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The David Wade House



The house that David Wade built during the antebellum decades was located on the north side of Bob Wade Lane just east of Mt. Lebanon Road. It was a massive structure of solid brick, two tall stories above a raised basement. The giant wooden entablature was basically a false front that obscured the parallel gables behind and terminated the enormous portico of six rough Doric columns, set on simple, ground-level bases. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

The Wade house was constructed west of the Meridianville Pike by David Wade who had migrated to Madison County from Virginia when he was about 33 years old. His wife, also born in Virginia, was Eliza Grantland, and together they reared six children in Alabama. David made his first land purchase in April of 1817 when he acquired 640 acres for \$3,520, which became the heart of his plantation and the site where he constructed his extraordinary house. It is not known when he began construction; probably he first built a simple log house for his growing family while



The design of the portico was apparently unique in Madison County with its unstuccoed, brick columns rising two-and-a-half stories from the brick-paved ground with no porch at the main floor level. A crude set of wooden steps without railings provided access to the front door, which was a half-level above ground. Surely this arrangement was a later adaptation after the entry level porch was removed for whatever reason; a series of holes and discoloration on the front brick wall strongly support the removal of a more formal treatment, including simple pilasters at the corners of the facade. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935



Pat Jones, when writing about the house for the Huntsville Times, repeated a family story that the house was inspired by the image of a house on a clock that David Wade brought with him from Virginia. Close inspection does reveal that the lower panel of this mantel clock contains a house having the same general appearance as the Wade house. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

he made plans for his mansion and gathered materials. He must have made slow progress for when he wrote his will in 1857, he was living in the mansion, but it was not completed nor properly furnished. He died four years later, and his will directed “that my whole estate shall be kept together under the control and management of my executrix for the space of ten years at least...[and] I direct that my executrix shall have my mansion house in which I now live finished in good style and genteelly furnished at the expense of my estate—But I do not wish her to buy furniture at extravagantly high prices. . . .”

David Wade was most insistent that what he had amassed and built be maintained and remain in the family. Interestingly, he appointed his older daughter Amanda as his executrix and directed that he wished his “daughters Amanda and Harriet to live upon my plantation, and to be supported out of my estate, so long

as my estate shall be kept together; and occupy my manor house.” Neither Amanda nor Harriet married, both spent their entire lives in their father’s house, and Amanda ran the plantation until her death. David’s two sons challenged the appointment of



The fireplace mantels are of Greek Revival derivation, but they lack the boldness and scale that characterize the house. Naturally, only the mantels in the formal rooms would have been photographed, so those upstairs or in rear rooms may have been more influenced by Federal tastes. This mantel retains the traditional black finish. The wooden ceiling is unpainted. Nothing is known of the deer's history. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

Amanda as executrix, and a special administrator was designated by the court in 1862; but surviving records suggest that Amanda basically had control and her brothers were out of luck.¹

Just how well Amanda controlled her father's estate and the dispersal of her own estate was revealed on the day of her death in January 1895 at age 78. She took no chances that her executor or a court could ignore her wishes by the simple expedient of signing her will on the day she died, having previously deeded the plantation, manor house, all the stock, tools, machinery, and her personal property to her nephew Robert B. Wade. She retained a life estate, to include rents and profits from the plantation. (Harriet, who had kept house for Amanda, preceded her in death.) Amanda had signed, but not recorded, two additional deeds the previous October disposing of other property in her

possession: 700 acres in the Big Cove were given to another nephew, T. B. Wade; and an additional 100 acres, also in the Big Cove area, were deeded to her niece Mary Anne Mills. These three deeds were also recorded on the date of her death. Her will stated that she had conveyed the bulk of her property by deeds of gift, and



This two-room, brick structure behind the house reputedly was the original kitchen and dining room. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

she directed that her two remaining properties be sold for payment of her debts and the “remainder used for putting monuments over my grave.” Ironically, the Wade cemetery, located beyond the house, has no stones so it is impossible to know who was buried there and whether her wishes were ever carried out—the one request she could not control. ²

Robert B. Wade may have lived in the mansion from 1895 until 1940, but he owned it only sporadically, apparently suffering from a cash flow deficit. A peculiar relationship with Lena Garth began in 1916 when he sold her 845 acres for \$24,000, including “the land on which we now reside,” but excluding the livestock, agricultural equipment, 3,000 bushels of corn, 50 tons of hay, 4 tons cotton seed, a saw mill, engine and boiler. Presumably he continued to live there as a tenant since Lena resided on Franklin Street and already owned numerous other properties. In 1920 Robert repurchased the property “known as the Robert B. Wade homestead



Built to the same massive scale as the house, the smokehouse still stands today in excellent condition. A huge fireplace on the ground floor produced smoke to preserve the meat, which was hung from rafters on the upper level. The small, louvered side vents now have glass installed behind them. Photograph by Alex Bush for HABS, 1935

plantation.” But problems persisted; six years later he deeded the property to Allen J. Shamblin, his son-in-law, for assumption of a mortgage of \$30,000, to be paid as balance of the purchase money. Wade’s tax assessment for 1926 listed 480 acres on the north side of the road with improvements consisting of a six-room, two-story residence, two barns, and eight cabins. The following year the son-in-law and daughter deeded the property to Wade’s wife Fannie L. Wade for love and affection and assumption of the \$30,000 debt. By 1929, Lena Garth was again the owner when she purchased it for \$34,000 at public auction when the Wades could no longer stave off default on the mortgage. Lena Garth died in 1938 still in possession of the Wade plantation, and it was irretrievably lost by the Wade family when the trustees of her estate sold it in December 1941—just one year after Robert B. Wade died.³

The new owners Samuel and Jennie Harris were identified as farmers, but their residence initially was on East Clinton Avenue, leading one to suppose that they might have rented the Wade house, perhaps to the Wades or Shamblins, or perhaps it sat empty. The HABS photographs taken in the summer of 1935, while under the second ownership of Lena Garth, show interiors filled with furniture, mementos, and a stuffed deer head, indicating that the house continued to be occupied by someone. Pat Jones, writing about the house in the mid-1930s for the *Huntsville Times*, stated that it was then occupied by Rene Rush Shamblin, a granddaughter of Robert B. Wade.

Whether occupied or empty, the Wade house stood until 1952 when it was torn down and a new four-room concrete block house constructed. In 1954 the HARRISES deeded the western portion of their farm, which included the antebellum smokehouse, to Samuel, Jr., who erected a brick residence. The smokehouse, an imposing structure, still stands today as the last remnant of David Wade’s once outstanding plantation complex and of the struggling grandson who could not hold his inheritance together during perilous economic times, but who left his name on Bob Wade Lane.⁴

The impact that the David Wade house had on people is evident by its inclusion in the HABS archive. Four years later, Frances Benjamin Johnston chose it as one of

only four antebellum structures she photographed in Madison County. Johnston, a nationally renowned architectural photographer, had been commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation on behalf of the Library of Congress to photograph noteworthy antebellum structures in the South for which she spent two months working in Alabama. However, in the four years between the HABS session and the arrival of Johnston, deterioration of the Wade house became apparent; Johnston's photograph of the façade reveals that the boards of the entablature had begun to rot and drop off. Yet the house stood for another dozen years.⁵

LINDA BAYER ALLEN

Notes

- 1 Dorothy Scott Johnson, *Cemeteries of Madison County, Alabama, Vol. I* (Huntsville, Alabama: Johnson Historical Publications, 1971) 160; Deed Book C, 107; Will Book 1, 277; Probate Case #2444, Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Will Book 2, 409; Deed Book 75, 401 & 403, Madison County, Alabama; Johnson, 160.
- 3 Deed Book 111, 379; Deed Book 119, 421; Deed Book 123, 562; Deed Book 134, 100; Deed Book 138, 157, Madison County, Alabama.
- 4 1953 Madison County Tax Blank for Samuel Harris, n.p.; Deed Book 216, 78, Madison County, Alabama.
- 5 David Robb, "The 1939 Tennessee Valley Architectural Photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston," *Historic Huntsville Quarterly of Local Architecture and Preservation*, Vol. XXVI, Nos. 1&2, Spring/Summer 2000, 4.