

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 32
Number 3 *Our Vanishing Heritage*

Article 6

9-22-2006

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Linda Bayer Allen

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Recommended Citation

Allen, Linda Bayer (2006) "The Horton-McCracken House," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 32: No. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol32/iss3/6>

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The Horton-McCracken House



The massive Doric columns of the Horton-McCracken house were constructed of brick and finished with a hard stucco coating. Local lore holds that the portico was a later addition; the sheer mass and scale of it against the more fragile frame house would seem to support this conjecture as does the crude manner in which the entablature meets the house wall without being carried across the facade. On the other hand, the timing of Rodah Horton's death leads one to wonder whether such a major alteration would have been undertaken by his widow. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

The antebellum Horton-McCracken house on Meridian Street survived long enough to be documented by HABS; but shortly thereafter, in the late 1940s, it became a teardown, to be replaced by a residential subdivision when Huntsville entered its most phenomenal period of expansion.

The house is believed to have been built for Rodah Horton, a wealthy Virginian, born in Staunton in 1794. He had immigrated to Huntsville by 1818, and began purchasing land in and around Huntsville in 1820. In 1824 Horton married

Lucy Ann Otey. The Oteys were from southwestern Virginia, arriving here about 1817; whether Rodah Horton and the Oteys were acquaintances in Virginia is not known, but their lives became entangled once in Madison County. In 1821 Horton purchased the section of land (640 acres) across the Meridianville Pike from the plantation of Walter Otey. It had been advertised in the *Republican* by its owner William B. Harris as “An Elegant Estate for Sale,” and was described as “formerly owned by Dr. Manning.” The ad raved about “The conveniences of the [house], the fertility of the soil, the great abundance of water and never failing springs, sites for water works, bordering immediately on the meridian road and within 7 miles of Huntsville.” Horton paid only \$10,800, a sum that was 40 percent of the price Harris had paid just two years earlier for the estate. The deed described the house as a mansion, leading one to assume that this became Rodah and Lucy Ann’s first home, later referred to as the “old residence.”¹

During the 1820s and ‘30s, Horton continued to purchase tracts, primarily north of Huntsville and occasionally in partnership with John Robinson with whose family he also shared a close connection through marriage. Lucy Ann, Rodah’s wife, had five siblings; her sister Caroline married John Robinson, another sister Mary Frances married his brother James B. Robinson, and yet a third sister Mariah married John W. Pruitt, who was a merchant in Meridianville. William Madison Otey, Lucy Ann’s brother, inherited the plantation lands on the east side of the Meridianville Pike that his father Walter Otey had settled.²

It was not till 1839 that Horton acquired the 160 acres on which he constructed his new homeplace, the Horton house. This land was on the west side of the Meridianville Pike (now Meridian Street), north of the Sparkman Drive overpass. The new mansion is believed to have been constructed circa 1843-44. The HABS photographs reveal that it was an eight-room, two-story, clapboarded frame house with a symmetrical five-bay façade, side-gabled roof, and exterior end chimneys. A massive, full-height, pedimented portico of four Doric columns may, or may not, have been added at a later date.³

The Meridianville Pike at that time was the principal road connecting Huntsville and Nashville making it an important route for importing goods from the north. Work on macadamizing the road had begun when the Madison Turnpike Company was incorporated in the mid-1830s to upgrade the section between Huntsville and the Green Bottom Inn (located on the campus of Alabama A&M University). The improved road was to be 30 feet wide with a road bed width of 21 feet. The city took bids in the spring of 1835 to surface this stretch and in the summer was still trying to hire sufficient men to complete the job. Then, in 1839, the Alabama legislature authorized the incorporation of the Meridianville and Hazel Green Turnpike Company to extend the macadamized road from Green Bottom Inn to the Tennessee line. Seven residents, including Rodah Horton and John Robinson, were appointed to sell shares of \$25 each to raise \$100,000 for the project. The riding surface was to be finished with nine inches of gravel, rising in the middle, with ditches on either side and stone culverts, and was to follow the route of the existing road but could deviate where the directors thought necessary. When five miles had been constructed, and the work approved by a group of independent observers, the company could begin collecting tolls at no more than three gates. The following year Rodah Horton and two other property owners deeded two acres to the Madison Turnpike Company for a toll gate and house, which presumably would have been about half-way between Huntsville and the Green Bottom Inn. Horton's only other identified brush with public service consisted of two terms as a state representative from 1836-38. ⁴

The intermarried Horton, Otey, and Robinson families built magnificent mansions during the 1840s and 1850s along the portion of Pike stretching from Huntsville to Meridianville. John Robinson and his wife Caroline (Otey) constructed Oaklawn in the mid-1840s; Rodah's house dated from the same period; and James Robinson and Mary Frances (Otey) built Forrestfield on the Pike (which was reputed to be identical to Oaklawn—however, since it was burned on the order of the Union Provost Marshall during the Civil War, the resemblance remains unconfirmed). Lucy Ann's brother William Otey constructed his house Greenlawn about a mile



The backsides of houses are seldom photographed; but as is the case here, the rear is very interesting, revealing three parallel gables running perpendicular to the front gable but obscured by it from view. Even more unusual are the chimneys which begin as exceedingly shallow exterior stacks, disappear behind the gables, and then pop out through the roof ridges. This treatment also appears at Greenlawn, hinting that the same architect/builder may have worked on both. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

south of Meridianville circa 1850, and Mariah (Otey) Pruitt and her husband resided in Meridianville. William, a third Robinson relation (either brother or cousin to John and James, depending on who is telling the tale) began construction of his house Quietdale on the east side of the Pike just south of Oaklawn; but William died in 1852, leaving his widow to oversee construction of the house, which was completed in the late 1850s.

Sadly, Rodah Horton did not live long to enjoy his new mansion. He died in 1846 at age 52 and was interred in Maple Hill Cemetery. He had made no will, thereby throwing his estate into years of probate court proceedings and leaving his widow



The only interior shots of the Horton house are of two fireplaces, neither of which had been altered to burn coal as were so many in the late 19th century when it became commercially available. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

and six children in a state of uncertainty, which lingered into the war years. Rodah had amassed not only extensive land holdings in Madison County but also a major plantation in Marengo County containing 1,361 acres that was managed by an overseer. The Marengo County estate inventory listed 115 slaves, 9,000 bushels of corn, 8,000 pounds of cotton, 2 cotton gins, and assorted mules, horses, oxen, cattle, and 230 hogs. The real estate inventory for Madison County included the homestead of 96 acres, 320 acres at the “old residence,” 280 acres north of the old residence, an additional 1,625 acres in several tracts in various locations, and two houses and lots in Huntsville proper. He also left 63 more slaves (many of whom were children), an additional 14,000 pounds of baled cotton, and 450 barrels of corn.⁵



This fireplace protruded into the room and was more ornate, having an engaged column on either side. Faintly visible on the back wall of the firebox are bits of the design left by a cast iron fireback that was installed to help reflect heat into the room and protect the masonry of the chimney base. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

Lucy Ann received as her dower right one-third of the real estate including the new homeplace on the Meridianville Pike, and one-fifth of the balance of the estate. She died in 1863 and is not listed in any Madison or Limestone county cemetery; the assumption is that she went south with her sisters (who had married the Robinson brothers) to her Marengo plantation as Union troops approached North Alabama and that she was buried there. Two of her sons, James E. and Rodah, had moved to land in Limestone County prior to the outbreak of war. It was James' son James E. Horton, Jr., who became famous as the Alabama judge who overturned the verdict and death sentence of Scottsboro Boy Haywood Patterson in 1933. Judge Horton



This view of the Horton-McCracken house was taken just two weeks after the house had been sold at public auction to pay mortgages on which the McCrackens had defaulted. The house looks as desolate as the March landscape. All the blinds are closed, boards are missing, and tall weeds surround the house. Although Laura McCracken died only the previous year, she may not have continued to live there by herself following the death of her sister in 1928. Photograph by W. N. Manning for HABS, 1934

was living in an antebellum house in Athens at the time of the trial, but his ruling in the Patterson case effectively killed any chance he might have had of being reelected to the circuit court. He bought 2,000 acres near Greenbrier the following year and moved his Athens house to the new plantation. The house still stands there today, still in the Horton family, the only surviving landmark to the events that Rodah Horton set in motion when he moved to Madison County more than a century earlier. ⁶

In 1871 the Horton place on Meridianville Pike was finally sold out of the family at a court-ordered auction. Frank Mastin was the high bidder at \$6,500; he owned

other land in the vicinity, never lived in the house, and died two years later. Eight more years passed before Mastin's heirs sold the property to Mary M. McCracken and her two daughters, Mary C. and Laura, who paid \$3,000 cash and financed the remaining \$1,400. The McCracken ladies became the only long-term occupants of the house. Unfortunately they seem to have been perennially short of cash—a situation common to many southerners during that period—on the evidence of their long list of mortgages. Probably in an effort to pay off debts, they sold 40 acres in 1887, and in 1892, they conveyed approximately one acre “being all of that tract of land known as the Horton tract lying east of the Meridianville Pike,” which left the McCrackens with a little less than 45 acres. Three years later the mother deeded her interest in the property to her two daughters and probably died shortly thereafter. Mary C. died in 1928 leaving her share of the house and furnishings to her cousin Sarah Leech. Mary's probate file reveals with startling clarity just how cash-strapped these people were: the final settlement listed \$18 in the bank, some chickens, a cow, and a little corn and cotton. In 1933 Laura McCracken also died—leaving two mortgages on the property still unpaid.⁷

By the middle of the Depression, with all the McCrackens deceased and no money in the estate to repay the debts, one of \$1,800 from 1915 and a second for \$995, the house was again sold at public auction in 1934 for \$7,000 to J. C. Smith, who held the two unpaid mortgages.⁸

It was at this point that HABS appeared to document the house. Interestingly, there are two almost identical photographs of the front façade taken one year apart by different photographers. The one dating from March 1934 shows a deteriorating, closed-up, apparently abandoned house. This would have been just days after the house had been sold to Smith, and the occupants had been absent for some time. The following year, HABS sent another photographer to the house; this picture reveals the house to still be in the same sad state of disrepair, but the blinds are open and a figure—perhaps Mr. Smith—is standing on the portico. The only two interior shots hint at long occupation, suggesting that perhaps the house was sold

with its contents, there not being any local heirs to collect them.

The saga of the Horton-McCracken house gets hazier as its end nears. Whether it was occupied by the new owner, rented, or sat vacant for the next ten years is not known, but in 1944 the property changed hands when Herbert Ray purchased it. At the time, Ray owned Ray Auto Company, the Ford dealership, on Meridian Street and also lived on Meridian Street north of Oakwood Avenue. As Huntsville boomed in the 1950s and '60s, his business became Ray & Pearman, and he moved to a new house on Echols Avenue.⁹

The Horton-McCracken house was demolished in 1949 and the land subdivided into lots for a new residential development called Colonial Hills (possibly a naive nod to the old mansion?). The subdivision entry is from Delaware Boulevard and the Horton house site extended south as far as Baxter Avenue. In 1967 a new elementary school also named Colonial Hills was constructed across Meridian Street, slightly north of the old house site; the school has since been renamed for Martin Luther King, Jr.¹⁰

Although the McCrackens owned and occupied the house for half a century, there was never enough money to make alterations or even undertake routine maintenance. The positive aspect of this situation is that the house was in almost original, if shabby, condition; the negative, is that people frequently consider run-down property as ripe for demolition and redevelopment, particularly when the community is prosperous and growing.

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 Diane Robey, Dorothy Scott Johnson, John Rison Jones, Jr., and Frances C. Roberts, *Maple Hill Cemetery, Phase One* (Huntsville, Alabama: The Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, 1995), 29; Dorothy Scott Johnson, *Madison County, Alabama Deed Books* (Huntsville, Alabama:

- Johnson Historical Publications, 1976), 53; Deed Book H, 250; Marriage Book 3, 326; Deed Book H, 434, Madison County, Alabama; Nancy Rohr, "The News from Huntsville," *Huntsville Historical Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1999, 12.
- 2 Nancy Rohr, *Incidents of the War: The Civil War Journal of Mary Jane Chadick*, (Huntsville, Alabama: Silver Threads Publishing, 2005), 59.
- 3 Deed Book R, 257, Madison County, Alabama.
- 4 *Acts of the General Assembly of Alabama, 1836-1838*, the original act for the Madison Turnpike Company could not be located, but Act 53 of 1836 referenced and amended the original act approved January 9, 1835; Act 133 approved February 2, 1839, established the Meridianville and Hazel Green Turnpike Company; James Record, *A Dream Come True, Vol. 1* (Huntsville, Alabama: James Record, 1970), 266.
- 5 Probate Case #1325, Madison County, Alabama.
- 6 Probate Case #2498, Madison County, Alabama; Chris Edwards and Faye Axford, *The Lure and Lore of Limestone County* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Portals Press, 1978), 34-35.
- 7 Deed Book RR, 130; Deed Book GGG, 408; Deed Book MMM, 570; Deed Book XXX, 549; Deed Book 77, 52; Deed Book 102, 555; Probate Case #7670, Madison County, Alabama.
- 8 Deed Book 141, 113, Madison County, Alabama.
- 9 Deed Book 165, 555, Madison County, Alabama.
- 10 1949 Madison County Tax Blank for Herbert Ray, n.p.