Charity House
5.0 mi. N of the intersection of
State Rte. 32 and County Rte. 1
Memphis
Pickens County
Alabama

HABS No. AL-871

HABS
ALA
54-MEM,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HABS ALA, 54-MEM, 2-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. AL-871

CHARITY HOUSE

Location: 5.0 miles north of the intersection of State Route 32 and County Route 1, Memphis, Pickens County, Alabama.

USGS Pickensville 7 1/2' Quadrangle, UTM Coordinates: 16.378035.3666865.

Present Owner: United States of America (August 1978).

Present Use: Vacant.

Significance: The Charity House, a one-room rectangular house with a later single-room addition to the rear, is an example of a single-pen plan, the most basic folk house type in rural Alabama. Probably dating between 1885 and 1900, the house was associated during the 20th century with a Black family named Charity, and the bootlegging activities of Tom Charity.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Local historical information, house type, and architectural and structural details suggest a late nineteenth or early twentieth century date of erection. Mrs. Hugh Wyatt Cooper stated that the house was standing in 1922, the year she was married. According to Mr. John Lee, the house appeared old during the 1930s. Information from Miss Ernestine Parker suggests that the association of the house with the Charity family goes back as far as the early twentieth century.

   The Charity house is constructed of timber cut with a circular saw. The screen door of the south room has a row of small balusters of a type common to the period of 1890 through 1910. The upper sash of the western four-over-four windows on the north elevation of the original part of the house is glazed with lights which in size and quality appear to date from 1860 to 1890.

   The original plan of the Charity House, a single slightly rectangular room, is an example of a single-pen house, the basic folk house type of the Deep South. Using Eugene Wilson's typology in Alabama Folk Houses, the frame construction and brick piers and chimneys characterize the "third generation" single-pen house, the final stage of evolution in this folk house type. According to Wilson, most third generation houses in Alabama date from 1875 to 1920. (Wilson, pp. 25, 26, 30)

2. Architect: Unknown.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The Charity House is situated on a tract of land acquired by the United States of America as part of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Project and described as follows:

> "All that tract or parcel of land lying and being in Fractional Section 22, Township 22 South, Range 17 West, Huntsville Meridian, Pickens County, Alabama, being all of Block 12 of the original plat of the Town of Memphis, Alabama." Deed Book "W", p. 488, Office of the Judge of Probate of Pickens County, Carrollton Alabama. Containing 5.00 acres, more or less..."

The East Tennessee Title Company, under contract to the United States Army Corps of Engineers, could not establish clear title for the last resident, Earnest Coleman. Two adverse possession affidavits, recorded in Deed Book 120, Probate Office of Pickens County, Carrollton, Alabama, were filed. The affidavit signed by William D. King III, dated September 24, 1975, recorded in Book 120, p. 302, states that Coleman had been in possession of the property for 40 years, as does that affidavit signed by Annie Mae Cooper, dated October 15, 1975, recorded in Book 120, p. 804. Both affidavits state that Earnest Coleman, and his predecessors in title exercised, to the signer's knowledge the following acts of possession:

> "They have assessed the same for taxes and have paid the taxes thereon, have cultivated the soil and harvested the crops therefrom, have grown and harvested timber thereon, have erected fencing and buildings thereon and maintained the same, and have exercised the various other acts of ownership which are customarily performed by an owner over his land during this time".

According to Miss Ernestine Parker and Mrs. Hugh Wyatt Cooper, the property had previously been owned by Tom Coleman, also known as Tom Charity, who is believed to have been Earnest Coleman's father.

In 1975 the property was acquired by the United States of America (Warranty Deed, October 15, 1975, Deed Book 120, p. 799-801)

Further attempts to trace the title have been unsuccessful. The deeds in Pickens County are unabstracted, and the names Charity and Coleman do not appear in the index. The Pickens County Courthouse burned in 1875, so there are no records prior to this date.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Unknown.

5. Original construction: The current plan of the house consists of two rooms, one forming an ell off the back of the other, with no interior connecting door.

   The original plan of the house consisted of a single rectangular room, approximately 15' x 13' with an outside end chimney at the eastern gable end. The front door is slightly off center, toward the chimney end, and is flanked on either side by windows. The back door (at the southeast corner) of this room is probably original or added at the time of the rear addition. This plan is an example of the single-pen house, described by Eugene Wilson in Alabama Folk Houses (p. 25) as one of the four basic folk house types of the state and "the oldest folk house type in the Deep South". According to Wilson's typology, the frame construction and brick fireplace and piers are features of a "third generation" (ca. 1875-1920) single-pen house.

6. Alterations and additons: Structural evidence (See Part II., Architectural Information.) Indicates that an ell, consisting of a single rectangular room, approximately 11' x 13'-6", was added to the south (rear) of the original house. Side porches were added on both sides of this ell.

   At some point the sills at the southeast corner of the north room were apparently damaged and were replaced with wood of a smaller dimension. Except for the upper sash of the western windows on the northern facade, the window lights of the house have all been replaced. The front door (of the north room) is a modern, plain-surface hollow core door.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the House:

The longest known resident of the Charity House was Tom Coleman, also known as Tom Charity. Charity, who, according to Mrs. Hugh Wyatt Cooper, was believed to be the father of Earnest Coleman, the last resident of the house, died during the 1960s. Tom Charity was well known locally as a bootlegger. According to John Lee, Charity made a good rye whiskey which he sold at his house, and was seldom bothered by the law. Lee, who had owned a cotton gin in nearby Dancy, Alabama, stated that Tom Charity also grew a small crop of cotton.

Also a long-time resident of the house was a woman known as "Aunt Charity." According to Miss Ernestine Parker, who had once lived nearby in Memphis, Tom Charity was believed to be Aunt Charity's son. However, a less reliable source, and article titled "Old Memphis Tombs Signal For Ghosts", appearing in the Jackson, Mississippi, Clarion Ledger on November 21, 1952, makes reference to Aunt Fanny Charity and Tom Charity, "her gigilo Junior of about 60."

The Charity house sits about 0.1 mile away from one of the main roads of Memphis, Alabama, near the center of the town. Once a thriving river town during the height of the steamboat trade on the Tombigbee River in the mid 19th century, Memphis became a small rural Negro community in the 20th century. (See HABS No. AL-869)

C. Sources of Information

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Records, Probate Office, Pickens County Courthouse, Carrollton, Alabama.

Interviews:

Miss Ernestine Parker, Vice President, Merchants and Farmers Bank, Macon, Mississippi, June 20 and 30, 1978. Miss Parker, a former resident of Memphis, Alabama who lived near the Charity House, provided information about the Charity family.

Mr. John Lee, Dancy, Alabama, June 29 and 30, 1978. Mr. Lee, a local historian who owned property near Memphis, Alabama, provided information about Tom Charity.

Mrs. Hugh Wyatt Cooper, 109 Wayne St., Macon, Mississippi, July 7, 1978. Mrs. Cooper, widow of a former Memphis resident, provided information about Memphis and the Charity-Coleman family.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Clark, Alleen, "Old Memphis Tombs Signal For Ghosts." Clarion Ledger, Jackson, Mississippi. November 21, 1952.

Wilson, Eugene, Alabama Folk Houses (Montgomery, Alabama: Alabama Historical Commission, 1975).

Prepared by: Michael Ann Williams
Assistant Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
August 1978

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This house is an example of a single-pen house that has been enlarged by the addition of a single room at the rear.

2. Conditon of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: This one-story house measures 22'-4" (three-bay front) by 33'-10" in overall dimensions. It consists of the orignal front room (15'-2" by 13'-1"), the added back room (11'-2" by 13'-6"), and attached porches on three sides. Chimney height above grade is 19'-6".

2. Foundations: There is a collection of foundation materials including pedestals of cast concrete, brick masonry and concrete blocks. The house is raised approximately 18" above grade on these pedestals and left unenclosed below floor level.

3. Wall construction, finish and color: The exterior walls originally consisted of horizontal weatherboards nailed to wood studs. The walls have been resurfaced with asphalt siding, gray in color.

4. Structural system, framing: Under the house reveals differences in the manner of setting the joists and the joining of the sills between the north (front) and south (back) rooms, indicating different construction dates for the two rooms. The sills of the north (original one-room house) are joined at the northeast corner by means of a tongue-and-groove. In contrast, the sills of the south room (addition) are joined at the southeast corner by a lap. (The low height of the building on the east side prevented inspection of the sill joints on that side. The sills at the southeast corner of the northern room have been replaced by wood of smaller dimensions.) The floor joists of the north room, which run north-south, are 2 x 6s, notched 1", with 5"

of wood resting above the sill. The floor joists of the south room, which run east-west, are 2 x 8s, notched 3 1/2", with 4 1/2" of wood resting above the sill. The southern sill of the north room is notched to receive the east and west sills of the southern room.

5. Porches: An L-shaped porch (approximately 4'9" in depth) runs the lengths of the north and west sides of the house. A smaller porch is located along the south end of the east side. A single block of solid concrete measuring roughly 2' in width, 8" in depth and 10" in height serves as a step to the latter porch but is not physically attached to it. Porches have plank flooring laid perpendicular to the adjacent walls. Planks vary in width from 4" to 6".

6. Chimneys: There are two exterior, gable-end chimneys. The east chimney rises in two sections, the lower being 4' wide, the upper being 2'-3" wide. The south chimney also rises in two sections, the lower being 3' wide, the upper being 2'-3" wide. Both chimneys are brick, covered with a stucco-like coating.

7. Openings:

   a. Doorways and doors: The only doors are exterior doors. The principal entrance is on the north and consists of a single, two-panel wood door (approximately 2'-10" by 6'-10") set into a simple, undecorated wooden frame. Opening from the front room onto the southeast rear porch is a four-panel wood door (approximately 2'-10" by 6'-10") in a simple wood frame. A wood door with eight window lights opens from the south room onto the southeast porch. Frame widths average four inches. There are screen doors at all three entrances.

   b. Windows and shutters: On the north and west facades, are four-over-four double hung windows. Each window is approximately 2' wide, and 5' tall.

8. Roof:

   a. Shape, covering: The roof arrangement consists of two gable roofs intersecting at a right angle. The roof of the original front section of the house rised approximately 1'3" higher than the roof of the rear addition. Both roofs are covered with standing seam galvanized metal sheeting.

Over the north, west and east porches are shed roofs, having about the same slope as the main gable roofs to which they are adjacent. These shed roofs are covered in green asphalt roofing shingles.

b. Cornice, eaves: The gable roofs overhang the walls at the gable ends by approximately 4" and have 4"-wide fascia boards. Horizontal edges of gabled roofs extend 8" to 12" beyond the walls. There are no fascia boards used along these edges. Lower edges of shed roofs extend approximately 8" beyond their support posts.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The house consists of only two rooms, arranged in an L-shaped plan. The smaller rear room has no interior door connecting it with the front room.

2. Flooring: Tongue-and-groove hardwood flooring.

3. Wall and ceiling finish: The gypsum-board walls are unpainted. The ceiling consists of tongue-and-groove boards.

4. Decorative features and trim: Mantel in the front room is the only noteworthy feature and is an example of a folk interpretation of classical elements.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces north in a yard enclosed with a barbed wire fence.

2. Outbuildings: Approximately 20 feet east of the northeast corner of the house is gable-roofed shed roughly 14 feet wide and 16 feet deep. Approximately 90 feet east of the house is an outhouse roughly 5 feet wide and 4 feet deep.

Prepared by: James Murray Howard
Project Supervisor
Historic American Buildings Survey
August 1978

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of the documentation done during the 1978 Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Project, undertaken by HABS in cooperation with the Interagency Archeological Services, Atlanta, and cosponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile and Nashville Districts, in compliance with Executive Order 11593, as a mitigative effort in the construction of the waterway. Records were made of eighteen historic sites and structures in the region between Gainesville, Alabama, and Iuka, Mississippi.

The project was executed under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief, and Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal Architect, of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor was James Murray Howard of the University of Illinois. Project historian was Betty K. Bird of the University of Virginia. The Assistant Historian was Michael Ann Williams (University of Pennsylvania). Foreman was Ruthie D. Wiley of the University of Florida. Student Architects who prepared measured drawings for the project were Carol J. Crandall (Carnegie-Mellon University), Richard J. Cronenberger (University of Miami), Peter G. Darlow (McGill University), Daniel M. Gaines (University of Tennessee), and R. Bradley Mellor (Rice University). The inventory of sites within the project area was carried out by Inventory Supervisor J. A. Chewning of the Massachusetts Institute of Techonology. Assistant Historian for the inventory was Pamela J. Wolf (George Washington University). One structure was recorded during the winter of 1979 by project supervisor Peter G. Darlow (McGill University), Sally K. Tompkins, Project Historian, and Staff Architects Bethanie C. Grashof, Rudy Massengill, and Janet Hochuli (The Cooper Union). Drawings for this structure were completed during the spring of 1979 by staff Architects Peter G. Darlow, Janet Hochuli, James F. Speake and Reginald A. Berry (Howard University). Photographs were taken by David J. Kaminsky in the summer of 1978 and by Gil Ford in the spring of 1979.