008) and *Madison County 1817-1819: from Territory to Statehood Alabama at 200* (2017); and Raneé G. Pruitt, *Eden of the South: a Chronology of Huntsville, Alabama 1805-2005* (2005).

Reproduced below are three accounts of visits to Huntsville before 1861 and the coming of the Civil War. Together these accounts give a colorful firsthand account of the growth of Madison County during the antebellum years. Prominent travel writer Anne Royall also visited the thriving community in 1818 and later published an account of what she witnessed in her well-known *Letters from Alabama on Various Subjects* (1830), pp. 43-46, 151-54. It is available on the internet.

Westchester County, New York born and Yale educated Congregational minister Elias Cornelius (1794-1832) kept a dairy as he passed through the South in his efforts to establish schools for converting to Christianity the Southern Indians. He worked on

behalf of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. From his later travels, he wrote the first account of a visit to the Etowah Indian mounds. Colonel Elias Cornelius Boudinot, named for Elias Cornelius, became a prominent Cherokee Confederate leader. The Rubenstein Library of Duke University today has the Elias Cornelius Papers, 1816-1832, in which the following appears:

Tuesday-11 [November 1817] this day continued my journey & took breakfast at Col Davidsons 6 mi and made on through the civil & beautiful country of Franklin to the house of Esq Miller in the edge of Madison Co. Alabama Ter[ritory] this country contains a population of about 16,000 souls-nearly half of them are blacks. It formerly belonged to Miss[issippi] Terr. But has recently been annexed to the Territory of Alabama [on March 3, 1817] at Esq Millers I tarried all night and was happy to meet with a man who appeared to be pious—when he understood that I was a clergyman he proposed to a mans belonging to the house that ~~would be agreeable to~~ I should perform family worship to which he replied "that praying was a thing not allowed in that house" & alleged as a reason the prejudice of Esq Miller against the clergy men with whom he had been acquainted. Having said thus much it was no longer urged. Mr Jones who had made the request, and who had long resided in the western country remarked that it was the first house he had ever met with in which social prayer was forbidden,

In the course of day, I rode thirty miles crossed several creeks and rode over a corner of the Cherokee Land. I notice this because its appearance was to me very irregular. It was upland and yet previously had the appearance of a river bottom. The trees and grape vines were very large[.] A Poplar tree I measured which

was a few inches over six feet in diameter & 20 feet in circumferences. It had been cut down and proved to be perfectly solid. From the number of growth which I counted on another tree, this must have had 600 of those circles representing its age to be 600 years. It was seventy feet to the first limb [?] a grape vine I measured which was 22 inches in circumference. This corner of land was six miles in extent & for that whole distance appeared to be of the richest kind of soil—at present not a soul worked it [Wednesday November 12, 1817] This day left Esqr Miller's in company of strangers—crossed the forks of the Flint River—distant from each other 3 miles and very deep.

Arrived at Huntsville a few minutes before eleven having rode twenty miles on my arrival I found that several gentlemen had left the place for New Orleans only fifteen minutes before. As I was an entire stranger to the rode [sic, road] to Natchez and know it in a bad condition for traveling, I resolved to fall into their company. I immediately rode after them & soon overtook them—made known my wishes & received their approbation. As I had business in Huntsville I was compelled to return—at the same time informing them I would endeavor to reach them the following night.

Huntsville is a flourishing town the capital of Madison County in the New territory of Alabama and although settled but 10 or 12 years contains 40 stores of different kinds and a large number of dwelling houses—arranged in several streets. The town stands upon a small hill of lime stone rock—covered superficially with earth & terminating on one side in a perpendicular bluff of 80 or more feet in height beneath its base a large stream of water, brings forth to view & widens below so as to form the appearance

of a small pond. The water is very clear & fine & furnishes the whole town with water of a most excellent quality. I have been told that this great spring of water was the circumstance, which gave the preference to this place as seat of a town.

Huntsville presents an appearance of great business. The grand staple of the county of Madison is Cotton. This is brought in large quantities to Huntsville in the seed, and is here picked, cleaned & baled for market. It is next shipped upon the Tennessee & sent to New Orleans. There are however numerous places in other parts of the county in which cotton gins are erected for the purpose of cleaning and baling cotton. The people are becoming rich with astonishing rapidity. One crop of cotton is worth more than the plantation upon which it is raised. The people seemed to me to almost infatuate with the prospect of making money. There is however a serious subtraction to be made from their prosperity sickness and vice—find in this region a most congenial & luxuriant soil Slaves are in great demand & will probably ere long constitute the principal part of the population of the country. The high demand for slaves made by the cotton planters holds out a most powerful ~~inducement~~ encouragement to the prosecution of that great abominable traffic in human flesh in the southern country are engaged in. The miserable objects of this traffic are brought up in the old states and driven like cattle to the western market when they are sold & bought with as little computation [?] of conscience as if they were so many hogs or sheep.

One of these sales I witnessed myself at Huntsville, during the short stay I made there—a number of Africans were taken to the center of the public square & soon a crowd of spectators & purchasers assembled.

The scene to my feelings was shocking to the last degree I had never witnessed such a spectacle before. One woman was pregnant. Her age & history was demanded and whether she had ever had a child to which she replied in the negative. In consideration of the prospect she presented one man, bid for her 750 dollars while other females of a similar age but not pregnant would not be bid up so high within 100 to 150 dollars. I stood and beheld as long as I could. I was ready to cry out with indignation & weep over the miserable wretches who had been brought from afar & exposed in this manner at an interval of silence. I exclaimed well did Mr. Jefferson remark on such a subject as this "I tremble when I think that God is Just" and immediately left them.

This dreadful traffic with the evils of slavery generally upon moral & political welfare of the southern country I am resolved to delineate in writing—in another place

In Huntsville I tarried 3 hours and never felt gloomier in any place in my life—I did not want for company. There were hundreds in the Town. But the love money appeared to me to be engraved on every door & on every heart. No temple to the living God met the pious eye. A Noble courthouse built of Brick occupied a conspicuous place in the center square which was the only public edifice I could see. I did not understand that any clergyman lived within the town—and from the awful profanity which I heard in every place I entered I concluded that a minister of the Gospel had but few companions there.

I left there intending to make fuller enquires concerning them on my return in the spring & if the Lord should give me opportunity to declare the council of his will to them.

Inventor and traveling mercantile agent Augustus René Moen (born Paris, France September 1, 1799, died Samford, Connecticut August 24, 1867) toured the Tennessee River Valley of Alabama in 1831, selling axes for Collins Company of Canton, Connecticut. The excerpt below comes from his letter to Collins Company of June 16, 1831, A. S. Williams III Americana Collection, University of Alabama Libraries, Tuscaloosa.<sup>i</sup>

The Counties of Lauderdale, Limestone, Madison, Morgan, Lawrence and part of Franklin contain some of the best lands, wealthiest merchants, and planters in the state of Alabama and Morgan most particularly Huntsville its County seat [sic, Huntsville is the county seat of Madison County] is a town outranked by no other in the state but Mobile. Its merchants are in the highest degree wealthy and responsible, the amt. of goods sold there last year was exceeding at retail \$350,000 and Florence \$100,000. It labours however under the disadvantages of an interrupted navigation and a remote location from the principal wholesale markets. In high water however they ship their cotton (the great staple) to Florence or Waterloo by flat bottomed boats. The most of the merchants up and down the Valley of the Tennessee purchased their goods mostly in Pha. [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania] Their hardware particularly-and wagon them to Pittsburg at \$1.75 or 2.00 per. Cost then by boat to Florence \$2.00 and to this place \$1.00 or 75 cts. or ship to N. Orleans by that route to this place amounts to \$3.75 or \$4.00 by the time our axes arrive here they will cost them \$1.75 to \$1.81 this will operate unfortunately [?]. Yet at the even the axes when fairly tested and well known can be sold here at a profit in considerable quantities altho the Country is much

cleared. The country made axes are poor course and clumsy and sell from \$2.50 to 3.00 it is with such only that ours at present will have to compete. Our axes as Yet are but little known at Huntsville and but one of the principal merchants has kept them (F. T. Mastin & Co.) and they had bot [bought] but one box K large eye [axes]. Hays & Wyatt and W. H. Powers (the first small dry goods Merchants, the latter a grocer) had each one box R. S. E. [axes] in good order. The first in Phild at \$18 the latter in N Orleans of Puech & Bein at \$20. Neither had sold more than One or two ax at \$3.00 or \$2.50 each. I spent the whole day at this place among the principal merchants 1<sup>st</sup> Patton Donegan & Co, 2<sup>nd</sup> F. T. Mastin & Co., 3<sup>rd</sup> B. M. Lowe, 4<sup>th</sup> Andrews & Brothers (Jews have a house in Tuscaloosa and deal in Pha. With an Importer who (they say) supplies Hand S & Bird [axes] and others (They sell Andrews & Brothers for cash only and last year sold for \$30,000) and 5<sup>th</sup> Yeatman & Kent. Now all these merchants are said to be as good as the Bk of England—deal in NYk [New York City?] and Pha. The 1<sup>st</sup> with Hand S. & Bird, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Rogers & Brothers (both write this day to their partners now in the city to purchase several doz of our best R.S.E.) The 3<sup>rd</sup> deals with Jeffer & Chase NYk and Yeatman & Kent with Rogers & Brothers. If I had found Brooks as fresh in the memories of the merchts. here as at Florence I should have left early this morning. He was hardly remembered by any but W. H. Powers and B. M. Lowe's clerks who forgot to enter our axes on Lowe's memorandum who is also in NYk purchasing and may not think of them. Mr. Brooks views of this place may differ from mine or he would have scoured it more effectively. I consider it more important than Florence at present and the new

purchase of the Chickasaw country may enable Florence to sell more axes in time.

On the eve of the Civil War, Connecticut born artist and engraver John Warner Barber (1798-1885) visited Alabama for illustrations to use in his monumental work *Our Whole Country* (1861). Connecticut born writer Henry Howe (1816-1893) composed the text for the book that included the following about Huntsville:

...HUNTSVILLE, the shire town of Madison county, one of the most beautiful and well built places in the southern states, is on the line of the Charleston and Memphis railroad, about 10 miles N. of the Tennessee River, 217 N. from Montgomery, and 211 from Memphis, Tenn. The court house is of Grecian architecture, erected at an expense of \$45,000, the banking house is of hewn stone, with an Ionic portico, built at a cost of \$80,000. It has several churches and academies, three female seminaries, and many handsome private dwellings. The inhabitants are supplied with pure and cold water from a spring which breaks out at the foot of a rock, a few feet distant from the Northern Bank, with a power sufficient to move a forcing pump for elevating and distributing it to all dwellings. This place presents many attractions for a permanent residence. One of the best collections of paintings and statuary in the United States is here, in the possession of Dr. Colhoun [Meredith Colhoun/Calhoun].<sup>ii</sup> Population about 5,000.

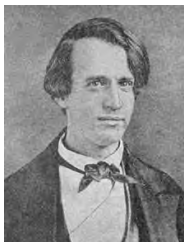
Huntsville received its name from Capt. John Hunt, a revolutionary soldier, the first settler, who located himself near the spring which supplies the city. The plot comprising the town was sold by the government, in 1809, to Leroy Pope, in his honor or that of his namesake in England, who wrote the *Essay on Man*, it was called Twickenham, the place of Pope's residence,



near London. It was, however, changed back to Huntsville, at the next session of the legislature. The Presbyterians and Methodists organized the first religious societies. Rev. Dr. Blackburn at first preached in the court house, and organized the first Presbyterian society. Among the first settlers, Gov. Clement C. Clay, father of the senator in congress of the same name; Gen. John Braham, receiver of public moneys; Col. John Read, merchant and register of the U. S. land office; Dr. Henry Chambers, a representative in congress; Gen. Benjamin Paterson, U. S. Marshal; Richard W. Anderson, an extensive land dealer; Stephen Neal, first sheriff of Madison county; Capt. Francis T. Mastin, merchant; James Clemens, father of Senator Clemens; James J. Donegan, president of the Northern Bank; Capt. Wm. Hale; Dr. Alex'r Erskine; Dr. Edmund Irby; Wm. Patton, merchant; Capt. Wm. Wyatt; Jesse S. Searcy; Lewis and William H. Winston; Benj. S. Pope; Saml. and Wm. O. Cruse; Alex. Gilbreath; John P. Hickman; T. G. Percy; Irby and Edwin Jones; Thomas and Wm. Brandon. [The article concludes with the inscriptions on the tombstones of Rev. John Allen, D. D.; Dr. David Moore; a monument placed in memory of John Anderson by Richard W. Anderson; Thomas and Pamela Bibb; and John Williams Walker.]



*Eias Coernelius*  
*(Library of*  
*Congress)*

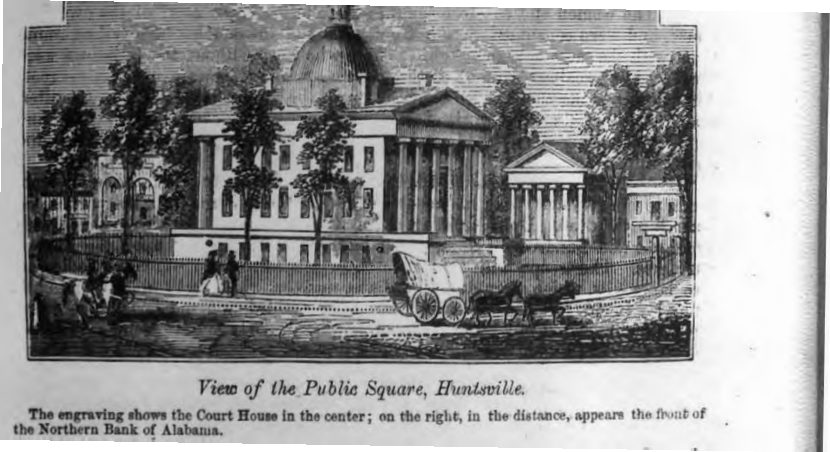


*John Warner*  
*Barber (from Our*  
*Whole Country)*



*Mr. Henry Howe*  
*(Library of Congress)*

Below: The square in Huntsville from John Warner Barber and Henry Howe, *Our Whole Country or the Past and Present of the United States Historical and Descriptive* 2 vols. (1861): 2: 820.



*View of the Public Square, Huntsville.*

The engraving shows the Court House in the center; on the right, in the distance, appears the front of the Northern Bank of Alabama.

