

Antebellum Architecture

OF UPPER TALLADEGA COUNTY

IN 1834, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT began removing the Native American population from what had been the Muskogee-Creek Nation—millions of acres of tribal land straddling the states of Georgia and Alabama. Most of that territory was then ceded to Alabama, and one particularly promising portion was designated as Talladega County. The pioneer families who settled the upper county—most relocating from South Carolina and Georgia—were the expected farmers and planters, but also attorneys, physicians, merchants, tradesmen, ministers and teachers who established the town they named Talladega as the county seat. Over time, the settlers' original utilitarian log buildings would be expanded or replaced with a more conscious regard for architecture.

Architecture as a profession barely existed in the United States before the 1850s.¹ In the nation's early years, a small number of professionally educated architects had emigrated from England, Ireland and France, but the design of most buildings was dictated by the owner and carried out by builders, carpenters and masons working without detailed plans or specifications. They copied what they pleased from pattern books, such as *The Young Carpenter's Assistant; or, A System of Architecture, Adapted to the Style of Building in the United States*. As a result, construction in the New England colonies emulated the architecture of Georgian England.

But after the nation gained its independence and began expanding southward, the neoclassical aesthetic came to the forefront in buildings that reflected the simplicity of ancient Greek temples. Towering colonnades, as exemplified by the Parthenon, set the standard for monumental civic architecture as well as the quintessential Southern plantation mansion.² But planters' homes in upper Talladega County were in a less conspicuous style known to some as Plantation Plain, which was influenced by the 16th-century Italian villas of the architect Andrea Palladio and his studies of ancient Roman architecture. The Palladian influence that emerged from Italy's Mediterranean climate and rural ambiance was ideally suited to wood-frame construction in the American South.

Palladian characteristics include strict symmetry, not only in a building's exterior elevations but also in its floor plan; an abundance of oversized windows to admit sunlight and provide ventilation; and the adherence to the 1:1.618 proportion known as the "golden mean." Its main aesthetic consideration was the design of the portico (porch) centered on the façade and consisting of a triangular pediment supported by simple columns to create an attractive, welcoming entrance.

1. Only after the Civil War were schools of architecture established, first at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1868, followed by Cornell University (1871), the University of Illinois (1873), Columbia University (1881) and Tuskegee Institute (1881).

2. In *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, John Michael Vlach wrote: "There were in 1860 [throughout the Southern states] only about 2,300 truly large plantations, and perhaps only half of these were developed to the state of elegance promoted by widespread mythology."

The lure of what was called “Alabama fever” persuaded several wealthy families to sell their established plantations in Georgia, purchase vast tracts of the former tribal land in Talladega County and move every transportable item and animal they owned hundreds of miles. Classified as *planters*, as opposed to *farmers*, on the basis of the number of acres and enslaved laborers they controlled, these families immediately faced the challenge of constructing homes for themselves (and often for their extended family) as well as quarters for their slaves and various out buildings to serve what amounted to independent agricultural communities. Planter families represented about five percent of Talladega County’s settlers and automatically became the upper echelon of its citizenry.³ Planters could afford to build homes that were thoughtfully designed for comfortable living and entertaining—houses that were conceived architecturally.

The surviving plantation homes in the upper county bear a remarkable similarity to one another in both plan and appearance. Most were of wood-frame and clapboard construction with wood-shingle roofing, brick chimneys, and brick foundations. The most common layout resembled an inverted T: a rectangular block containing the entry and common rooms joined perpendicularly by a rear wing of bedrooms. On each floor, rooms were aligned along a wide central hall while a nearby outbuilding housed the kitchen. Large windows and ceilings as high as fifteen feet helped make the intense summer heat tolerable. The most distinctive feature of the exteriors was the entrance portico. Some were one-storied and others two, but owing to the limitations of the local lumber mills, wooden columns were limited to the height of a single story.

Plantation life in East Alabama lasted only 25 years, abruptly curtailed by the Civil War. At war’s end, Union troops swept through Talladega County, slowing only to torch the town’s railroad depot, loot nearby homes and businesses, and demolish a nearby ironworks. The outlying farms and plantations were spared. Several of these homes remain standing outside the town of Munford. They were constructed by Negro slaves under the direction of country builders, none of whose names is known.

The Jemison-Turner Home

Off Turner Mill Rd, near Eastaboga Rd.

Robert H. Jemison (1788 to 1870), a 45-year-old native of Lincoln County, Georgia, was already a wealthy planter and slave holder in Perry County, Alabama, when he relocated his family and plantation to upper Talladega County. In 1833, he purchased one square mile (640 acres) of land on Cheaha Creek⁴ from four Indians—Osio-Yoholo, Ochub Pecca Hadjo, Talladega-Hadjo and Choccolocco-Hadjo—for \$2,650. The father of four sons who were coming of age, he was a man intent on building a dynasty in the upper county. In addition to cultivating cotton, he developed a sandstone quarry and established a sawmill on Cheaha Creek. His ongoing acquisition of land would make him one of Talladega County’s most influential men.

Jemison and his first wife were the parents of four sons and a daughter. Each would begin their married life with a gift from their father: a plantation that included a fine home on hundreds of acres and dozens of enslaved laborers.⁵ Three of the houses Jemison built for his family have survived. Two of them—the Jemison-Turner Home and the Cedars—are thoughtfully designed and unlike any other house in the county. Constructed around 1838, the Jemison-Turner Home may be the oldest of all the surviving structures there. It stands in ruin today (2024), but

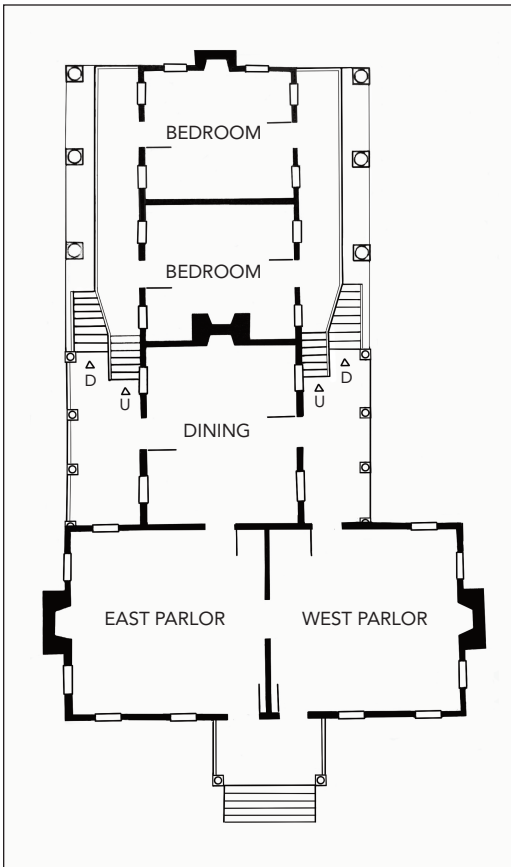
3. The ownership of slaves wasn’t limited to plantation owners. Farmers who cultivated cotton depended on Black field hands, and many professionals owned slaves who tended their kitchen gardens, worked as household servants and assisted with their businesses.

4. The English family’s 960-acre farm on the north side of Cheaha Creek adjoined the Jemison plantation, and the two families enjoyed a neighborly relationship that included sharing a cemetery and exchanging land along their shared property line.

5. The 1851 marriage of Robert H. Jemison’s daughter Mary May to William Curry merged the upper county’s two most prominent families. William was the son of William Curry, Sr., a planter and merchant. Jemison is said to have given them the nearby Willow Glen plantation. There is no trace of it today.



Historic Photo of the Jemison-Turner Home, Undated



The Upper-Level Floor Plan



Gallery Balustrade Detail



Façade (Its Portico Having Been Removed)



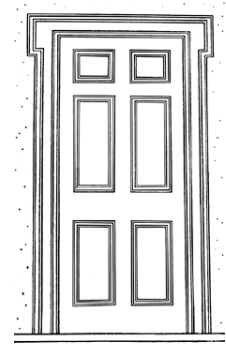
North Elevation



North Gallery

what remains clearly underscores its singular architectural significance.

The front main block is a single story raised nearly six feet on brick piers. Its façade featured a Palladian-style portico supported by a pair of Tuscan columns;⁶ two separate entry doors, each in the Cross-and-Bible style with a glass transom above; and four windows with louvered shutters. The two-room plan (without a center hall) resulted in each entry door opening into one of the side-by-side parlors. One parlor was apparently used informally by the family while the other was reserved for receiving guests. Because the main block is one storied, there was no need for a central hall to contain a staircase; this increased the size of the parlors.⁷ (The parlors are possibly connected by a doorway through their common wall.) Elegant Federal-style mantels and interior woodwork are said to remain in the parlors and have been described as “exceptionally fine and intact.”



Cross-and-Bible Door

The off-centered, two-storied rear wing contains the spacious dining room, accessed from the east parlor and opened on either side to galleries with wide, overhanging roofs. The galleries’ split-level configuration joining the main block and rear wing is unique. Stepped up were two bedrooms opening on either side to the galleries. Flights down led to three rooms on the ground level, possibly bedrooms although their function is less clearly defined.

The mind behind the Jemison-Turner Home (as well as the Cedars) is unknown, but the building’s ingenious design and enduring construction were by no means haphazard. What stands out initially is the two-storied rear wing that was enabled by the main block being elevated (a characteristic of antebellum homes on the Gulf Coast). The dining room—the one room where the entire family gathered throughout the day—is positioned at the center of the house and easily accessed. Each of the two upper-level bedrooms has four or six windows and two doors opening to the galleries, ensuring plenty of daylight, shade and cross ventilation during the steamy summer months. Four brick chimneys heated the interiors in winter, while the bedrooms’ less lofty ceilings would have helped keep them cozy.

Two features of the house are easily overlooked: The long upper galleries are cantilevered from the house without touching the row of Tuscan columns that stand on tall plinths. Those columns support only the overhanging roof. Finally, there is the elegance and refined workmanship revealed in what remains of the gallery balustrade.

The house passed from the Jemisons to the Turners and finally the Randalls. At some point, it was expanded with the ruinous addition of a row of narrow bedrooms to the west side of the rear wing. The west galleries thus became dark interior hallways leading to the added rooms. Uninhabited since the 1970s, the Jemison-Turner Home still stands, although its future remains in doubt. The collapsing portico has been removed to a storage facility by the nonprofit Alabama Trust for Historic Preservation.

The Cedars

590 Cheaha Rd.

Located about six miles northeast of the Jemison-Turner Home, the Cedars is its well-preserved twin, evidently constructed in the late 1830s by the same builder for an unidentified member of the Jemison family.⁸ It took its name from the trees said to have once lined its approach. While the main block is less elevated than the Jemison-Turner Home,

6. Tuscan columns are similar to the Greek Doric order, but without vertical fluting.

7. Of the surviving upper county homes, only the Jemison-Turner and Cedars were built with two separate, side-by-side entrances.

8. Whether Robert Jemison constructed the Cedars for himself or one of his sons is unclear. The most likely possibility: that the Cedars was a wedding gift for his eldest son, Samuel Jemison (1820-62), who married in June 1840. Ten years later, the Federal Census of 1850 credits Samuel with 840 acres and 35 slaves, as well as a sawmill and grist mill.

it has the same double entries and split-level configuration of the bedroom wing. The variations are subtle: Windows on the façade are spaced differently, and the Cedars' more elaborate portico rises higher, supported by paired square columns rather than single Tuscan columns.

The first identifiable owner of the Cedars and its surrounding property was Joseph Camp, a farmer and self-trained Methodist-Episcopal minister. He apparently bought this Jemison home in the late 1850s. Camp, his first wife and their son had arrived from Georgia in 1833. The son of a judge, he purchased tribal land just north of the settlement known as Talladega and was one of the pioneers who voted for it to become the county's seat. In addition to preaching and farming, he apparently speculated in upper-county real estate. Beginning in 1839, he purchased numerous forty-acre parcels from the federal government. By 1850, he owned 14 slaves, hardly enough to work a plantation. At the Cedars in 1870, corn was the farm's main crop.

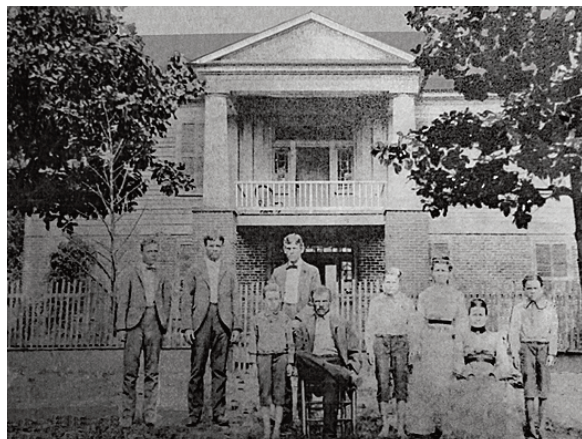


Today, the beautifully restored plantation house represents both the Cedars and the Jemison-Turner Home as they appeared in their heyday. Its parlors retain the original mantels and woodwork, and the several additions to the rear wing are in keeping with the original architecture. At present, the house is operated as a bed-and-breakfast inn. A cemetery set aside for slaves is located a short distance down Cheaha Road.

Sunnyside Plantation House Curry Station Rd.

Robert Jemison built Sunnyside in about 1848, possibly as the wedding gift for his second eldest son, Robert S. Jemison (1824-70), who had recently married. According to the 1850 census, young Robert's property included the house with 900 surrounding acres (valued at \$9,000) and 33 slaves. (This left the senior Jemison with 4,125 acres valued at \$50,000 and 119 slaves, who were considerably more valuable than his real estate.)

The Jemison Family at Sunnyside, Undated



The two-storied house stood on a knoll overlooking Cheaha Creek. Both levels of the main block were bisected by a central hall, with two rooms on each side. The first story is of brick construction; the upper story, of wood frame and clapboard; and there are four brick chimneys. Visually, the most distinctive feature is the portico and elegant entry. Tall brick piers support fat Tuscan columns flanking a balcony. In *Historic Architecture in Alabama*, Robert Gamble describes an innovation in Sunnyside's design: "Surely among the most unusual solutions to the problem of ventilation was to be found at Sunnyside, near Talladega ... a hallway that branched at the rear to create an unusual, loggia-like back hall enclosed winter and summer only by slatted jalousies, in the West Indian manner."



Historic Photo of Sunnyside, Undated

Robert Jemison lived eighty-two years, long enough to see that the legacy he dreamt of—each of his heirs happily established on a thriving plantation in the upper county—would never be realized. In 1858, two of his sons—Robert S. Jemison and Elbert Sevier Jemison (1835-96)—migrated to northeastern Texas, leaving the ownership of Sunnyside to their brother Shadrach Mims Jemison (1827-97). The patriarch Robert Jemison died in 1870 and was buried at the Sunnyside Cemetery.⁹ His legacy would be far different from anything he intended. The Civil War that doomed his way of life emancipated hundreds of Black men, women and children who would take the Jemison surname for themselves. The 1950 census for the county listed 223 people who identified as Jemisons, only seven of whom were white.¹⁰



The house remained in the family following Robert's death, but was eventually sold. Today, Sunnyside has a commanding presence on Curry Station Road, overlooking Cheaha Creek. While its interiors are thought to have been considerably altered, the exterior of the main block of the house is well preserved.

The J.L.M. Curry Home

Hwy. 21, near Eastaboga Rd.

William Curry (1793 to 1855) was every bit as wealthy and well-to-do as Robert Jemison. Both planters were born in Lincoln County, Georgia, two hundred miles to the east, where Curry owned 7,000 acres. They relocated their plantations side by side in upper Talladega County, Curry having purchased what was known as Kelly's Springs. His 1,100-acre plantation included a country store that also served as the upper county's U.S. Post Office, and as a result, the area became known as Curry Station. By 1850, Curry owned 10,335 acres, a thousand of which were farmed, and his enslaved workforce numbered 112.

He died at age 62 in 1855, and no trace of the family's original plantation home, described as "a two-story building of ample proportions," remains. The structure known today as the Curry Home was built by William's son Jackson C.

9. Alex and Margaret English's first two children died in infancy in 1840 and 1842, and were buried in a lovely spot on their property that overlooked Cheaha Creek. Other family members followed. It appears that the Jemison family eventually purchased that portion of the English property and added a walled and gated plot for their relations. Taken altogether, this is Sunnyside Cemetery, the final resting place of Englishes, Jemisons, Currys, Bests and other families.

10. Mae Carol Jemison became the first African American woman astronaut to fly into space. In September 1992, she orbited the earth 127 times. Her family traces its roots to the Jemison plantations of Talladega County.



Historic Photo of the Curry Home, Undated



Curry, who sold it to his newly married brother J.L.M. (Jabez) Curry in 1847.¹¹ Three years later, Jabez is said to have moved the relatively small, single-storied house several miles to a site on McIntosh Trace near Idlewild Plantation.

Jabez Curry (1825 to 1903) was a young Harvard-educated attorney¹² who would become one of the state's historical leading figures. He was elected to the Alabama State Legislature in 1847 and went on to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1857 until resigning at the outbreak of the Civil War. Commissioned as a lieutenant-colonel in the Confederate Army, he served as a staff aide to General Joseph E. Johnston and General Joseph Wheeler.

His family occupied this house during that war. Although Curry had owned 19 slaves in 1850, orated in favor of secession and prominently served the Confederacy, he returned from the war an advocate of national unity and free universal education for both races, arguing that by being made in God's image the Negro child "has the same indefensible right to the unfolding of his powers, the exertion of his faculties." It's said that Curry "did more than any one other man to encourage the expansion and improvement of the public school system and the establishment of training schools for teachers throughout the South." He is also remembered as president of Howard College (Samford University), as a professor of history and literature at Richmond College (Virginia) and as a U.S. diplomat to Spain.

Jabez Curry was a remarkable man from a wealthy family, yet his single-story home was comparatively modest. The foundation is of slave-made brick; the exterior walls, hand-hewn clapboard. A wide colonnaded veranda wraps across the front and two sides; the parapet over its square piers conceals the structure's low gabled roof, giving it the appearance of being flat roofed. The interior consists of four large main rooms opening from the center hall, with smaller rooms beyond. The room that served as Curry's office is said to be lined with the original bookshelves. A central chimney and large fireplaces provided heat for two rooms, while the kitchen was located in an outbuilding. In 1965, the J.L.M. Curry Home was designated a National Historic Landmark.

The B.W. Groce Home

Eastaboga Rd.

Dr. Benton Walton Groce (1820-95) of Lincoln County, Georgia, graduated from the Augusta Medical College in 1842. He was a recently widowed physician when he arrived in Talladega County about 1843, his young bride having died two months after their wedding. He purchased a hundred acres and married Caroline McElderry, the 19-year-old daughter of Thomas McElderry. Dr. Groce balanced his medical career with his prominence in state politics. He was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives and also represented the county as its state senator throughout the Civil War. He owned 26 slaves in 1860. The family's story-and-a-half home, most likely built in the mid 1840s, is probably typical of well-appointed residences of that time and place.¹³

11. Jackson and his family relocated to Perry County in south Alabama, from whence the Jemison family had come.

12. As an attorney, J.L.M. Curry oversaw the probate of the estate of Alex English, father of James S.C. English, in 1851.

13. Groce wrote the obituary of Alex English, father of James S.C. English, that was published in a Talladega newspaper in 1851.



Historic Photo of the B.W. Groce Home, Undated



The Montgomery Plantation House 8232 Eastaboga Rd.

About 1838, James Madison Montgomery (1797 to 1878) and his family moved from Jackson County, Georgia, to Talladega County, where he purchased land above Choccolocco Creek, an area that would become known as Eastaboga. There, he established a thriving cotton plantation, manned in 1850 by 53 slaves. The original two-storied plantation house is of typical wood-frame and clapboard construction with brick chimneys. Four square piers support the portico's wide, low-rising pediment. A kitchen outbuilding once stood behind the house, only steps from the Montgomery family cemetery.¹⁴



The Montgomery Plantation House

Idlewild Plantation Home 1279 Eastaboga Rd.

Two military men, General William Blount McClellan (1798 to 1891) and Colonel Thomas W. McElderry (1790 to 1883), moved their families from Morgan County in north central Alabama to Talladega County in about 1838. It was a territory McElderry knew from having served with Andrew Jackson's Tennessee Volunteers at the Battle of Talladega during the Creek War in 1813. McClellan had owned several plantations in Morgan County and, as a graduate of West Point, served as brigadier general of the local militia there. Owing to his experience as a member of the Alabama House of Representatives, he was appointed state senator for the new Talladega district.

Construction of the McClellan family's Idlewild Plantation home, east of Talladega town and west of the enormous Jemison and Curry plantations, was completed by his enslaved workforce around 1843. The two-storied brick house was the most imposing residence in the upper county. A local historian later wrote: "No home in all the country was more delightful or more hospitable. It was a charming home, and a delightful household that one could not forget." Only two families have owned Idlewild throughout its history. The original two-storied portico (most likely similar to Sunnyside's) was later replaced by full-height columns and a cantilevered balcony. The original kitchen structure remains standing behind the house. Upgrades and additions were architecturally designed and executed with attention to the building's historical context. As a result, Idlewild is said to remain remarkably unchanged after almost two centuries.

14. The neighboring plantation was owned by Isaac Kirksey, whose granddaughter, Maude Hunter Kirksey, would marry James S.C. English there in 1878. Only the Kirksey family cemetery remains, overlooking Eastaboga Rd., indicating where their home once stood.



Idlewild Plantation House



The McElderry Home

The Thomas W. McElderry Home 3086 McElderry Rd.

McElderry (1790 to 1883) had represented Morgan County in the state senate from 1828 to 1829 before partnering with McClellan in relocating to Talladega County. Among his land purchases was a large portion of Chinnabee Town, as the settlement of Chief Selocta Chinnabee was known.¹⁵ The family's two-storied home with its stacked portico mirrored the original design of Idlewild, but in clapboard rather than brick. It is said to have been fully restored in the early 20th century and inhabited ever since. Each level of the portico is supported by two pairs of Tuscan columns beneath a classic Palladian pediment.

By 1850, sixty-year-old Thomas McElderry's holdings included 3,280 acres, 650 of which were farmed, valued at \$20,000.¹⁶ A decade later, he estimated the value of his real estate at \$40,000 and his property (including slaves) at \$85,500. Five years after the Civil War, his entire wealth had been reduced to an estimated \$10,000. He died in 1883 and was buried in the family cemetery at Chinnabee beside the second of his three wives. One year later, a post office was established there, and the community became known as McElderry Station. Later in the decade, the newly constructed 53-mile Anniston and Atlantic Railroad connecting Anniston and Sylacauga skirted the McElderry property.

—Don Roberts

15. McElderry may have become acquainted with Chinnabee during his time as a Tennessee Volunteer. The chieftan had sided with the United States and fought under Andrew Jackson in the Creek and Seminole Wars in 1813. As a respected Muscogee-Creek leader, Chinnabee traveled to Washington to sign the Treaty of 1826, after which President John Quincy Adams presented him with a silver medal. Out of respect, McElderry allowed Chinnabee to continue living on the McElderry plantation. Chinnabee died in his home there in 1836, just prior to the removal of Talladega County's Indian population, and was buried on the site of his home. His grave was dedicated in 1900 as a historical landmark.

16. One of McElderry's daughters had then married a son of Dr. B.W. Groce; another would marry into the Jemison family.